

# FAST Pathways

*Unlock your life*



*with Sue Evans*

## *Welcome to FAST Pathways – Ditch the Fear, and THEN Do It Anyway*

“Feel the Fear and Do It Anyway” is the title of Susan Jeffers’ book (first published in 1987), and it’s a well-used mantra for pushing yourself beyond your comfort zone.

A bit of fear can be energising, even exhilarating - the annual spend on extreme sports is over \$12.1 billion, in the US alone. There can be a thrill in pushing yourself to new limits. It can be hugely satisfying, achieving something which once felt daunting. An achievement to cherish.

Even if you’re not a thrill-seeker, a bit of fear can be useful, making you pay attention. The fear of looking foolish in a presentation, focusing your attention on your research, making sure you’re ready for all the likely questions. The fear of dealing with someone who’s hurt you, or challenging relationships with colleagues, making you more vigilant and shaping your responses.

But what when that fear gets too big to do it anyway? When it builds up so much that you just can’t face it, no matter what it means missing out on. Or when you do manage to push through, but that fear gets in the way of you giving it your best, and enjoying the challenge.

That’s when the skills in this section of FAST Pathways can serve you well – to Ditch the Fear, and enjoy the freedom that awaits. And you don’t have to suffer to get there: Becoming able to do

something which you currently avoid completely, dealing more smoothly with conflict and challenging relationships; and embracing your challenges with greater confidence, comfort and ease.

### *Where to Find It*

Introduction	p4
Refreshing your Re-Set	p19
Changing your Mind's Pictures	p21
Changing the Sound Track	p27
One Point	p29
Mental Rehearsal	p34
Havening® in New Outcomes	p41
Taking a Different Perspective	p45
Your Shield	p50
Language to Relieve and Resolve Conflict	p59

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## *Ditch the Fear, and THEN Do It Anyway*

Fear can so easily start to get in the way, transitioning from a useful attention-focuser, to an obstruction. I've worked with many people who felt their career had been held back by their fear of public speaking and presenting – several who'd seen colleagues promoted ahead of them. Not, it seemed, because they were any better at what they do, but simply because they were better at putting it across.

Because we can sense each other's fear, and it colours what we think of each other. It was part of our collective survival mechanisms when we lived in tribes, in constant danger from predators and our environment. And we learn fears from each other too.

It fascinates me that the fear of spiders is apparently the 4<sup>th</sup> most common in the UK; even though all our native spiders are harmless. I've worked with people who couldn't even say the word spider, without screwing up their face in disgust; who couldn't look at a picture of one, without wanting to run away.

But I'm prepared to bet that not one of those people had ever been physically hurt, or even threatened, by a spider. So where had that fear come from? It's learned. Have you ever watched really small children, looking at spiders? They find them just as fascinating as everything else.

But by the time those kids reach three, maybe four years old, most of them have started to pull a face or pull away from a spider. Not because they've had a bad experience, but because

they've seen that response so many times around them, and accidentally adopted it as their own.

Even my daughter started to (not for long, though!), despite having grown up with my stories of mind-patterns and all the people I've helped, and photos of me holding tarantulas on training courses. She's even held one herself, before other people's spider responses started to influence her. Social patterns have immense influence, even when we don't realise it.

No matter that it doesn't make sense, no matter that its effects can become really disruptive. Once set, that fear pattern can just keep on running. Because 'sense' comes from the awareness, on-purpose part of your thinking – and although it's powerful, it's not so big compared to the rest. There's way more going on in your mind than you're doing on purpose.

Most of your thinking happens in patterns, operating automatically. It's your mind's way of running efficiently, allowing you to do far more than will fit into your conscious awareness. Some of them are patterns you've set by deliberate practice, like reading and walking; and some of them, you've picked up by accident. Either way, your mind can keep on running them – often, no matter how much logic and willpower you throw at changing them.

Your mind's patterns might be less extreme than running screaming from a spider, but their effects can still be powerful. It might be that you're able to do the thing which your fear, and you want to do it more comfortably:

To develop your competence, maybe even start to enjoy it, instead of just aiming towards that welcoming wave of relief

when it's over. To be able to stand your ground comfortably in difficult conversations, without feeling threatened or intimidated. To prepare calmly for a test, interview or exam – keeping enough of the nerves to give your preparation and performance an edge, without getting in the way.

No matter what level of fear or discomfort you're experiencing, the skills we'll explore can help you clear away its disruptive effects, using what's left to help you perform even better. Because although willpower can work, pushing yourself through towards that sense of achievement, it needn't be the only thing you rely on.

