

Building Courage

Courage is a sense of inner strength that enables you to persevere, despite fear or difficulty; it is a voice inside that encourages you to be brave and step beyond your comfort zone; it is a drive to speak out against injustice, even if your voice feels small and insignificant; it is something that we all have within us. Accessing the courage within, however, is not always easy, but it is important if we are to go out and connect with strangers in our communities. The good news is that the more we work on building up our courage, the more courageous we will feel and the easier once intimidating tasks become.

One of the reasons why it is hard to access the courage within is that we are not always encouraged to feel like capable agents in our own lives. It often feels like we have little choice in how society is organised and that we are too small to change things; this sense of powerlessness can fill us with self doubt. We also live in a society where it is the norm to criticise others, to shame them and ridicule those who put their heads above the parapet. This can create fear about being brave and bold, particularly as acts that require courage involve us taking ourselves out of our comfort zones and making ourselves vulnerable.

But courage is also about facing such fears. Often what we are afraid of is connected to our insecurities: what we perceive as our failures and weaknesses. It is quite normal to avoid opportunities or procrastinate before engaging with important tasks if we are afraid of doing badly. We must acknowledge these fears and recognise when we are dodging tasks by hiding or taking on pointless work that fills up our time. When we remove mental roadblocks we are better able to take bold action.

And it is worth it: being bold and courageous has its rewards: it can help us achieve our goals, it can help us feel more confident in who we are, and it can open up new and exciting doors. It is also something that we can practice and get better at over time: courage does not suddenly grow within us, it needs to be nurtured. We need to flex our courage muscle in daily life and get into the habit of pushing ourselves in small ways that help make us braver and more resilient.

Here are some exercises to help you find that inner courage.

Acknowledge Your Emotions

Acknowledging and sitting with our feelings is important pre-work when building courage – they are there for a reason and they can help us better understand ourselves. It is therefore important to take time to recognise feelings, accept them and investigate them to learn about what is driving them. Understanding how we feel is a vital step in allowing us to process our emotions and let go of them; it also creates space for self-care, for ensuring we are looking after our needs.

As we build courage, we will begin to sit with uncomfortable emotions and gain a greater understanding of them and their effects on our bodies. Through this greater understanding of ourselves, we will be able to address our needs, which can make us more confident in moving out of our comfort zone and facing up to more challenging scenarios.

Next time you feel yourself overcome by any emotion, consider reflecting on your feelings using the following approach (you may find it useful to take notes with a pen):

R - Recognise the emotion/feelings

A - Accept the emotion/feelings

I - Investigate what is causing the emotion/feelings

N - Nurture the cause of the emotions/feelings (it is often an unmet need)

Reflect on Your Fears

There are healthy fears and there are unhealthy fears. Sometimes it is healthy and natural to be afraid: the fear we might be feeling is an instinct that keeps us safe from putting ourselves in dangerous situations. It is sensible, for example, to be scared of walking too close to the edge of a cliff as it can result in a fall.

More often than not, however, we find ourselves afraid to do things which are actually not that dangerous and may even be beneficial for us. We might be scared to ask a question, or speak out when we disagree with something, or to ask for something that will help us. We might be scared to go on a date, or try out for a new job. The reasons we are afraid are a little harder to pin down; they may feel unsafe to us: this fear is not centred around risk to life or limb, but more abstract worries – that we won't succeed, that we'll be rejected or embarrassed. Often our fears in these situations are linked to certain core beliefs about ourselves and/or to self doubt. We might think:

"My question won't be interesting enough".

"I will be criticised for not understanding enough".

"I will be rejected because I won't be good enough".

It is important to think about our fears, identifying what causes them and the impact that they have had on past behaviour.

Identify Your Fears

By identifying what you are afraid of, you can empower yourself to act with courage and face such fears.

1. Make a list of different things that you fear.
2. Write down different things you would do if you did not have those fears.

3. Discuss one of your fears with someone you know.

Identify How Fears Have Impacted Past Behaviour

Calling out these fears will be difficult and painful but it is important to do so if we are to understand what's holding us back.

Take a pen and note down five situations in which fear or discomfort have stopped you from doing what you wanted to do. Then mindmap each of those situations, using the following questions to help you:

1. What was happening in the situation?
2. Why did you feel fear or discomfort?
3. What reactions did you fear?
4. Were your fears valid? How do you know?
5. What were the consequences of your response?
6. What would have been the consequences if you had followed through with what you wanted to do?

Step Out of Your Comfort Zone

Take a medium sized risk and see where it leads. If there is something you have been putting off, take the jump! It's important to be gentle and patient with yourself and realistic about what you can accomplish, so maybe best not to go too big for your first time – but do make a conscious choice to take a risk. An act of courage does not need to be an enormous show or act, like standing up to speak in an auditorium in front of a thousand people. It can be a decision to smile at a stranger in the street or strike up conversation with a neighbour. Remember, overcoming our fears and building courage is a process, start small and see where you end up.

What you choose to do should be something that makes you nervous, not petrified with fear, and it's a good idea to spend a while on this step, and to make a habit of whatever you are choosing to do before moving on.

Then reflect on the process. You may wish to use these questions to help you:

1. How did it feel to step out of your comfort zone?
2. How did the experience differ from your expectations?
3. What did you learn about yourself?

Experience the New

Make a tiny change to experience unfamiliarity. This doesn't need to be anything significant. You might, for example, choose to start the way in a different way by eating something different or changing your morning routine. Or, you could cook something you have never cooked before or buy an ingredient you have never bought. Or decide that you will spend one week saying yes to whatever suggestions come your way.

The idea of this is to break you out of any ruts you may be in, and to help you be more adaptable to change. Sometimes the familiar and the routines that we have become comfortable and make us averse to change, which can in turn prevent us from taking risks and being courageous.

After you have spent some time experiencing the new, in whatever form it took, reflect on how it felt: How did it feel? What did you learn about yourself?

Pursue a Bold Act of Courage

Once you have become practiced in stepping out of your comfort zone, you can turn your sights to a bigger goal. It should be a bigger risk, something that you have always wanted to do but felt unable to accomplish. This is not about “ripping the band-aid off” this will rarely be achieved all in one go. Usually, it is a case of taking small steps to achieve a big goal. Since it is such a big goal there are lots of things that need to be ticked off on the way and every one of them is important!

If, for example, you want to create a sense of community and get to know all of your neighbours, you might start by reaching out to see if anyone in your area has similar desires by posting on some form of social media or leafleting through people’s doors. This can lay the foundations for connecting with people and creating a community.

Courage is a vehicle, not an end goal. It’s something that we can build to boost our confidence and enable success, but it does require practice. Trust that you have courage inside and find ways to flex that courage muscle daily, and see where you end up!
