

DAY  
15

# breaking PATTERNS





# NEW PATHS

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**SOMETIMES IT CAN BE REALLY WORTHWHILE TO  
BREAK A PATTERN, TO PUSH THE ENVELOPE A LITTLE.**

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**CAROLINE BUIJS FINDS OUT HOW.**

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Years ago, while on my first holiday in an unfamiliar, far-away place, I had a very literal experience of leaving my comfort zone. I was staying at a hotel in Delhi, India, and it was surrounded on all sides by a glorious tropical garden and had a pool shaded by palm trees. There were tidy rows of sunbeds, and a drink and a book were always within reach. It was bliss. As soon as I would stick my nose out the gates, however, it was hot, dusty and noisy, and I would be besieged by shouts coming from a line of rickshaw drivers: “Madam, Madam!”, “Rickshaw, rickshaw!” It was overwhelming, and I would retreat back into the hotel garden.

By the third day, however, I realized that if I wanted to see more of India than a swimming pool, I would really have to get out of the garden. To get used to the colorful but hectic Indian world little by little, I took the safe option of booking a guided city tour at the hotel reception. The next day I took a taxi to the temple nearby, and, finally, on the last morning I did allow a rickshaw to take me to the market. Although it was a bit hectic, it wasn’t as scary as my first impression had made me believe.

I also discovered that a new experience like this—doing something I didn’t usually dare to do—felt really good, and I love how a city makes the biggest impression when you are visiting it for the first time, no matter how lost you feel.

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## **IT'S NOT SCARY; IT'S EXCITING**

Why do we always opt for safety and familiarity? “We don’t like what we don’t know,” explains Dutch psychologist Pieter Dijkstra. “We have a sense of familiarity with what we know and what we are used to. That’s our comfort zone—our safe territory—and breaking out of it is risky. We don’t know what to expect and it’s that insecurity that we often find hard to deal with. Whether it’s conscious or not, we want to maintain control over ourselves and our feelings.” >



*'Comfort is safe, but safety limits  
the amount of satisfaction you can  
get from a new activity'*

It's true: When we try out new things we have no routine to rely on. But what are we afraid of? Frederike Dekkers, a coach who holds courses in The Artist's Way in Amsterdam, the Netherlands (see 'Day 16'), sees a lot of people in her practice who are prevented from trying something new because they are afraid of looking foolish or of being a rookie again. She, however, sees it as a



## SIX TIPS FOR BREAKING HABITS

- \* Speak the truth (without being hurtful).
- \* Try out a new sport or activity.
- \* Stop reading the news for a week.
- \* Write a letter to someone you admire.
- \* Take a day off for no reason.
- \* Tip from American social psychologist Roy Baumeister: Keep a journal. Pick out things you would like to change, the behavior that would be easiest to change. Write down your goals and record what you are doing in detail.

positive quality to be able to allow ourselves to feel insecure because, ultimately, it provides us with more opportunities. If we never feel insecure, we also will never have any motivation to take a good hard look at ourselves.

Dekkers has a simple trick for dealing with fear and insecurity: "Don't call something scary; call it exciting instead," she says. "It immediately changes how something feels when you do that. And another important tip: When you leave your comfort zone, chances are high you'll start hearing a little voice in your head spouting critical comments such as, 'You don't have to do anything, just stay the way you are'. It's good to be aware of that and not let it stop you. It's better to think: Oh, right, I'm scared, it's exciting. That's all just part of the process. Everyone spends most of their time in their comfort zone. That's fine. But if you don't do anything, you can get stuck there, and it's good to realize that too."

## THE WHITE MOMENT

American psychologist Judith Sills writes about why it's good to step out of our comfort zone every now and then in her book *The Comfort Trap*. She explains that comfort is pleasure plus safety and satisfaction, combined with security. But there are things that lie outside the limits of our comfort zone and we can only reach them by letting go of our security blanket. She gives a number of examples, including:

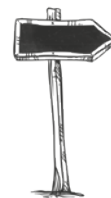
- \* Intimate relationships. Being in an intimate relationship sometimes requires extreme honesty, which can feel very uncomfortable.
- \* Sexual satisfaction: Daring to express your sexual desires and needs is not always easy for everyone.
- \* Sports: The slight reluctance you can feel before you do something athletic.
- \* Big life choices: Moving to an unknown city or switching jobs can be very intimidating.

