


## Leaving the Comfort Zone

### Mindset

 Exercise

 10 min.

 Client

 No

To have a growth mindset is to believe that our most basic abilities can be developed through dedication and hard work; that personal qualities like intellect and natural talent are just the starting point (Dweck, 2008). Holding such a view helps one build resilience and foster a love of learning, contributing to accomplishment and success (Dweck, 2008; Yeager & Dweck, 2012).

However, having a growth mindset is not the full story; a growth mindset must be translated into action. A growth mindset in action means that we allow ourselves to fail, to make mistakes, and persist in those areas that we have not yet mastered, despite our fears and discomfort. The growth that is experienced by people with a growth mindset does not happen within the comfort zone; the space in which we explore only the things we know; the things that we feel we know and can control. In order to learn and grow from a situation, one must venture beyond the comfort zone into what can be called the fear zone.

The fear zone is, by definition, scary and uncomfortable; it is the zone that prevents most people from ever leaving the comfort zone. However, those with a growth mindset are more able to endure the fear zone in the service of growth and learning. These people are able to experience the benefits of venturing beyond their comfort zone, which makes it easier and more attractive to do it again. This tool was designed as a visual aid for people to understand the costs of staying in the comfort zone and the necessity to leave this zone for the experience of growth.



### Author

This tool was created by Hugo Alberts (PhD) and Lucinda Poole (PsyD).



### Goal

This tool was designed as a visual aid for people to understand the costs of staying in the comfort zone and the necessity to leave this zone for the experience of growth.



### Advice

- Help clients understand that growth and learning is a process and that growth and fear go hand in hand. One cannot grow without experiencing fear. Highlighting the notion that fear is virtually a prerequisite for growth and learning may increase willingness

and acceptance of fear. A great tool in this respect is “The Acceptance or Avoidance Route”. This tool can motivate clients to move through the fear zone by highlighting the costs of staying in their comfort zone and the necessity of acceptance of fear.

- Point out the relative differences in the size of each zone. Compared with the learning and growth zones, the fear zone is small, and the comfort zone even smaller. The highlights (1) the limited nature of living within one’s very small comfort zone and (2) the possibility of enduring the relatively minor fear zone in the service of bigger and better things.
- Practitioners should ensure that clients understand that learning involves getting things wrong and can often require struggle and discomfort (the fear zone). Emphasize that the experience of failing or finding something difficult actually allows clients to progress with learning.
- Please note that the process described in this tool may give rise to the impression that the process of learning and growth is a linear process, where people move through the different zones and “reach” the growth zone. In reality, however, this process is highly dynamic and continuous. Clients may enter the learning zone and fall back to the fear zone when new, unforeseen challenges are presented. The process of growth is a process of falling and getting up, where it is per definition impossible to reach the growth zone and stay there. As soon as the growth zone is accomplished, the client has created a new “comfort zone”, and the process outlined in this tool repeats itself.
- It is important to note that for some life domains it is easier for clients to move through the fear zone than other life domains. For example, a client may find it relatively easier to move beyond their comfort zone at work than at home with their spouse. When this is the case, the practitioner may ask the client to tap into the mindset and experiences of the life domain in which the client does have the courage to leave the comfort zone. What can the client learn from his actions here? How can the insights and experiences that result from the courageous actions in this life domain be used to facilitate action in the other life domain?



### Suggested Readings

Dweck, C. S. (2008). *Mindset: The new psychology of success*. Random House Digital, Inc.

Yeager, D. S., & Dweck, C. S. (2012). Mindsets that promote resilience: When students believe that personal characteristics can be developed. *Educational psychologist*, 47(4), 302-314.

## Leaving the Comfort Zone

*“Promise me you’ll always remember: You’re braver than you believe, stronger than you seem, and smarter than you think.” – A.A. Milne*

At some point in our lives we do everything for the first time, and accepting there are going to be challenges, and at times failure, all comes with stepping out of our comfort zone. We all have a comfort zone; that space within which we feel safe and in control and where things come easy for us. Life seems good in the comfort zone because there is little to be afraid of or worried about, and there is a low risk of failure or rejection or any other unpleasant experiences. However, the problem with living life in our comfort zone is that there is little if any room for growth and learning. Growth and learning come only from venturing beyond the comfort zone.

### Step 1: Introduce the comfort zone infographic

#### *Comfort Zone*

Have a look at the comfort zone infographic displayed in Appendix A. The red circle represents our comfort zone. It is the space in which we feel safe and in control. Here, things come easy for us. We know what to do and what to expect. However, no learning or growth takes place here, because we rely on the things we already know and have been doing over and over again.

