

Expanding Your Comfort Zone

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Summary

It turns out that the best personal growth and learning happens when we push ourselves outside of our comfort zone. This doesn't require big or bold changes. It can just be trying new things or putting yourself in new situations. Yes, it can be a little uncomfortable in the moment, but regularly pushing yourself outside of your comfort zone can build new skills, increase your confidence and give your future self an interesting and varied life to reflect back on.

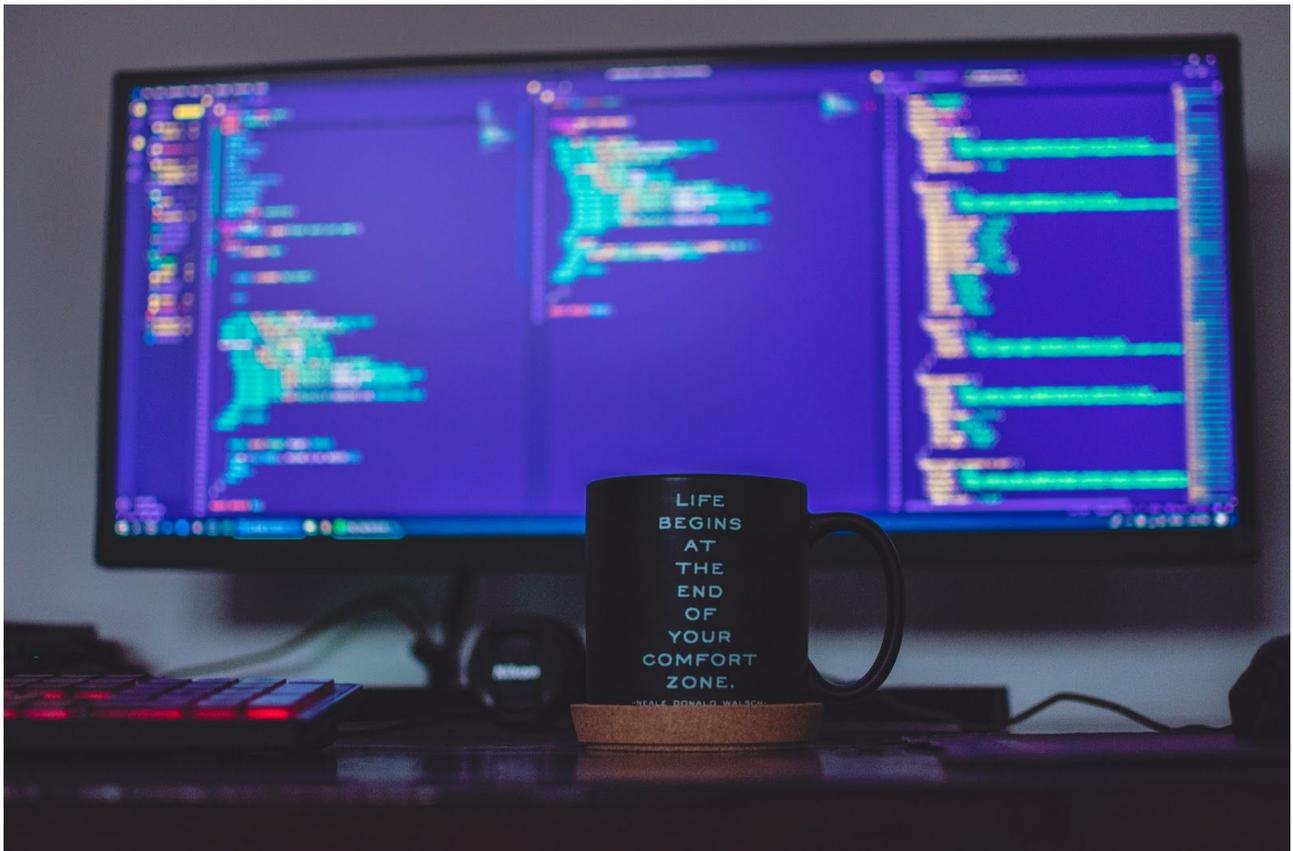
You may have heard the saying “*life begins at the end of your comfort zone.*”

It has been splashed across inspirational posters, on the front of travel diaries, used as advertising for adventure activities, yet what does it really mean? And how can stepping outside our comfort zone help us lead a rewarding and satisfying life?

The famous quote ‘*life begins at the end of your comfort zone*’ originally came from a man called [Neale Donald Walsch](#), a religious author and speaker.

He claimed that there are two types of people in the world: those who live in their comfort zone where it feels safe and secure, and those who step outside their comfort zone, and confront their fears, challenge themselves, and experience new things.

It is the latter group of people, those who step outside their comfort zone, who end up leading more fulfilling lives.



