

WELCOME TO THE COMFORT ZONE

# Step Out of YOUR COMFORT ZONE

They say that life begins at the end of your comfort zone. But how do you identify your own zone, so that you can move beyond it? Journalist Caroline Buijs examines the benefits of living with some uncertainty.

Once, on my very first trip abroad to India, I came into literal contact with the perimeters of my own comfort zone. At the hotel where I was staying in Delhi, there was a tropical garden paradise in the shade of palm trees, with sun beds, cocktails, and a gorgeous, clear pool. But the moment I stepped outside the hotel's gate, I found that it was hot, dusty, and noisy, and there was a long line of rickshaw drivers shouting at me, "Lady, lady, rickshaw, rickshaw!" Frightened, I immediately ran back into the hotel garden, like a child.

On my second day, I still could not manage to exit the hotel, and I found myself enjoying the pool, but not quite as happily. I knew there was a world out there that I'd come to explore, but I couldn't get past my fear of going out into it. On the third day, I realized that if I wanted to see more of India than just a swimming pool, I really *had* get out of that garden.

I started with the safe route, booking an organized city tour with other travelers through the reception desk. The following day, I worked up a little more courage and took a taxi to a nearby temple by myself. Then, finally,

on the last morning of my trip, I walked out to that line of rickshaw drivers and asked one to take me to the market, only to discover that the ride was not at all scary, but actually very exciting. It was thrilling to be out on my own, and to see the real life of India, rather than the safe haven of the hotel. I found out that having new experiences felt good: I was doing things that I ordinarily wouldn't dare to do, and I actually enjoyed feeling a little bit lost.

#### COMFY STRAITJACKETS

"What you know and what you're used to feels familiar, and that's your com- ➔➔

"Do not go where the path may lead, go instead where there is no path, and leave a trail" – Ralph Waldo Emerson

“No matter how boring or painful your comfort zone is, if nothing tempts you out, you’ll stay where you are”

fort zone,” says Pieterneel Dijkstra, a Dutch psychologist, researcher, and writer. “Breaking out of it means taking risks. You don’t know what to expect, and many people find the uncertainty especially difficult because they’re very focused on safety. Consciously or unconsciously, we want to stay in control of ourselves and our feelings.”

It’s different for every one of us, that comfort zone. Just ask your friends, or observe how people in your family behave. Your sister has no trouble addressing a room full of strangers (most people’s greatest fear), but when it comes to attempting something creative, she can’t even begin. Your best friend is a great adventurer when it comes to bungee jumping or running naked into the surf, but at work she can’t get up the courage to

ask her boss for a raise. Even if we’re incredibly confident in some ways, fear is part of what makes us human, and all of us have fears.

Because fears differ from person to person, there are also degrees of discomfort as people leave their comfort zones. “For some people, it’s a very tight space, almost a straitjacket that you can’t get out of,” says Dijkstra. “Often, these people live very methodical lives. You’ll see that more flexible people have a more roomy comfort zone.”

I began to wonder: what defines our comfort zones? And why do we tend to opt for safety and security in certain areas, rather than seek out experiences that will expand our world? Dutch career counselor, life coach, and photographer Frederike Dekkers says some uncertainty is healthy.

“People who are never uncertain are actually unbearable, because they aren’t prepared to examine themselves,” she says, “but if you never allow uncertainty into your life, you will become inflexible.”

Sticking to our comfort zones can prevent us from leaving our hotels on our holidays, or it can have more serious and long-lasting effects: it can keep us in a dead-end job, prevent us from ending a destructive relationship, or make it impossible to stop negative behaviors like smoking or using drugs.

#### SOURCES OF GRATIFICATION

American psychologist and workplace consultant Judith Sills, who is also the author of *The Comfort Trap*, a guide to changing patterns and habits that are only leading to dead ends, writes that there are sources of intense gratification that lie just beyond the boundaries of our comfort zone:

- \* *Intimate relationships:* Within a relationship it’s sometimes necessary to be very honest, and that can feel uncomfortable.
- \* *Sexual satisfaction:* Daring to admit your sexual desires and needs is not always easy for everyone.
- \* *Sports performance:* Just think of that slight aversion to exercise you feel before you start.
- \* *Major objectives:* These are big steps, like taking on a new job or moving to an unfamiliar city.

