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## Fear Factor

Kevin Ogar, Tony Blauer and others explain how to overcome trepidation to find success in the gym and in life.

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Dave Re / CrossFit Journal

It was July 2010, my first week of CrossFit. The affiliate had opened a month prior, and I was the only person in the noon class. After I warmed up, the coach brought out a 20-inch wooden box and told me to jump up on it.

I looked at the rough edges of the homemade structure, eyeing the sharp corners, the screws embedded in plywood. Jumping on top seemed like a terrible idea. But my coach was looking at me expectantly, so I bent my knees and made a half-hearted jump, rising a few inches off the floor. I was nowhere close to the top of the box.

I kept trying, but each time I got ready to jump I'd look at the sharp-edged box and hesitate. I was terrified of what might happen if I really tried.

Finally, my coach pointed to a tractor tire in the corner of the gym.

"Jump on that," he said.

"How tall is it?" I asked.

"Just jump on it," he said.

I walked over to the tire, bent my knees, jumped and ended up on top of the tire.

"That's 22 inches tall," my coach said. "Now jump on the box."

And I did.

I didn't improve my jumping ability on the walk to the tire, but a soft-edged target removed my fear. Once the fear was gone, the task became manageable.

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### Everyone feels fear. The secret to success is managing that fear.

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Everyone feels fear at some point in CrossFit—or in any challenging athletic endeavor. Even the most experienced athlete eventually finds himself or herself face-to-face with a weight or a workout that makes the knees shake.

Everyone feels fear. The secret to success is managing that fear.



Dave Re / CrossFit Journal

**CrossFit Defense's Tony Blauer says the "fear loop" is a large factor in not achieving goals.**

In his book "The Fear Project," Jaimal Yogis talks to neuroscientists, psychologists and elite athletes about how to overcome fear. Contrary to what most of us were taught, the best way to manage fear is not to push it aside but to acknowledge it, accept it and then take action. Yogis puts this practice to the test at Mavericks in Northern California, facing down some of the biggest, scariest waves known to surfers.

Similarly, Tony Blauer spends much of his CrossFit Defense seminar addressing how fear affects performance. He shares specific techniques athletes and coaches can use to overcome fear.

Like Yogis, Blauer says the only way to deal with fear is to face it head-on.

### The Fear Loop

About a year ago, Kevin Ogar suffered a critical injury to his spine after a failed attempt on a 3-rep-max touch-and-go snatch event at a competition. The accident left him in a



NCHPAD

*After his accident, Kevin Ogar continued training, setting his sights on the Paralympic Games.*

wheelchair, a paraplegic, but it didn't stop him from doing what he loves, which is training and coaching at CrossFit Unbroken in Englewood, Colorado.

Ogar started training as soon as he could after the accident. He set a new goal. Instead of training for the CrossFit Games, Ogar began training to qualify for the 2016 Paralympic Games.

In order to qualify for the Paralympic Games in weightlifting, Ogar needed to improve his bench-press numbers. In October 2014 he benched 260 lb. for 5 reps. He was going for 8 but failed on rep 6. He couldn't get the weight off his chest.

That weekend, Ogar attended Blauer's CrossFit Defense seminar at CrossFit Unbroken.

One of the things Blauer teaches in his seminar is the "fear loop"—how to recognize it and how to break out of it. Blauer has turned the word "fear" into an acronym: false expectations (or evidence) appearing real. Many things

can trigger a fear reaction, but whatever the trigger, once a person starts feeling the psychological and physiological effects of fear, it's difficult to come back.

That's where Blauer and his seminar come in. Blauer talks about breaking out of the fear loop by coming up with a plan, something for the mind to focus on other than fear.

Recognizing you are stuck in the fear loop is the first step. The second is to focus the mind on a plan, a cue or even just one word. The same is true if you're a coach working with a fearful athlete.

As he listened to Blauer, Ogar realized he was stuck in the fear loop with his bench press. He was worried about what the weight could do to him, not what he could do to move the weight.