Perhaps you want to be more comfortable public speaking - it used to terrify me: My first experiences were delivering technical presentations for my first two degrees – neither had the most engaging content, and both were to contribute to my over all marks, so the stakes were high.

My nerves clearly showed, and the more I felt them, the faster I spoke and the stronger my accent became; worsening the nerves still further as I hoped the ground would open and swallow me. By the end, I doubt if anyone could have understood a word I was saying (and not just because of the technical stuff!). I looked up to sea of blank, bewildered and bored faces, and returned to my seat feeling drained; hoping never to repeat anything remotely similar.

So the first time I was asked to present in work, I seriously considered going off sick to avoid it. I tried everything to get out of it, but my boss was insistent. I spent days preparing. It went better than the previous two, but my throat was still dry, and my

hands shaking. Then they asked me to present again, to the whole of the manufacturing team. By the time I'd delivered the same presentation about 12 times, I'd actually started to enjoy it. If only I'd known then, that there are easier ways to get comfortable!

When I was training in CBT (Cognitive Behaviour Therapy), I had a very lively, and ultimately very frustrating, discussion with my trainer. He asserted that the only way to overcome an extreme fear, like a phobia, is with graded exposure.

That's when you gradually allow yourself to be subjected to the source of the fear, having it slowly brought closer and closer, until eventually you over-write the mind's old fear pattern. It can take weeks, and sometimes the fear's just too big to be overcome in that way. Sometimes, it can reinforce the pattern instead of over writing it. It's also got a significant drawback - if the thing you fear isn't something which can be brought into the room, it's pretty much impossible.

Now a mind-pattern doesn't just shape your behaviour – it can shape your beliefs too. It sets a filter for what information gets allowed through to your awareness, and what you're more likely to reject as an anomaly or untrue. When I talked about other ways to resolve phobias, deep inside the thinking pattern itself, he dismissed it completely. Impossible – despite an overwhelming body of evidence that it works.

In his world, there's one way, and one way only. Maybe that's a filter you've encountered before. It's a common misconception, that the only way to overcome a fear is to push yourself through it – and it's often the first question people ask, when they're

thinking of working with me one-to-one. Let me reassure you, that it's simply not true. There are other ways.

Fear can set your filters too. Phobia sufferers are often hyper-vigilant, always scanning for the source of their fear. I worked with a lady to resolve her extreme fear of anyone vomiting – she could never enjoy a night out where people were drinking, because she was constantly scanning around for signs of anyone looking the slightest bit off-colour. And another lady, who never entered a room without scanning thoroughly for signs of spiders, putting her system on an uncomfortable raised alert, even when there was nothing there.

And like the mind's other set-by-accident patterns, the fear can generalise; transferring to other things which have nothing to do with the original source, but which the mind recognises as similar. I worked with Ruby when she was 13 years old. When she was tiny, a dog had startled her by barking loudly, right next to her – and not surprisingly, she'd developed a fear of dogs. But by the time we met, her fear had generalised to cats, rabbits, guinea pigs.... Pretty much anything with fur.

She couldn't go outside without scanning for danger, and she'd notice dogs and cats everywhere. When she did, her heart would race, she'd cling to the hand of whoever she was with (putting them between herself and the animal), and try to get away as quickly as possible.

Even though it was one her mind had been running for longer than she could remember, it was a pattern she found easy to change. Less than an hour into exploring FAST Pathways, she was proudly photographed, holding her friend's rabbit. She doesn't

even notice dogs any more, and has visited a number of farms and zoos, which she'd previously have done anything to avoid.

The skills at the heart of FAST Pathways, began when a few innovative pioneers started to deliberately look for what was already working well in people's thinking: Instead of working only with people who were experiencing problems, they started to learn from those who'd already made amazing changes – breaking addictions, leaving abusive relationships, overcoming phobias..... Changes which, for those individuals, might have happened by accident.

Now what each of these individuals had experienced, their own personal situations (the content of their experiences), were unique to them. But when it comes to thinking, the content isn't the whole. In between the content and its effects (how it makes you feel), there's a process happening.



And what started to emerge were some clear patterns in their thinking process – specific characteristics, which had changed as

they'd reached that 'Never turning back' point. Characteristics which you can deliberately change, to get to that point sooner and more smoothly.

Because although it might come as a bit of a shock, unless you're in immediate mortal danger, it's not the actual thing which you're afraid of that's making you feel bad. It's the way that thing shows up in your thoughts. The pattern your mind's running, and the feelings it creates. That's why you can feel scared just thinking about it – when the only place it's happening is in your imagination.

