

## **Breaking Free of Anxiety, Part VI, Be Willing To Expand Your Comfort Zone**

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Everyone has a psychological comfort zone; an imaginary space where we feel most comfortable. It is a space that encompasses the familiar and routine. To move outside of your comfort zone is to experience some degree of nervousness and self-doubt. The ability to step outside your comfort zone, requires a degree of trust in your ability to learn, grow, and adapt to new circumstances. It is interesting to note that children whom are over-protected by their parents, lose precious opportunities to develop this inner trust. This is, no doubt, why children of over-protected parents are increasingly susceptible to anxiety and panic disorders as they progress into young adulthood.

For anxiety prone individuals, the idea of venturing outside the comfort zone is more than uncomfortable. It can be terrifying. They lack an inner trust in their ability to learn, problem-solve, and cope with the demands of novel situations. This is why anxiety sufferers will generally resist change with all their might. They feel most comfortable and safe only when things remain the same, so they adhere to rituals and routines vehemently. In extreme form, daily routines and rituals can become compulsive, and must be performed over and over in order to reduce anxiety. Blocking an obsessive-compulsive ritual can result in overwhelming anxiety. Examples of common compulsive rituals include handwashing, checking and re-checking doors and lights to make sure they are locked or off, folding and stacking clothes in just the right order or sequence, lining up toiletries in a specific sequence, etc. The potential range of compulsive rituals which can develop is endless.

What is important to understand about obsessions and compulsions is that they are rituals of familiarity utilized to help reduce anxiety. There is an overwhelming fear of falling apart, if you don't perform the rituals in just the right way. As you might imagine, this is a terribly uncomfortable way to move through life.

The bottom line...you cannot grow without stepping outside your comfort zone. Your willingness to seek out new experiences is how to eventually develop trust in the ability to learn and cope with life's challenges. To break free of anxiety, you must be willing to expand your comfort zone. Self-confidence comes only through confronting self-doubts and initial discomforts which comes with trying something new. When you step outside of your comfort zone, you are expanding your sense of self. New situations require some tolerance of nervousness, self-doubt, and confusion, while you are learning to adjust and cope with the novel and unfamiliar.

One major key to breaking free of anxiety is the willingness to challenge yourself to grow. This growth needs to occur in graduated steps, which provides opportunity for new challenges without becoming overwhelming. Expanding one's comfort zone generally becomes a therapeutic goal once the anxiety sufferer has acquired some skills in relaxing, reducing rumination, and effective problem-solving. Now you are ready to begin

challenging yourself and putting these new tools to work. As your comfort zone expands, the need for compulsive rituals declines.