

# The Mindful Kind

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Australia's top 10 podcast



If you're feeling overwhelmed, pressured and anxious this book will change your life, one mindful step at a time.



## CHAPTER 1

# *Exploring outside your comfort zone*

Imagine a safe and comfortable home. It's quiet and cosy, filled with all of your favourite things. You know your home so well that you could find your way around in the dark – and when it's stormy outside, it's the perfect place to take refuge.

Your comfort zone is just like your home. It's a secure place where you can stay within the boundaries and feel comfortable and safe.

However, we tend to enjoy exploring outside our homes, too. Without exploration, we grow bored and frustrated and isolated. We miss feeling the sunshine on our skin, the thrill of discovering new places, the challenges that arise from the unknown.

And the more we explore, the more we become familiar with new parts of the world. Initially, we might become familiar with our neighbourhood, then places we visit regularly (such as work, shops, school or friends' houses), then other states, or even different countries!

The same is true of our comfort zones. The further we explore outside them, the more our comfort zones expand. As the psychologist Abraham Maslow once said, 'In any given moment, we have two options: to step forward into growth or to step back into safety.'

Of course, stepping forward isn't always easy and neither will it guarantee success. For these reasons, I think it's incredibly important to focus on one thing: going outside your comfort zone will always teach you something. Perhaps it's not something you expect to be taught! You may find yourself learning from mistakes, feeling a range of challenging emotions, realising hard truths, or finding out more about yourself and your capabilities. You may even find yourself wishing you'd taken a different path or stayed within your comfort zone and it won't be until later that you can look back and feel grateful for making the choice to venture out there.

## The temptation of a comfort zone

One of the main reasons why comfort zones are so alluring is that they tend to decrease stress. They offer a sense of safety and familiarity, so that when we return to them, we feel relieved. This is both a wonderful feature and a potential danger of comfort zones.

So how can we effectively use our comfort zones as safe spaces, while not becoming too attached and reliant on staying within them?

The answer lies in how you perceive them. Comfort zones, like homes, are safe and familiar, but in order to go exploring you need to leave them. If you can encourage yourself to see your comfort zone as a secure base to return to when you need it, but also a launching pad from which to boost yourself out, then you will be able to experience the safety of a comfort zone without needing to be there all the time.

## Going outside my own comfort zone

In 2011, I moved away from my rural hometown to the second-largest city in the country so I could study psychology at university. Being an introvert who loved familiarity, it was completely outside my comfort

zone. For several months, I struggled. I caught the wrong train in the middle of the night and ended up somewhere completely unknown. I felt overwhelmed by crowds and the hustle of city life. I pulled my car over to the side of the road (multiple times!), in tears, having taken a wrong turn and ended up somewhere unfamiliar.

Yet the thrill of being so far out of my comfort zone also pushed me to embrace the new. Within a few months, I'd mastered reading the train timetable and navigating around my area of the city. I'd discovered new support networks and felt safe even when things were unfamiliar. I learned to smile when I walked through crowds, just because it felt better than looking at the ground while ducking and weaving around people.

But it still wasn't easy to be outside my comfort zone. There were times when I felt knots of dread twisting and tightening in my stomach. There were mornings when I wanted to get in my car and drive back to my hometown. There were days when I wondered if I'd made a mistake moving to the city, where things were so different from the place where I'd grown up. There was even a period of several months when I became so judgemental about 'city life' that I spent the majority of my spare time daydreaming about moving back to the country. I had a detailed image of what my home would be like – far away from other people, with several dogs and a studio where I could dance – and I'd mentally created my garden, featuring winding, interconnecting paths and raspberry bushes in wooden boxes. I'd figured out how I would earn money in that remote location and I'd even gone so far as to start putting aside money to fund the dream.

However, this wasn't truly a dream; it was an escape. Rather than embracing the present moment and appreciating all the good things and opportunities in my life, I spent hours fantasising about something else. Of course, not having the perfect country house when I wanted it so badly created a real sense of sadness. I was constantly wishing for

something I didn't have, believing that when I finally got it, everything would work out and I would be happy.

It was during this time that I began volunteering on a helpline at the Anxiety Recovery Centre for Victoria and I started learning about mindfulness. We were sitting in a room undergoing training and we were guided through the following mindfulness technique:

Bring your attention into the room.

Notice five things you can see.

Notice four things you can hear.

Notice three things you can feel.

Notice two things you can smell.

Notice one thing you can taste.

At the end of the technique, I felt content. By allowing myself to let go of the incessant daydreaming, as well as the predicting and planning that regularly contributed to my own stress, I'd learned what it felt like to simply be in the moment. No expectations. No judgement. Just an open-minded acceptance and curiosity about what that moment actually had to offer.

Mindfulness was completely new to me and a very different way of thinking and being. For such a simple practice, it often drew me so far out of my comfort zone that there were times I believed I couldn't do it.

My comfort zone was about always trying to stay a few steps ahead, so I could plan and predict my own future and avoid mistakes. It involved believing that happiness was in my future, when I would finally have everything I wanted. Inside my comfort zone, challenging and vulnerable emotions, such as anger and sadness, were bad. Happiness and excitement were good. Getting through tough times was about distraction and actively trying not to experience the present moment.

Mindfulness challenged all of that. My practice slowly began to teach me that I could allow my life to unfold and that I could embrace unpredictability, even when it was challenging. I discovered that my constant planning was causing more stress than providing help. I stopped suppressing emotions as much and found that by open-mindedly experiencing them, I felt less judgemental of myself and more self-compassionate. These shifts in thinking led to even more tangible benefits in my life, from better sleep to stronger relationships and more experiences of fun and creativity (more on that later!).