It might have originated in your own experience, or generalised from something similar, or it might have been learned from others. So it's right inside your thinking, in changing that unhelpful mind pattern, that magic can happen and freedom can be won.

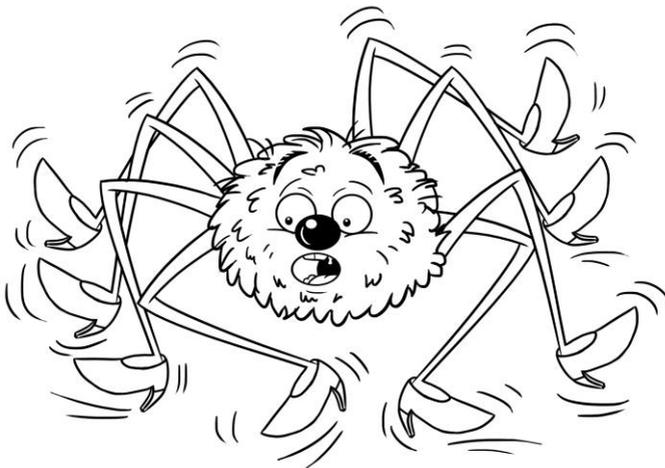
The first spider phobia which I worked with was a friend of mine. She had it baaaaad. She'd run screaming from one on their bedroom floor, and even after her husband had caught and killed it, she slept on the sofa for two nights. Really helpfully, someone had once told her that spiders don't live alone, and she was so scared that its pals would come out to play, that she couldn't face going into the room.

Over the years, she'd tried all sorts to try to rid herself of that fear. She thought that it could only be properly fixed by facing it head on, and it was just too big. So that belief had kept her stuck.

As I was talking with my friend, each time 'spider' was mentioned, she'd pull back slightly, even though there was nothing there. Turned out that the spiders her mind was picturing were huge, and REALLY scary. The spiders in her imagination could move faster than any human, and that was what freaked her out so much.

But instead of trying to face it head-on, often, the best way to collapse an unhelpful mind pattern is to just tweak it slightly, so it loses its potency. So as speed was the big thing for her, I asked what would slow that spider down. She decided on pink high heels – and as she closed her eyes and imagined it, she started to smile.

When I asked to make it even funnier, she added a clown nose, and circus music. Within a few seconds, her terrifying mind spider was staggering around in its high heels, utterly failing to co-ordinate its 8 hairy legs. And my friend was laughing out loud.



A wonderful thing, imagination. And suddenly, she didn't feel bad at all about spiders – when she tried to think of them in the old way, she couldn't. She'd set a new mind pattern. She wasn't convinced right away that it had worked – after all, she hadn't actually seen one yet. When she did, a week or so later, it was on her bedroom ceiling. Feeling too tired to get up and remove it, she lay watching as it eventually went off behind the wardrobe, and she went to sleep, knowing it was on the loose in the room.

Simple. A pattern which her mind had been running for as long as she could remember, terrifying the life out of her, fixed with a few simple tweaks. Maybe pink high heels won't do it for you, so let's start exploring some other ways to get that fear gone....

### *Why Calm's Not Always Best*

The fear responses we've been talking about so far have all been of the 'flight' variety, triggering your mind's strong desire to get away from the thing you're scared of, or avoid it in the first place. But no matter how much you'd like to, some of life's scary challenges simply can't be avoided. Like interviews, tests, auditions and presentations...

When faced with that kind of stressful situation, the vast majority of people (over 90%) believe that the best approach is to try to calm down. Not easy! And as it turns out, not very helpful either.

Research carried out at Harvard measured performance in 3 stressful tasks: Singing in front of a stranger, giving a short talk,

and a maths test. In all three, the participants were split into 3 groups – one group asked to say “I’m calm”, a control group asked to say nothing, and the third group asked to say “I’m excited”. Nothing more – just to say it.

In all three tests, the ‘calm’ group performed worse than the control group, and the excited group performed the best – even though saying they were excited didn’t reduce how anxious they also felt.

This same re-framing has also been used for highly maths-averse students before tests, before subjecting people with social anxiety to the social stress test (the one designed to really pile on the pressure), and before college exams. In every experiment, some kind of intervention or re-frame improved performance – even without changing how stressful participants said they’d found the experience.

So what made the difference? It could be as simple as a little information on how the physical changes of that high arousal state help to boost performance. The increased heart rate increases the flow of oxygen to give you more energy. The extra oxygen to the brain, and heightened senses, can help you to think more clearly and respond more quickly....

