

Teamwork Makes the Dream Work

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Introduction

Sometimes a pat on the back is all you need. Any time I am struggling with a task or activity, a simple “you got this!” can be the difference between giving up or not. Whether someone is cheering on the sidelines, helping with a homework problem, listening to a rant, or helping pick out an outfit for a date, small demonstrations of support enhance relationships. Consistent demonstrations of support, grand or not, create an understanding of appreciation and love in close relationships, which can help people accomplish feats of all kinds. Partners need support, especially in stressful situations. Stressful situations form the basis for *Fear Factor*. *Fear Factor* is a competition-style reality show that ran on MTV from 2001 to 2012. Individual contestants, siblings, best friends, couples, and more combinations compete and face commonly held fears to win prize money (“*Fear Factor*”). Scholars across multiple disciplines provide commentary on interpersonal communication in normal settings, but they lack commentary on interpersonal communication under the effect of more extreme emotions, including fear. Can *Fear Factor* be used to add knowledge to the field of interpersonal communication? I say, yes. Due to its fear-inducing qualities, *Fear Factor* reveals much about the contestants and their strength in communicating to each other. The show *Fear Factor* introduces emotionally charged, stress-inducing, and fearful situations to its contestants, and only those contestants who use consistent, efficient, and effective interpersonal communication succeed at the tasks.

I will first outline what interpersonal communication is and how it applies to *Fear Factor*. Then I will discuss what kind of communicative support enhances close relationships. I will also explain the basic tenets of fear and which specific type of fear

Fear Factor tries to elicit from its contestants, and finally, I will use several episodes as case studies to specifically demonstrate what methods of interpersonal communication lead to success, as well as examples that lead to failure.

Interpersonal Communication

Before I define interpersonal communication, I must first describe the type of relationships we see in *Fear Factor*. The contestants fall into three groups: 1) romantic couples, which include dating couples, married couples, and sometimes couples who are on and off in their relationship or broken up completely; 2) friendship pairings; 3) and familial pairings. These relationships are interpersonal relationships, which *Reflect and Relate: An Introduction to Interpersonal Communication* defines as “the emotional, mental, and physical involvements that you forge with others through communication” (McCornack 36). These contestants know each other before coming on the show, and by engaging in interpersonal communication, the contestants further develop their relationships with each other. Also, McCornack states that “interpersonal communication changes the participants’ thoughts, emotions, behavior, and relationships” (21). Therefore, due to interpersonal communication’s ability to influence behavior, the communication the *Fear Factor* contestant pairings exchange throughout the tasks can either help or hurt their chances of success. Due to the time constraint of most of the tasks on *Fear Factor*, effective interpersonal communication skills are imperative to performing well under the pressure from the time and the fear the contestants might be experiencing. I argue if a partner supports their partner and communicates that effectively, the chances of success are higher, compared to a situation in which someone uses ineffective communication, like berating.

Interpersonal relationships foster support between two people and contribute to how that support plays a role in winning *Fear Factor* tasks. In “Skilled Support Within Intimate Relationships,” Tracy A. Revenson states that “intimate dyadic relationships are the primary source of support and capitalization for most individuals, and support is very frequent within such relationships (qtd. in Rafaeli and Gleason 21). The intimacy in these dyadic, or paired, relationships enhances the ability of each partner to support the other. *Fear Factor* creates a high level of stress between the competing pair, which may cause normal communication methods to break down. Only those who can maintain consistent, supportive methods of communication will succeed.

There are different support types between partners, and Pamela Regan in *Close Relationships* describes six different support types—forms of interpersonal communication—that partners provide when in need. The two relevant to *Fear Factor* are emotional and appraisal support. Emotional support consists of warmth and concern. For example, “You’re important to me” (Regan 155). Though all support types are helpful, emotional support fosters an especially strong feeling of closeness, well-being, and positive outcomes between partners (Regan 157). More consistent with the communication in the show is appraisal support, otherwise known as esteem support. This support type builds self-worth and goes hand in hand with emotional support (Regan 155). Examples of appraisal support include, “I know you’ll figure it out” and “you’ll get through this” (Regan 156). Emotional support relies on the existing relationship between partners, while appraisal support focuses on elevating one partner’s esteem. These matter in *Fear Factor* because the contestants often engage in both of these support types when competing in the tasks. It is perfectly normal to hear “You got this!” or “Go! Go! Go!” when watching the show. The tasks’ high energy level and time constraints contribute to the urgency in this support communication. I argue that

consistent use of the mixture of emotional and appraisal support are necessary to contestants winning and beating other contestant pairings. Though non-verbal methods of support, like high-fives or hugs, are important, I will focus on verbal support communication.

