

# ACT

The Ultimate Personal Development Handbook

Clarify your vision, set your goals and take ACTION



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## Chapter 1 - Exploring Current Reality

Before we start on any new journey it is useful to take a moment to reflect on where we are. For example, if we want to plan a trip to Paris, knowing the starting point would make effective planning so much easier.

So, let's start with the "comfort zone".

### Comfort Zones

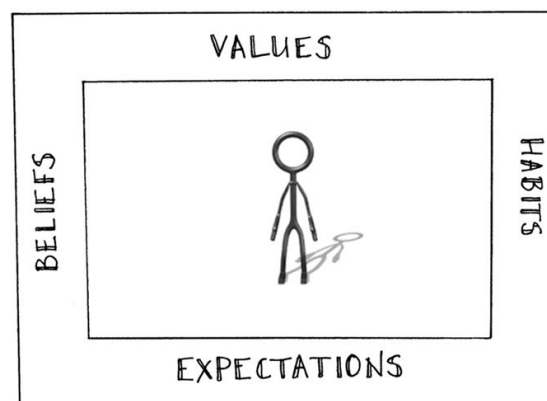
We all have a "Comfort Zone", a place where we feel comfortable and safe. However, whilst it may feel safe, there is often a sense of dissatisfaction. This dissatisfaction is what brings people to books like this – they want something different. The good news is that feeling of wanting something different is exactly what we need to motivate us to change.

Let's look more closely at how the comfort zone is created, starting with when we were young.

When we were very young, we lived out of our imaginations, believing anything was possible and life was an adventure. We didn't walk we ran, when we played at being astronauts or ballerinas, we really believed we were astronauts and ballerinas. But all too soon we started to take on limiting beliefs such as "money doesn't grow on trees" or "you'll never amount to much" from those around us, from our culture, families, schools, peer group, social media etc.

These limitations create the boundaries that define our Comfort Zone. The boundaries (or barriers) are not real though, they are mental constructs. The good news is, that since we have learned these limitations, we can unlearn them. Of course, some of the habits and boundaries are helpful and we might not want to change them. The key lies in being aware of these boundaries and making a conscious choice to either leave them as they are or change them.

We could think of the comfort zone as a box, with the edges defined by these mental constructs.



This story about elephants gives us another way of thinking about how we have learned to be limited.

## A story about baby elephants and boundaries

*If you think about an adult elephant; it can easily uproot huge trees with its trunk.*

*When an elephant living in captivity is still a baby, it is tied to a tree with a strong rope or a chain every night. Because it is the nature of elephants to roam free, the baby elephant instinctively tries with all its might to break the rope. But it isn't yet strong enough to do so. Realising its efforts are of no use, it finally gives up and stops struggling. Having tried and failed many times, it will never try again for the rest of its life.*

*Later, when the elephant is fully grown, it can be tied to a small tree with a thin rope. It could easily free itself by uprooting the tree or breaking the rope. But because its mind has been conditioned by its prior experiences, it doesn't make the slightest attempt to break free. The powerful elephant has limited its present abilities by the limitations of the past.*

Human beings are exactly like the elephant except for one thing—We can CHOOSE not to accept the false boundaries and limitations created by the past...

When we learn anything new or are faced with a challenge, we are being asked to step outside our comfort zone, into the unknown. This can bring with it some anxiety. This book is about addressing the anxiety so we can move forwards in a more comfortable way.

An example of this anxiety might be starting a conversation with a stranger. Many of us have created negative beliefs from past experiences of meeting strangers such as:

I am a dull person

People don't like me

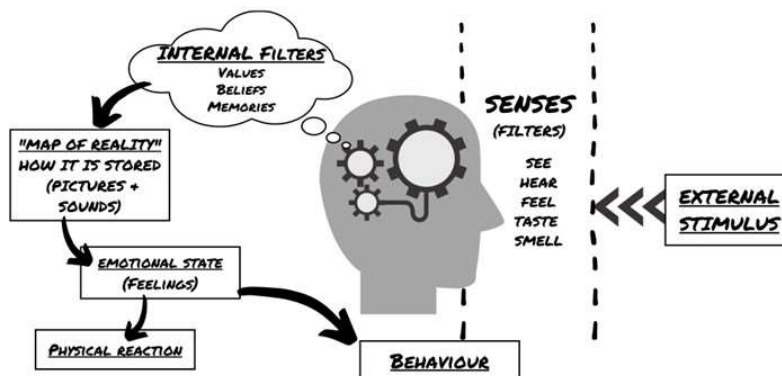
I'm no good at speaking to strangers

He/she won't like me

With these beliefs, you can imagine the feeling of anxiety that arises when going into a room full of strangers. We will have a negative physical reaction, we may blush, get tongue-tied, break out in a cold sweat, or start to have palpitations as our heart rate speeds up (and other physiological changes). These will produce behaviours that are not conducive to a positive interaction – we may run away, or at the very least avoid such interactions. To make matters even worse, we have now collected another piece of evidence to strengthen our belief that we are no good at talking to strangers.

