



Threshold

Why some of us freeze off the deck—and how to push through this common fear

Story By Ula Chrobak | Illustrations by Sarah Nicholson

I was almost there. Only 15 feet of climbing stood between me and the anchors of *Tangerine Dream*, a 90-foot 5.10d at the Riverside Quarry in Southern California. The first part of the route romps up blocky 5.7, leading into a short section on flat edges and a later crux on sidepulls and underclings.

I had climbed easily to the last crux. Conveniently, there's a large, incut corner here with enough room to stand and rest while you ponder the sequence above. For the next move, I needed to grab an undercling and smear my feet high. But this meant leaving the corner. Every time I crept out and sized up the move, I inadvertently glanced down and was struck by how high I was—about 75 feet—and my stomach dropped. I felt 75 miles above my friends, my belayer, and safety. Noise from the nearby freeway grew louder, as did the echoing calls of cliff swallows. Although I was in the shade, the air felt warm and stuffy. The bleak surrounding landscape—a gravelly, graded lot sprinkled with scraggly plants, trash, and the occasional abandoned car—mirrored my mindset.

I eyed an X-marked block nearby, worrying about rock stability. I re-checked my knot. My last draw, about five feet below on a slight overhang and a little to the side—meant a clean fall, if a bit swingy. I stepped out to make the move, huffing and heart thumping, but quickly gave up and crawled back into my corner. I imagined falling, a limb clipping the undulating granite wall, me flipping upside down. I thought about how if my rope or harness or belayer spontaneously failed, I would definitely die in a groundfall from this height.

Friends encouraged me: *The move's easy—bring your feet up. The fall's safe.* But my anxiety had dried up my motivation. I was too scared. I lowered. I had let myself down—again—another climb gone awry thanks to my outsized fear.





LEFT: Ula Chrobak stretching her comfort zone on *Delusions* (5.11c), Frustration Creek, San Bernardino Mountains, California. BELOW: The author getting more comfortable with spending time up high.

The thin red line

After nine years of climbing—I’ve never taken more than three weeks off since I took up the sport at a climbing gym in Riverside, California, in late 2010—I’d think that I wouldn’t get as scared at heights. In fact, close to the ground—usually 30 feet and under—I feel fine. I’m flowing, making big moves, and unlocking technical sequences. But above that line, my confidence dies. My breathing gets rough, my movements grow choppy, and my fingers death-grip the holds.

Though I’ve never had an accident that would warrant distrust in my gear or belayers, my anxiety over heights and falling has been a constant. And it’s much worse outside where I’ve taken my share of “practice” falls. Most of this time, I’ve lived in California—moving between my hometown of Riverside, Davis, and Santa Cruz—where I’m a frequent gym climber who drives out to Bishop and Red Rock on weekends, not to mention the many local crags and boulderfields.

Although I realize it’s generally safer to fall from up high, because it limits the risk of groundfall, exposure worsens my fear. There are other ironies, too: I feel better on slabs, with their cheese-grater falls, than on overhangs, with their clean drops into space. In the latter scenario I start racing to beat the pump, and this haste ratchets up my anxiety.

My fear has stifled my progression. As a V4/V5 boulderer, I should be climbing 5.12 by now, but it’s not possible when I still freeze up on 5.10s. As frustrating as this irrational fear is, I know I’m not alone. While climbing culture and media tend to celebrate the bold, many of us don’t find taking falls fun, and stress over the possibility of airtime.

While I was working on this story, I learned that a friend of a friend had similar issues, and would even downclimb crux sequences to avoid taking falls. This was Sarah Brengosz, 29, a climber of 20 years living in Fayetteville, West Virginia. She likens her super-human downclimbing ability to that of a mom who suddenly develops incredible strength to



PHOTOS BY HARMONY HAFT (2)

lift a car off her trapped baby: “I could summon that,” she says. Brennosz had climbed 5.12s and even a 5.13a, but usually through a long projecting period with a lot of downclimbing and stick-clipping: “I only sent things when there was no fucking way I could have fallen,” she says.