To further bolster my argument, in “You Can’t Always Give What You Want: The Challenge of Providing Social Support to Low Self-Esteem Individuals,” the authors express that there are ways of supporting that are helpful, including “expressing care, concern, interest, and affection,” which adds to the definition of emotional support (Marigold et al. 57). However, certain kinds of support are deemed “almost always unhelpful,” including criticism of and putting blame on a partner (Marigold et al. 57). Scholars in many different fields, including psychology and communication, recognize similar definitions of emotional, appraisal, and social support that benefit and hurt close intimate relationships.

Nevertheless, problems arise when two people infer different messages from the same collection of words. For example, if a person yells at their partner, “Go! Go! Go,” the partner may take that as appraisal support: “My partner trusts me and is encouraging me to get through the task.” In contrast, the partner may also take that message as, “My partner does not believe in me and does not think I can pull my weight.” The difference between those two inferences is vast. Though some messages may be lost in inference, I still maintain my argument that in *Fear Factor*, consistent emotional and other support increases closeness between partners and success in tasks. Next, I will discuss how *Fear Factor* creates such a need for efficient and effective interpersonal communication.

Fear

Fear is the premise of *Fear Factor*. Threats of harm arouse fear in many different animals, including human beings (Ekman 152). Paul Ekman in *Emotions Revealed* discusses how fear can be present within all people, learned or unlearned. Sometimes fears can be developed for no rational reason, and other times, it can be a stimulus naturally within people (153). Consequently, “it requires a well-developed capacity for compassion to respect, feel sympathetic toward, and patiently reassure someone who is afraid of something of which we are not afraid” (Ekman 153). *Fear Factor* involves people with different fears already ingrained within them, whether they learned the fear throughout their life or naturally are afraid of it. Partners with differing fears affect the performance of the team in different tasks because one partner might feel no fear of, for example, heights, but the other partner suffers a debilitating fear of heights. Whether it be bugs, rats, small spaces, heights, or other stimuli, fear affects all people. *Fear Factor* uses this knowledge to create the most dreadful tasks for its contestants. Also, fearful situations may propel people into “hiding and fleeing,” which could mean quitting a task in *Fear Factor* (Ekman 153). With *Fear Factor*, I surmise that the personal relationship contributes to the reduction of the freezing, hiding, or fleeing responses to fear, therefore creating a better chance of success at overcoming this fear.

Each task involved in each episode of the show elicits fear from the contestants by using commonly held phobias to make up the tasks. From watching multiple episodes from each season, I can attest that *Fear Factor* generally uses heights; certain animals, usually some type of bug or rodent; and water to elicit fear from the contestants. The potential psychological effects of these tasks trigger a need for the partner’s support during the task. Paul L. Gower in the *Psychology of Fear* details different components, varieties, stimuli, and determinants that contribute to fear’s complexity. Gower then discusses phobias, which he lists under the category of “Fear

Related Syndromes” and defines as “an irrational, wild fear that is capable to conceal the reasonable thoughts of a person” (32). Phobias are necessary to discuss when analyzing *Fear Factor* due to the purpose of the show, which is to elicit as much fear as possible in a short amount of time during a task. Contestant pairings must be aware of how their fear differs between them, so they can recognize when the other will be in most need of support.

Case Studies

In Season 6 Episode 16, “Flying High/Junkyard Canine Attack/Vertical Bus Drop,” Todd and Jeanette, friends and the winners, engage in both emotional and appraisal support as their primary means of interpersonal communication. In Todd and Jeanette’s first task, they have to search through a pit of mud for hidden containers. Throughout this physically arduous process, both contestants aim to support the other. Todd repeats “Keep trudging” and “Attagirl!” to his partner, showing, through appraisal support, that he believes in her ability to complete this task. Jeanette reacts by maintaining her focus, not letting the time ticking stress her out. Getting that consistent approval from Todd helps her push herself mentally to get through the task. Using positive language during these high-intensity tasks is imperative to the success of the pairing, and without his support, I do not believe that she would have worked as hard and as quickly to sift through the mud. He gave her the extra nudge to finish the job. They both engage in emotional and appraisal support throughout the rest of the tasks, which leads them to take home the money.