#### *Fear Zone*

For us to learn and grow, we must leave the comfort zone and step into the fear zone (orange circle), which is far less comfortable. In fact, the fear zone is very uncomfortable. We do not know what to expect and cannot build on our previous experiences. This new way is paved with uncertainty. Consequently, we often tend to try to avoid this space and make excuses as to why we cannot go there. And even if we find the courage to leave the comfort zone, the fear of the unknown can cause us to move back quickly to our comfort zone. The fear zone is often the most challenging part of learning and growth journey.

#### *Learning zone*

If we can muster up the courage to endure the fear zone, we come out the other side, into the learning zone. The learning zone (yellow circle) is where we can begin to acquire new skills and learn to deal with challenges and problems. When we make it to the learning zone, we actually extend our comfort zone, meaning that we begin to feel comfortable in this previously uncomfortable experience.

#### *Growth zone*

When we stay long enough in the learning zone, we begin to experience that we are able to change and start to redefine ourselves in terms of what we can do, achieve and feel comfortable with. Over time, we enter the growth zone (green circle). Staying long enough in the learning zone has helped us to grow as a person, at multiple levels. We may have increased our resilience by conquering obstacles, we have created a pathway that makes it easier for us to follow our dreams, we may have experienced a sense of meaning by investing time in something that really matters to us. The growth zone is the bigger picture; that which we have gained at a more fundamental, personal level. Entering the growth zone is the ultimate reward for enduring the fear zone.



### Step 2: Use an example to illustrate the process of moving through the zones

Consider a person with a fear of public speaking. Avoiding any and every opportunity to speak publicly allows this person to remain in his comfort zone. By doing so, the person does not have to face the fear of failing, not knowing, or imperfect performance.

If, however, an unavoidable speaking event arises, such as being asked to speak at a work meeting, this person will be required to leave his comfort zone and step into the fear zone. Just prior to the meeting, this person may experience feelings of anxiety and self-doubt, and a strong desire to run away. However, by enduring this fear and speaking at the meeting, he will enter into the learning zone and begin to acquire new skills. Per definition, the fact that this person is doing something new will provide him with an experience that he has never had, and thus the potential to learn. It is because he gave the speech that he can now reflect on the speech, in hindsight. What went well? What are the things he could do differently next time? If this person is willing to take more opportunities to speak publicly in the future, he will begin to leave his comfort zone and enter into the learning zone. Eventually, he may start to feel a little more comfortable with the task at hand. He has expanded his comfort zone.

Over time, when this person has spent a considerable amount of time in the learning zone, having talked at numerous meetings, he will begin to move into the growth zone, which is where he masters this task, and starts setting goals to speak publicly again, feeling confident and deriving a sense of meaning from voicing his opinion in public.

Now had this person opted to stay within his comfort zone, this growth and learning could not have occurred. This person would continue to live a life limited by this fear, missing out on potentially valuable professional and personal opportunities. For this person, remaining in the comfort zone could have a lasting detrimental impact on his life.

### Step 3: Comfort zone: Identify a current comfort zone situation

Thinking about your own life, is there something on the horizon that will require you to step outside your comfort zone and into the fear zone? Or, is there something that you would like to do but fear is holding you back from doing? Examples include staying in an unfulfilling job, or declining an invitation to a party where you do not know many people, or opting not join a sports team because you are only a beginner. Describe this situation below:



#### Step 4: Fear zone: Identify your personal signs of fear

What would you experience if you were to step outside your comfort zone into the fear zone. In other words, what characterizes your fear? For instance, would you feel anxious, or notice your heart beating faster, or sense a lack in self-confidence, or have critical thoughts such as “I can’t do this” or “I’m not smart enough for this”? List as many fear signs that you can think of in the space below.

#### Step 5: Learning zone: Identify your opportunities for learning

What are you losing out on by staying within your comfort zone? That is to say, if you endured the fear zone (Step 2), what opportunities for learning would you miss? For instance, by declining an invitation to a party where you don’t know many people, you are missing out on building your social skills, potentially making new friends, and having a good time. List the most important learning opportunities you miss by staying in your comfort zone below:

#### Step 6: Growth zone: Identify your potential for long-term growth

Consider your potential for growth if you were to stay in the learning zone for quite some time. How might this transform you as a person? What could you gain at a more fundamental, personal level, by this learning?



How would you feel about yourself, do you think?

How could your growth affect your relationships with others?



### Appendix A Comfort zone infographic