Is this true? What does it mean to expand your comfort zone?

Well, psychologists have been investigating this concept for years.

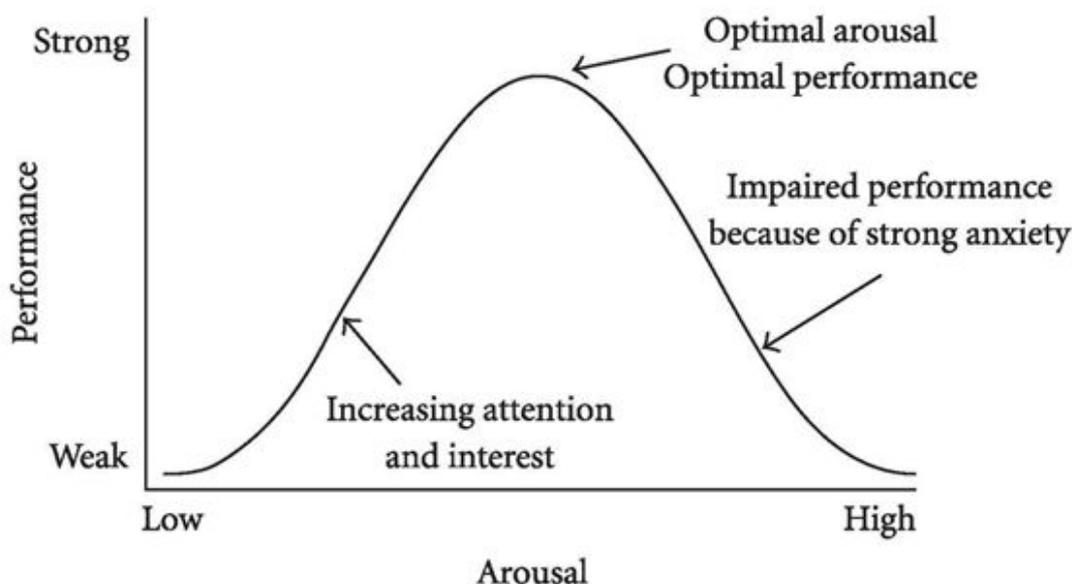
The psychological definition of a comfort zone is a “psychological state in which things feel familiar to a person and they are at ease and in control of their environment, experiencing low levels of anxiety and stress”.

There are many theories and perspectives that support the benefits of expanding your comfort zone, from social learning theories, performance management perspectives, and organisational behaviour. All agree that expanding one's comfort zone leads to optimal growth and performance.

The comfort zone model suggests that learning occurs when people move into the unknown, beyond what is familiar and safe. When placed in new and challenging situations, people learn how to overcome feelings of self-doubt, and rise to the occasion, redefining their perceived abilities to succeed and grow as individuals.

This area, just beyond the comfort zone, is where peak learning occurs. Can you remember being at school, sat in the classroom struggling to understand a new concept? Or being given an assignment that was difficult and felt slightly beyond your capabilities? Whilst challenging, these were the times of peak learning and growth. When we experience times like these, we are in what is called the stretch zone. Of course, it is not good to stretch oneself too far, beyond the learning zone to the PANIC zone. However, small steps beyond the comfort zone have been found to have huge benefits for one's confidence, performance and growth.

A groundbreaking study on animal behaviour by psychologists Yerkes and Dodson in 1908 provided insight into anxiety and performance which has paved the way for research on optimal levels of discomfort for growth and success. Comfort was said to lead to steady performance, however to reach peak performance, increased levels of anxiety and stress are needed. An increase in anxiety has since been shown to be healthy, and necessary to master new challenges.



So let's be clear - I am not suggesting you start jumping out of planes and climbing mountains – but I am suggesting you reappraise anxiety as something which helps, rather than hinders. Be open to challenges, embrace discomfort. This is how we grow!

But stepping outside my comfort zone is hard!

Yes, stepping outside our comfort zone is not always easy, and there are benefits to staying in our comfort zone. There is a sense of security in doing what we know, and there is always that part of ourselves that doubts whether we can do it. I am guessing thoughts like 'what if I fail', 'what if it's too hard', 'what if I can't do it,' 'what if I don't like it' might come to mind.

Our brain is very good at tricking us into thinking about all the things that could go wrong, but what about all the things that could go right? Are these not just as likely to occur?

One way to overcome this fear of failure (and believe me we all have this from time to time), is to practice engagement in the present moment. By keeping our focus on what is happening in the present moment, and letting our thoughts about the past or future fall into background noise – the thoughts are there, but we don't get 'hooked' into them – we are less likely to feel overwhelmed and experience self-doubt, or we can at least cope with these feelings better.

