

Embracing Discomfort Can Open Our Minds to New Ideas

May 18, 2022



When trying something new, it's common to interpret discomfort as a sign we're in over our heads. Embracing these feelings of stress and awkwardness as a part of learning—instead of heading back to gentler waters—could help motivate personal growth, suggests new research in *Psychological Science*.

Kaitlin Woolley (Cornell University) and Ayelet Fishbach (University of Chicago) explored [how discomfort can motivate personal growth](#) through five studies of 2,163 adults. The participants, some of whom were told to use discomfort as an indicator of learning, engaged in improv classes and expressive journaling, as well as learning about challenging topics such as COVID-19, opposing political viewpoints, and gun violence.

“People we invited to embrace discomfort were more motivated: They persisted longer in improvisation exercises, engaged more in an expressive writing exercise, and opened themselves up to challenging but important information,” wrote Woolley and Fishbach. “Personal growth is sometimes uncomfortable; we found that embracing discomfort can be motivating.”

This strategy uses cognitive reappraisal to help people assign a new meaning to discomfort before they experience it, allowing it to serve as a source of motivation rather than a stopping point, the researchers explained.

Taking risks to build new skills

In the first study, Woolley and Fishbach instructed 557 improv students to either embrace discomfort as a sign of learning or “feel themselves developing skills,” an intentionally vague concept that constituted the control condition.

As part of the class, all students completed a “give focus” improv exercise in which one participant moved around the room in unusual ways while their classmates remained frozen. The moving student would then “give focus” by trading places with another student, who would continue the exercise.

When students’ performance on the task was rated by outside observers on Amazon Mechanical Turk, participants who had been instructed to embrace discomfort were rated as taking more risks with their movements, such as by moving their arms wildly and keeping the focus longer. Participants who were told to feel themselves improving were rated as more risk-averse and were likelier to walk around normally instead of taking creative risks.

Students who sought to embrace discomfort also reported a greater sense of achievement after completing the class.

Similarly, in a study of expressive writing with 258 participants, the researchers found that writers who were encouraged to embrace discomfort reported a greater sense of achievement and more interest in using expressive journaling in their day-to-day lives than those who were told to simply focus on the task.

Opening up to uncomfortable ideas

The next set of studies investigated how seeking discomfort might increase participants’ openness to information, particularly when it conflicts with their existing beliefs.

In the first of three studies on the subject, 265 participants completed readings about either the COVID-19 pandemic or making coffee. The COVID-19 articles had been rated as moderately uncomfortable in a previous study, while the coffee-making articles made for much more comfortable reading.

As in the previous studies, participants who were encouraged to embrace discomfort reported a greater sense of achievement related to learning about COVID-19 than those who were instructed to “learn what’s new.” When presented with a series of article titles and synopses, participants also reported higher motivation to read the full versions of articles in the discomfort condition than in the learning-only condition. However, this was true only for articles about the pandemic; discomfort-seeking participants were no more motivated to read about coffee than those in the learning-only group.

“Seeking discomfort motivated reading about a dire health crisis more than seeking to learn did, but this manipulation did not affect motivation to read news that was unassociated with immediate discomfort,” Woolley and Fishbach explained.

In a related study of 600 Americans in the lead-up to the 2020 presidential election, the researchers found that both Democrats and Republicans who were encouraged to embrace discomfort were more motivated to read articles from news organizations affiliated with the opposing party.

Woolley and Fishbach drilled down into this effect through a study of 401 participants who were tasked with reading about how peoples' lives had been altered by gun violence. In this case, as in the previous studies, some participants were encouraged to embrace their discomfort as a sign of learning, whereas others were instructed simply to try to feel uncomfortable in response to the readings or did not receive any instructions related to discomfort.

As it turns out, participants did not need to be explicitly instructed to use their discomfort to enhance learning: People in both discomfort conditions were equally motivated to read articles about gun violence.

“When seeking discomfort, people spontaneously reappraise discomfort as a positive cue, even when not explicitly prompted to do so,” the researchers wrote. “Perceiving negative experiences as a sign of progress is particularly motivating when positive experiences are delayed and discomfort is immediate.”

Feedback on this article? Email apsobserver@psychologicalscience.org or login to comment.

Reference

Woolley, K., & Fishbach, A. (2022). Motivating personal growth by seeking discomfort. *Psychological Science*, 33(4), 510–523. <https://doi.org/10.1177/09567976211044685>

Related content



[Goals and Motivation](#)

Effort, stamina, and purpose drive our accomplishments — science shows us what to do to keep motivation going.



Fear

Why are we scared of some things and not others? Psychological scientists are exploring the many facets of fear and the mechanisms that drive it.



[Studying and Learning](#)

Psychological scientists delve into study strategies, math anxiety, reading comprehension, and more.