"After the CrossFit Defense course, I went in and kind of recognized the fear loop, where I was focusing on what would happen if I failed the bench press instead of what I needed to do to get the bar off my chest," Ogar said.



RE Factor Tactical

***"I struggled with rope climbs when I first got out of the hospital because of fear, fear of falling or hurting my back. Recognizing that fear loop has completely turned rope climbs around for me. Now they are one of my favorite things to do."  
—Kevin Ogar***

Ogar said his thoughts had previously been a cycle of, "Oh my God, this is heavy. They are gonna have to get this bar off me if I fail. What's going to happen to me if I can't get this bar off? It will really suck if I fail at this. I'll need to redo it."

On the Monday after the CrossFit Defense seminar, Ogar tried something different. In order to make the reps, Ogar knew he needed to keep his elbows in and maintain speed off his chest throughout each of the 8 reps.

As he set up for the lift, instead of thinking about failing, Ogar said he kept repeating the same thing to himself: "Speed off the chest, speed off the chest, speed off the chest."

Ogar benched 265 lb. for 8.

"I called it 'watching one TV instead of focusing on five,'" Ogar said. "I put a mantra or a chant into my head, so all I could think about was what I needed to do."

## Coaching Fearful Athletes

As he continues to rehabilitate, Ogar has been working on using long leg braces and crutches to stand up and walk around.

"I got new crutches, and I've been really struggling with standing up and sitting back down. (I've been) just failing over and over and over again," Ogar said.

Then his physical therapist gave him a new cue, telling Ogar to relax his shoulders.

"I recognized I was in the fear loop. I recognized I wasn't really focusing on what I needed to be doing. All I was focusing on was, 'If I don't do this right, I'm going to fall,'" Ogar said.

"Falling was the only thing I could really focus on. So once I kind of recognized that fear loop, I was able to switch my mindset and focus on relaxing my shoulders so I could get a better push. Within a few attempts, I went from having to be completely spotted to being able to get back up on my own," he said.

Focusing on negative feelings and experiences is very common. In fact, scientists say it's what made our species successful. When humans were first evolving, it was of utmost importance to avoid real danger. Scientists believe our brains developed a negativity bias, meaning fearful experiences leave a much greater imprint on our brains than positive, happy experiences.

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**Within the first month of trying to rescue athletes from the fear loop, Ogar said he helped people in his classes achieve at least six to 10 new PRs on their lifts.**

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"Basically, negativity bias is about survival. Nature likes skittish creatures because skittish creatures survive," Rick Hanson said in "The Fear Project."

## Fear ... (continued)

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A neuropsychologist, best-selling author and co-founder of the Wellspring Institute for Neuroscience and Contemplative Wisdom, Hanson said in today's world, most of the time our fears are exaggerated. We have a fear reaction to situations that are not actually harmful—like a 20-inch box or a barbell loaded to a weight out of our comfort zone but well within our ability.

Since attending the CrossFit Defense seminar, Ogar has not only used Blauer's fear-management techniques for himself, but he's also helped the athletes he coaches overcome fear. It's been particularly useful when he sees someone struggling with an Olympic lift.

"They'll miss and miss, and I'll ask them what they are focusing on. They will say they don't know," Ogar said.

"Let's get you focused on something," he'll tell them. "Are you focused on what is going to happen when you fail or what you did wrong last time? Or are you focusing on what you need to do (on) this rep to get it better?"

Most of the time, Ogar will learn the athlete is thinking about the mistake on the last rep.

"Instead of focusing on, 'I didn't get my hips fully extended,' focus on what you need to do to get your hips fully extended," Ogar said.

Within the first month of trying to rescue athletes from the fear loop, Ogar said he helped people in his classes achieve at least six to 10 new PRs on their lifts.

"It makes coaching a little easier when you know what you're focusing on," Ogar said.

"When I start classes, I tell (the class) what they need to focus on in the workout to take a pre-emptive step to keep them out of the fear loop," he said.

If he has an athlete he knows struggles with wall-ball shots, he'll tell her to choose a mantra like, "Solid squat, solid squat."