Learning mindfulness is a key way to build the skills to be able to live in the present moment, and I encourage you to look into this further. Practical guides like [Mark Williams and Danny Penman's popular text](#), and apps like [Smiling Mind](#) and [Headspace](#) which have daily mindfulness exercises, are good places to start.

Mindfulness will help you to navigate beyond your comfort zone with greater confidence.

But first, here are some reasons that you should expand your comfort zone:

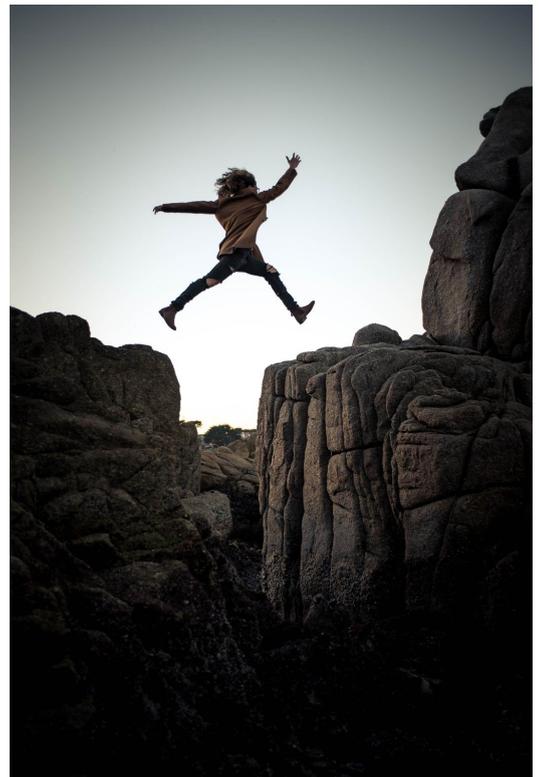
1. **Change will happen.** That is one of the only certainties in life, nothing is permanent. Things do change, so why not embrace it, be ready for it, and take control of how you would like your life to change.
2. **You might actually succeed!** You will realise you are capable of things you never could have imagined. Expanding your comfort zone leads to self-improvement, greater self-confidence, mastery of skills and a greater thirst for life.
3. **Discover yourself.** You may find talents and passions you never knew you had. Stepping outside your comfort zone is a great way to engage in personal growth and living a life you value.
4. **Your future self will thank you.** When you look back on your life, where do you want to be? Do you want to have good stories to tell? Or would you rather dream of things that could have been... if only I had...
5. **How comfortable are you anyway?** Sitting in our comfort zones isn't all that inspiring, and we are not always happy there, so what have you got to lose?

Okay, now how do I expand my comfort zone?

Have I got you convinced yet? Maybe, maybe not. But I challenge you to take a step outside your comfort zone, no matter how big or small, and kick-start your life!

Here are some top tips on how to get started.

1. Think of an activity you have always wanted to do, it might be a bucket list item, or something you have always been interested in, and go do it! Stepping outside your comfort zone doesn't have to be scary, it can also be fun!
2. Find a friend/ family member /colleague, anyone who might be interested in trying something new with you. You can push and support each other. You don't have to go it alone!
3. Try to integrate it into your routine. It doesn't have to be expensive, or time consuming, it can be as simple as going a different route to work, visiting a new coffee shop, volunteering for a new task at work, trying a new hobby at lunch time. Anything that doesn't involve the easy (and maybe lazy) option.
4. Tell others! Regardless of what it is, and whether or not you will go it alone, tell someone else what you are planning. They will help hold you accountable.
5. View it as a reward, not a challenge. This is a gift you are giving yourself to improve your life, it may seem difficult, but it is actually a blessing, and well done to you for doing it! Enjoy the process of self-growth.



What skills will I gain?

Once you start expanding your comfort zone, things that once seemed hard will no longer seem that bad, and new opportunities will unfold.

There will be an element of uncertainty as we navigate a path outside our comfort zone, but as with most things in life, it gets easier with practice.

Here are some things you will get better at if you start to expand your comfort zone:

- Confidence
- Creativity
- Self-esteem
- Resilience
- Adaptability
- Open-mindedness
- Goal setting (and goal achievement)
- Performance
- Perseverance
- Identifying your values

Just to name a few!



How will this improve my life?

Whilst living in our comfort zone may feel nice and safe, in the long-term it can lead to complacency, low motivation, and dissatisfaction with life.

“A comfort zone is a beautiful place but nothing ever grows there”

Expanding your comfort zone enables you to do the things you have always wanted to, and live a life you feel proud of. Just think about how satisfied you will be if you achieve something you once thought was impossible. All it takes are little steps in the right direction – outside of your comfort zone!

Interesting (and fairly easy) reads on related topics

The [Confidence Gap](#) by Russ Harris
[Flourish](#) by Martin Seligman

Key References

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