Season 4 Episode 25, “Tumbler Transfer/Grab and Grind/Tanker Truck Flag Build,” demonstrates another pairing with strong, consistent, interpersonal communication. Siblings Erica Olivarez and Fredo Marquez compete against three other

sibling pairings for the win. In the first task two large tubes with square holes scattered throughout are suspended high above the ocean. Erica and Fredo must run back and forth across these tubes, narrowly avoiding falling through the square holes, to pass each other flags. A stressful task for most, Erica struggled with getting to the edge of the tube due to her fear of heights. She could not confidently place her feet at the rim of the tube, but Fredo recognized this fear in his sister, and his communication demonstrates this awareness. Almost as a mantra, Fredo repeats, "You're good. You're good." Erica continues to run across the tube with this support. In the final task Fredo tells Erica, "The money's in your pocket. We just got to do this first." His communication techniques exude confidence, positivity, and comfort. Fredo's interpersonal communication skills help create a successful partnership with his sister, and the show's host, Joe Rogan, notices by saying, "He's really good at being supportive and encouraging." No other pair in this episode match Fredo and Erica's level of effective communication, and we learn a lot from Fredo in this episode. His support carried his partner to the end, and without it, it is not certain if they would have been the champions.

Continuing with a close analysis of *Fear Factor*, Season 5, Episode 10, "Dual Heli Disc/ Spider Head Game/Sinking Counter Balance," also demonstrates how providing strong emotional support leads certain contestants to finish a task. This episode poses three tasks. In the first task the sibling pairs stand handcuffed on a small disk, suspended from a helicopter, and they must pull up a rope from the bottom of the disks, unlock themselves, and jump in the water to stop the clock. In the second task, the siblings must put their heads in two conjoining square boxes that are filled with spiders. The siblings must transfer keys to each other, while the spiders are crawling all over them and biting them. The third task presents an underwater challenge, with both siblings swimming in a pool to unclip weights from the bottom. The fastest time in all of these tasks wins, and

the prize is fifty thousand dollars. I will focus on the second and third tasks with brother-sister pairs, Chip and Kelly Bromley and Mitchel and Jennifer Tannis. Mitch and Jennifer Tannis dominate the second task from an interpersonal communication standpoint. When *Fear Factor* host Joe Rogan removes the covering to the conjoined boxes filled with spiders of all sizes, Jennifer bursts into tears. The other contestants look fearful of the dreaded boxes, but Jennifer is visibly agitated. She expresses that spiders are “the one thing I’m terrified about.” Jennifer admits her phobia of spiders before she has to approach the boxes. The other contestants now have a hope that Jennifer will call it quits and not compete because of her fear. When the time comes for Jennifer and Mitch to put their heads into the boxes, Jennifer constantly repeats, “I can’t do it,” but Mitch draws on his relationship with Jennifer to encourage her to participate in the task. He softly but firmly repeats, “Look at me” over and over to persuade Jennifer to come out of her “I can’t do it” mantra. He then uses a more forceful tone to push Jennifer to put her head into the box fully so they can participate, saying, “Jen, push up here and look up here right now.” Though they did not win the money at the end, Jennifer and Mitch complete the task in the second-fastest time. Their effective interpersonal communication helped them complete the task Jennifer feared most. Jennifer and Mitch reveal their closeness during this difficult encounter. Relying on the trust she places in Mitch, Jennifer participates despite her almost debilitating phobia. Mitch’s consistent appraisal support helps Jennifer conquer her fear, and Mitch’s clear, verbal, affirmations provide efficient interpersonal communication to finish the task.

Participating in the same episode are Chip and Kelly, the winners. Throughout the entire episode, Chip and Kelly maintain a cool and collected demeanor. Unlike Jennifer, both Chip and Kelly do not experience any debilitating fear throughout this episode, which helps them navigate the tasks. In task three they decide on a strategy before

beginning the task, choosing to remove two weights at a time from the bottom of the pool, as well as dividing the number of weights they remove equally between them. Their clear and decisive communication throughout the task leads to Chip and Kelly taking the win and the fifty thousand dollars in prize money. Chip and Kelly do not engage in clear signs of emotional or appraisal support, but they discuss what they need from each other. They show effective interpersonal communication that works for them. Both Jennifer and Mitch and Chip and Kelly demonstrate how intimacy in their close, personal relationships creates a foundation of trust that enhances interpersonal communication during *Fear Factor* tasks.