Comfort is so attractive because it’s safe, but security limits the satisfaction that a new experience can give you. And everyone needs to go on having new experiences, if only because they make our lives seem longer. New experiences also provide new memories that can comfort you when times get tough. They also provide you with a breath of fresh air, and a little bit of space in your head, so you can see the world with a new kind of clarity.

“We need to feel comfortable to live fully, yet if we’re too comfortable, something essential dies,” Sills writes. “A life that is too much work erodes the body, but a life that requires too little effort depletes the soul. Between these two extremes there is a harbor, a state of psychological grace, a platform of emotional well-being. It is your comfort zone. It’s a haven. And by its nature, it is temporary.”

Dekkers argues that we keep our habits because we’re afraid of uncertainty, but it’s generally a good thing to let uncertainty into our lives, because if we dare to try something different, we’ll ultimately have more options.

#### START STRETCHING THE LIMITS

The benefits of sailing out of your haven for a little while are enormous,

according to psychologists.

To begin with, if you are always doing the same things because they’re safe, you may not be seeing any progress in your life. In *Waiting for Godot*, Irish playwright Samuel Beckett’s characters observe, “habit is the great deadener.” Albert Einstein also weighed in on the subject: “Life is like riding a bicycle,” he wrote. “To keep your balance, you must keep moving.”

Here’s another benefit of allowing yourself to experience new things: doing something new requires your full attention because it’s unusual, leaving little room in your mind for worrying. Small things that might normally bother you start to become unimportant and tend to disappear.

So, how do you exit your comfort zone? Psychologists say that it’s much easier to start to stretch or bend the limits of your comfort zone by breaking daily habits in easy little steps. You can do this by, for example, taking a different route to work some days, or eating breakfast at a restaurant for a change, or taking yourself to the movies, or cooking once a week with ingredients that you rarely use. Once you start making little changes in your life that alter your habits, it’s easier to get used to the idea of taking bolder steps.

“One big step is too scary,” says Dijkstra. “You must prepare well for change. If you try doing it in one step, you often fail. Then you have a negative experience that won’t encourage you to give it another try. By carefully preparing yourself, you increase the chances of having a successful experience. And that gives you more strength the next time.”

#### CULTIVATING COURAGE

Marianne Elliott, an author, human rights lawyer, yoga teacher, and ➔



#### Six Tips for Breaking Old Habits

- \* Tell the truth (But don’t be rude about it)
- \* Take a class you otherwise never would (Carpentry course? A philosophy lecture series?)
- \* Order a drink that you’ve never tasted before (A minty Mojito? A pomegranate smoothie?)
- \* Take a lesson in a sport that you’ve never done (Horseback riding? Fencing?)
- \* Try a weeklong media blackout (No reading, watching TV, or surfing the Internet)
- \* Read a completely different magazine (“The New Yorker,” for example)

#### Change Makes for a Great Movie

“About Schmidt” (2002) is a great film directed by Alexander Payne, with Jack Nicholson playing Schmidt, an insurance agent whose life is evenly paced and organized around the clock. After his wife dies, he sets out on a journey in an RV. Two other worthwhile films by Payne, “Sideways” (2004) and “The Descendants” (2011), also focus on characters who have lived their entire lives on autopilot and step (or get dragged) out of their comfort zones.

#### Keep a Diary

American psychologist Roy Baumeister is sometimes called the Sigmund Freud of the 21st Century. Here are his tips on making changes:

- \* Make changes when things are going well in your life.
- \* Keep a diary. Out of all the things you want to change, choose the behavior that will be the easiest to adjust. Write down your goals and record accurately what you’re doing. Writing down what you are doing is vital. If you simply make plans without registering what you do, nothing will come of it.
- \* Practice! No matter what change in behavior you’re aiming for, the fact that you are introducing a change already has an effect. Now for the training. Start with something simple, such as clearing the table immediately after eating. These small things prepare you for the big challenges, such as quitting smoking or losing weight. Those two are the toughest behavioral changes for people in our day and age.