## Our Mind Creates Our Reality

In order to understand how we react when we step outside of our comfort zone it is useful to look a little deeper into our psychological processes. A simple map of what happens can be found in the diagram below (the NLP Communication Model).

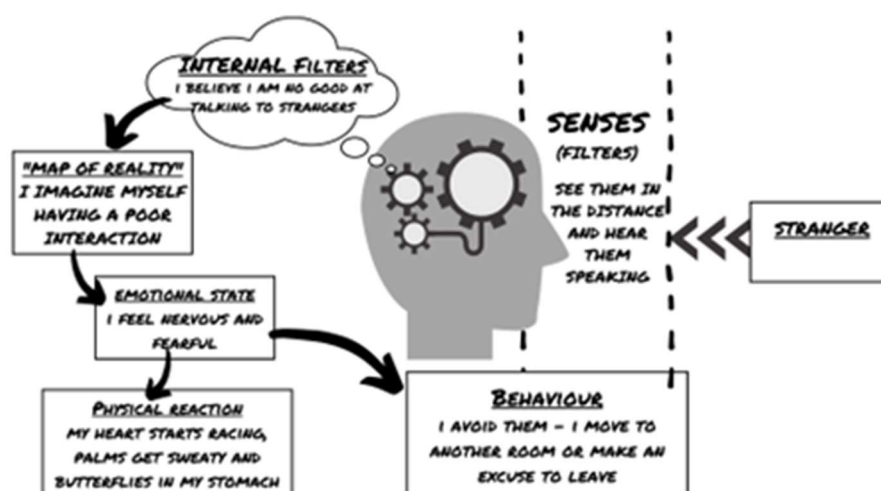


Starting on the right-hand side of the diagram, there is an external stimulus. This external stimulus represents an event or even a goal that we want to achieve. For example, delivering a presentation at work.

We become aware of the stimulus through our senses. The stimulus is then processed through our values and beliefs and a meaning is given to that future event. This meaning could be something like “great I’m looking forward to that” or “I’m no good at presentations”.

Whatever the meaning, it is then translated into a state, this could be anything from excitement to dread, confidence or insecurity. The state then shows itself in our bodies, in our posture, in our breathing, the colour of our skin etc. It then translates into a behaviour such as doing nothing or taking action.

So, let’s just take a moment now to relate this map to our previous example of the person who has negative beliefs about their ability to interact with strangers. It might look something like this...



Of course, the map can be applied to happier scenarios too, like a birthday party or going on holiday.

We will be using the above map throughout this book, looking at each of the elements in turn (Internal filters, emotional states etc) their purpose, and how we can use them to make change in our lives.

### Using someone else’s map to enrich our own

One helpful way to learn how step out of our comfort zone is to look at how someone else (who has already done it) constructs their map of reality. You can do this by imagining, and then putting yourself into their shoes.



Continuing our example of talking to strangers – put yourself into the shoes of someone who is good at it:

What do you think they believe about themselves and other people?

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What are their behaviours likely to be as a result?

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How would your life be different if you adopted some or all of these beliefs and behaviours for yourself?

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Whilst this is a seemingly simple exercise, it can have a profound impact on any anxieties, not just speaking to strangers. It is a great way for generating options for thinking and behaving differently using the resource of your imagination.

## **Develop Your ACTitude**

In order to develop new ways of thinking and being, it is helpful to first develop a positive attitude towards learning and change. Here are some useful attitudes that will help you to get the most from this book:

Understanding comes from acting (you will never know what an apple truly tastes like without taking a bite).

Change comes from a willingness to try something different.

Success comes from being willing to challenge the limitations of your comfort zone (don't be like the baby elephant).

Take new ideas at face value – test them for yourself.

There is no failure, only learning.

Ask yourself, are you willing to adopt these attitudes as you read this book?

## **Learning to Change**

### **Let's be curious about how we learn**

All our skills have been learned, we often do them so automatically that it takes no thought at all. We have forgotten that we learned them, as well as the amount of trial and error and practice that went in to mastering the skill in the first place.

Learning a new skill involves creating a neural pathway in the brain, repetition and practice strengthens this pathway allowing the task to be performed automatically.

If you need convincing the following exercise will give you an experience of what it is like to change a familiar habit and learn something new.

### **Exercise**

Fold your arms (as you would naturally do it – no need to think about it).