Even pros have to work with fear. If she’s projecting a new route or on El Capitan for the first time in a given year, Beth Rodden says she tends to have anxiety. “It’s usually like a racing-thoughts-type thing,” she says, in which she starts worrying about how a potential fall will play out or whether her belayer is paying attention. In these situations, she adds, “I’ll start breathing more heavily or chalking up more incessantly.”

“In our sport, admitting you have fear can be seen as a weakness, but I think that everybody has it, and it’s just in varying degrees,” says Rodden. “The more we can put some normalcy around the fear, the easier time people will have dealing with it.”

Fear in fact is normal. We’re wired to identify and avoid threatening situations. “Our threat response is universal—every human, every species, has a response to being threatened,” says Margee Kerr, a sociologist at the University of Pittsburgh and author of *Scream: Chilling Adventures in the Science of Fear*. “But what that [response] looks like and what it’s triggering can change, based on time and place and person.”

Kerr explains that all emotions can be parsed by two criteria: level of arousal, and whether that arousal is good or bad. The chemicals surging through the body at a haunted house or when your friends throw you a surprise birthday party are very similar—in both situations,

there’s a high level of “good” arousal. When we choose to do something that scares us, we feel good because a little fear forces us to focus—our evolutionary machinery is telling us to heed a potential threat—and we gain a sense of accomplishment upon facing that scary thing. But a scary experience crosses over into “bad” arousal when we lose our sense of control. For me, when I’m climbing, a little bit of fear makes me focused and my movements precise. But past that threshold, I feel out of control and start panicking. “We no longer feel like we’re in the driver’s seat,” says Kerr. “We get to the point where we just can’t think clearly.” Some people are more inclined to tolerate and even seek out novel or scary experiences—what psychologists call “sensation seekers,” a trait that Kerr says is pretty stable across people’s lives. But the rest of us, and probably myself included, are “stress sensitive.” Some of our differences in sensation-seeking are encoded in the amygdala, a tiny structure in the brain that—among other things—interprets how we should respond to possible threats. If you’ve watched *Free Solo* (or read the related August 2016 *Nautilus* magazine story), you’ll recall that Alex Honnold’s amygdala is far less active than the average person’s: Most of us have much more active fear centers in our brains than Honnold.

While rock climbing tends to get lumped in with other “extreme” sports like skydiving, we’re not really sensation seekers, says the UK-based clinical psychologist and climber Rebecca Williams. “Climbers are not really like that; we much prefer being in control.”

In 2018, I reached out to Williams for help. Williams has been coach-

Rebecca Williams’s Top 3 Rock-Relaxation Tips

01 Diaphragmatic breathing

Next time you feel anxious on the wall, listen to your breathing—chances are, it’s fast and shallow. Stress causes such breathing, and continuing this panting makes stress even worse.

As an antidote, Williams recommends diaphragmatic breathing. To practice, start by lying on your back, one hand on your chest and the other on your belly. Spend a minute observing how far each hand moves. If your belly hand moves more, great! If your chest travels the most, try to move the breath lower down. “Ideally, our relaxed breathing is from the diaphragm—like a balloon inflating and deflating inside your stomach,” says Williams. The most important part of this practice is the outbreath, which should be slightly longer than the inbreath, lasting three to five seconds. Once you nail the lying-down exercise, check in with your breath throughout the day. Then work this practice into your climbing, taking advantage of an easier section or rest stance to deliberately slow your breath.

02 Progressive muscle relaxation

Shoulders raised, fists clenched, jaw tight—the “look” of stress. “Climbing encourages you to do that [posture],” says Williams. “For tricking the brain into feeling relaxed, we want to release that tension.”

To do so, while on the ground focus on tensing up for a few seconds then releasing the shoulders, biceps, forearms, fists, quads, glutes,

and calves, doing each muscle group one at a time.