For now, it's important to understand that your comfort zone may be challenged by your mindfulness practice. And that's okay.

## Mindfulness, stress and exploring the boundaries of your comfort zone

When we go exploring outside our comfort zones, we often experience varying degrees of stress. However, this isn't necessarily a bad thing! In fact, we can experience a state of 'optimal stress', a term coined by psychologist Robert Yerkes in 1907, which refers to a behavioural space in which we experience slightly higher stress than normal. This experience of slightly higher (but still manageable) stress leads to an increase in performance.<sup>1</sup>

For example, imagine you're asked to give a speech at a close friend's wedding. You agree, but you can already feel a tingle of fear starting to build. Your previous experiences of public speaking remind you of sweaty palms, stuttered words and a group of blank faces staring back at you with a hint of pity. So you start preparing. You write some notes, edit them, memorise some key points, practise your speech in front of someone else and create cue cards. When it's time to present your speech, you feel a rush of fear, but your preparation supports you through it and you end up feeling quite proud of how it unfolds.

Now, let's imagine the same situation but without the experience of optimal stress. Your friend asks you to present a speech at their wedding and while you're honoured to have been asked, you don't feel any stress about it. Maybe you haven't had any experiences with public speaking before and you believe it will all happen easily and naturally, without you having to put in any effort. So you don't prepare and you don't particularly think about it either. When the moment to present rolls around, you feel a sudden, overwhelming sense of unexpected fear and you don't know what to say.

Compared to the first scenario, the second scenario doesn't involve optimal stress and results in a decrease in performance.

While many of us perceive stress as a challenge, or a sign that something's wrong, there are actually some incredible benefits which can come from experiencing it. Not only can optimal stress increase your performance, it can also motivate you to work towards your goals, try new things and make beneficial changes in your life. Even the experience of stress itself can encourage you to discover new ways of managing it, so that when you do experience higher levels of stress or anxiety, you're equipped with different tools and techniques to support yourself through it.

Keep in mind that when you expand your comfort zone, you may experience some stress – and that can be a good thing! Allow it to become part of what motivates you and encourages you to grow. If you do find the stress starts to become overwhelming, remember that you can return to your comfort zone for a little while, use mindfulness techniques, or turn to your support network for help. On the next page you'll discover some helpful tips for going outside your comfort zone in small yet meaningful ways.

## **Tips and techniques for going outside your comfort zone**

*Seek support for particularly challenging journeys outside your comfort zone.* Humans weren't made to traverse the wilderness alone! Don't be afraid to ask for help, create a buddy or accountability system, visit a health professional, join a support group or communicate with people you trust.

*Try doing everyday things differently.* Not every attempt to explore beyond your comfort zone has to push you to the edge of your boundaries. Why not practise – and make it a daily habit – to make small changes in your life, such as walking different routes, trying new recipes, listening to music you might not normally listen to, getting out of bed earlier (or later), swapping chores with someone else in your home, or using a different form of relaxation from what you would normally use.

*Change 'I can't do it' to 'I can't do it, yet.'* Such a simple change can completely alter your perceptions of your abilities and your potential to grow. By saying 'I can't do it, yet', you'll give yourself a chance to learn and gain knowledge (or skills), whereas 'I can't do it' implies that you already believe you never will.

*Spend time with people who are different from you.* A few of my friends are extroverted and I find it both challenging and rewarding to spend time with them. They show me new ways of interacting and communicating, while encouraging



me to flex the boundaries of my introversion and learn more about myself.

*Return to your comfort zone to recharge, or when you've gone beyond optimal stress.* Remember how the comfort zone is like a home? Sometimes, you just need to be at home so you can feel safe and recharge your batteries and the same goes for your comfort zone. You don't need to be out of it all the time, or feel like you should always be pushing yourself! In fact, I think we all need decent breaks every now and again so we can reflect and re-energise. Return to your comfort zone when you need to and simply appreciate being there for a while.

*Use affirmations.* Choose a few simple affirmations you can repeat whenever you need a little boost of self-belief. For example, 'I am capable of exploring outside my comfort zone' or 'I am confident' or 'I love challenges which help me grow.' Of course, you can also create your own affirmations, too!

*Do nothing.* While this may seem like a simple activity, many of us just aren't used to doing nothing. Go somewhere quiet so you can be alone, put your phone away, turn off all technology, try not to fidget and just sit and do nothing for a few minutes. It may feel uncomfortable or disconcerting, and that's alright. If your mind starts racing, try to become present by noticing your breath or tuning in to your different senses. This practice is great if you're feeling nervous about going outside your comfort zone because it will likely

challenge you without pushing you too far (plus, you can stop whenever you like).

*Try not to 'just do it' before you feel ready.* Going outside your comfort zone often takes courage, patience, kindness, self-efficacy and understanding. Sometimes, we put such high expectations on ourselves and want perfection, when we often need some time and self-care to adjust. Some days you may find it easy to explore outside your comfort zone, but other days might be really difficult. Always try to listen to what your body and mind are telling you and make adjustments accordingly.

*Take your time in making decisions.* When we make quick decisions, we tend to do the same things over and over again, or act on autopilot. The next time you need to make a decision, actually take some time to think about it and explore whether there might be a better way to go about it, or new things you could incorporate!

*Go outside your comfort zone for yourself, not because other people think you should.* At the end of the day, the choices you make and the actions you take need to come from a place of internal motivation, when you choose to go outside your comfort zone because you want to learn more and grow as a person for your own sake.