Notice how easily you did that, you didn't have to think about which muscles to contract, and in which order. You didn't have to carefully plan where to place your hands – you probably gave it no thought whatsoever. Notice how comfortable it feels to fold your arms in this way.

Now fold your arms the other way so the other arm is on top.



Notice how much of a challenge that was, and how different it feels. Repeat folding your arms in the new way 10 times – notice how the experience changes.

Now fold your arms the original way – what do you notice?

### **What did we learn from that simple exercise?**

We had an experience of the learning process and learned that the first time you try something new, you will have to really think about it, it will take conscious effort and may well feel a little uncomfortable to begin with. There will be a temptation to revert to the old way of doing things, commitment and perseverance will get us to the stage where the new way becomes our “default setting”.

The learning process you have just experienced is described below in the “Learning Ladder”.

## **The Learning Ladder – How Learning Happens**

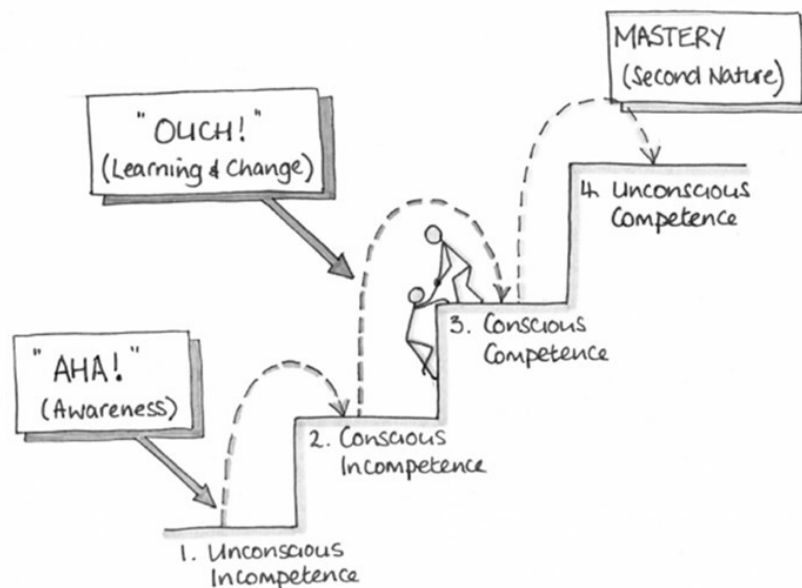
Remember a time when you learned a complex skill e.g. learning to drive (or ride a bicycle).

Before you started you probably had no idea how difficult it was going to be, you may even have thought it would be easy! You were **UNCONSCIOUSLY INCOMPETENT** – not knowing what you didn't know.

After you'd had a couple of lessons, it probably started to dawn on you how difficult it was going to be – just how many things you had to master. Doubts may have started to surface around whether you would in fact be able to learn the skill. You were **CONSCIOUSLY INCOMPETENT** – knowing what you didn't yet know and being aware of your shortcomings or lack of skill and experience.

With practice and repetition, you could do it (drive or ride the bicycle), but you still had to think about it, and it took conscious effort. You had become **CONSCIOUSLY COMPETENT**.

Finally, you were able to do the skill naturally and easily, without having to think about it – you reached the level of mastery and had become **UNCONSCIOUSLY COMPETENT**. Congratulations! A new habit had been formed.



### How does the learning ladder relate to ACT?

Throughout this book, we will be following the learning ladder model, and encouraging you to tap into your natural ability (your unconscious competence) to set goals and successfully achieve them. In essence we will be bringing this ability into conscious awareness, so that you can apply it more choicefully.

We will also be developing new skills, which may seem an effort at first (see the OUCH! In the learning ladder), but with commitment and practice they will become second nature. It will be worth the effort.

Finally, we will look at our unhelpful habits of thinking and behaving which might be preventing us achieving our goals and vision. We will be unlearning these habits by bringing them into conscious awareness and replacing them with more useful ones.

### Being Comfortable with Change

As human beings we like to do things the way we have always done them, this is how ingrained habits develop, the brain doesn't need to think about what it is doing, it is on autopilot (unconscious competence). This doesn't take too much energy and creates a tendency to stick to routines. The only way of breaking these routines is to present the brain with new information.

One way of getting new information is by stepping outside our comfort zone. This may cause some discomfort, but creating a new habit is like building a muscle - there will be some discomfort at first but if you persist, it will become easy.

A great way of starting the habit of change is by doing something different every day (see the exercise at the end of this chapter) it doesn't have to be anything big – just enough to change the routine and encourage your brain to re-engage. You could try taking a different route to work, wearing your wristwatch on the other wrist, changing the order of your morning routine, or even sleeping on the other side of the bed! Remember the arm folding exercise, it will seem strange at first but persevere.