Then look for opportunities to release tension on the rock. While holding onto a jug, grip super-hard for a few seconds, then relax until you’re using just enough strength to stay on. The result of intentionally relaxing your muscles, says Williams, is less stress, reduced exertion, and more-relaxed, flowing movement.

03 Mindfulness

“[Mindfulness] is paying purposeful attention to the present moment, without judgement,” says Williams—and it’s a practice that can lead to performance gains, by bringing you out of racing thoughts and into the present.

You can practice mindfulness by the more traditional means of meditation or yoga. But if that’s not your thing, it can really be done anywhere. The first step is to observe your internal chatter and realize that your thoughts are just thoughts—you don’t necessarily need to have a reaction. Then, refocus your attention on the task at hand. On the rock, tune in to the holds in front of you, the color and texture of the rock, or the sound of your breath. Become curious. Think, *How might this stance feel if I shifted my weight differently?* rather than judging a move to be too hard or a hold to be too small.





Mark McGwire stays loose and trusts the system on *Land of the Lorax* (5.12d), Banks Cave, Nevada.

ing climbers for 14 years through her business, Smart Climbing. According to Williams, who has been climbing for over 20 years herself, the problem is that many climbers—myself included—are doing it wrong. We take practice falls at the gym thinking that these will fix our fear. But, according to how fear actually works, this doesn't make sense.

Although a lot of fear is conditioned early on, it remains malleable as we age—albeit to a lesser extent. In my case, I may have unintentionally warped my fear in the wrong direction, Williams points out. Every time I have a fearful experience up high, I'm reinforcing a pathway in my brain that connects "heights" with "scary." So while you'd think that taking practice falls at the gym would help, it's not that simple. If you're tense when you fall, that reinforces the connection in your brain between falling and fear. Also, adds Williams, practice falls aren't really falls, because we're letting go at a predetermined point. "Falling practice is usually jumping, and jumping isn't equivalent to falling," she says. "Because if you jump, it's in your control."

During a FaceTime call, I explain to Williams that the idea of taking an unplanned fall, especially outside, is terrifying. I've even felt bad while top roping, and once panicked to tears in Colorado on the Piedra River's *Wild Hops* (5.12a), a crimped sandstone route with slippery footholds. With each step up, I felt like I might slide off unexpectedly.

Unexpected. Unplanned. Williams asks if I often find myself in leadership roles. I do—even if I don't necessarily want to. In school, I was the person who did most of the work in group projects. Now, I orga-

nize weekend climbing trips with friends. Williams notes the contrast between this aspect of my personality and the fact that limit climbing requires letting go of control, since we never really know where that threshold is until we push up against it—risking a fall. This all ties into the idea of trust, too. I did all the work in class projects in part because I didn't trust others to do a good job. I don't necessarily distrust my friends to organize a trip, but I know what to expect if I take the lead. I trust myself to stick my landing in a bouldering fall, but it's harder to trust another person to catch me on a rope.

"The picture I'm getting is that it's something about the unpredictability—being in control is important to you," Williams tells me. This is common among her clients. My fear, she adds, is less about the fall itself and more about losing control. When I'm up high, I realize that I need to let go of some control and trust my gear and belayer, and this scares me. "We can't change your personality or who you are, so we need to work with that," Williams concludes. I'll need to accept that I'm stress sensitive, and start the slow process of re-programming my fear.

Systematic desensitization

One of the most accepted approaches in treating fear and phobias is systematic desensitization. Here, the sufferer constructs a hierarchy, starting at the least scary version of their feared object, creature, or situation and training themselves to relax in its presence. Once their anxiety to one iteration subsides, they move step by step up the hierarchy

OVERCOME YOUR FEAR OF FALLING

Is your fear of "airtime" keeping you from climbing your best? Then check out our upcoming AIM Adventure U course *Overcome Your Fear of Falling*, launching December 16. Taught by mental-training guru Arno Ilgner, this 5-week course has all the skills, drills, and mental tips and tricks to help you work through your fear of whipping. [CLIMBING.COM/OVERCOMEFEAR](https://climbing.com/overcomefear)



to reach their true fear. So, if someone has a fear of spiders, they might start with an image of a spider. When the image causes no anxiety, they move up, until eventually they're able to hold a tarantula.