Source: *De Volkskrant*



## "Your comfort zone is a refuge, but that's why it should only be a temporary residence"

photographer from New Zealand, spends a lot of time thinking about courage and teaching people how to break through their comfort zones. In her book, *Zen Under Fire*, she tells the story of her UN peacekeeping mission to Afghanistan, and how living in an incredibly stressful environment changed her relationships and taught her about what it means to cultivate courage. On her blog, she guides people through a "30 Days to Courage" program "for people who want to step out of their comfort zone, through the small acts of daily bravery that add up to a courageous life" (marianne-elliott.com).

"People are more successful at making changes in their life by starting small," Elliot says. "There are times when life will put you in a situation where you have to take a big step, and they are very rare occasions where you don't have time to take small steps. But if you have been cultivating your capacity to make courageous choices in small ways, when life presents you with a moment where you have to make a big courageous choice, you'll be ready to make it."

Courage isn't what you might think it is, though, in her definition. It's not about being tough, strong, or confident, and it's not a personality trait, either. "There's always a relationship between courage and vulnerability, because stepping out of the comfort zone inherently means stepping into a place where we feel vulnerable," she says. "It's a place where we don't know yet what's going to happen there, and one of the possibilities is that we experience something that we don't enjoy, like rejection or failure."

As she describes with great honesty in her book, Elliott doesn't think of herself as a particularly courageous person, in spite of the fact that she

does look quite brave from the outside. "Every courageous choice I've ever made has been about being afraid," she says. "I don't feel impermeable and fearless and untouchable. It always involves feeling vulnerable. We need to remember that vulnerability is the only true measure of our courage. If we're not feeling vulnerable, it's guaranteed that we're not feeling courageous."

### SCARY VERSUS EXCITING

However, when you do allow yourself to be vulnerable and drum up the courage to step out of your comfort zone, the chances are you'll meet your inner critic. "It's a kind of dragon guarding the gate of your comfort zone, telling you things like, 'You don't have to leave, just stay nice and cozy where you are,'" says Dekkers. "Be aware of the

dragon and don't let it stop you. You'd be better off thinking, 'Oh yes, I'm scared. It's terrifying, but that's just part of it.'"

Her simple but effective trick for beginning to cope with fear and uncertainty: don't call what you're doing "scary;" call it "exciting." That immediately alters your attitude about the change.

Elliott goes a bit further. In her experience, the inner critic isn't just a voice that tells us "this is not safe." It's a voice that says, "it's not safe because you're not up to this," because you're not strong enough, smart enough, or something else. It's a demoralizing, demotivating voice. And as you walk towards the edges of your comfort zone, that voice gets louder. "I've worked with people, from yoga students, to writers,



TEXT CAROLINE BUIJUS WITH NINA SIEGAL ILLUSTRATIONS RUBY TAYLOR

or students, who tell me that when the voice gets louder they think that it's their intuition telling them not to go there," says Elliott. "We need to recognize the inner voice of the critic is different from our intuitive, wise, inner voice. One way you can tell the difference between the two is that the inner critic – that fearful voice – tends to make a catastrophe out of it – to catastrophize, if that's a word. So the message you might get is, 'you could completely fail and humiliate yourself; it will be a disaster.'"

### HEARING VOICES

An intuitive voice, Elliott continues, might also be your gut telling you something is unsafe, but your intuitive response is more likely to suggest taking certain precautions – do some background research, for example – or otherwise prepare yourself physically, emotionally, or intellectually, for a new challenge. The intuitive voice won't tell you that you're making a horrible mistake. "There's a difference between the voice that is making sensible suggestions about the steps you need to take to ensure you succeed, rather than the voice that is trying to scare you into not doing something," she says.

