

## Integration Ten

# AGERE CONTRA

“Do the thing you fear and the death of fear is certain.”

- Ralph Waldo Emerson

We all have fears, anxieties, and addictions in our lives, as well as things that we avoid. St. Ignatius labelled these stressors as “unfreedoms” that hold us back from a flourishing life. He recommended the practice of *agere contra* (meaning “to act against”) to free ourselves from these anxieties. Specifically, when you find an “unfreedom” in your life, you should act in the opposite manner and face these frustrations directly. For example, if you have a fear of asking for help, you should do the opposite of your fear and start asking for help repeatedly.

Fr. Edmund Lo, SJ, describes the practice [this way](#):

“We can be attached to patterns of behaviour that seemingly make us feel safer, be they our insecurities, doubts, or unwillingness to be pulled out of our comfort zones. They prevent us from living our lives fully in the way the Lord intends. When we live our lives in Spirit and in Truth, we live in a true freedom. *Agere contra* helps us to confront those things that hold us back from such freedom; better yet, it helps us to grow into this freedom.”

**Your Integration this week is to work through a specific fear or anxiety through direct confrontation.** You can explore your fears through a mind map and a [failure résumé](#); then choose one or two issues to focus on. Then take small steps each day to work through this fear through exposure and practice.

## Examples

- During Fr. James Martin’s Jesuit novitiate, he told his director that he was afraid of working in the hospital. So he was immediately assigned to work in a hospital in the practice of *agere contra*.<sup>1</sup>
- A classic example of exposure therapy (a related practice explained below) demonstrates someone getting over a fear of snakes. First they visualize the snake in the room with them, name their emotions, and try to release the anxiety. Then they progressively expose themselves to a snake: looking at one through a window, across the room, in person, and so on, until the fear is gone.
- This [TED Talk](#) demonstrates how to get over a fear of rejection through this exposure and practice.

<sup>1</sup> Martin, James, SJ, *Becoming Who You Are: Insights on the True Self from Thomas Merton and Other Saints*, Hidden-Spring, 2006, pg. 34.

“Not everything that is faced can be changed; but nothing can be changed until it is faced.”

- James Baldwin

## *Agere Contra* Tips

- **Small Steps:** Remember to start with small steps. If you are scared of public speaking, visualize the experience first. Then speak to a small group of friends, and keep expanding it piece by piece.
- **Gradual Process:** This is not a quick fix, and we have no illusions that you will resolve all of your fears this week (or even that one can fully get over something like that). However, you can jumpstart the process and work towards freeing yourself from these anxieties.
- **Flow Experimentation:** As an extension of this activity, we also recommend that you pick one or two activities from your [flow résumé](#) and actively practicing them throughout the week (which we suppose would be *agere cum*, or “acting with”).

## Scientific Foundations

- **Research:** One of the most effective ways to deal with our fears is to face them directly in a method often referred to as “exposure therapy.”<sup>2</sup>
- **Self-Efficacy:** Exposure therapy can also increase your self-efficacy and confidence that you can free yourself, that *you* accomplish what you once considered impossible.<sup>3</sup>
- **A Caveat for Serious Disorders:** Note that this method is designed for mild and typical fears and anxieties. If you have a fear that is related to a serious mental illness such as post-traumatic stress disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder, or social anxiety disorder, you should seek a mental health professional for advice.

“The cave you fear to enter holds the treasure you seek.”

- adapted from Joseph Campbell

<sup>2</sup> Zoellner, Lori A., et al, “[Teaching Trauma-Focused Exposure Therapy for PTSD: Critical Clinical Lessons for Novice Exposure Therapists](#),” *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy*, vol. 3, no. 3, 1 Sept. 2011, pp. 300–308, doi:10.1037/a0024642.

<sup>3</sup> For a more generalized overview, read [the APA’s primer on the topic](#), and [this practical explainer at UC Berkeley’s Greater Good Science Center](#).