For me, systematic desensitization means spending time up high, just above my "comfort zone." So, at that 30-foot threshold, I should stop—either by hanging or finding a stance—and be present with the height. Williams advises me to look around, take deep, slow breaths ("diaphragmatic breathing"—see sidebar, p.63), and try to relax.

As Williams puts it, dealing with fear is like stretching a rubber band. To expand my comfort zone, I need to slowly stress that band without breaking it. Imagine anxiety on a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being totally relaxed and 10 being redlined. You want, with each step of systematic desensitization, to hit the middle of that scale and stay there until you start to feel more at ease. "You rarely want to feel discomfort over 6 or 7—then you're getting into panic and it's more survival mode," Williams says. Thus my homework is to make my breathing relaxed and ease muscle tension on the rock, tricking my brain into thinking I'm more relaxed than I actually am—going no higher than 6 or 7 in situations that would usually push me to 9 or 10. Over time, this work will help to train a new pathway in my brain that says heights are OK.

Williams also suggests mindfulness. The best I've felt climbing is when I've become so absorbed in a sequence that I forget to second-guess myself or panic. In an odd twist, by becoming more experienced at climbing and thus not having to think about moves as much as in my early years, I've freed up more mental energy for worry. So, the solution is to try to regain that curious, open, and interested mindset—cultivating mindfulness. Williams describes the practice as "paying purposeful attention to the present moment, without judgment."

"Mindfulness is definitely the long game," she says, noting it may be harder to learn than breathing techniques and muscle relaxation. But, "the good thing about those practices is they can be done anywhere at

any time." On the route, you can redirect your attention to the color and texture of the rock, the sequence, or the sensations in your body. In day-to-day life, you can observe your thoughts, and check in on your breathing and posture while sitting in traffic or brushing your teeth.

Delusions

During my first trip after working with Williams, my climbing partner Leah and I go to Frustration Creek, a small mountain canyon in Southern California incised with a trickling stream and lined with gray, fine-grained rock. It's a warm October day, but the cliff gets afternoon shade. It's got the characteristics of a gritty locals' crag—visitors report rockfall, rattlesnakes, and stolen cars on Mountain Project. But it's also home to *Delusions* (5.11c), one of the best 5.11s in my area.

We warm up on two 5.8s, both about 50 feet tall, climbing blocky edges, corners, and flakes. In keeping with my instructions, I take my time, going against my tendency to climb quickly to minimize time spent up high—to just get to the anchors and get it over with. One of the warm-ups is on the side of an arête, and the exposure stirs up anxiety. Normally, I'd move fast and avoid taking in the view. This time, I instead slow down, trying to absorb myself in picking out the cleanest, most flowing sequences. I take slow breaths and occasionally crack a joke with Leah. I still feel nervous up high, but not uncomfortable.

After I warm up, I take a shot at *Delusions*—the route is mostly perma-drawn, so even if I'm scared it's easy to back down. I move up the first few bolts without much difficulty, covering an easy slab, a small roof, and a traverse on big flakes. Then things get steep—the next section is a traverse on sidepulls and demands techy footwork. I go bolt-to-bolt, hanging at each clip, taking care to slow my breathing and relax when I rest, staying conscious of not pushing myself into panic. Climbing on sight here, even if I could will myself to try, would almost certainly bring my anxiety up to 8, 9, or 10.

At the end of the traverse, the route moves up columnar blocks. Here, I get lost, and have trouble deciphering how to use the cryptic crimps and edges that scar the columns. And there are few obvious footholds—mostly just smooth slabs. I try moving up, but get frustrated and pumped, and—unable to downclimb—take a small fall. Now, my stomach's dropping, I'm shaking, and my breathing is shallow—I've bumped up to 8 or 9 on that anxiety scale. It's too much. I ask to be lowered.

