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Let's Start with Hello

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Once upon a time, from a faraway land, there was an extremely shy little girl who refused to say “hello” to her visiting aunt. Despite all the entreaties, bribes and threats, the girl didn’t budge. In the end, her mother came up with a brilliant idea. She told the little girl to say “hello” behind a curtain. She reluctantly did. Disaster averted.

That little girl was me. For many years, I struggled with my shyness, avoiding human interaction as much as I could. Eventually, I got tired of letting my shyness control my life—if you wish that you’d die before the day you had to do a presentation, that’s an example. I decided to do something about it.

Perhaps shyness has never been your specific problem. Whatever it is, I believe that you can overcome it, or at least manage it so that it doesn’t control your life, by taking the following steps:

1. USE LOGIC

What usually keeps us from overcoming our shortcomings is fear. Fear, like all emotions, is irrational. Therefore, the first step in overcoming your fear is to reason yourself out of it.

For example, you have a critical presentation tomorrow, in front

of very important people, and you are a nervous wreck. Ask yourself: “Do I know my stuff?” (*Yes*); “Am I prepared?” (*If not, practice*); “What if I’m asked a question that I don’t know the answer to?” (*I can always say I’ll follow up later*); “What’s the worst that can happen?” (*I’d choke, but how much will just one presentation affect my chances of getting promoted or being fired?*).

As far as I know, nobody has ever died from getting fired from a job, so your worst-case scenario isn’t that bad, after all. The point of this exercise is to use logic—the thing that most of us are good at—to defuse fear, the thing that holds us back from doing something good for ourselves.

2. VENTURE OUTSIDE OF YOUR COMFORT ZONE, ONE SMALL STEP AT A TIME

Recently, I went hiking with some friends. I was a novice, having hiked a total of three times in my life. About 0.2 miles into it, I was already out of breath. My friends were very supportive. They waited patiently for me whenever I had to stop and take a break, and I took a lot of breaks! In the end, I managed to finish the entire hike, which was seven miles of a very steep mountain.

In my experience, many big problems can be solved in small steps. For example, if you want to overcome your fear of public speaking, don’t just sign up to speak in front of hundreds of people tomorrow. Start speaking up in small meetings, where you know everybody. Then, join Toastmasters to practice and improve your speaking skills. After that, volunteer for small speaking roles and then larger roles. You get the idea. If you do things in small steps, but do it persistently, you’ll be amazed at how much you can accomplish.

3. GIVE YOURSELF A BREAK

Most of the time, you are your harshest critic. If you forgive

yourself for making mistakes, other people will too. I once did poorly on a presentation. I went home and cried for hours. I spent another week agonizing over it, thinking that my career was over.

As extreme as this example sounds, most of us fall prey to destructive self-criticism when it comes to our own failure. Nobody feels good about failing, but one good use of this negative emotion is to turn it into positive energy that motivates you to succeed. So, instead of wasting your time and energy crying over past failures, choose to learn from your mistakes so that you won’t make the same ones next time. And there’s always a next time.



4. KNOW WHEN TO QUIT

A lot of times people are afraid to start something because they are afraid to quit if it doesn't work out. You don't want to give up every time you hit a roadblock—but don't be afraid to quit, either. The trick is to know when to continue and when to quit. Ask yourself this question: "What are the benefits and the costs of not quitting?"

The key here is opportunity costs. Suppose that, after my success with hiking the seven-mile trail, I decide to make it my life-long goal to hike the Appalachian Trail. Even though I regret it right after I announce this goal to everyone, I stick with it because I don't want to be called a quitter. As a result, I spend every single vacation day to build up my distance. I miss out on all of the other things I dreamt of for my downtime, just because I'm embarrassed to quit.

It is admirable to stick with your goals, but it takes a lot of courage to quit. This is because most people associate quitting with failure. You need to reframe quitting as simply moving on to better things. This way you are more willing to try new things.

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5. REMEMBER THAT YOU DON'T HAVE TO BE GOOD AT EVERYTHING TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Although I've been talking about overcoming weaknesses, I think it's futile to try to turn them into strengths. Instead, the goal is to focus on your strengths and manage your weaknesses so that they don't interfere with what you want to accomplish. What is an easy, low-risk way to showcase your strengths, manage your weaknesses, and make a difference? Volunteering, of course!

Volunteering with the Society of Actuaries (SOA) has helped me grow tremendously in the past eight years. I started out, and am still active, with the exam committees where I can network with other actuaries, stay current on actuarial matters, and help maintain a high-quality exam system. This led me to running for the Leadership and Development Section Council,

which has helped me develop my leadership, organization and communication skills.

This is my last article as chairperson since my three-year term expired in October. I'd like to thank you for the opportunity to serve as a section council member. It has been a rewarding experience for me. I encourage you to reach out to our new chairperson, Kelly Hennigan, or other section councils, to find out ways you can participate in section activities. It's a great way to develop your skills and make a difference.

Remember that it all starts with "hello." ■



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