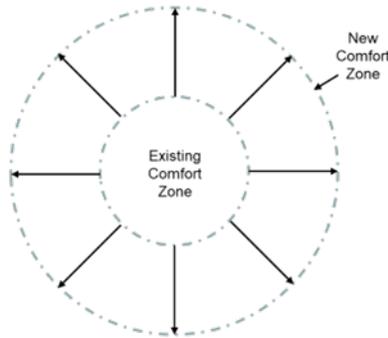


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Have you ever used or heard the phrase “comfort zone” as in “He needs to get out of his comfort zone and try something new”? You probably have, but have you ever thought about what a person’s comfort zone really is?

Our comfort zone is a mental boundary in our brains that tells us what is comfortable to do and what isn’t. It is a self-made construct that determines what we prefer to do and what we prefer not to do. We can act outside of our preferences, but it takes extra energy, thought, and effort which makes it uncomfortable.

As an example, some people are comfortable speaking up in meetings, giving presentations, and sharing differing opinions. Others are not. They prefer to remain quiet, allow others to give the presentations, and keep their opinions to themselves. So when they are pressured to speak up, it takes extra energy, thought, and effort. In the area of public communication, their comfort zone is much smaller.

There is nothing inherently wrong with having a smaller comfort zone. In fact, in areas that represent safety and risk, having a smaller comfort zone can keep you alive. For example, if you are not comfortable driving at a high-rate of speed or texting while driving, that is generally a good thing.

In other situations, having a small comfort zone isn’t as good. It promotes complacency. Small comfort zones constrain you from learning and doing things that can be helpful. For example, having a small comfort zone related to relationships can prevent you from advancing in your career, having a voice in matters that are important to you, and building friendships. It can prevent you from going places and enjoying new experiences.

Consider what you would do if you had no comfort zone and hence no fears. What if you weren’t afraid to do anything, within legal and moral constraints of course? If a manager, would you better hold an underperformer accountable? If being bullied, would you confront someone about it? Would you start your own business? Travel to new places? Speak up in meetings, give presentations, or try new approaches? If you can think of things you would like to do, but fear is holding you back, you might be limiting yourself by your comfort zone.

The good news is that our comfort zones are pliable. You can do things to stretch them and with repetition can more easily function outside of them. Expanding your comfort zone takes effort, but if desired enough you can even make it permanently larger. For example, you can overcome glossophobia – the fear of public speaking. You can become more comfortable spending time with people in social settings. You can become more vocal, better handle conflict, and hold people more accountable. You can become more openminded, less controlling, and willing to try new things.

Get Out of Your Comfort Zone

If you are open to challenging your status quo including new ways of thinking and doing, here are a dozen ways to expand your comfort zone:

1. Appreciate that growth generally comes through trial, error, adversity, and discomfort.
2. Care less about what others think about you. Don't depend on others for your validation.
3. Don't take yourself so seriously. Give yourself a break from unreasonably high expectations.
4. It's not all about you. Even if you are being constantly watched, consider it their issue, not yours.
5. Don't fret over not knowing everything or being entirely competent. No one is perfect, including you, and it's okay.
6. Don't compare yourself to others. You are as good as everyone else in your own unique way.
7. Give your best effort and accept that you did enough. You did what you could and knew to do.
8. Have an internal locus of control. Don't limit yourself by blaming others for that which you can influence.
9. Think about what you can do rather than what you can't. Maintain a positive can-do attitude.
10. Practice doing that which is uncomfortable. Persist and the resistance will diminish.
11. Try new approaches and experiences. Accept opportunities to take on assignments and challenges.
12. Be vulnerable. Put yourself at risk of being wrong or making a mistake. As an added benefit, you'll be more respected as being seen as authentic.

Try these new ways of thinking and doing to experience the freedom that comes with less fear and an expanded comfort zone.

Article written by Mike Hawkins, award-winning author of *Activating Your Ambition: A Guide to Coaching the Best Out of Yourself and Others* (www.ActivatingYourAmbition.com), author of the *SCOPE of Leadership* six-book series on coaching leaders to lead as coaches (www.ScopeOfLeadership.com), and president of Alpine Link Corp (www.AlpineLink.com), a boutique consulting firm specializing in leadership development and sales performance improvement.

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