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Become Comfortable with the Uncomfortable: The Rewards of Leaving Our Comfort Zone

In any area of practice, at any level of expertise, it's common eventually to find ourselves in what many have termed a comfort zone — a physical place or a state of mind (or both) where we feel at ease, at home ... comfortable. If we're in search of challenges, advancement or increased fulfillment (personal or professional), it's often necessary — and often a good idea — to step out of our comfort zone.

In the words of author Daniel Pink, the Closing Session keynote speaker at the 2020 Food & Nutrition Conference & Expo: "We need a place of productive discomfort. If you're too comfortable, you're not productive. And if you're too uncomfortable, you're not productive. Like Goldilocks, we can't be too hot or too cold.¹"

I asked some of our Academy colleagues for their thoughts on stepping out of our zone: why and how they did it, and what were the results.

Sandra G. Affenito, PhD, RDN, CD-N, FAND, became vice chancellor of academic administration at Johnson & Wales University in 2021, after working for more than 40 years in health care, private practice, the corporate sector, research and higher education. She says a willingness to step out of our zone is needed for any type of professional growth — a subject that will be covered at an October 10 education session she is moderating at FNCE 2022 Food & Nutrition Conference & Expo™ on "Advancing the RDN Education Trajectory to Ensure our Profession's Sustainability: Doctorate Degree Standards."

"We must continually prepare ourselves to step up and lead self, based on our goals," Affenito says. "Potentially, we may be able to make a difference where we are, or we may need to seek out new experiences to realize our dream. As we transition into a new role, we must embrace all opportunities to learn and aim to tackle challenges through an inclusive, creative, data-informed lens. Taking calculated risks can lead to significant professional development."

"As with changing any behavior, it is always helpful to break the chain of what is holding us back, potentially the fear of failure and disappointment. Taking small steps to become comfortable with the uncomfortable helped me to achieve my aspirations," Affenito says. "Be strategic as you plan for your success with your new endeavor—pursue stretch assignments, equip yourself with a robust toolkit, and stand ready to assume greater responsibilities to achieve results."

Sarah M. Baudoin, MS, RD, CDN, system director of clinical nutrition at Compass One at Hartford (CT) HealthCare, says she used her professional interests in clinical nutrition as a

springboard to improve both her practice and how her department provided care. "I have always loved the process behind serving meals, especially patients in the hospital," Baudoin says. "I saw an opportunity to elevate my practice as well as to provide a dietitian's perspective to the operational management of the department and the hospital. "In taking on the role of director of food and nutrition, I had never been responsible for an entire department. And while I've supported operations before, leading an operational team was new territory for me. I felt confident that stepping into an operational leadership role would open other exciting professional opportunities for me, which it did! Plus, I have a hard time walking away from a good challenge," she says with a smile.

"I stepped out of my comfort zone because I wanted to experience new things, learn new things and go to new

Ideas for Moving Out of Our Comfort Zone ... and What Comes Next

RDNs have the foundational knowledge, skills, and interpersonal capabilities to be successful and to advance a vision — what you aspire to be! Find someone you can rely on as a trusted mentor or sponsor, who can provide thoughtful feedback for your ongoing enhancement. Network with colleagues across your institution and outside of your institution. Get involved with your professional organizations, such as the Academy, dietetic practice groups, committees, and other professional development opportunities that enable you to prepare for your next step in your positive trajectory. At our upcoming FNCE, engage with learning opportunities that will enable you to advance your practice, gain new skills or even step into new areas of practice.

Sandra Affenito

Do it! Be open minded and curious about areas of the profession you never considered before. You never know what lessons you will learn or what other opportunities it may open up for you. Also, nothing is ever permanent. If you find a role is not right for you, you can always pivot and change direction. That is part of the beauty of dietetics: We have so many options! Don't let fear limit your potential.

Sarah Baudoin

The only difference between a rut and a grave is the depth of the hole. Don't stay in a rut for a job. If you want to experience new things, step out and experience them; you can always step back.

Robert Skinner

places,” says Robert M. Skinner, RD, CSSD. After 13 years working with athletes at Georgia Tech and the University of Virginia, Skinner was approached by the U.S. Navy to create a new sports performance model for the Naval Special Warfare Command, which includes Navy SEALs. He subsequently worked for the Washington, D.C., National Football League team known today as the Commanders; and the U. S. Olympic and Paralympic Committee,

working with athletes in combat and acrobat sports. Since 2021, Skinner has been working in a contract position in Germany with Special Operations Command Europe/Africa.

“I approached every new position as a challenge that I needed to figure out. Each new place was a puzzle, being open-minded enough to apply what you know but being humble enough to learn new things from each experience,” Skinner says.

Steps we take out of our comfort zone can be big or small, incremental or radical. Our education and experience are amazing preparation for any challenge. I worked in foodservice and as a consultant dietitian before becoming in the 1970s one of the relatively few registered dietitian nutritionists to earn an MBA, and I transitioned into higher education. I soon found myself outside my comfort zone, writing grant proposals for the first time; over the years these included USDA grants for programs teaching food safety to high-risk and low-literacy foodservice employees using distance education and the internet.

Was I uncomfortable? Sometimes. Was it challenging? Yes. Was leaving my comfort zone worthwhile? Absolutely.

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Reference

1. The New York Times. Tiptoeing Out of One's Comfort Zone and of Course, Back In. Accessed August 4, 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/12/your-money/12shortcuts.html>