

"F" IS FOR "FEAR"



Heroes and villains alike in the comics use fear as a weapon, heroes striking at the heart of a “superstitious cowardly lot” and villains obsessed with the power that sheer terror gives them over people. Heroes face fearsome challenges and find the courage to overcome them. Sometimes they encounter monsters out of myth and legend, or sanity-blasting horrors from beyond reality. What are the ways of incorporating an element of fear into your **ICONS** games?

FEARSOME QUALITIES

First and foremost, fear—like other character emotions—arises out of different qualities in **ICONS**. Fear is one aspect of activating a particular quality, and has as wide a range as the qualities themselves.

Some qualities are obviously associated with fears: A character with a “Claustrophobic” quality, or any “-phobic” quality, is clearly afraid of something. The GM can activate that quality to cause trouble related to the character’s fear, while sometimes the character may draw strength and Determination from overcoming that fear, an opportunity for the player to activate the quality for advantage.

Other qualities may have the seeds of fear within them. Relationship qualities like “In Love with X,” “Sense of Duty/Responsibility” or a particular supporting character listed as a quality can lead to fears of loss, break-up, or harm befalling that character. Similarly, a threat or enemy associated with a quality can be fearsome, perhaps triggering deep-seated fears or trauma.

Even seemingly unrelated qualities can be associated with fears. A “Patriotic” hero might fear for the future of the nation or fear becoming a political pawn. An “Industrialist Inventor” could fear the misguided applications of technology, or that inventions are not enough to help people. Characters with particular codes of ethics or inspirations may fear failing to live up to them, and so forth. Almost any quality can contain an element of fear, if you look at it in the right way.

Game Masters commonly activate qualities for fear to create trouble. The most common is a compulsion: fear causing someone to act irrationally or against their best interests, but it can just as easily be a moment of hesitation (lost panel) or a weakening of resolve (increased difficulty). Fear can be paralyzing or even undermine confidence so severely that a character is unable to function normally (disability). Fear-based challenges tend to be a consequence of actions taken out of fear, although it can also represent bringing a fearsome element into play, such as having a feared opponent unexpectedly show up, or a phobia “coincidentally” occur.

Note, as always, that *players* can also activate their qualities to cause this kind of trouble for their characters, if they want to bring a character’s fears to light and earn some Determination Points for doing so. Bringing out a hero’s fears in play can be an excellent spotlight for learning about the character, as well as a great roleplaying opportunity.

INTIMIDATION

Heroes and villains often use force, and threats, to cow their opponents into cooperating: heroes may rely on fear both to keep criminals off-balance and to interrogate them for information.

In **ICONS** terms, intimidation is a maneuver (see **Maneuvering** in the **Taking Action** chapter), usually relying on Willpower: as your action, roll a test of Willpower against the target's Willpower. You're looking to create an "Intimidated" quality for your target; marginal success means you create it and can then activate it normally. A moderate or better success means you also get to activate the quality for free (once per degree of success above marginal).

Example: *Hangman, about to confront Speed Demon, wants to use fear and intimidation to take away the advantage of the villain's super-speed. So he looms up, his shadow falling across the villain, and dropping the loop of the Noose of Justice so it is clearly visible. "Going somewhere...?" Hangman asks in an ominous tone.*

Hangman's player rolls a 4 on the die, adding the hero's Good (5) Willpower for an effort of 9. The GM rolls a 3 for Speed Demon, adding his Fair (4) Willpower for a difficulty of 7. Hangman's player also spends a point of Determination to activate the hero's "Grim Guardian of the Gallows" quality, applying improved effort to the test (increasing Hangman's effort from 9 to 11). That is a major success (11 effort - 7 difficulty), garnering Hangman two free activations of the "Intimidated" quality he places on Speed Demon, who gulps in fear at the hero's appearance. He uses the first to impose the lost panel trouble on the villain as Speed Demon hesitates and Hangman leaps into action!

Note that, rather than imposing a quality on the target, characters can use an intimidation maneuver to give themselves a temporary quality of being more fearsome or intimidating. This is useful for those who do not have such qualities regularly. It's also a way to use abilities other than Willpower to lend the character the necessary quality—any ability can be intimidating if the character shows it off in the right way.

For example, All-American Girl isn't particularly intimidating, but when she gets really mad ... watch out! Her player could use a maneuver to give All-American Girl the temporary "You Don't Want to Make Me Angry" quality, and potentially gain one or more free activations of it. Of course, the drawback of gaining such a quality is that others might be able to activate it as well, such as a villain taking advantage of All-American Girl losing her temper to cause trouble for America's Sweetheart.

FEAR AND MADNESS

Fear can go beyond mere intimidation or a sudden fright into trauma that threatens the victim's sanity, causing lasting harm.

Growing influence of madness and the crumbling of a character's sanity can be handled through a pyramid test (see **The Basics** chapter of **ICONS**). The following modifier may apply:

- **Collapsing** if the pyramid loses successes over time, meaning the character recovers from the shock and fright and eliminates some of the accumulated successes. This reflects the hazards of a rapid succession of traumatic shocks versus time to recover.
- **Escalating** if, the more the victim experiences, the worse it becomes, and the more difficult it is to resist further trauma.
- **Fragile** if outside aid or treatment can remove accumulated successes. This can be anything from therapy and psychic assistance to just having a chance to receive comfort from a friend.
- **Long or Wide** to draw out the process, requiring more degrees of success to the character's mind to truly crumble under the weight of all of the fear and horror.

