Afraid — the fears driving everything

I was afraid…?

Example: *Afraid to lose control of my job, my marriage, my life.* — #1 Mr. Brown

References: Column 4 Instructions | The Chain | Self-Seeking | Selfish | Dishonest | Common Fears | Examples

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What Is Afraid

Afraid is the **deepest, hardest-to-find link** of The Chain — the root fear that drives the delusion, produces the attitude, and generates the action. *(ref. p.62-¶1 "a hundred forms of fear", p.67-¶3 "fear is bracketed alongside the difficulties", p.68)*

The Big Book maps it in one sentence:

> *"driven by a hundred forms of **fear**, **self-delusion**, **self-seeking** and **self pity** [my attitude]" (p.62-¶1)*

Fear is listed first because it comes first. Everything else in the chain is fear's expression. The delusion is fear's story. The attitude is fear's posture. The action is fear's behavior. Remove the fear, and the entire structure collapses.

The Big Book devotes an entire passage to fear's pervasiveness:

> *"This short word somehow touches about every aspect of our lives. It was an evil and corroding thread; the fabric of our existence was shot through with it." (p.67-¶3)*

And the Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions names fear as the activator of all defects:

> *"The chief activator of our defects has been self-centered fear — primarily fear that we would lose something we already possessed or would fail to get something we demanded." (12&12, p.76)*

This single sentence identifies the **two root categories of self-centered fear:** (1) the fear of *losing* what I have — job, marriage, control, reputation — and (2) the fear of *not getting* what I demand — love, success, respect, security. Every fear in every one of the twelve worked examples falls into one of these two categories.

This is also the hardest part of the Fourth Column to write because fear is buried. Actions are visible. Attitudes feel like common sense. Delusions feel like reality. But the fear — the thing that started it all — is the one thing I've been running from all along. Naming it is the work.

How to Identify the Fear

Ask yourself:

- **What fear was driving everything above?** — the delusion, the attitude, the actions
- **What was I really afraid of?** — not what the other person did, but what it meant about *me*
- **What was I afraid would happen?** — or be exposed, or be confirmed
- **What was I afraid I would lose?** — or never get, or never be

The fear is almost never about the other person. It's about *me* — what I might lose, what I might be exposed as, what I might become. Even when the fear sounds relational ("she'll leave me"), it's really about identity ("I'm not good enough to keep her").

Fear Identification Prompts

The 12&12 identifies two root categories of self-centered fear *(p.76)*: fear of losing what I have, and fear of not getting what I demand. The following four categories expand these into practical prompts for identifying the fear in each resentment.

1. Fear of Losing

I'm afraid of losing… approval, respect, love, security, safety, comfort, material things, health, sanity.

2. Fear of Not Getting

I'm afraid I won't get… approval, respect, love, security, safety, comfort, material things, health, sanity.

3. Fear of Something Happening I Can't Prevent or Cope With

I'm afraid that _____ will happen and I won't be able to prevent it or deal with it…

Fear of the unknown, change, rejection, failure, success, authority, intimacy, abandonment, pain, illness, death.

4. Fear of Wanting Something I Can't Make Happen

I want _____ to happen and I can't make it happen…

Fear of loss of control, poverty, ridicule, loneliness, commitment, responsibility, uncertainty, being trapped.

Fear of Being

Sometimes the fear is not about losing or getting something — it's about *who I am*. Scan this list and ask: *Is this what I'm really afraid of?*

Not good enough, Inadequate, Incompetent, Unlovable, Unworthy, Helpless, Powerless, Weak, Abandoned, Rejected, Forgotten, Ignored, Hurt, Betrayed, Controlled,

Manipulated, Trapped, Judged, Criticized, Embarrassed, Humiliated, Exposed, Vulnerable, Guilty, Ashamed, Responsible, Misunderstood, Different, Blamed, Alone.

See also the Common Fears Reference for 80+ individual fears mapped to the seven areas of self from the twelve worked examples.

How to Write It

Question: *I was afraid…?*

Write the root fear — the thing underneath all the delusions, attitudes, and actions. Start with *"I was afraid…"* or *"I'm afraid…"*

Template:

- I was afraid _____.
- I was afraid _____.

Alternative sentence starters *(from Joe & Charlie Big Book Study)*:

- *"Fear of…"*
- *"I was scared that…"*

Drill-down method: If the fear feels surface-level, ask *"If this fear happened, then what would happen?"* — and repeat until you reach the core. Example: *"I fear she'll leave"* → *"I'll be alone"* → *"No one will love me"* → *"I'm fundamentally unlovable."* The last answer is usually the real fear.