In other words, the combination of pleasure and security is actually the problem. Comfort is so attractive because it is safe, but safety limits the amount of satisfaction you can get from a new activity. And it's nice to keep having new experiences, if only because that way our life feels longer. These experiences also create new memories that can be a source of consolation in hard times. They clear the cobwebs in our mind, so we see things more clearly again.

Another positive note: Doing something new takes up all our attention because it takes us off our ordinary path, leaving little space for worrying. Details we usually fuss over simply fall away. Daring to leave our comfort zone is also good for our creativity. Dutch actress Annemarie Prins talked about this quite eloquently once during a TV interview. She draws from an essay by Irish playwright Samuel Beckett: "Humans are creatures of habit and when a habit is broken, we have the tendency to replace it with a new one. As long as we have not yet fully developed that new habit, we are in the dark and a sense of sheer terror is unleashed."

### **SOMETIMES IN BALANCE**

Everybody's comfort zone is different, naturally. One person may be able to effortlessly speak to a room full of people, but won't want to leave



### **FILM TIPS**

- \* 'About Schmidt' (2002): A beautiful movie about an insurance actuary (Jack Nicholson) who leads a structured life set by the clock until, after the death of his wife, he goes on a journey in a motor home. Director Alexander Payne has made two other movies about characters being tossed from their comfort zones: 'Sideways' (2004) and 'The Descendants' (2011).
- \* 'Yes Man' (2008): A comedy with Jim Carrey, based on the autobiographical book of the same name by Danny Wallace, who really did say yes to everything for a year. It brought him a wealth of unexpected and beautiful experiences.

the country when vacation time comes around; someone else may feel intimidated by the idea of talking with a stranger, but has no problem traveling all over the globe. And then there are also degrees in how far you can go in leaving your comfort zone. You don't have to break free entirely; you can stretch daily routines out a little bit at a time. By having breakfast in a new café, or going to the movies on your own, cooking with new ingredients once a week or picking a book merely by intuition instead of choosing something off the bestseller list. >

“Your comfort zone is not static and you should be able to play with your boundaries,” Dijkstra says. “When they are too rigid it becomes a corset that you can’t get out of; you end up living your life according to a strict plan.” And Sills points out the paradox of our comfort zone: “We need to feel comfortable to live life to the full, but if we feel too comfortable something essential dies. A life that consists of too much work exhausts the body but a life that doesn’t exercise us enough impoverishes the soul.”

So you could say it’s all about balance. The words of Albert Einstein—“Life is like riding a bicycle. To keep your balance, you must keep

*Your comfort zone is not static and you should be able to play with your boundaries'*

moving”—are just as worthy and true as those of Milan Kundera, who wrote in his novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, ‘Happiness is the longing for repetition’. So life doesn’t have to consist solely of new experiences, thank goodness. What’s more, by repeating something, the experience can gain in depth. It’s never entirely the same, because you notice new things each time.

### WHAT YOU REALLY WANT

It’s clear that it’s good to break the pattern now and then, but how? Looking at our fears in a new way is one method, and it’s also smart to go about it by taking tiny steps. “Taking a huge step all at once really is scary of course,” Dijkstra says. “And if it would fail you’d have a very negative experience, which discourages any new attempts. Good preparation increases

the chance it will be a successful experience. And that is a source of power for a next time.” Another thing that helps, according to Sills, is knowing what we really want. “A lack of desire can pin you down in the same place as surely as any fear,” she says. “No matter how boring or even painful a comfort zone is, if there is nothing else beckoning you, you will stay where you are.”

Sometimes it’s hard to be aware of our desire; we may have hidden it away. Sills says we can get in touch with what we desire by looking for a creative outlet. Desire resides deep in our subconscious and the creative process accesses these areas. Another method is by helping others, as this also distances us from ourself for a moment. So, we need to cross that threshold and accept that this comes with a certain amount of fear. Nelson Mandela once said: “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 AND DO MORE?

- \* 'The Comfort Trap: or, What if You're Riding a Dead Horse?' by Judith Sills
- \* 'Living Out Loud: Activities to Fuel a Creative Life', by Keri Smith. This is one of Smith's first books. There are no worksheets, but it's full of beautiful insights and tips to break free of rusty old patterns and expand your world.