The Guide to Courage

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“Life shrinks and expands in proportion to one’s courage.”
- Anais Nin

In 1989, after seven weeks of protests, the Chinese government ordered the violent suppression, killing hundreds of Chinese students in Tiananmen Square. A few blocks away, as a column of tanks rolled down Chang’an Avenue, a lone man, carrying only two grocery bags, walked into the street and stood in front of the tanks, halting the column. The tanks stopped.

On April 25, 1915, Mustafa Kemal, commander of the Turkish forces at Gallipoli, sent his most famous order to the 57th Infantry Regiment: “I do not order you to fight, I order you to die. In the time which passes until we die, other troops and commanders can come forward and take our places.”

Everyone in the 57th Infantry was either killed or wounded. No one deserted. This last stand made possible one of the greatest victories in Turkish history, and eventually allowed Kemal to lead the creation of modern-day Turkey. Out of respect, there is no longer a 57th Regiment in the Turkish Army.

Some time in 2011, an anonymous young man browsed the internet alone on a Friday night, looking for explanations on how to talk to a pretty girl he liked. He read three books but never talked to her.

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How does one feel the fear and do it anyway? We’re all confronted with fears and anxieties throughout our lives. Some of them make us uncomfortable. Others debilitate us and keep us from achieving what we really want. All of them slow us down and keep us from living our lives how we’d like.

It could be the fear of asking your boss for a raise, or approaching the attractive woman at a party, or booking a vacation overseas by yourself, or confronting mother over what you’ve resented about her for years. Our fears and anxieties consume us and work against us to keep the status quo, to keep us from changing, to keep us in the same repetitive, reactive lives that we’ve always had and that everyone else is used to.

If you have read the Guide to Happiness, you’ll recall that the determinant factor of our baseline happiness is the extent which we feel we control our lives. People who are chronically unhappy are often unhappy because they feel
powerless to the fears and anxieties which keep their life on the same path. People who are happy tend to seem fearless and like “go geters.” This is not a coincidence.

Developing courage is an important component of leading the life we desire, which in turn leads to consistent, long-term happiness.

With that said, building courage and overcoming anxiety are often misunderstood. In fact, a lot of books out there prescribe exactly the WRONG advice to overcome your fears. They sound nice, but most of them ignore real psychological research into anxiety and advocate methods which sound nice on the surface but inevitably fail.

The first part of this guide will break down anxiety, what it is, how it occurs and what’s required to overcome it. Chances are it will dispel a lot of rumors and misinformation you’ve heard (for instance, the idea that anxiety ever completely goes away). The second part of the guide will then be a how-to on overcoming whatever your fears are and acting despite them. In short, I will show you how to build up your courage.

**Understanding Anxiety**

Chronic anxiety has a variety of causes. It can be largely genetic. It can be caused by the family environment we grow up in (if dad was socially anxious, his anxiety can be “contagious” to his children who look to him as an example). Anxiety can be caused by trauma we’ve suffered in our lives (PTSD for war veterans is a popular example).

Anxieties are hardwired into us and never completely disappear. One way to think about it is that they are emotional habits. And just like if you build the permanent physical habit of riding a bike, your emotional habit of feeling anxiety in certain situations never entirely goes away either.

That’s the bad news. The good news is that we can overlay new, more powerful habits over the top of our emotional habits which cause us anxiety. We can also build a pretty strong habit of acting in spite of fear of anxiety which we’ll touch on as well.

But for now it’s important to understand that anxieties are not temporary maladies. They are a permanent part of ourselves. And not only are they permanent parts of ourselves, but they’re common. Almost everybody suffers
from some form of social or sexual anxiety, no matter how mild. Almost
everybody gets the jitters before they speak before a group of people. Everyone
gets a bit nervous when meeting attractive members of the opposite sex. It’s a
question of magnitude and it’s a question of equipping people with the tools and
motivation to overcome their anxieties.

Research on anxiety has shown that the difference between people who perform
well in high-pressure situations and the people who perform poorly comes down
NOT to a lack of anxiety, but rather to self-efficacy, more commonly known as
confidence. Both types of people experience the same anxiety, but some have
trained themselves to harness it rather than become crippled by it.

People who are confident in their abilities become more assertive and energized
by anxiety — their nervousness even helps them. Others who freeze up and feel
debilitated experience the same anxiety, but they process it poorly because they
lack confidence in themselves. The sports star who freezes up and blows it in big
games hasn’t developed the psychological confidence in his game to step it up,
whereas players who are “clutch” have. Players like Michael Jordan are able to
use their anxiety as fuel to make them play even better, whereas players like
Alex Rodriguez historically crumble under the pressure of the moment.

So how do we turn around our confidence? Lebron James, the best basketball
player alive at the moment, famously caved in the 2011 NBA Finals, but came
back in 2012 and won. Not only did he win, but he dominated the championship.
He strut around with a cool and calm demeanor, whereas the year before he
slinked around, nervous, like a kid who just shat the bed.

