



Thriving in the Discomfort Zone

Passion Catalyst Curt Rosengren on how to sidestep fear and habit for a shot at a more exciting life and career.

IMAGINE living a life of complete comfort. No stress. No fear. No anxiety about what comes next or how it's going to turn out. You're absolutely certain about every step you take. Sounds like heaven, right?

Wrong, unless lackluster and uninspired happen to describe the life you're looking for. If you want to live a vibrant, fulfilling life, put down any aspirations you might have for nonstop comfort and learn to thrive in the Discomfort Zone.

The Discomfort Zone is that place that lies beyond the edge of your comfort, but not so far outside the realm of the currently possible that you're reduced to a quivering mound of jelly. It's the land between the slam dunk and the impossible dream, and it's where possibility starts to take root and grow.

What's wrong with comfort? Absolutely nothing . . . up to a point. But it's possible to have too much of a good thing. Comfort is a nice place to rest, regroup and get your footing, but if you stay there too long your passion will spring a leak, slowly deflating and ultimately falling flat.

Our ability to live up to our potential, just like muscles that get no exercise, starts to atrophy if we do nothing with it. It's a case of use it or lose it. If you don't use it, what's possible in your career starts to shrink. And like muscles, the more you venture into your Discomfort Zone, the bigger your comfort zone gets.

Every time you engage an uncomfortable challenge successfully, you gain confidence. The more confidence you build, the less discomfort you feel in trying new things because that also fosters a fundamental belief that you can handle it. The unknown and uncomfortable turns into the unknown but doable.

Whether you feel like it right now, you were made for the Discomfort Zone. It engages you, keeps you sharp and helps you grow.

Question your comfort. At the end of every week or every month, ask yourself, “Am I uncomfortable enough? **Am I taking enough action that takes me out of the complacency of the known? Am I taking any?”**

My Own Story

Much to my chagrin, I recently had the chance to take an up close and personal look at the perils of neglecting the Discomfort Zone. The seeds of this article were actually planted several months ago with a seemingly innocent question from a friend: “Have you done anything out of your comfort zone lately?”

At the time, I had hit a plateau and was feeling stagnant and stuck—not the best spiritual place for someone who focuses on helping people find passion in their careers.

His question stopped me dead in my tracks. I realized that I was on autopilot. It had been far too long since I had really stepped beyond comfort.

When I started my Passion Catalyst business six years ago, everything was outside my comfort zone. I was reinventing myself and every step I took was into the uncertain, unknown and unfamiliar. It was sometimes painful but always energizing.

As my new identity took root and I developed proven systems and approaches, I started to get comfortable. After all the turmoil of the reinvention process, it was nice to have my feet back on solid ground. But over time the comfort became a source of malaise. I was still in love with the focus of what I was doing, but the day-to-day had started to lose its luster, and the same old reliable thing that had once felt so good had become a rut.

Since that simple question, I have consistently looked for ways to step into my Discomfort Zone. From new ideas to try in my work to a Cambodian vacation that took me far outside my realm of experience, I started stepping out once again into the uncertain, unknown and unfamiliar.

The result? I feel as charged up as I ever have about what I’m doing, the future I’m creating and the potential it holds.

Why Don’t People Venture Out?

One major deterrent to people entering the Discomfort Zone is fear. Fear of failure. Fear of looking stupid. Fear of not being perfect. Fear of not knowing. It’s a bit like an invisible dog fence, a discomfort of stepping beyond the edge.

The other big barrier is habit. When people get entrenched in their comfortable way of doing things, the inertia can be tremendous. Their change muscles start to waste away because they’re never used. And that breeds the feeling of, “I can’t do that.”

How To Get To The Zone

Luckily, you can learn to thrive in the Discomfort Zone—it just takes a little work. Here are some suggestions.

Practice discomfort. Make it a regular habit to take action that takes you into the Discomfort Zone. If your resistance is strong, start small. The more you do it and succeed, the more you will feel comfortable with it.

Make a list of items that would put you in the Discomfort Zone. They can be big steps or small steps. Make a career-related list and a rest-of-life list.

ON THE CAREER SIDE, YOU MIGHT ASK QUESTIONS LIKE:

- ▶ What new roles am I drawn to?
- ▶ What new projects do I want to take on?
- ▶ What new skills do I want to learn?
- ▶ What new directions in my career do I want to take?
- ▶ What have I always wanted to do, but just been too nervous about to actually try?

ON THE PERSONAL SIDE, YOU MIGHT ASK ABOUT:

- ▶ Relationships
- ▶ Finances
- ▶ Spiritual exploration
- ▶ Travel
- ▶ Recreation

Question your comfort. At the end of every week or every month, ask yourself, “Am I uncomfortable enough? Am I taking enough action that takes me out of the complacency of the known? Am I taking any?” If you’re not, use the list you made from the last step as a source of ideas for uncomfortable action to take.

Find the fear and face it. So often, the fear is worse than the action. Ask yourself, “What am I afraid of?” Give that fear a name, then ask what one step you can take to move toward that fear. Take the step. Repeat.

Experiment. Often the fear of going beyond your comfort zone comes from a black-and-white perception of failure and success. Instead of something that absolutely must yield a superb out-

come, look at your steps as experiments. The goal of an experiment is not to achieve perfection, it's to learn. It's impossible for an experiment to fail.

Chunk it down. If you're faced with a mega-fear-inducing beast of a step, re-examine it to figure out what are the smaller steps that you could take? If your goal is to be able to speak in front of a crowd, but it strikes terror into your heart, how about starting small? Test the waters with a group of friends who know you well so there's no worry about performance. If that's even too much, go smaller. Start by talking to one person, or to yourself in the mirror. As you get comfortable with one step, then take the next.

Make "failure" OK. Don't paint your entire world with one negative result. Remind yourself that if you have a 100 percent success rate with everything you try, you're selling yourself short. Occasional failure is part of the game.

Actively learn from your mistakes. Incorporate a regular mistake debrief into your process. Each time your efforts come up short, ask, "What did I learn from that? How can that knowledge apply in the future?" Keep a record of key insights for future reference.


Learn to not know. Part of what makes the Discomfort Zone uncomfortable is the fact that we don't know what's going to happen. The more accustomed you can get to operating in the realm of the unknown, the less daunting those forays beyond your comfort will be.

Practice flexibility and spontaneity. If your life is defined by an ingrained habitual structure, the resulting ruts make any deviation from that routine bone-jarringly bumpy. Incorporate more movement into your life to make change easier. Introduce change to your routine. Do something new. It doesn't have to be uncomfortable, just different from the norm.

Find support. Don't try to do it alone. Bring someone else into the picture who can support your efforts to thrive in the Discomfort Zone. Maybe that's someone to hold you accountable, or to bounce around ideas with about overcoming an obstacle.

None of this is to suggest that you create a nonstop roller coaster ride of discomfort and stress. It's not a stark choice between 100 percent comfort or 100 percent discomfort. It's about striking a balance between the two.

To help you get a picture of where you stand, rate your comfort level on a scale of one (total discomfort) to ten (total comfort). Ideally you should see a good balance, somewhere in the four to seven range. If you score too low on the scale, it's time to take a step into the Discomfort Zone. If you score too high on the scale, look at ways you can ground yourself and create some sense of comfort.

Step into the Discomfort Zone, back that growth up with some comfort zone R&R, and watch yourself fly. 

Seattle-based Curt Rosengren is a Passion Catalyst, helping others find what makes them come alive. He blogs at <http://curtrosengren.typepad.com/occupationaladventure/>



What's your **motto**
Curt Rosengren?

“I want to change the world
—I just don't want to do all
the work.”