

Strategy: Try new things that involve moving out of your comfort zone.

One factor that helps people maintain positive self-regard is the feeling that they are growing and progressing in their lives. Personal growth is multi-dimensional. It can include age-appropriate accomplishments and milestones in areas like learning, career, family and relationships, as well as emotional and spiritual growth. Personal growth can help individuals achieve what some writers have called self-actualization: a process of growth that helps people reach their full potential. If we don't seek out and act upon opportunities to develop to our full potential we may use only a small fraction of our true capabilities.

Fortunately there is a strong impulse to grow in every person, according to Abe Arkoff, a psychologist and developer of the Illuminated Life Program. We all have ideas of what we wish to become. Some people want to become more knowledgeable, others more creative, understanding, loving or serene. But, one way or another, we all have a natural impulse to keep growing.

Roadblocks to Growth

In spite of this impulse to grow, certain barriers can interfere with our progress, such as:

- A negative view of ourselves
- Skepticism
- Uncertainty regarding how to begin or what direction to take
- Fear of growth (not feeling safe to grow)

Another barrier is what Harold Bloomfield and Robert Kory, authors of *The Holistic Way to Health and Happiness*, call the "I'm stuck" syndrome. This is when people take the position, "I've always been that way, so how could I possibly change?"

We all feel stuck at times, and when we do, we tend to have lower feelings of self regard. Often this feeling is temporary. Sometimes we become "unstuck" almost by chance. We're given a new opportunity, we make a new friend, or a new challenge presents itself. Other times, we may need to push ourselves to try something different or become open to new experiences. In other words, we may need to push ourselves to move out of our comfort zone.

Thinking About Comfort Zones

We all have a comfort zone: activities, places, people and routines that feel reassuring, predictable and comfortable. Comfort zones can be very beneficial, especially in times of stress and difficulty.

However, it's possible to get "stuck" in our comfort zone in a way that limits possibilities for the kind of personal growth that can build self regard.

Moving Out of Your Comfort Zone

It's not always easy to move out of your comfort zone. Sometimes we worry that if we try, it won't work out, we'll have a bad experience, or even feel or look foolish.

Moving out of a comfort zone requires us to break free from the past and push ourselves to do something we wouldn't ordinarily do. Some people believe in taking fairly radical steps. In the world of business, for example, experts commonly advise people to "do the thing your fear most." Facing fears successfully can give people a renewed sense of courage and a feeling that anything is possible. However this bold, fear-based approach is not for everyone.

Sometimes, the simple act of trying a new activity can help people move beyond their comfort zones. There are many possible ways to do this. Here are some suggestions:

- Take a cooking, art or fitness class.
- Try a type of food you were always afraid you might not like.
- Volunteer for an organization in your community.
- Change your daily routine. For example, take a new route to work.
- Say "Hi" to newcomers and other people in your neighbourhood or place of work.
- Plan a trip to a part of your city or region you've never been to before, or a place where people speak a different language.
- Arrange to spend some time with a person outside your normal social circle, someone you have always wanted to know better.
- Call a friend and arrange a last-minute get-together.
- Visit a new place of worship.
- Take music lessons, join a community theatre company or join a church or community choir.
- Go bungee jumping or whitewater rafting.
- Read a book, watch a show or see a play that you would normally not be drawn to.
- Take some initial steps towards making one of your dreams a reality.

Taking That First Step

If you're having trouble taking the initial step away from your comfort zone, here are some strategies that might help.

- Take a friend with you to a new activity or place. Most of us are a little braver when we're with someone else.
- Do your research. Find out as much you can about the new activity. Why do people like it?

- Accept that trying something unfamiliar will probably be uncomfortable at first, and remind yourself that feeling a little uncertain isn't going to hurt you.
- Think about past times when you tried something new and found that it was exciting and fun.

When You're *Really* Stuck

If you find it very difficult to move beyond your usual activities and ways of doing things, you may need to work on taking more control of your life. Here are some ideas that may be helpful:

- Stop thinking of yourself as a “fragile” individual. We all feel fragile at times. Focus on your strengths.
- Eliminate the words *wish*, *hope*, *maybe* and *should* from your vocabulary and replace them with *can*, *will* and *do*.
- Stop letting anxiety about obstacles get in the way. Identify and deal with the obstacles that get in your way.
- Be spontaneous and take action. Small steps can lead to big results.
- Stop putting things off and making excuses.
- Reach out to friends and family for support.
- Start challenging yourself beyond your limits.
 - Depend on yourself, for your own happiness, not others.

Accept the Uncertainty

Trying something that takes you outside your comfort zone may not always bring the desired or expected results. Even if your attempt doesn't work out very well, it can still lead to growth and positive results. You may:

- Discover that you have the courage to try new things.
- Realize you can “survive” the experience of trying something new, which will likely encourage you to try again.
- Feel less “stuck” and more adventurous.
- Learn that failure often leads to growth. In fact, some of the world's most famous entrepreneurs and politicians experienced major failures before they became successful.

Once people push themselves to take that first step, they often find that moving out of their comfort zone is easier than they imagined. Not only that, they often find the

experience interesting, exciting, and rejuvenating and come out of it with a renewed sense of optimism.

Additional Resources

Arkoff, A., Goud, N. (2008): *Psychology and Personal Growth*, Eighth Edition: Allyn and Bacon.

Bloomfield, H.H., & Kory, R.B. (1978). *The holistic way to health and happiness: A new approach to complete lifetime wellness*, New York: Simon and Schuster.

Firman, J., & Virgiu, J. (1977). *Dimensions of growth*. *Synthesis*, 3-4, 6-120.