Taking a moment to stop and listen to the voice, and its tone, will help you distinguish between the useful critic and the nay-saying guard. Once you do, it won't hurt to take some of the advice of your friendly, intuitive voice, suggesting some degree of caution. And don't spend any time and energy combating the guard in your head. "You don't have to fight that voice or argue with it," Elliott continues. "You just have to cultivate the other voice, the inner sweetheart, that supports you, that encourages you, that says, 'it's okay

Marianne, just keep going.' For me, that's been huge."

### A CREATIVE OUTLET

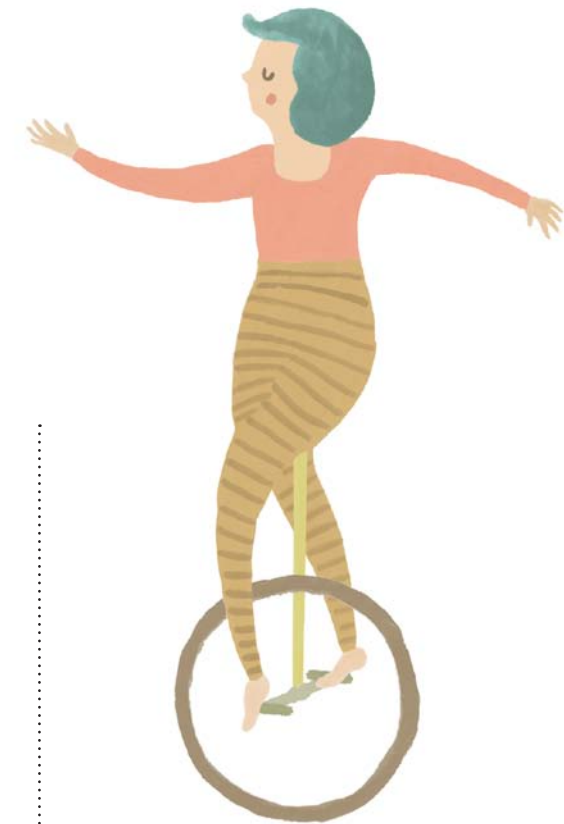
According to Sills, another great help in getting out of that comfort zone is if you know what you want, if you know what you desire. "No matter how boring or painful your comfort zone is, if nothing tempts you out, you'll stay where you are," she writes. "If that desire doesn't make itself known, you should go out and look for it," she continues. And how do you do that? According to Sills, "By searching for a creative outlet, because suppressed desire lives in your subconscious mind and the creative process gives you access to it."

In her book, *The Artist's Way*, Julia Cameron presents a proven method for uncovering your desires. She loves working with lists and suggests you ask yourself simple questions to help reveal your unconscious wishes. For example, she instructs you to finish these sentences:

- \* If I didn't have to do it perfectly, I would...
- \* If I could/dare to be a beginner, then...
- \* Things I would never try, but sound like fun are...

They work especially well if you fill them in quickly and don't think too much about the answers.

Keri Smith's books, such as *Living Out Loud*, are also useful for clarifying what you want. She has exercises such as "10 (Small) Ways to Shake Things Up." Her ideas: Have a lunch date with yourself to try a new restaurant, or add more color to your wardrobe. "When you challenge yourself and break out of your fixed patterns, you expand your world," writes Smith, "and that makes you happy."



So, we just have to challenge ourselves to cross that threshold at times. Fear is part of it, but not the only part. Nelson Mandela once said something very beautiful on the subject: "I learned that courage was not the absence of fear, but the triumph over it. The brave man is not he who does not feel afraid, but he who conquers that fear." ●

### WANT TO READ MORE?

- \* *The Artist's Way* (Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam, 2002). Julia Cameron's book is a classic.
- \* *Living Out Loud* (Chronicle Books, 2003). One of Keri Smith's first books. No fill-in pages, but lots of beautiful insights.
- \* *The Comfort Trap or, What if You're Riding a Dead Horse?* (Viking Adult, 2004) Judith Sills invites readers to jump over "the electric fence of anxiety" to find more satisfaction in life.
- \* *Zen Under Fire: How I Found Peace in the Midst of War* (Sourcebooks, 2013). Marianne Elliott's book about her time in Afghanistan.