Tips:

- The fear is about *me*, not the other person
- If the fear sounds like a situation ("I was afraid she'd leave"), dig deeper to find the identity fear underneath ("I was afraid I'm not good enough")
- A single fear often drives the entire chain — if you have many fears listed, look for the one that explains all the others

- Consider the opposite of each fear and add it if it applies — being alone / being committed? failing / succeeding? *(ref. p.68-¶1-L1)*
- The fear should *explain* everything above it — if it doesn't, dig deeper
- These fears feed directly into the Fear Inventory

Examples from the Inventory

Every one of the twelve worked examples includes an Afraid entry. Notice how the fears become more primal as you move from person-based (#1-8) to principle-based (#9-12) resentments.

Person-Based Resentments (#1–8)

- *"Afraid to lose control of my job, my marriage, my life."* — #1 Mr. Brown
- *"Afraid that I'm incapable of living up to anyone's expectations of me, let alone my own."* — #2 Mrs. Jones
- *"Afraid that I'll never succeed or amount to anything."* — #3 My Employer
- *"Afraid she'll see I'm incapable of doing any better and will eventually leave me."* — #4 My Wife
- *"I'm afraid if I stand up for myself she'll reject me."* — #5 Susie
- *"I was afraid that if I stand up for myself, he'll really be out to get me and I'll lose my job."* — #6 Mr. Brown Alternate
- *"I am afraid that I don't matter and that unless I look a certain way, no one will love me."* — #7 My Father
- *"I was afraid that I might do something wrong like relapsing, beating the crap out of her, or killing myself to make her feel sorry. I'm afraid that her opinion of me that I'm too defective to be loved is true."* — #8 My Sister

Principle-Based Resentments (#9–12)

- *"I am afraid that if there is a God, he will never love me. I am afraid that I can't be fixed."* — #9 God Does Not Care About Me
- *"If I am alone too long, I'll die inside spiritually."* — #10 Not Fulfilled Without a Relationship
- *"I'll never be loved and always be alone."* — #11 I Am Unloveable
- *"Even with Money, I am still unhappy. I am a nobody and will always be a nobody."* — #12 Not OK Without Money

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Fear Patterns

The following patterns are observed across the twelve worked examples and are presented as analytical groupings, not Big Book categories. All six map to the 12&12's two root categories: fear of losing what I have and fear of not getting what I demand (12&12, p.76).

Looking across all twelve examples, the fears fall into six categories that move from situational to existential.

Fear of Losing Control

The fear that things I depend on — job, marriage, life — will be taken away:

- *"Lose control of my job, my marriage, my life."* (#1)
- *"If I stand up for myself, he'll be out to get me and I'll lose my job."* (#6)

This is the most *surface-level* fear — it's about specific things in specific situations. But trace it deeper and it points to the fear of powerlessness.

Fear of Inadequacy

The fear that I am fundamentally not enough — not capable, not worthy, not up to it:

- *"Incapable of living up to anyone's expectations of me, let alone my own."* (#2)
- *"I'll never succeed or amount to anything."* (#3)

- *"She'll see I'm incapable of doing any better."* (#4)

This is the most common fear in the person-based resentments. It's not about losing something — it's about *being* something: not enough.

Fear of Rejection

The fear that if I am honest, real, or visible, I will be pushed away:

- *"If I stand up for myself she'll reject me."* (#5)
- *"If I stand up for myself, he'll really be out to get me."* (#6)

Rejection fear is about exposure. The fear is not that the other person will do something — it's that they will see something about me that will cause them to leave.

Fear of Not Mattering

The fear that I am invisible, insignificant, or expendable:

- *"I don't matter and unless I look a certain way, no one will love me."* (#7)
- *"Her opinion of me that I'm too defective to be loved is true."* (#8)
- *"I might relapse, beat her up, or kill myself to make her feel sorry."* (#8)

Notice #8: the fear includes both what I might *become* (the monster) and what I might *be* (defective beyond love). The two fears coexist — I'm afraid of both my darkness and my damage.

Fear of Permanent Brokenness

The fear that I am damaged beyond repair and beyond God's reach:

- *"If there is a God, he will never love me. I can't be fixed."* (#9)

This is the most spiritually raw fear. It's not about losing something or being rejected by someone. It's about being permanently broken — beyond help, beyond love, beyond God.

