

## **The Orlando Shooting: Conquering Fear**

More than a month has gone by since Omar Mateen opened fire killing 49 people and injuring at least 53 others in Pulse, the popular Orlando LGBT nightclub. The incident no longer commands 24/7 news coverage but the renewed awareness that we could be targeted simply because we are LGBT remains. In the wake of this awareness, it's easy to fall into fear.

Fear makes us vigilant. For our primitive ancestors, this was helpful. Vigilance helped them avoid becoming a tasty snack for hungry predators. Now, this life or death type of vigilance is not so useful. It can put us in a state of hyper-alertness so that we are constantly looking for danger. Physiologically, this causes us to tense our shoulders, tighten our guts and breathe more shallowly, which in turn causes us to be more anxious or afraid. It also makes us less present and less able to successfully defend ourselves or escape from danger because we are not able to think clearly and slows our response time.

But how do we stop being afraid?

First, we breathe. I'm serious. Slow, focused breathing is the antidote to fear. You can do this standing or sitting. If you are standing, bring your awareness to your feet. Rock slightly forward and back and then left and right to until you feel your weight balanced between the balls and heels of your feet. Then imagine sending roots down from the soles of your feet into the core of the earth. Next, lengthen your spine and roll your shoulders back and down. This will counter the tendency to have your shoulders hiked up towards your ears and curled forward. Let your arms hang comfortably by your side. Close your eyes or find something to focus on and bring your awareness to your breath. Notice the air coming in and going out of your nostrils or on the rise and fall of your belly. See if you can lengthen your exhale. Once you've gotten the hang of focusing on your breath, see if you feel your heart beat as you continue to watch your breath and feel your feet grounded. Do this every day for 3 to 5 minutes (of longer if you can). If you find your mind wandering, just gently bring your awareness back to your breath and start over.

To do the exercise sitting down, find a place to sit where your feet touch the floor or put a pillow under your feet so that they are connected to something. Lengthen your spine, roll your shoulders back and down and rest your hands on your legs. Notice the chair beneath you and imagine sending roots from your tailbone or the soles of your feet into the core of the earth and follow the directions above.

Second, let yourself be aware of your surroundings in this moment. Are you in danger? If you are, take a breath and get out of the danger zone. If you aren't in danger, you are safe. If you don't feel safe, keep breathing and remember a time when you felt truly safe. Perhaps it was in your grandmother's arms or in a quiet spot in the woods. Where ever it was, let yourself feel it as if it is happening now. Let yourself really feel what it feels like to feel safe and notice what safe feels like in your body.

If you can't do this or if you find yourself having persistent thoughts of being attacked or shot at, butterfly tapping may help. To do this, put your hands in front of you, crossing them, like a butterfly. It doesn't matter which hand is on top. Bring your hands to your chest, placing the heel of your bottom hand on your sternum, and your left thumb on the left inside collar bone point, your right thumb on the right inside collarbone point, and then gently tap your left collar

bone with your right middle three fingers and then right collar bone with your left middle three fingers, and continue tapping left and right while you imagine yourself successfully defending yourself, getting out of a dangerous situation, or simply being safe.

If none of this works, you might need to try taking a yoga, tai chi, or formal meditation class to train your body to relax. It seems paradoxical, but allowing yourself to feel safe actually makes you more able to successfully respond to potentially dangerous situations. The more you allow yourself to breathe and be in the present moment, the more in control of your life and your destiny you will be. The point of terrorism is to terrorize a group or society – to shut them down and cause them to make their lives smaller. Putting an end to terrorism is a political issue that requires massive resources, but refusing to take the bait and by staying present is how we, at an individual level, defeat terrorism, especially when it's roots lie in homophobia.

*To ask Regina a question, propose a column topic, read about her approach to counseling, or check out her books and other writing, go to: [www.ReginaSewell.com](http://www.ReginaSewell.com) . Her essay "Unequal Wedding" appears in **Untangling the Knot: Queer Voices on Marriage, Relationships, & Identity**, published by Ooligan Press.*