

# “Help me step out of my comfort zone!”

Trying new things doesn't just boost our resilience, it also keeps our brains sharp, according to new research. Read on for easy ways to confidently step into the unknown

### Defuse doubt

#### Stimulate your noodle

Why ditch same-old routines? Studies show people with higher levels of openness—a willingness to explore unfamiliar situations—tend to have stronger “cognitive reserves,” says expert Pninit Russo-Netzer, Ph.D. “Novelty promotes new neural pathways.” And when we challenge ourselves, we gain insights into our motivations. “This self-awareness helps us align our lives with our goals.”

#### Sidestep worries

Psychologist Andy Molinsky, Ph.D., has pinpointed a few common reasons we stay cloistered in our comfort zone. The first is *authenticity*. “We may avoid something we've never done, like travel abroad, because it doesn't feel like us,” he says. The next is *likability*, worrying that if we behave differently, people



won't like this new version of us. And the third is *competence*: “If we don't feel like we're good at something, like public speaking, we tend to stay doing things we know.” Whichever roadblock you face, “know that things we avoid typically aren't as scary as we thought and we're better at them than we thought.”

#### Picture the future

Envision the outcome of your efforts, urges expert Suzanne Degges-White, Ph.D. “If you want to join a church group, for example, but worry about putting yourself out there, imagine the concrete benefits,” she says. “Being part of a committee may give you a larger say in the organization or you'll get to know more members. Ask how this change will make your life better.” This deceptively simple question is key to broadening your horizons.



### Start small

#### Boost confidence

“We can train our ‘growth muscle’ to expand our comfort zone by regularly exposing ourselves to new experiences in *familiar* places,” says Russo-Netzer. “This may be as simple as smiling at or complimenting a stranger or being a ‘tourist’ in your own neighborhood by, say, visiting a new coffee or antiques shop.” Taking small steps somewhere we feel safe helps dial down what she calls “uncertainty aversion” or the anxiety of the unknown.

#### Tailor your approach

People who successfully venture outside their comfort zone tend to “customize” their approach to a new activity, says Molinsky. “They tweak it to make it a bit more comfortable, like bringing a ‘prop’ with them.” He recalls a

woman who wears what she calls a “fierce bracelet” to boost her confidence when she tries something new. Timing is another way to customize change. “If you're uncomfortable walking into a loud event, you might arrive early to familiarize yourself with the surroundings.” These little shifts, he says, “put power back in your hands.”

#### Reward yourself

“Acknowledging progress can be instrumental in sustaining motivation,” says Russo-Netzer. “When you complete a ‘stretch activity,’ or move outside your perceived limits, celebrate the achievement—no matter how small it seems.” She adds that varying the types of rewards prevents them from losing their motivational impact. “The key is to find rewards that are meaningful to *you*.”

## Our expert panel



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