

Tiptoeing Out of One's Comfort Zone (and of Course, Back in) By ALINA TUGEND

LAST week, I moved out of my comfort zone, psychologically and literally. And it didn't feel so good.

First, I spoke to a group of middle-school students about journalism. It was a day when parents were supposed to come and talk about their work and discuss why what you learned in middle school was actually important in real life.

I am fairly self-confident about talking to a roomful of adults. But 12- and 13-year-old children made me sweat. Some looked at me intently, but others stared out the window, played with their pencils or poked their neighbors. Suddenly, I was pulled back to my middle-school years, trying to entertain the "popular" kids. I was most uncomfortable.

A few days later, we had some workers in to paint a few rooms in the house. No big deal, I thought. Except that as more rooms were draped in drop cloths and living room furniture crowded the dining room, our entire family — and two befuddled cats — retreated upstairs.

No one could find anything. Everyone was out of sorts. We were feeling decidedly uncomfortable.

Moving out of our comfort zones is supposed to be a good thing. We challenge ourselves, we grow and take on new risks. But is this always true? After all, over the last few years, many of us have been pushed out of our comfort zones, forced to seek new jobs, even careers.

First of all, I wondered, how did the term originate? In my research, I came across one theory that comfort zone was the temperature range — about 67 to 78 degrees, depending on the season — at which people were neither too hot nor too cold.

All right. I can't test that with snow on the ground. But if we transfer that to a psychological comfort zone, it makes sense — it's where we're completely at home. Or as Judith M. Bardwick, author of "Danger in the Comfort Zone" (American Management Association, 1991), writes, "The comfort zone is a behavioral state within which a person operates in an anxiety-neutral position."

She cites a famous experiment conducted by the psychologists Robert M. Yerkes and John D. Dodson, way back in 1908. Using mice, they found that stimulation improved performance, up to a certain level — what is now known as optimal anxiety. When that level is passed, and we're under too much stress, performance deteriorates.

"We need a place of productive discomfort," said Daniel H. Pink, author of "Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us" (Riverhead, 2009). "If you're too

comfortable, you're not productive. And if you're too uncomfortable, you're not productive. Like Goldilocks, we can't be too hot or too cold."

Everyone's reaction to stress is different, of course — your comfort zone is not mine.

The objective is to reach that optimal level so that our skills increase and we become comfortable with that new level of anxiety — then we're in an expanded comfort zone. And ideally, we will get more used to those feelings of "productive discomfort" and won't be so scared to try new things in the future.

Brené Brown, a research professor at the [University of Houston Graduate College of Social Work](#) and author of "The Gifts of Imperfection" (Hazelden, 2010), has another definition of comfort zone: "Where our uncertainty, scarcity and vulnerability are minimized — where we believe we'll have access to enough love, food, talent, time, admiration. Where we feel we have some control."

The trouble is, Ms. Brown said, "When we get into times of social, political or financial instability, our comfort zones get smaller." The more afraid we are, she said, "the more impenetrable our comfort zones buffers become."

There was a huge shift after 9/11, she said, in just how vulnerable people were willing to be in their personal and work lives. When we feel vulnerable, she added, we often feel fear and shame.

And, "since those are some of our most difficult emotions, we want to avoid them," she said.

A friend, a family man in his mid-40s who asked that he not be identified, recently took a huge stride outside his comfort zone. He quit his job as a partner at a corporate law firm — although he will still maintain informal ties for a year — to write a novel. He has no publisher or agent at this point. He just decided to pursue something he always wanted to do.

The interesting thing, my friend discovered, is that his leap out of his comfort zone made other people uncomfortable.

"Because it was not an expected choice, it caused people to step outside the usual assumptions," he said. "It's like the Wizard of Oz drawing back a curtain — they realize, 'If he's making an active choice, then I'm making an active choice on my part to stay. And I can choose to do something completely different myself.'"

Ms. Brown isn't surprised by some of the reactions to my friend's choice.

"Any time we open ourselves up to vulnerability, it's a very uncomfortable mirror," she said.

Choosing to leave our comfort zones is hard enough. But being forced out is even more difficult. And that is happening all too frequently, with jobs and entire professions disappearing.

How do we cope with that? A. J. Schuler, a business consultant who has written about resistance to change, advised finding a core group of people — just two or three was enough — who would listen and understand how difficult this was.

“I call that a personal life board, like a board of directors,” he said. “You need to obtain prior permission to just talk.”

The advice on accepting change is pretty obvious, but difficult to carry out, he said, so “you can get down on yourself because you see yourself as stagnant. You need people who won’t get frustrated with that.”

Ms. Brown, who as part of her research interviewed a large number of men affected by the recession in 2009, agreed. “I think the biggest mistake people make is not acknowledging fear and uncertainty.”

Second, realize that you need to give yourself time and space to mourn your loss, Mr. Schuler said.

Finally, he said, create a plan to find new opportunities regularly and keep working that plan. “That way you take some control back in an environment that feels out of control.”

As parents, we can help our children grow into adults who feel more secure about leaving their comfort zones, Mr. Pink said, by resisting the urge to always shield them from uncertainty and discomfort. “If we do that, they can’t be productive,” he said.

An interesting point Ms. Brown brings up is that while the term comfort zone sounds pleasant, being the complicated human beings we are, we can sometimes feel the most comfortable when we are worried or depressed.

“It’s outside my comfort zone to experience joy,” she said. “I fear that it’s inviting disaster.” And many of us may feel that way. Ms. Brown gives the example of watching your child sleep and feeling overwhelming love — and then quickly imagining some catastrophe befalling that child.

“It’s an uncomfortable feeling imagining how much we love someone,” she said.

We all know people who seem to feel most happy being unhappy — always complaining or worrying about something. That’s their comfort zone.

So being slightly uncomfortable, whether or not by choice, can push us to achieve goals we never thought we could. But it’s important to remember that we don’t need to

challenge ourselves and be productive all the time. It's good to step out of our comfort zone. But it's also good to be able to go back in.