

# Transcending your comfort zone

By Rose O. Sherman, EdD, RN, NEA-BC, FAAN

● Embrace the challenge of leaving your comfort zone and reap the rewards.

**JACKIE WORKS** in a coronary care unit. Recently, she was approached by senior leadership in her organization about a new position to coordinate the care of chronic heart failure patients across the continuum of care. The role sounds interesting and will capitalize on many of Jackie's nursing strengths. It also offers the potential for career growth in an outpatient setting, which is something Jackie had considered doing in the future. However, she's conflicted about this opportunity because she's comfortable in her current role. Her manager is encouraging her to move out of her comfort zone, but Jackie is uncertain about what the future might hold and fears the unknown.

Jackie's mixed emotions aren't unusual. This is new territory for a nurse whose experience is as a clinical inpatient staff nurse. As with any big change, this new position involves risks but also incredible opportunity, and it means moving from the safety of the known to the potential risks of the unknown.

Change is difficult and instinctively we may try to resist it. When confronted with an unpainted canvas that lacks the structure of our current role, we may find it challenging to think about the creative possibilities of change. Putting ourselves out there into something new can make us feel vulnerable. For Jackie, the belief that she's not ready for that next step could hold her back. James Cameron, the director of *Titanic*, observes that "There are many talented people who haven't fulfilled their dreams because they overthought it and were unwilling to take that leap of faith."

With the changes in healthcare, talented nurses like Jackie—and you—will be presented with new and exciting opportunities. Although feeling as if you're not ready is a common response, you may be the best

person for the job. The key is to fight your fear of the unknown and consider the possibilities if you just say yes and move beyond your comfort zone.

## Understanding our comfort zone

All of us have a comfort zone. It's a space where our activities and behaviors have become routine, and we've established patterns that minimize stress and risk. Our brains crave this routine and mental security. Charles Duhigg, an expert on habits, writes that we're all creatures of habit who thrive on the pre-

dictable and comfortable to minimize stress. We each feel comfortable at a certain temperature, in a particular way of life, with certain people, and in specific types of work situations. When we find ourselves outside our comfort zone, we feel out of place. Our natural

inclination is to value comfort. The problem is that our comfort zone can prevent us from reaching our highest potential.

Eleanor Roosevelt recommended that we do something every day that scares us. This is good advice if we want to grow and learn, but it doesn't mean taking action without thinking about the consequences. Taking calculated risks and risky behavior are two different things, and knowing the difference is critical to how effective we'll be at managing an uncertain future.

## Feel the fear and do it anyway

Fear of failure is the most common reason people give when they avoid moving outside their comfort zone. Why move into a new situation where we risk criticism and external judgment? Although sticking to the status quo may be tempting and comfortable, that's not how growth occurs. Failure is part of the leadership growth experience. The hard knocks, the disappointments, and the losses give us challenges. Although we may wish that we didn't have to weather these storms, they make us strong. They give us maturity and responsibility, and after all, what better teacher can we have than our own direct experience?





## Taking the first step

To overcome the fear of moving outside your comfort zone, you have to take that first step and then practice. One of these actions may inspire you to begin the journey.

- Apply to give a presentation at a national conference.
- Write an article on an area of special interest to you.
- Volunteer to chair a fundraising activity.
- Talk to somebody new each day at work.
- Teach a class at your local nursing school or college.
- Become certified in your specialty.
- Travel to a different country.
- Try a new sport.
- Drive a different route to work every day for a month.
- Read a professional journal you've never read before.
- Perform in a talent show.
- Learn a foreign language.

In the words of Susan Jeffers, a noted author on this subject, “Feel the fear and do it anyway.”

### Begin with small steps

If you know you're stuck in your comfort zone, like Jackie does, you've taken a big step in recognizing the problem. Moving out of your comfort zone can seem daunting, so take small actions that allow you to stretch yourself slowly. Begin with a list of new things you want to do, and then choose one to start with. Make a plan and then take one step in a new direction toward achieving your goal.

For example, many nurses are afraid of public speaking and turn down invitations out of fear. However, public speaking is a critical skill for nurse leaders, who often have to present their ideas or new initiatives to staff or higher levels of management. An effective presentation can help pave the way to achieving leadership goals. If you share that fear and want to overcome it, volunteer to give a short presentation to a small group. You've now made a commitment to the outside world and begun the practice that's required to move outside your comfort zone. The more you do it, the more comfortable you'll feel. (See *Taking the first step*.)

### Reaping the rewards

A challenge for Jackie as she looks at moving out of her comfort zone is that she's focused almost exclusive-

ly on possible losses; she's failing to consider what she could gain and how she could grow. Author David Van Rooy has identified the following six benefits of transcending your comfort zone.

- 1. Letting go of your need to be perfect.** A need to be perfect can hold you back. When you step outside your comfort zone, you move back to being a novice and will inevitably make mistakes. With any risk comes the chance of failure but also the possibility of greatness.
- 2. Inspiring others.** When you take risks in a new direction, others will notice, some of whom will be inspired by your actions. You'll be a role model for those who may be reluctant to move outside their own comfort zones.
- 3. Having no regrets.** Van Rooy's observation about the absence of regrets is one that I've observed in my own career. Almost every nurse I know who stepped outside of a comfort zone has had only one regret—that he or she didn't do it sooner.
- 4. Defining yourself authentically.** Often our behavior is driven by conforming to the norms and ideas others have about our jobs. By pushing yourself into new areas, you'll shape the career and life you want for yourself.
- 5. Gaining control.** Taking control of our decisions gives us more control over our lives. When you force yourself to take the risks, you gain increased confidence in your abilities.
- 6. Experiencing life more fully.** When you leave your comfort zone, you learn what you're truly capable of doing and achieving. As you're exposed to new experiences, new people, and new ideas, your world naturally expands.

### Embrace the challenge

If breaking out of our comfort zones were easy, we'd do it all the time. We know we'll face challenges accompanied by some stress. Nurses like Jackie take risks when they venture into new career areas, but that shouldn't stop them from trying something new. When you embrace the challenge of stepping outside your comfort zone, you'll find that you're more resilient and courageous than you once believed. ★

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