What changed? In an interview after winning his first championship, what he
said was illuminating. He said, “I had to learn to have fun again. I had to stop
trying to be what people expected me to be and instead get back to playing
basketball how I liked to play it.”

We’ll find out later in this guide how significant this change really was and how
it likely reduced his anxiety.

**Defense Mechanisms**

But before we get into how Lebron built the confidence to finally excel in the
big moment, before we dive into how to become more confident in situations
which scare the bejesus out of you and how to act despite them, I want to talk
about the stories we tell ourselves. Our defense mechanisms.
When we feel large amounts of anxiety, it triggers our primal “fight or flight” response. In prehistoric times this simply meant running away. But today we’ve evolved far more complex and subtle ways of avoiding what makes us uncomfortable. Our unconscious minds have an entire arsenal of psychological defense mechanisms to keep us away and safe from confronting our fears.

Defense mechanisms come in a variety of flavors: blaming others for our problems, apathy, intellectualizing or making things more complicated, rationalizing excuses, getting angry and defensive, the list goes on.

Some examples of defense mechanisms in response to what could give one anxiety:

- **Anxiety: Ask a woman out on a date.** “She’s too busy. I’m too busy. I’m not good-looking enough. She hasn’t given me “signals” yet. I have to find something clever to say. I don’t know where I would take her. She’s actually not that hot. What’s the point?”
- **Anxiety: Quit your job to change careers.** “I don’t have something else lined up yet. I don’t have enough money saved yet. It’s a dumb idea anyway, it won’t work. I’ll just save up a little more before I do it. I need to get more opinions first.”
- **Anxiety: Committing to a relationship.** “I don’t want to lose my personal freedom. I need a little more time. Only if I know the relationship is going to eventually end.”
- **Anxiety: Moving to a new city.** “I need to make friends there first. I should save up more money first. I’ll ask my friends what they think. I probably won’t like it because of X reason.”

You get the point. Hopefully you can relate to a few of the defense mechanisms above. Rationalizations, assumptions, judgements, all invented by our minds to keep us from taking the action we want to take.

The trick is to recognize your own bullshit and call it out. One of the most valuable habits you can develop when it comes to taking action and building a healthy amount of courage is learning to recognize your own defense mechanisms.

For instance, my primary defense mechanism is apathy. When I get nervous, I convince myself that I don’t care about something and it doesn’t matter to me, when in fact it does. For instance, years ago I used to go out to bars and parties for no other reason than to meet women. But once I got there, I would convince myself that I didn’t care about girls and just wanted to drink and talk to my friends. Obviously, I was full of shit.
The first time I moved abroad to Argentina, I was terrified. I had a friend who was going to meet me there and I became paranoid that he wasn’t going to show up. I told myself that I needed to email him and confirm everything again and again before I finally got the balls to buy the tickets. I blamed him for my anxiety, as I would freak out for days between hearing from him.

**Take a moment and consider what your defense mechanisms are and when they arise.** You definitely have them. We all do. And chances are some of them aren’t obvious. Once you’re able to recognize them, then you’ll be able to dismantle them when they arise.

**Will Power and Building Courage**

When it comes to overcoming fear, people will teach you a lot of nonsense. Some people say it’s purely a matter of will power. Others say that fear is not real or that it doesn’t exist. Other people say to focus on the positive and ignore the negative.

None of this works and the people saying it don’t know what they’re talking about. Believing that fear doesn’t exist is nice from a spiritual point of view, but in the real world it encourages disassociation from emotion, which is not a healthy long-term solution (see my post on Ken Wilber for more on this concept). Focusing on the positive feels good in the moment, but research shows that ignoring negative stimuli in lieu of positive thoughts actually makes us unhappier and more anxious as a result.

Then there’s the will power solution. Hey man, man up, grab your balls and just do it. With enough social pressure and belittling, this can also work in the short-term.

But all of these solutions, since they only create short-term gains, don’t overlay permanent habits over the anxiety. Remember, anxiety is an emotional habit wired into your brain, so to overcome it we must hardwire a different, more positive habit over the top of it.

The other problem with will power is that its finite. Psychological research has found that will power is like a muscle. When used our will power becomes fatigued and needs time to recover. Anyone who’s had a stressful day on the job could tell you this. You come home from a stressful day at work and all you want to do is lay on the couch and watch *Family Guy* reruns and maybe eat some ice cream.
But because will power is a muscle, it can be built. And if it’s not exercised, it becomes weak. You’ll notice that the lazier a person becomes, the harder it is for them to develop positive habits. It’s a downward spiral. The longer they’ve been a couch potato, the harder it is for them to get up and go to the gym. Meanwhile, people who have a lot of discipline and strong habits seem to be able to adopt new habits and push through uncomfortable situations much easier and with little complaint. It’s an upward spiral as well.