This exercise will help to get you into the habit of making small changes and may even start the belief to form that change can be fun! You could think of this as a “warm-up” exercise for the bigger changes ahead.

## **Deciding Where to Begin - The Wheel of Life**

Sometimes life seems a muddle and it is difficult to know where to start to make changes. This simple Wheel of Life exercise enables you to begin to unravel the confusion and gain a new perspective on where to start.

To fill out your wheel of life, first label each of the 8 segments to represent different areas of your life – here is a list of some common labels but choose words that are appropriate for you.

Physical environment

Career

Money

Health

Friends & family

Relationship

Personal development / learning

Leisure / fun

Take the centre of the wheel as “0”, and the outer edge as “10”.

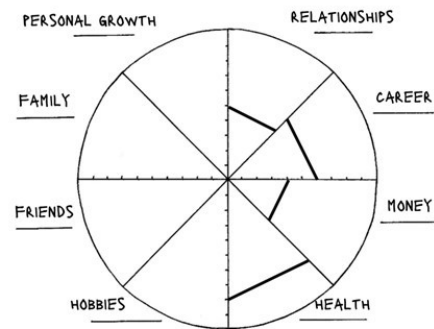
Now, taking each segment in turn, first imagine what a “10” would be like, what will you be seeing, what will you be hearing, and how will you be feeling?

Only when you have a sense of what 10 would represent allow yourself to think about your current situation and ask how far off that 10 you currently are.

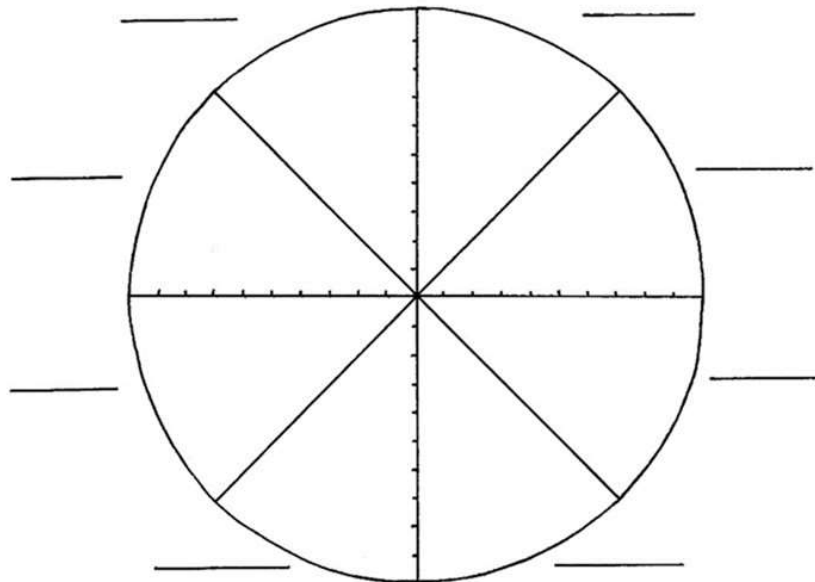
When you have a score draw an arc in the relevant segment. When you have completed each segment, chances are you will have a wobbly wheel.



Here is an example of a wheel of life we have started to fill in.



Here is a blank wheel for you:



## Review

Now, sit back and review the wheel. Remember, the aim is not necessarily to have all areas at “10” - there may be a good reason why some areas are lower than others at present. Look for areas that you are dissatisfied with, or that you would like to improve (these might not be your lowest scores!)

You may find it useful to “step back” from your wheel, reflect on the whole thing and answer the following questions:



Are there any surprises?

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How do you feel about the whole thing as you look at the wheel?

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Which of the areas would you most like to improve?

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What 3 things could you start doing now to improve that score?

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What would be your evidence that change is happening (i.e. that the score is going up)?

What will you see?

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What will you hear?

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How will you be feeling?

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Don't worry if you are having difficulty in deciding which area to focus on – just pick any area. We operate as a cybernetic system which means that if one part of the system changes, the whole system will shift to accommodate the change. Whichever area you pick will have an impact on the other areas – the important thing is to pick one and start taking ACTION!

## End of Chapter ACTivities



Review your Wheel of life and note down any additional thoughts

For one week, do one thing differently each day – something that takes you out of your previous comfort zone. Make a note of what you have done each day.

Day 1 \_\_\_\_\_

Day 2 \_\_\_\_\_

Day 3 \_\_\_\_\_

Day 4 \_\_\_\_\_

Day 5 \_\_\_\_\_

Day 6 \_\_\_\_\_

Day 7 \_\_\_\_\_