Fear of Spiritual Death

The fear that I will die inside — that the core of who I am will cease to exist:

- *"If I am alone too long, I'll die inside spiritually."* (#10)
- *"I'll never be loved and always be alone."* (#11)
- *"Even with money, I am still unhappy. I am a nobody and will always be a nobody."* (#12)

These are the deepest fears in the twelve examples. They move beyond specific situations or relationships to the existential: *I am nothing, I will always be nothing, and nothing can change it.*

The Opposite-Fear Principle

(BBA teaching methodology. The Big Book says to write down fears "even though we had no resentment in connection with them" (p.68-¶1), which supports adding fears beyond the resentment inventory. The specific instruction to "consider the opposite" is BBA's practical application of this principle.)

The Column 4 instructions include a key instruction:

> *Consider the opposite of each fear; if it applies, add it to the fear list.*
>
> *Example: being alone / being committed? looking bad / looking too good? failing / succeeding?*

This principle is visible throughout the examples:

- **#4 My Wife:** fears she'll leave *(abandoned)*, but also fears the demands of commitment *(controlled)*
- **#7 My Father:** fears she doesn't matter *(insignificant)*, but also fears being seen *(exposed)*
- **#9 God Does Not Care:** fears God won't love him *(unloved)*, but also fears what it means if God does *(accountable)*
- **#10 Not Fulfilled:** fears being alone *(dying inside)*, but the actions show fear of genuine intimacy *(known)*
- **#12 Not OK Without Money:** fears being a nobody *(worthless)*, but also fears that money won't fix it *(the mask is pointless)*

Opposite fears coexist because they come from the same root: the belief that *I* must arrange reality to be safe. Whether I run toward something or away from it, I am still running. The opposite-fear principle reveals that I am often caught between two fears with no honest position in between — and that middle ground is exactly where surrender lives.

Connection to the Fear Inventory

The fears discovered in Column 4 feed directly into the Fear Inventory — Step 4d. The Big Book instructs:

> *"We put them on paper, even though we had no resentment in connection with them." (p.68-¶1)*

The fear drill-down process traces each fear to its root. The fear drill-down examples show how surface fears consolidate:

Surface fears → Intermediate fears → Root fears

not good enough → unwanted → alone → emotional pain → using → dying → unknown → no God → self-reliance fails

The Column 4 fears are the starting material. The fear inventory is where they are traced to their roots. See also the Common Fears Reference for a comprehensive list of fears from the twelve examples.

Connection to The Chain

Fear is the **first link** — the root cause that starts the entire chain:

AFRAID → drives → **DISHONEST** → produces → **SELFISH** → generates → **SELF-SEEKING**

Fear is written *last* in the Fourth Column but comes *first* in reality. The writing order is an archaeological dig — you start at the surface (actions) and work down. But the chain runs the other direction. The fear was there first. The fear created the delusion. The delusion hardened into attitude. And the attitude produced the actions.

Once written, read the chain in reverse — from fear to action — and ask: *Does the fear explain everything above it?* If it does, you've found the root. If it doesn't, dig deeper.

Deeper Understanding

Why "Afraid" Is Written Last

The Fourth Column writes Self-Seeking first and Afraid last because that's the order in which we can see them. Actions are visible. Attitudes take some honesty to see. Delusions take real searching. And the fear — the root — is the hardest to find and the most important to name.

But the Chain runs the other direction. The fear was there first — maybe since childhood (#7). The fear created the delusion long ago. The delusion hardened into attitude over years. And the attitude produced the actions that brought you to this inventory.

The writing order is an archaeological dig. The Chain is the geological history. You dig from the surface, but the layers were laid from the bottom up.

Person-Based Fears vs. Principle-Based Fears

The twelve examples reveal a clear progression:

Person-based resentments (#1-8) produce fears about *specific situations and people*:

- *Lose my job, she'll leave me, she'll reject me, I don't matter to him*

Principle inventories (#9-12) produce fears about *who I am*:

- *I can't be fixed, I'll die inside, I'll never be loved, I am a nobody*

The person-based fears are individual threads. The principle-based fears are the fabric. When you write multiple person inventories and start seeing the same fear repeating — *not good enough, alone, unwanted, worthless* — you are seeing the principle underneath. The principle inventories name what the person inventories can only hint at.

