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You need to speak in public, but your knees buckle even before you reach the podium. You want to expand your network, but you'd rather swallow nails than make small talk with strangers. Speaking up in meetings would further your reputation at work, but you're afraid of saying the wrong thing. Situations like these — ones that are important professionally, but personally terrifying — are, unfortunately, ubiquitous. An easy response to these situations is avoidance. Who wants to feel anxious when you don't have to?

But the problem, of course, is that these tasks aren't just unpleasant; they're also necessary. As we grow and learn in our jobs and in our careers, we're constantly faced with situations where we need to adapt our behavior. It's simply a reality of the world we work in today. And without the skill and courage to take the leap, we can miss out on important opportunities for advancement. How can we as professionals stop building our lives around avoiding these unpleasant, but professionally beneficial, tasks?

First, be honest with yourself. When you turned down that opportunity to speak at a big industry conference, was it really because you didn't have the time, or were you scared to step on a stage and present? And when you didn't confront that coworker who had been undermining you, was it really because you felt he would eventually stop, or was it because you were terrified of conflict? Take an inventory of the excuses you tend to make about avoiding situations outside your comfort zone and ask yourself if they are truly legitimate. If someone else offered you those same excuses about their behavior, would you see these as excuses or legitimate reasons to decline? The answer isn't always clear, but you'll never be able to overcome inaction without being honest about your motives in the first place.

Then, make the behavior your own. Very few people struggle in every single version of a formidable work situation. You might have a hard time making small talk generally, but find it easier if the topic is something you know a lot about. Or you may have a hard time networking, except when it's in a really small setting.

Recognize these opportunities and take advantage — don't chalk this variability up to randomness. For many years, I've worked with people struggling to step outside their comfort zones at work and in everyday life, and what I've found is that we often have much more leeway than we believe to make these tasks feel less loathsome. We can often find a way to tweak what we have to do to make it palatable enough to perform by sculpting situations in a way that minimizes discomfort. For example, if you're like me and get queasy talking with big groups during large, noisy settings, find a quiet corner of that setting to talk, or step outside into the hallway or just outside the building. If you hate public speaking and networking events, but feel slightly more comfortable in small groups, look for opportunities to speak with smaller groups or set up intimate coffee meetings with those you want to network with.

Finally, take the plunge. In order to step outside your comfort zone, you have to do it, even if it's uncomfortable. Put mechanisms in place that will force you to dive in, and you might discover that what you initially feared isn't as bad as you thought.

For example, I have a history of being uncomfortable with public speaking. In graduate school I took a public speaking class and the professor had us deliver speeches — using notes — every class. Then, after the third or fourth class, we were told to hand over our notes and to speak extemporaneously. I was terrified, as was everyone else in the course, but you know what? It actually worked. I did just fine, and so did everyone else. In fact, speaking without notes ended up being much more effective,

making my speaking more natural and authentic. But without this mechanism of forcing me into action, I might never have taken the plunge.

Start with small steps. Instead of jumping right into speaking at an industry event, sign up for a public speaking class. Instead of speaking up in the boardroom, in front of your most senior colleagues, start by speaking up in smaller meetings with peers to see how it feels. And while you're at it, see if you can recruit a close friend or colleague to offer advice and encouragement in advance of a challenging situation.

You may stumble, but that's OK. In fact, it's the only way you'll learn, especially if you can appreciate that missteps are an inevitable — and in fact essential — part of the learning process. In the end, even though we might feel powerless in situations outside our comfort zone, we have more power than we think. So, give it a go. Be honest with yourself, make the behavior your own, and take the plunge. My guess is you'll be pleased at having given yourself the opportunity to grow, learn, and expand your professional repertoire.

Andy Molinsky is a [Professor of International Management and Organizational Behavior](#) at the Brandeis International Business School. He is the author of *Global Dexterity* (HBR Press, 2013) and the forthcoming book *Reach: A New Strategy to Help You Step Outside Your Comfort Zone, Rise to the Challenge, and Build Confidence* (Penguin, 2017). You can receive [his free e-book](#) to master ten key cultural codes from around the world. Follow Andy on Twitter: [@andymolinsky](#).