Taking control of failure

It's turning out to be a lot of work to not be miserable doing something that's supposed to be fun. It even begs the question: *What's the point?*

A lot of Williams' clients are high achievers in their careers, but she says, "If the climbing is not going well, then they feel terrible about everything." I've had similar experiences. When I'm not happy with my climbing, my life as a whole can feel stagnant and unrewarding. Like so many of us, I want to see progression in my climbing; it helps me stay connected to the sport.

So why, among so many other measures of self-worth, is climbing so powerful? No one really knows, but Williams speculates it could have something to do with climbing being a relatively small community—it feels very public when we aren't climbing well. We might even feel ashamed if we're seen as wimpy—as not going for it or "logging big air"—in a culture that celebrates risk and machismo. Also, some of our desire to keep going to the cliffs is, it seems, anxiety itself. "In rock

climbing, it seems the anxiety's so central to the whole reason for doing it," says Tim Woodman, a sport psychologist at Bangor University in Wales. Woodman has studied the differences between the motivations of athletes of many "high-risk" sports, including mountaineering, extreme skiing, and skydiving.

Climbers, more so than other high-risk athletes, seek to address "the deep-seated demons that lie within each of us," Woodman says. In his surveys, climbers and mountaineers tended to describe a nonspecific anxiety in their day-to-day life and difficulty identifying and discussing emotions. Facing a real, concrete fear, even with safety precautions in place, helps them hinge their anxiety on something more concrete—risk of injury and death. In overcoming their fears on the rock, climbers feel a sense of mastery over their messier emotions.

"I go into this new environment, which is climbing, and now I understand why I'm scared, because I think if I fall I'm going to die—so now I have a sharp focus on why I feel anxious," says Woodman. "I get over the fear, I overcome that fear, I feel really good about myself. I go back to everyday life with a renewed sense of self and a confidence."

Over the course of weekend-long workshop with Williams in 2015, Rauni Higson, 49, of Wales, realized what had been holding her back. It wasn't fear tied to climbing itself; instead, Williams pointed out to Higson that she wasn't trying her hardest. When faced with a hard move, she'd talk herself out of it: "I would say, *This is beyond me*, and get myself out of the situation—I was constantly backing off in case I did some-

5 Surefire Ways to Manage Fear

01 It's OK to be scared

While teaching a women's clinic in Berkeley, California, Beth Rodden noticed a change when she told participants it's OK to be afraid. "Giving the women permission to say that they're scared was the biggest breakthrough for them," says Rodden. "That gave them so much confidence, and then they were able to break through barriers."

02 Find a supportive partner

Hilary Sherman, a 37-year-old cell biologist and climber living in New Hampshire, says you should never feel bad about being picky with your belayers. Her husband, Jed, has supported her through her journey from struggling to lead 5.9 due to fear to whipping on (and sending) 5.13s. "It's not just about the good catch; [a good belayer] knows how you move and knows how to talk to you," she says. A supportive, encouraging partner can go a long way in making you feel more secure up high.

03 Baby steps

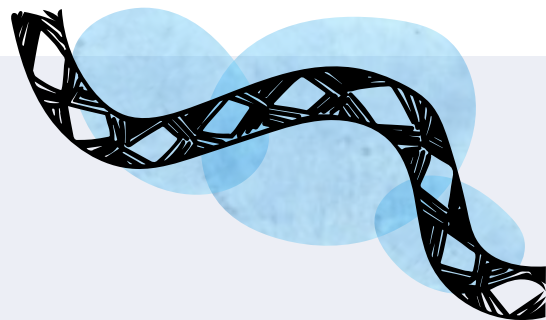
Brengosz has made big strides since her downclimbing days. She added falling practice into her routine, starting simply with letting go "basically on top rope" and—over two years—eventually working up to leading dynamic routes that can't be downclimbed. "Being brave is a muscle you have to exercise constantly," says Brengosz. Find your personal barrier—be it heights, exposure, or falling—and slowly, incrementally exercise your bravery muscle.