Because once you’re more comfortable that these changes are helpful, rather than something to fight with, you can turn your attention back to the task in hand.

*Reference: Get Excited: Reappraising Pre-Performance Anxiety as Excitement. Alison Wood Brooks, Harvard Business School*

Nobody expects their favourite team to walk out on to the field feeling calm on final day – if anything, they'll have been pumping up the adrenaline as they got ready. They know how to channel the pressure they're under into peak performance.

Now I'm not suggesting that you shout out war cry, or thump the air before your next presentation. But once you've resolved the fear overload, that little bit of anxious can help you to perform even better too. And that's what the skills you're about to learn will help you to do.

## *The FAST Pathways Exercises*

Doing the FAST Pathways exercises is essential to getting results. For each exercise, choose somewhere suitable, and give yourself time to make the best of each experience.

The exercises work best when you think of something really specific – running the exact mind-pattern which makes you feel bad, so that you can change it. Please choose something which is uncomfortable enough to want to change, but that you're still able to think of and work on alone. If you're suffering a more extreme fear or phobia, I recommend to work with a trained professional.

Each is marked with one of the following:



*Audio-guided*



*Video-guided*

The exercise outlines, presented in grey, are intended as a quick reminder – there to help you refer back and refresh an exercise. There's no substitute for using the exercise audio or video-guidance the first time you explore.

When using the audio-guided exercises, it's best to use headphones. Each contains hypnotic content, so please don't listen while driving, as a passenger in a car, or when doing

anything else that requires your attention – listen only when it’s safe to let your mind wander.

## *The FAST Pathways Case Stories*

I’ve supported many people in overcoming their fears – from mild discomfort at public speaking or networking, all the way to fears so intense, they’d started to significantly impact daily life.

The first friend I with whom I shared these skills, was so afraid of needles, that she couldn’t bear anyone to say the word. Unfortunately, our colleagues would often sneak up behind her, and shout “Needles!” just to freak her out. Nice.

Within 40 minutes (I was slow back then!), she was happily chatting about them. She went home and watched an operation on the television; and when she goes for blood tests, she coaches anyone in the waiting room who’s looking uneasy.

I will always be grateful for her spirit of adventure, and willingness to explore. That first breakthrough began a tremendous momentum, as I delved further into just how powerful these skills are. And so, I invite you too, to explore.

Every person who’s chosen to share their story, surprised themselves at the ease with which they could adjust their mind’s patterns, easing away their fears and growing their confidence, without the struggle they’d thought was inevitable.

Each of the case stories is shown in green

## *How to Use FAST Pathways*

The guide book and exercises are designed to be used together; at your own pace, to get the best results. Most of the exercises take around 15 minutes; so even if you're preparing for an event which is happening soon, you've still got time to explore.

For those few minutes, give each exercise your full attention, where it's safe to let your mind wander; and let yourself immerse. The more thoroughly you can imagine the situation, following the exercises' step-by-step guidance, the more effectively you can neutralise your fear. Replacing your mind's old patterns with the ones you want.

Your brain learns by repetition, so as you set each new mind-pattern, run through it a few times to let your mind start making it automatic. Perhaps trying a few different changes to find which works best, then running that exact sequence three or four times. Then imagine yourself in your chosen situation, handling it just as you want to – you don't have to wait until it actually happens to test out your new responses.

As time passes and your skills embed more deeply, you may want to re-visit some exercises, developing them to work even better.

There's no right and wrong, and your outside-awareness thinking knows you better than anyone. The suggestions in the exercises are to get you started - so if you find your mind suggests other variations, embrace them. You might be surprised.

### ***Amber's Travels***

Lots of people are afraid of flying. It wasn't being in the air which bothered Amber - it was more about not being able to control it,

and not being able to return home to 'safety' should she feel like she needed to. Feeling trapped.....

It was affecting her life, as in every job, she'd been asked to travel to Hong Kong, Paris, China, Bangladesh, Berlin... A dream for many people, a nightmare for Amber. She'd always either managed to avoid going; or she'd gone, but had a horrendous time with panic and anxiety, in the airport and during the trip. It had once become the deciding factor for handing in her notice.

She hadn't had holidayed abroad in over 5 years: She'd booked a holiday with friends, and got all the way to the airport check-in. Then she couldn't handle it – she had a huge panic (which was very embarrassing, reinforcing the problem even further), and went home, losing all of money she'd paid for the holiday.

After learning how to de-code her fear, she travelled again. She was a little nervous beforehand; but she did the whole thing comfortably once in the airport. She's flown several times since, and knows she no longer has to design her holidays or career around avoiding air travel.