

## Scared of snakes?

In my social science undergraduate days a fellow student set out in his final year dissertation to discover "why so many people have an irrational fear of snakes". He had a bee in his bonnet, you see, having worked the summer at a zoo. His starting point, that the vast majority of snakes pose no threat to humans, was sound but he drew from it an unexamined conclusion - fear of them is therefore irrational - far less so.

There are those who link snake 'phobia' to the biblical account of the Fall. Even Kipling, who really should have known better, writes in *Kim* of "the white man's horror of the serpent" but in my travels I've seen Hindu and Buddhist, African and Asian, display the same aversion. More telling yet, other primates [show distress](#) when confronted by snakes. What's going on?

I look to evolution. Instinctive fear of snakes confers a tiny advantage, and tiny advantages are what the natural selection of random genetic mutations is all about. So why, Genesis blamers object, don't tigers evoke the same visceral response? The difference, surely, is that it's *obvious* tigers can do us in. They are big and heavy. They have fearsome teeth and claws. Most snakes by contrast are small, light and without visible weapon. A few, however, can pose a grave and sudden threat. As with other matters too urgent to be left to conscious reasoning, we need a mechanism to bypass our admirably capable but pedestrian higher brain processes. Is it really so irrational to be repelled by snakes? Should we really lose vital seconds establishing 'rationally', and likely as not in low visibility, whether that neck-stripe is the sage green of the harmless mud snake, or olive green of the near identical but deadly sand viper?

Fear of snakes is no more irrational than fear of heights. The [visual cliff](#) experiment with babies suggests this too is innate and, we may conclude, evolutionarily useful. But climbers and other thrill seekers learn to transcend that fear - or to savour its *frisson* - and this points us to something uniquely human and relevant here. Apes fear snakes; horses too, as thrown riders have found to their cost. But with ape or horse that's all there is to it. Neither can of its own accord overcome that instinct whereas we, given an incentive, can: not just because we are more intelligent but because we are *self aware*. We can stand back from the play of our minds to judge a fear or desire, however 'natural', to be holding us back from something we want more. (In *Voyages of Sinbad*, recall, snakes are guardians of fabulous jewels, a time honoured mythic association.)



Can I have my diamonds now please?

Early explorers assuredly felt homesick: that too is useful; keeping us on our own turf where we are by and large safer. But homesickness did not stop them, and the difference is not that human fear can be overridden - we can train animals to overcome fear - but that we can do it *by our own volition*. Willpower presupposes self awareness: an asset as critical to our ascendance, perhaps, as abstract reasoning, language and opposing thumb. Our ancestors feared heights, fire, alien landscapes and much besides but the more intrepid and curious faced down the movement of their own minds and led us onwards and upwards.<sup>1</sup>

They had their reasons, mind. It is not in our nature to exercise will without cause, and this takes us back to the topic in hand. Some fears are highly disruptive of everyday life. I know someone whose father had *foliphobia*. I know another with *koumpounophobia* (Apple's Steve Jobs had it too). Since leaves and buttons are daily inevitabilities, we can agree these aversions must pose logistical problems far from trifling. Snakes by contrast are seldom encountered. Even in hot climates they do their best to stay out of our way. Given this, and the fact our days are numbered, we may choose to do other things with our time than master an instinct seldom needed in modern life, to be sure, but by the same token no great hindrance either.

That seems eminently rational to me.

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<sup>1</sup> To be accurate, they led us onwards and upwards *where they survived*. These early intrepids would have been male and by that fact, since one man can impregnate many women, expendable. There are good reasons why women are on the whole more cautious than men. Both ends of the risk taking spectrum have their purpose.