04 Introduce absurdity

"If you're climbing and start spiraling out, [think of] something ridiculous—when that is reconsolidated as an experience, as a memory and in your body, it's not all negative," says Kerr, who calls the technique "fun-scary" and a helpful way to recondition fear. Rodden will often sing when she feels nervous: "I've caught myself singing Bob Marley's 'Everything's Gonna Be Alright.'"

05 Make a choice

"Our sense of agency doesn't have to do with what kind of control we actually have; it's the inner experience of how much control we *feel* we have," says Kerr. In climbing, making the choice to push forward—once we've assessed that we're safe, despite our anxiety—puts us back in the driver's seat. On her 2003 send of *Sarchasm* (5.14a) in Rocky Mountain National Park, Colorado, Rodden recalls feeling pumped and nervous about a fall near the top, nearly grabbing a quickdraw. "Instead, I said to myself, *Why don't you just try? It's just one more move*," says Rodden. Adds Kerr, "Introducing the choice is what really makes [fear] more manageable."





Chrobak jumps for joy after an afternoon of exercising her bravery muscle.

thing amazing,” she says. “And then I could take control of the failure.”

With Williams’s coaching, Higson tweaked her breathing and body language on the rock and adopted a curious attitude, rather than one centered on success versus failure. A couple weeks later, Higson led her hardest route to-date. She’s seen a difference in her professional work, too. Higson’s a self-employed silversmith, and has to pitch her work to potential clients. While previously she’d come to meetings with an attitude of expecting to fail, “Now, I’m more committed, I give it everything, and I generally get more back,” Higson says.

Delusions, redux

On my second battle with *Delusions*, three weeks later, I don’t expect much. I was up until 2 a.m. the previous night and feel groggy. And, hanging out at the base waiting my turn, I watch a climber nearly miss the clip at the section that stumped me, his foot popping off a highstep on a sloping block. But I try not to think about that as I move through the first half, instead watching for key holds and trying to remember the movement. I take slow, deep breaths and feel a notable calm.

And then, when I reach that tricky section with the columns, my body takes over and moves through it. I find a solid clipping stance and squirm up the rest of the crimps into an undercling, and then power up to a jug, concluding the technical crux. I finish the route, albeit bolt-to-bolt for the steep upper portion, taking advantage of each hang to belly-breathe and relax. I’m surprised at how little I panic, and how I kind of blacked out through the crux and just got the job done.

Unfortunately, I moved to Colorado before I could redpoint *Delusions*. But I’ve taken Williams’s lessons with me as I explore the Front Range. In April—six months and dozens of pitches after I started this journey—I had a breakthrough. Warming up on a 5.9+ slab in Boulder Canyon, smearing my feet on the smooth granite, I thought, *I could fall here, and that’s OK*. I carried that mindset into my next route, *Free*

Willy (5.11a). Before the steep and tiring traverse at the top of the 70-foot route, I rested on a jug, relaxing my grip and taking deep breaths. Then I climbed across the rail, hands shaking from fatigue, and into the awkward mantel finish. It was my third send of the grade, and I’ve continued to tick more 5.11s since.

This progress doesn’t mean I’m totally cured, of course. I still have bad, anxiety-wracked days. But I know how to calm myself now, and I also know when it’s not worth it to push too hard and risk reversing my progress; sometimes, that means backing off a climb that’s below my physical limit. It’s going to take a while to fully resolve my fear, which has been strongly conditioned over nine years of climbing.

“It’s a lifelong work,” says Kerr. “A lot of it is just cultivating self-awareness.” And this self-awareness allows me to introduce a choice into every scary scenario. Every time I *gently* stretch my comfort zone by belly-breathing my way through a tall climb, I’m taking control of my situation and helping recondition my fear response. I’m learning to take this process at my own pace, one hold—and one bolt—at a time.

Ula Chrobak is a freelance environmental and outdoor journalist. Visit ulachrobak.com or Twitter @ulachrobak.