Like short-term fear, madness imposes qualities on the victim, ranging from specific phobias or behaviors to a general "Madness" or "Insanity" quality. At moderate and major degrees, the madness qualities are short-lived, lasting for only pages or minutes, but a massive degree of madness makes the quality essentially permanent unless the character receives some kind of treatment to facilitate recovery.

FEAR POWERS

A number of different powers interact with or use fear in a variety of ways:

DREAM CONTROL

This is a common power for nightmare-creating characters, able to infiltrate dreams and dredge up the victim's deepest fears. It often has the Psychic extra of Illusion (following) and a dream-thief or nightmare creature may also have Fear Absorption (following) to enhance its powers.

EMOTION CONTROL

The primary power for creating and controlling is Emotion Control, of course, potentially limited to Fear Only. It creates and imposes fear-related qualities on targets, essentially using the same approach as **Intimidation**

(previously) but potentially lasting for much longer, with greater opportunities to activate that quality for compels or other types of advantage or trouble.

Emotion Control may be a mental power, but it can just as easily come from other sources. For some it is a magical or mystical ability, either an enchantment or an innate power for a fear-mongering demon or nightmare being. In other cases, Emotion Control is scientific, ranging from biochemical compounds delivered in a variety of different ways to subliminal ultrasonics or radiation stimulating the fear centers of the brain.

FEAR ABSORPTION

A character—usually a villain—may “feed” on fear, becoming more powerful the more others’ fears grow. Generally speaking, this is an example of Ability Boost, with the Source limit. The level of Ability Boost sets the upper limit of how much fear the character can absorb, while the ambient level of fear sets a limit of how much “energy” is available to improve the character’s abilities. The Ability Boost may have extras broadening the abilities it enhances as well.

A character can also have a “Feeds on Fear” quality, which can be activated to grant advantage when the character has fear to draw upon, but also causes trouble, since the character is dependent on fear, and may suffer disability when deprived of it, or be compelled to create and feed upon it.

ILLUSION

The Illusion power (and Images as well) can add the following extra:

Psychic: Your power taps into the target’s mind to produce its effect, lending support from the target’s own thoughts, emotions, and expectations. You can use your power to learn the target’s qualities as well as impose them through maneuvers, creating illusions like your target’s greatest fear, heart’s desire, and so forth.

Naturally, fear-based illusions often have Limited to Fears in addition to the Psychic extra, suitable for a character who only creates terrifying illusions out of the victim’s subconscious.

RESISTANCE

Mental Resistance generally protects against fear-based attacks, although some biological forms of fear (see **Emotion Control**, previously) might work around it. A character can also have a Limited Resistance to Fear, which only works against fear-based effects. This reflects a character with a specific resistance to having fear imposed from outside influences; for someone who is generally more courageous and fearless overall, increase

the character's Willpower level and add qualities like "Courageous" and "Without Fear".

SERVANT

More than just conjuring up illusions and nightmare images of people's worst fears, this power, coupled with the Psychic and Variable Extras, and possibly Limited to Fears, can literally summon "creatures from the id"—turning a target's worst fear into reality. Arachnophobia becomes a swarm of spiders or a giant spider-monster, while fear of clowns (coulrophobia) could be a group of demonic clowns or a giant monster in greasepaint and floppy shoes.

MOB SCENES

"A person is smart. People are dumb, panicky, dangerous animals," says Agent Kay in *Men in Black*. Fear is a force that creates mobs and drives them.

Rather than dealing with a mob as individuals, you can handle it as a single entity in **ICONS** game terms, with its own ability levels. In particular, a mob effectively has the Burst extra (see **Extras** in the **Powers** chapter of **ICONS**) on its attacks: able to simultaneously attack all targets within reach of the mob. The ability to gang-up on targets may also grant a mob slightly greater effective Prowess and Strength compared to its individual members.

A mob's Willpower largely represents the forces driving it and holding the mob together. The mob's Stamina is a combination of its physical make-up (effectively increased Strength) and this drive, or Willpower. You can base a deliberately created mob's Willpower on the level of the effect that created it, be it a power like Emotion Control or the Willpower level of an instigator.

Example: *The Serpent Sphinx whips up a mob of mind-blitzed bystanders to distract and delay the heroes. The people making up the mob are strictly Average, but the GM decides the mob as a whole has Fair (4) Prowess and Strength and Great (6) Willpower from the Sphinx's Great Mind Control. That gives the mob as a whole Stamina 10 and the GM gives it Poor (2) Damage Resistance to Bashing and Blasting, representing that little bumps and bruises aren't going to deter it. If the Sphinx's power lets him keep replenishing the mob with more and more people, the GM can assign it a Regeneration level as well. The mob has the Burst extra on its attacks, able to affect any target within close range of any part of the mob.*

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