

Stretching your comfort zone

We all have a comfort zone – a space or boundary for activity in which we feel most at home and comfortable. While it's different for everyone, this is the place in which you feel most relaxed and able to be yourself. Despite this comfort and ease, it's important to regularly challenge yourself to move out of it.

Why should I stretch my comfort zone?

It's good to have a comfort zone and the sense of stability in your life that it can provide, but when you don't challenge yourself, your creativity and even happiness can stagnate. When your comfort zone gets too comfortable it can become a rut. You may find yourself blindly following your routines even though they are no longer fulfilling or enriching. By stretching your comfort zone and challenging yourself to do new things, you stay fresh and open to opportunities.

Stretching your comfort zone does not necessarily mean doing something that makes you anxious or nervous. It can simply be exploring a new part of town or trying a new type of food. The point is that you open yourself to new opportunities and experiences when you're ready.

Breaking down barriers

Many of us stay in our comfort zone out of fear, such as fear of failure, fear of success, fear of new things or fear that others will not like us. While these fears are real, you can't allow them to restrict you. A constant barrage of negative self-talk can prevent you from taking risks, but it also limits your ability to reach your full potential. While it sounds simplistic, positive self-talk can make a difference. Here are some examples of negative self-talk replaced with positive self-talk:

- I can't. I can!
- I will fail. I will succeed!
- They'll say 'no'. If I ask, they may say 'yes'!
- I will make a fool of myself. I will only make a fool of myself if I don't try!

Barriers that hold you back are different for everyone and may include procrastination or indecision. Here are a few steps that can help you break down your barriers:

- **Identify the barriers that are holding you back and then think about how these barriers are protecting you.** If one of the barriers for meeting new people is a fear of rejection, this fear may be protecting you from getting your feelings hurt.

- **Write down the hardest thing you'll have to do to overcome or break down the barrier.**
If your barrier is rejection, you may have to remind yourself that if this rejection does occur, it does not change who you are as a person or how you should feel about yourself.
- **Write down the worst that could happen if you leave your comfort zone but do not achieve your goal.** In most cases, this is not as threatening or intimidating as it initially seems. If you are challenging yourself to meet new people and decide to go to a party but have a miserable time, you've lost a few hours but at least know you tried.
- **Describe in detail the best that could happen if you leave your comfort zone and succeed in realising your dream/goal.** You'll have new friends, meet new people and revel in the success of this challenge.

Setting and achieving your goals

A very important step in stretching your comfort zone is getting in touch with your goals. Think about your present goals and the goals you had 5 or 10 years ago. Don't place limitations, such as 'I'm too old' or 'I could never do that'. You may notice that many of these goals involve actions or risks that scare you. That's exactly why they are still goals to be achieved. Be creative and brainstorm other important or fun challenges.

Prioritise all of these goals and challenges to determine what is most important to you now and what you want to do in the future. Be sure to think about how these goals can and will affect your life in the future.

For some people, stretching their comfort zone is easier than it is for others. That's why it's important to develop an action plan of the things you want to do and include steps that will help you. Once you decide what it is that you want to do, give yourself some deadlines and stick to them.

For example, if you are determined to be a part of the local amateur dramatics society, set a deadline for auditions. Or, if you just want to explore more of your city, pick a day of the week or month for an excursion. Make it fun and invite other people, to stay motivated. You may also want to do a little research about your activity or talk to someone about it beforehand. If you are trying out for the theatre, consider taking acting lessons or calling up a friend or acquaintance who is involved.

Be sure to give yourself a reward after attempting and/or achieving your goal. This can be anything from a dinner out with friends to buying a new item you've been wanting. Remember that your success is both achieving your goal and challenging your comfort zone.

What if stretching my comfort zone makes me nervous?

It's very natural to be nervous when doing something new or taking a risk, but sometimes risks are necessary for growth. Keep in mind that your fears may be very extreme and irrational.

When you feel nervous or stressed, practice stress reduction/relaxation techniques such as:

- Envision yourself in a peaceful and calming environment.
- Sit comfortably in a chair.
- Close your eyes and concentrate slowly on one muscle group at a time starting from your head and moving down to your feet.
- Now that you have relaxed your muscles, focus on your breathing for 5 minutes or more.

Many people also find relaxation through yoga, meditation or keeping a journal. Write down your fears or the 'worst case scenario' as well as your feelings or discoveries during the various stages of your goal.

✓ Conclusion

Comfort zones feel safe and comfortable for a very good reason. They are places in which you feel relaxed and secure. But when you become too comfortable and complacent, it's time to move on and challenge yourself. Follow these tips to stretch your comfort zone and open yourself to continual growth and new opportunities.



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