The trick is to get ourselves off the downward spiral and onto an upward spiral of building will power.

The most reliable and scientifically supported method for starting this upward spiral and getting us over our fears is a form of therapy referred to as Cognitive Behavioral Therapy or CBT for short. CBT is based on the concept of progressive desensitization and exposure to something which makes us afraid. This is effective on two fronts: 1) it slowly develops our will power over the course of time instead of overwhelming us at once, and 2) builds a strong base of confidence in our ability to handle a situation, make us less likely to freeze up or cave.

For instance, if you’re afraid to approach attractive women, start by asking them what the time is, nothing else. Then once you can do that comfortably, build up to asking them for directions or asking them how their day is going. Continue to progressively push yourself little-by-little until you’re comfortable with the action.

(Nota: I’ve built an entire online program around helping men get over their anxiety around women based on this research.)

With one-off behaviors such as asking your boss for a raise or moving to a new country, it’s not as obvious what to do, but one can still apply the same principle. For instance, ask yourself what is it about asking your boss for a raise that scares you? Asserting yourself in front of him? Questioning his authority? Asking for something from someone else? Then start small. Start by asking him a small favor one day. Then maybe later question his authority on some small project and see what happens. See how you feel, then move on and push yourself a bit further. Build up to it.

As for moving to a new country, what is it about it that intimidates you? Being alone and independent? Not having any social connections? Being in an unfamiliar place? Then start small. Take a weekend and do a day trip to a nearby city where you know no one and challenge yourself to meet three new people there. Take a vacation by yourself. Then work up to moving by yourself.
The principles of CBT can be applied to any situation and are the most effective for healthy long-term change. No woo woo mystical shit. No unfounded advice to be positive or focus on what you desire or whatever. There’s no “secret” here, just decades of psychological research.

**Self Acceptance**

There is a Buddhist saying: “What you resist persists.”

When it comes to fear and anxiety the more you fight it, the stronger it becomes. You’ve probably noticed this in the past. Say you had a major presentation to give, sitting and stewing about how bad you didn’t want to screw it up often makes you even more nervous and more likely to screw it up.

Yet, the times where you surrendered to the fear, accepted that things may not go how you’d like them to go, decided that you were okay with whichever outcome occurred, you relaxed and performed fine.

Sometimes it takes failing horribly a couple times to become comfortable with this (just ask Lebron).

Anxiety is a strange paradox and most of us suffer from it in more subtle ways. For instance, I used to be a dating coach for men. A large part of coaching men in dating is getting them to take the initial effort with women: to get them to approach them and introduce themselves, to get them to ask them out on a date, to go for the first kiss, etc.

To do this, a lot of emphasis was put on overcoming anxiety and nervousness. It was all about building courage, exactly what we’re talking about here.

Yet, what I noticed was that the more nervousness a man felt, the more determined he’d be to stop being nervous and to overcome it. And the more determined he became to NOT be nervous, the more nervous he got. It was a catch 22. He would try technique after technique to overcome his anxiety instead of, well… actually overcoming his anxiety.

The point I’m making here is that few of those men ever sat down and said, “You know what, I’m a nervous guy, and this isn’t going to go away or get any easier. At some point I just have to decide that I’m going to live with it and act despite it.” When this did happen, it ironically LESSENED their nervousness. It relieved the pressure of “beating anxiety” and instead they were free to simply
feel anxious and act anyway.

Obviously we’d all love to beat our fears and our anxieties. But that very desire to beat them will make them stronger. Let go. Accept yourself. To this day, despite being a dating coach and literally approaching and meeting over a thousand women, I still get the jitters when it comes time to meet a new attractive woman. At some point I decided that’s just life and that I’ll deal with it. When I decided that, life became a hell of a lot easier.

**Creating Inevitable Success**

“Courage is not the absence of fear, but rather the judgement that something else is more important than fear.”

- Ambrose Moon

OK, so if you’ve made it this far (no small feat). You know to conquer your fears by progressively working up to them; you know to look out for your psychological defense mechanisms and dismantle them; you know to accept your anxiety as a part of yourself and not try to fight it or wish it away. You should be set, right?

Unfortunately, my experience has shown me that is not the case. People read it or hear it, understand it, nod and say they get it, then go back to the computer games and potato chips and email me a month later asking me how to get the courage to even begin. The fact remains that they’re too complacent in their daily life. They want to change. They want to improve. But they don’t want it bad enough and they’re too comfortable the way they already are.

Change requires emotional energy. If you’re lazy and comfortable and not engaging with the world emotionally, you will never muster up the courage or energy to change yourself. Fact.

If you leave yourself too many alternatives and too many superficial pleasures instead of progress, you will not maintain enough will power to continue pushing yourself. Fact.

