

What Are Comfort Zones? And Why Should We Escape?

We all have our comfort zones – havens of security, familiarity and comfort. But why, you may be asking, should we escape? Surely a comfort zone is our reward for hard work, the place we've struggled for so long to get to? The place everyone wants to be? And wants to stay?

These are good questions. But don't be fooled – because there's a lot more to comfort zones than meets the eye.

The first problem is that comfort zones are comfortable –at least superficially. And because they're comfortable, they lull us into a false sense of security and well-being. Yet the very fact that you have started reading this book proves that, despite your 'comfort'. You have a vaguely uncomfortable feeling that this may not be altogether a good thing.

That's good! Feeling uncomfortable is a really good sign; it's when we're blissfully oblivious that we've got a real problem. It's when we're not uncomfortable that we aren't motivated to confront our true feelings and simply run away from them – and are doomed to remain trapped in those Comfort Zones.

Slipping into a Comfort Zone is a simple process. When we are comfortable, our activities and behaviour tend to take on familiar patterns. Patterns become habits; habits become routines; and before we know it those routines become a rut. And the only difference between a rut and a grave is the depth of the excavation!

Of course, the most obvious of all is the material Comfort Zone. It's one of the easiest to get trapped in, and one of the most difficult to escape from. After all, it's the embodiment of the Great American Dream; the pursuit of success and wealth and all their external symbols. Perpetuated by movies and soap operas and reinforced by advertising, the material Comfort Zone seems, for most people, to have become the very purpose of life.

But there are also many other less obvious Comfort Zones. I'm talking about the invisible prisons of social and parental conditioning, of societal and cultural norms, of systems and rules and conventions, and a thousand other factors that are all just bricks in the walls of the prisons that surround us and prevent us from growing.

If we look at them objectively, Comfort Zones are almost inevitably states of limbo, secure castles in which we have imprisoned ourselves or allowed ourselves to be imprisoned by others. We perpetuate – and grow – those high walls by not being aware of them, or by refusing to recognise that they're there. And so we compromise and rationalize and convince ourselves that it's simply our 'fate' to be in our current situation... and, after all, we could be worse off, couldn't we?

Mostly, we don't even realise we're in Comfort Zones. And so we simply shut off any ideas of the alternatives, of the options that lie outside our own narrow existences. Because it feels so safe and comfortable within, even to think of venturing outside our castle (and I'm not necessarily talking about a physical escape) seems foolish and risky and scary.

And the fact is, it is risky and scary. But definitely not foolish. Recognizing that we are trapped in a Comfort Zone – and that there's a whole lot more to life beyond the walls of our self-imposed limitations – is the first step towards escaping it and gaining mature wisdom and insight into our lives. Like the alcoholic, whose healing process can only begin once he has stood up in front of his peers or looked into a mirror and admitted that he is an alcoholic, so we can only begin to escape our Comfort Zones when we admit that we are trapped in them. Until that moment of honest self-confrontation, nothing can happen.

A second important step is accepting the fact that risk and pain are essential and inescapable components of this escape, as they are of any change or transition. In its most trite form it's a question of 'no pain, no gain'. Until we confront this fact, and until we muster the courage to leave behind the temporary and unfulfilling 'myths' of security and familiarity and material possessions (and they are myths, no matter how real or vital they may seem to you now), we can never begin the process of discovering our true selves and leaning what is truly meaningful and fulfilling and worth while in life.

TO BE CONTINUE TOMORROW