"I've seen people PR their workouts like crazy just by refocusing what they're thinking about during a movement they suck at," Ogar said.

"Instead of just yelling 'Go,' (recognize) why they aren't going and (try) to fix that," Ogar said.



Dave Re / CrossFit Journal

***The facial expressions of athletes often reveal their thoughts. Good coaches can help athletes refocus to find the confidence they need to succeed.***

### Use the Fear

Todd Thompson is a career firefighter. The 41-year-old started doing CrossFit in 2008 and opened his affiliate, CrossFit Grit, in Saint Simons Island, Georgia, in 2010.

Thompson attended Blauer's CrossFit Defense seminar in 2013. The experience had such an effect on Thompson he is now part of the CrossFit Defense staff.

During the lunch break at the first seminar he attended, Thompson decided to join a group working out. They were doing one clean every minute on the minute until failure.

About eight months earlier, Thompson had injured himself trying to clean 290 lb.

He caught the clean very low and hurt tendons in both of his wrists as he went down into the squat. Thompson couldn't bend his wrists at all for a few weeks, and it was a few months before he could hold a bar in the front-rack position.

After he healed, Thompson went back to heavy lifting, but every time he got close to 285 lb. he'd remember the injury and couldn't make the lift.

The weight became more than plates on a bar.

"That weight is the bully at school. That weight is the boss at work that you give more power to or you don't give him your ideas because you're afraid of getting knocked down," Thompson said.

His injury—now completely healed—was on his mind as Thompson joined in on the clean workout. The minutes ticked by and the weights increased. Thompson was feeling good. He cleaned 255 lb., then 275 lb., then 285 lb.

"I load up and it's 290 lb.," Thompson remembered.

"I was telling myself, 'Here we are again.' I got that nervousness. I got that weak feeling in my body, because I know we've been here before. And so it was instant that I thought back to the fear loop."



Tatyana Kirichenko

**Firefighter Todd Thompson was so affected by the CrossFit Defense seminar that he worked his way onto its staff.**

Thompson had just heard Blauer give his talk about the fear loop. He knew his mind was stuck in the loop, and the only way to break out was to come up with a plan.

"I knew if I didn't pull hard enough and get under fast enough with my elbows, I was going to catch it low and potentially break my wrists. I had already had negative feedback from that lift, so what I started doing was I started making a plan. The plan was this: I had been working out for eight months since this happened. I knew that I was stronger. I knew that I had better technique. And so (I thought), 'It's right here in front of me, and I've just got to pull it,'" Thompson said.

Thompson stepped up to the weight, pulled it and successfully cleaned 290 lb. The next lift was 300 lb., and Thompson got under the weight and stood up without a problem.

"It wasn't that I was so much stronger," Thompson said. "It was that I could do it without the fear. It's realizing you have the skills—you can do it."



Tatyana Kirichenko

**"The fear is an extra battery pack that is going to give you more power." —Todd Thompson**

This moment was revelatory for Thompson. He learned not to deny the fear or try to push it away but to use it.

When Thompson is coaching, he tells his athletes the fear is a good thing.

"Your body is smarter than you are. When you do get the butterflies in your stomach, the sweaty hands, the nervous anticipation for what's happening, that's your body telling you you're about to get into a fight, and it's now real!"

Thompson's advice to himself and his athletes is to harness the fear as energy and power, not shoulder it as a burden.

"The fear is an extra battery pack that is going to give you more power," Thompson said.

### Fear Is Universal

Every athlete, even the most experienced competitor, feels fear. Denying fear will not work, because no person is without fear, Blauer said.

"Just let the fear be there. Don't run from it. Don't identify with it. Don't fight it," Yogis wrote in "The Fear Project."

Instead of having a panic reaction to fear, the trick is to recognize and accept the fear, and then focus the mind on more useful thoughts.

Once the athlete acknowledges the fear, the next step is to focus the mind on something else—a specific cue, a mantra, something to think about other than the fear.

With that mantra or cue running through your head, put your hands on the barbell, grab the rope, or step up to the box and jump.



### About the Author

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