Fear Factor also demonstrates partnerships that are not successful in completing the tasks in the time allotted. Sometimes contestants fail in tasks because of bad luck or a phobia that prevents them from being able to complete a task. Other times, the lack of communication and support between partners creates a rift that fosters negative attitudes. One example of this lack is also in Season 6 Episode 16, "Flying High/Junkyard Canine Attack/Vertical Bus Drop." Contestants Jacki and Matt, who are dating on and off, show signs of a lack of emotional support between them. Their aggressive and negative language towards each other ultimately leads to their demise in the last task. The first task, as I mentioned earlier, involves each contestant digging through a mud pit. When Matt is struggling in cutting the rope that will allow Jacki to search her mud pit, she repeatedly yells, "Come on! Harder!" Her language demonstrates she wants him to finish his part of the task faster, so she can go. There was no support in her language, only fear of losing the task. When Jacki starts her search for the box in her mud pit, she suddenly realizes that she cannot find it. She stressfully calls that she cannot find the box, and Matt berates her by saying, "You're killing me!" Wow, way to support your partner. In the final task, one partner must make their way down a ladder suspended high above the ground.

When the partners meet each other, they will run to a pile of sand and dig through it to find the pieces they need to stop the clock. The whole time Matt works on his rope to get down the ladder, Jacki practically screams at him, "Come on, baby!" Her loud and incessant communication only adds to the stressful nature of the task. She does not calm her partner, who is already frustrated with how he is performing the task. Jacki and Matt's poor skills in interpersonal communication, especially with how little emotional or appraisal support they exchange with each other, demonstrate how some types of support can be unhelpful and contribute to them losing.

Conclusion

Anne Spencer says it best: "Good communication is as stimulating as black coffee, and just as hard" ("Anne Spencer Quotes"). Having strong interpersonal communication skills leads to a greater understanding of the people close to you and of how to succeed in tasks involving people closest to you. Contestant pairings in *Fear Factor* have a strong personal connection before coming on the show, which helps with trusting in the communication they receive from each other. From personal experience in stressful situations, I know I would listen more attentively to someone who knows me well and cares about me. It is natural to be willing to respond to someone with whom you have a strong personal connection. Though intimacy between contestant pairings helps with the level of support and trust between the partners, effective interpersonal communication is the ultimate factor in succeeding in the *Fear Factor* tasks. When looking at *Fear Factor*, we learn that constant support in stressful or fearful connections is imperative to succeeding.

Why does this matter? Learning and being able to communicate effectively with other people, whether you have a relationship with them or not, can be valuable. People

have to interact with others every day to get what they want, even if it's something as simple as ordering a coffee from a barista at their local coffee shop. Being proficient in interpersonal communication leads to a higher chance of success in your preferred outcome. There is much to learn from pop culture about interpersonal communication, but I focus on *Fear Factor* due to the stressful nature of the tasks assigned. I urge scholars and other researchers to focus on how different emotions affect interpersonal communication, including fear, anger, sadness, and more. *Fear Factor* provides solid, repetitive evidence that effective interpersonal communication can help partners succeed even in the most stressful situations. Scholars can help partners learn this skill and successfully make the transition from communicating effectively in calm situations to communicating effectively in stressful situations by studying partner pairs that show success under extreme conditions and delineating strategies that other partner pairs can learn and use in their own relationships. In all my research, I found a lot of information on fear, interpersonal communication, and support, but I did not find anything on how these topics influence each other. People may experience diverse emotions every day and understanding how to alter our communication to accommodate people's different, complex, emotions would be very valuable to all people. Basically, communication that works in a calm setting may not work in another, more stressful, setting.

Also, fear remains an emotion that affects all people. *Fear Factor*, while sometimes trivial, presents common fears and phobias in a manner that desensitizes people to these fears. People should push themselves to discover what scares them and do their best to overcome it, because fear can often be debilitating. *Fear Factor* sets up a platform for people to discover more about themselves and their relationships with people closest to them, and I think that is powerful. Who knew that a reality competition show could teach

you so much? Learn more about how you communicate and how you manage fear. Watch *Fear Factor*.

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