*If you’re going to push through your fears and take control of your life, then you need to cultivate an environment where failure is not an option.*

Delete your computer games, sell your TV. Download a porn blocker for your computer. Call up your three best friends and give them each $100 and tell them
not to give it back until you go on three dates with women. Call up your dad and give him $1000 and tell him not to give it back until you’ve quit your job and started your own business. Get serious. I’m not fucking around here and neither should you. This is your life we’re talking about.

You need to create the environmental conditions so that your success is inevitable.

If the problem is that you don’t want it bad enough, then you need to take control of your everyday environment and make it so that you DO want it bad enough.

Our culture is spoiled. We’re given everything and work for nothing. We are endlessly entertained, placated and told we deserve the best without lifting a finger. Marketing has conditioned us to believe that there’s an intellectual solution or product that can give us whatever we want without getting off our asses and doing the work ourselves. We’re constantly over-stimulated, whether it be by 250 satellite TV channels, six video game systems, Blu-Ray movies, pornography or 10,000 MP3s.

You’ve been sold all your life on being lazy and complacent. Reject the easy environment. Change the environment and change yourself.

Back in 2008, I had a desk job at an investment bank in Boston. I hated it. I had been making some money online writing dating advice on and off for a few months and I had recently just sold out a seminar and made my first $1,000 from my own business. This gave me some hope.

My job at the bank was a job many guys in college dream about: it had a fast track to a lot of money and prestige. Other than the boredom and soul-destroying tedium, it was great. But I wanted more. I wanted to work for myself and travel as much as I could.

One day, my co-workers and I were sitting around one late afternoon and talking. We were all in our 20’s and had been working for the bank for only a few years. The topic came up of what we would do once we started making six figures. Everyone talked about beach houses, new cars, buying condos, and investing it to make even more. I said that I wanted to travel around the world. Everyone looked at me like I was crazy. That’s when I knew I needed to get out.

I had savings and a small monthly income. I had enough to last me 8-12 months before I went broke. I remember sitting in my cubicle going over and over an excel spreadsheet, making different projections of my new online business: this
is how long it would take to build a full-time income if things grew at the same rate; this is how long it would take if they grew at half the rate as they are currently; this is how long it would take if the rate of growth was terrible.

No matter what I rationalized or projected, nothing made me feel better about it. It was a huge risk. My family would think I’m crazy. My girlfriend would think I’m crazy. My friends would think I’m crazy. I could be broke in a year and have given up a solid financial future for nothing.

I’d love to say I knew better, that I said “Fuck it,” and just did it. But I didn’t. I deliberated for weeks. I changed my mind multiple times. A large part of me said to stay in my day job, to stay in the safety of my cubicle and work on my new business at night. Build it up slowly. Maybe find an investor or a business partner. Maybe just save up even more money first and then go for it.

But I went for it. And I went for it for two reasons:

1. I was young and the market still had a lot of opportunity, if I waited it would get harder and the consequences of failing would become worse.
2. I knew that as long as I had my cushy desk job I wouldn’t be as motivated to make my new business work. I’d always be tempted by secure mediocrity in front of me. But if I forced myself into the situation, if I gave myself no exits, then I would be forced to work my ass off and figure out a way to be successful no matter what. I’d have no alternative.

In ancient times, the Trojan armies would burn the ships they sailed in on. The message was clear: there’s no alternative to success. If you know there’s an escape route, you will half-ass it. So eliminate your escape routes.

Sure enough, within six months I went broke. I moved in with my girlfriend. And then later I moved in with my mother. Both supported me for a period of time. I sold my video games. I sold most of my possessions. I worked 12 to 16 hours a day. Not because I built amazing habits. I didn’t. Not because I had this overwhelming passion that I couldn’t satiate. I didn’t. In fact, some days I hated the work and dreaded it.

I did it because I was terrified. I did it because I had no other alternative. I did it because I wanted the outcome so bad and I knew I’d hate myself for the rest of my life if I didn’t achieve it.

Either I worked 12 to 16 hours a day to keep myself afloat or I would fail and my dream would never happen. I didn’t sleep some nights. I didn’t call friends for weeks. I forgot to eat some afternoons. Was I still nervous? Absolutely. I was
afraid of succeeding. I was afraid of becoming unique and different. I was afraid of trying new products, new launches, new marketing. But my fear of failing dwarfed all of my other anxieties. I had no choice but to push through them. I burned the boats.

Right now there’s something in your life you want but you’re afraid to do it. Part of it is you haven’t developed a lot of will power. Part of it is that you haven’t accepted your fear of success or fear of rejection or fear of intimacy or whatever it may be.

But the real reason you don’t do it is because you have left yourself alternatives. Eliminate your alternatives. Create an environment for yourself where you have no other options. How bad do you want it?

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