False Evidence Appearing Real (F.E.A.R.)?

In 1975, another tale surfaced of a man who'd got out of his car on safari to record some amazing footage of the 'king of the jungle'. He was killed by several lions. The trip of a lifetime turned into a nightmare before the eyes of his wife and children, including his two-year old son who cried helplessly from inside the vehicle. Tragic circumstances usually prevent us asking difficult questions. Years later, I have just one. Not, *Why did the man get out of the car?* but *Were the family inside the car 'afraid'?*

We have a tendency to use language terms incorrectly or interchangeably when they're closely linked (or just because it makes us feel better). We do this to get our message across easily. But what's the point if your conversations descend into chaotic misinterpretation every time you open your mouth? What do you want me to do? Do you want me to respond to what you said or what you meant?

Fear, stress and anxiety are some of those regularly misused words. Often because we have no idea what they *really* mean. You tell your boss you're stressed over a work deadline when you're actually anxious about being judged in front of others. You don't know the difference between stress and anxiety, but who cares as long as your boss recognises your distress and gives you the day off. 'Fear' is another word that overlaps with both 'stress' and 'anxiety'. But can you tell me the difference between them?

Don't be embarrassed if the answer is no. I surveyed a sample of international teachers and they couldn't do it either. This illustrates a very clear social problem. Everybody from students to public figures incorrectly bounce these words around in almost all conversations. If they realised how much this reinforces brain pathways to continue bad habits, would they still do it so recklessly? How can you possibly change anything if you don't know exactly what you're experiencing? The only alternative is to take a guess and hope for the best. So let's clear it up:

STRESS: *This is your **biological** RESPONSE e.g. racing heartbeat, erratic breathing, temperature rising, 'butterflies' in the stomach, (which is food digestion coming to a halt) etc. This enables us to get enough energy to the muscles when faced with a situation of PERCEIVED THREAT. It is our 'fight-or-flight' response.*

For instance, imagine being totally drained of energy after a 12-hour work shift. You're yards away from home and suddenly a massive dog starts barking and running towards you. Guess what: you suddenly have the energy to run. You're not going to stand there and let it bite you. A 'stressor' would be the thing that triggers the response; in this case seeing and hearing the dog.

ANXIETY: *This is a **mental feeling** and REACTION to experiencing or anticipating the biological stress response (e.g. unproductive thinking, crying, avoidance). It is a feeling that centres around concern and how you'll **cope** in a situation.*

For example, the exam's about to start. What if there's a question on the topics you avoided in your revision? It's too late now and you haven't prepared a plan B. You're unsure how you're going to concentrate. The feeling of being unprepared increases and the biological stress response pops up to say *hi* too.

FEAR: *This is an **emotion** designed to automatically trigger the biological 'fight-or-flight' response when faced with a PHYSICAL threat to our safety.*

Basically, to keep us away from *actual* danger so we don't accidently (or stupidly) get ourselves killed, lose a limb or poke our eye out. In terms of dealing with stress, you need to concentrate on how you're perceiving the EXTERNAL environment. How do you perceive things (the stressor) that produce your biological response? What is it *specifically* about flying (external) that makes your heart race? Can you change the way you look at it? If you don't perceive something as a stressor, you will not have a biological reaction.

Whereas to deal with anxiety, you need to concentrate on how you're perceiving your INTERNAL environment. How you perceive *your* ability to cope and remove the (anticipated) biological response. What *skills* do you have that can help you pass this Maths test? And if you're lacking the skills, can you get them? If you believe you have the skills to handle the situation, it will not result in the distressing feeling. Knowing these distinctions is vital if you're going to efficiently address adverse situations in your life. But our society has generally been ineffective at teaching us these differences. It doesn't educate us on what to do when things don't go to plan—and because of this, so many of us look for blame when the inevitable does go wrong.