This is why the Big Book has you consolidate fears into a separate fear inventory after the resentment columns: the fear list reveals the principles that run through all your person-based chains.

The Fear-Sickness-Defect Cycle

The Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions describes fear not just as a root cause, but as a self-reinforcing loop:

> *"When our failings generate fear, we then have soul-sickness. This sickness, in turn, generates still more character defects." (12&12, p.49)*

Fear produces defects (the chain). The defects produce consequences. The consequences produce more fear. The cycle deepens. *(Note: The 12&12 text describes a cycle — defects generate fear, fear generates more defects. The interpretation that the cycle "accelerates" and shows "progressively more desperate behavior" is analytical reasoning drawn from the twelve worked examples, not explicit 12&12 language.)*

This is also why untreated fear can't be outwaited. Time alone doesn't break the cycle. The Big Book's spiritual intervention — handing the fear to God — interrupts the loop at its source.

Why Self-Reliance Fails

After cataloging fear, the Big Book asks the diagnostic question:

> *"We asked ourselves why we had them. Wasn't it because self-reliance failed us?" (p.68-¶1)*

The answer reframes every fear on the list. The fears aren't evidence that the world is dangerous — they're evidence that *I am trying to run the show by myself and it isn't working*. Self-reliance didn't fail because I didn't try hard enough. Self-reliance failed because it was never designed to be the whole solution.

The Six Fear Patterns above (#1-#6) are all forms of self-reliance: controlling outcomes, managing perception, forcing relationships, building fortresses, performing success. Every one is the actor on page 61-62, trying to arrange the lights, the ballet, the scenery, and the rest of the players. And every one fails — not because the actor lacks talent, but because the show was never his to run.

The Spiritual Solution

The Big Book's answer to fear is direct:

> *"We ask Him to remove our fear and direct our attention to what He would have us be. At once, we commence to outgrow fear." (p.68-¶3)*

The prayer doesn't address the actions, attitudes, or delusions. It goes straight to the root. Remove the fear, and the delusion has nothing to drive it. The attitude has nothing to maintain it. And the actions — the ones that seemed so intractable — lose their fuel.

Notice the precision: *"direct our attention to what He would have us be."* Not what I want to be. Not what I'm afraid of being. What *He* would have me be. The prayer replaces self-reliance with God-reliance — not passivity, but a redirection of attention from fear to purpose.

This is the purpose of the Fourth Column: not just to catalog behavior, but to trace it to its source, so that the source can be handed over. The Chain doesn't just show you *what* you did. It shows you *why* you did it. And that *why* is always fear. And the answer to fear is always the same:

> *"God, please remove this fear and direct my attention to what You would have me be."*

This list is not exhaustive — your inventory will reveal fears unique to you. Use this as a starting point to help name what you're afraid of, and to see how those fears have been running the show all along.

Sources & Attribution

Direct Big Book text:

- p.62-¶1: “a hundred forms of fear” — fear as the root
- p.67-¶2: “Where had we been… frightened?” — the diagnostic question
- p.67-¶3: “This short word somehow touches about every aspect of our lives” — fear’s pervasiveness
- p.68-¶1: “We put them on paper, even though we had no resentment in connection with them” — fears beyond resentments
- p.68-¶1: “We asked ourselves why we had them. Wasn’t it because self-reliance failed us?”
- p.68-¶3: “We ask Him to remove our fear and direct our attention to what He would have us be”

Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions:

- p.49: “When our failings generate fear, we then have soul-sickness” — the cycle
- p.76: “The chief activator of our defects has been self-centered fear” — two root categories

BBA workshop methodology:

- The mapping of “frightened” (p.67) to root fears specifically
- The Opposite-Fear Principle — practical application of p.68-¶1
- Fear Identification Prompts (four categories expanding the 12&12’s two)
- The “Fear of Being” list
- The sentence starters, drill-down method, and template

Other sources:

- Joe & Charlie Big Book Study — alternative sentence starters (specific session/recording not identified)

Analytical work:

- Six Fear Patterns (Losing Control, Inadequacy, Rejection, Exposure, Abandonment, Worthlessness) — pattern analysis across the twelve examples
- The Fear-Sickness-Defect Cycle interpretation — extended reading of ◆ **12&12 p.49**
- Person-Based vs. Principle-Based fear distinction

From the Big Book Awakening Step Four guide at bigbook.it/step-4/ · a page of the guide, not the workbook itself: the workbook's own pages are linked from “Originals & sources.” · source afraid.md