

How to Be Adventurous Again

It's time to restore excitement to your life. These steps will help.

by Elizabeth Bernstein



Tired of the stress and exhaustion of the pandemic, Anna Torgerson recently decided to do something to boost her state of mind.

She signed up for a local open mic night.

"Everything's felt so dim," says the 35-year-old piano teacher. She planned to sing several songs she's written, which she'd never done in public before. "I needed something to make me feel alive."

For much of the past two years, we were buried in bad news, trudging along, just hoping to survive. If we took a risk, it was often mundane: going to work or the grocery store, talking to another human being in person. We spent so much cognitive energy trying to stay safe and keep up with events that we had little left to pursue the types of big, frightening-yet-exciting adventures that expand our lives.

Now, it's time to push ourselves outside of our comfort zone.

Adventures expand our world by allowing us to engage with our self and others in a new way. Research shows that novelty activates our dopamine system, which enhances our mood and positive outlook. It also may make us more creative, more motivated and better able to adjust to stress.

New situations, especially ones that seem dangerous, also force us to confront our fear. This can boost our mood by making us feel less stressed, less tired and even euphoric.

"An adventure gets us out of our patterns and helps show us our own competence," says Rachel Kazez, a clinical social worker in Chicago. "We get to see that things will turn out well, or that we can cope if they don't."

You don't have to free solo Yosemite's El Capitan to reap benefits. Any adventure—where you stretch yourself and learn something new—counts. For some, it may be jumping out of a plane or scuba diving in Iceland. For others, trying a different workout or going out to dinner at a new place might do the trick.

Ready for your adventure? Here's some advice.

Start small.

The risks you're up for now might look different from the ones you took before the pandemic. That's OK. Pick a manageable activity you can do soon—this weekend!—close to home. This will break your inertia, build your confidence and help you ramp up to bigger adventures.

"Taking gradual steps teaches your brain that the experience is not as bad as you expected and you can handle it," says Jacqueline Sperling, a clinical psychologist and co-program director at the McLean Anxiety Mastery Program at McLean Hospital in Massachusetts. Shift how you view anxiety.

Research from Harvard University shows that people who interpreted their nervousness about activities such as karaoke singing and public speaking as excitement enjoyed the experiences more and performed better than those who tried to tamp down their anxiety. This changed their threat mind-set into an opportunity mind-set, says Samantha Boardman, a New York psychiatrist and author of "Everyday Vitality: Turning Stress into Strength." Try talking to yourself out loud, saying: "I am excited" or "Let's get excited."

Use your imagination.

Envision the worst-case scenario. Say you want to go on a hike but are worried you'll become lost, hurt or too exhausted to get home. Try to picture this. Next, visualize the best-case scenario: the beautiful view, the fun you'll have, your sense of accomplishment afterward.

Now ask yourself what will probably happen. Are you more likely to feel happy after your hike, or to be carried off the mountain in a stretcher? This exercise helps put fear in perspective, says Dr. Boardman. Write yourself a letter.

Think of it as a pep talk. Start by addressing your trepidation. "I know you're nervous. This is normal because you're leaving your comfort zone." Then write about the skills you have that will help you succeed and past experiences where you took a risk and the experience went well.

"The point is to validate your feelings and remind yourself that even though you feel nervous you can handle this," says Dr. Sperling.

Tap into regret.

It can be very motivating. Think about whether you'll feel disappointed if you miss out on this interesting, expansive experience or glad you stayed home. (Another way to put it: Will you be proud you bit the bullet and took the adventure, or proud that you didn't?)

"We tend to regret actions we don't take rather than ones we do," says Dr. Boardman. "So the fear of missing out can help you."

"If you could do this whole thing perfectly, it would not be the adventure you're looking for," says Ms. Kazez.

Remember: Whatever happens, it should make a good story. Imagining how fun it will be to tell your friends about your adventure later will help you stop ruminating now. And you'll feel connected to others. "People love stories of someone triumphing over adversity or dealing with awkwardness because they can relate," Ms. Kazez says.

Ms. Torgerson says her dream is to be a singer-songwriter. She is trained in classical music and has experience performing as a pianist and in choirs, but was terrified to sing her own songs in front of strangers. "It's sharing an intimate piece of myself," she says.

For days before her first open mic night a few months ago, her heart raced, her chest felt tight and she had butterflies in her stomach. To calm her nerves and prepare herself, she performed her songs for her roommate and then-boyfriend and sent voice memos of herself singing to several close friends to get feedback. She also attended an open mic night to observe the proceedings.

On the night of the show, Ms. Torgerson sat on a high stool in front of 50 or so people and sang two songs, accompanying herself on ukulele. "I felt a little horrified because my voice wobbled and I messed up some chords," she says. "But it also felt good because my friends were cheering for me after I was done."

Now, she's become a regular at the shows. She still gets nervous. But she has more confidence now, too—and it spills over into other areas of her life, such as her social life and her teaching.

"I feel stronger," says Ms. Torgerson. "And this makes me more likely to take another risk in the future."

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