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 to 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.

“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.”

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 Cindy Mjoltz recipe?)

A pomegranate smoothie?

Try a weeklong media blackout (So 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 steadily 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: to 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.

Cultivating Courage

Marianne Elliott, an author, human rights lawyer, yoga teacher, and...
"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 Fox*, 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 be vulnerable. 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," Elliott 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 repetition or failure.

As she describes with great honesty in her book, Elliott doesn't think of the possibilities is that we experience "It's a place where we don't know yet where we feel vulnerable," she says. 

"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 is: 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, 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 recog- nize 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 -- a catastrophe, 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 sug- gestions 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 com- bating 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/like to be a beginner, then...* 

*Things I would never try, but sound like fun are...* 

She works 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 your favorite food, 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 recog- nize 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 -- a catastrophe, if that's a word. So the message you might get is, 'you could completely fail and humiliate yourself, it will be a disaster.'"