

Embracing limbo: After a setback, time in the neutral zone can be therapeutic

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5 things to do

Lisa Wimberger, author of "Neurosculpting: A Whole-Brain Approach to Heal Trauma, Rewrite Limiting Beliefs, and Find Wholeness," offered five exercises to help navigate a tough time:

Ask your stress a question: "When we remain rigid in our perceptions, we revert to old patterns of emotional coping," Wimberger says. "If your old patterns haven't gotten you through those tough times gracefully before, then it's time to reframe your statements to cause the brain to perceive a new or novel approach. When you hear yourself say, 'I knew this would happen,' try reframing it to 'I wonder what will be different about the situation this time?'"

Feed your brain: "Some of our greatest attributes, like problem-solving, creative thinking, motivation, perseverance, compassion and inspiration, are what we rely on to ground us when life's roller coaster tosses us about," Wimberger says. To that end, she suggests paying attention to your diet for optimal health. "Choice brain food is high-quality fat from sources like coconut oil, fish, olive oil, avocados, nuts and seeds. Adding more of these fats to your diet can give you more resilience when it comes to brain fatigue" and being overwhelmed.

Shake it off: "Tough times mean stress, and stress means the brain signals hormonal changes and muscle contraction," she says. "Take a few minutes each day to shake wildly so that your muscles have a chance to use the contracted energy and bring themselves back to relaxation."

Sleep it off: The brain is the most complex organ in the human body, with 86 billion neurons computing all the time. "We need ample rest for the brain to move through its required brain wave cycles, to reconsolidate memories, and to bring our bodies back to homeostasis," Wimberger says. Getting enough sleep creates "the mental endurance we need to navigate tough times." Check out the National Sleep Foundation's chart for recommended sleep times for different age groups.

Meditate regularly: "This could be as simple as five minutes in the shower noticing your breath, or a brief walk outside, or listening to a few moments of beautiful music with your eyes closed," Wimberger says. "If you have a meditation practice, then it's time to use it regularly. Allowing the brain to focus on these things gives us a break from the stalemate we usually find ourselves in when stress takes over. Consider it a mini-reboot."

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Virtually everyone, at one time or another, has been forced to follow — be it by circumstance or choice — the cliched advice to "hang in there."

Personal setbacks, unemployment, illness, romantic disappointments — any situation involving a period of uncertainty, doubt or fear can keep a person frozen in his or her tracks. And in a world where action is rewarded, this stasis can feel like failure.

But psychologists and grief counselors say that staying put can be a real and valuable life skill. It can provide a way station to gain insight into yourself, find a brighter path ahead and gather the strength to walk it.

The process of moving forward can be uneven anyway, often against a tide that keeps coming back with all the debris you thought you got rid of yesterday.

Gail Gross, a psychologist, educator and author who has written extensively on well-being, calls this place the "valley of despair" in her soon-to-be-published book, "The Only Way Out Is Through." Gross says any number of life traumas can thrust your sense of self into a neutral zone that lacks the familiar — "nothing is recognizable," she says.

Part of the problem when life takes a negative turn is that human beings have a tendency to hold onto a lifetime of detrimental thought patterns and habits, says Lisa Wimberger, author of "Neurosculpting: A Whole-Brain Approach to Heal Trauma, Rewrite Limiting Beliefs, and Find Wholeness." And, she adds, people tend to "default" to those when they face challenges such as losing a job or dealing with the death of a loved one.

Gross agrees. She believes that many people, facing this new and unfamiliar neutral zone, are too uncomfortable to "hang out" there, which is why they retreat to familiar if ineffective behaviors. But, she adds, those with the courage to remain in this new, unstructured environment while doing inner work will "have the potential to move forward." The soul-searching may not be easy, she acknowledges, but having the patience to learn, confront and accept truths about yourself can lead to momentum and change.

"Imagine being stuck in that 'I can't do it belief' you had when you first were learning how to ride a bike," Wimberger writes. Maybe that memory remains part of a complex failure dialogue you have with yourself when you face a challenge and fear, she adds. Her concept of neurosculpting is another way of saying you need to accept limbo until you can change automatic "negative, limiting or fear-based thought patterns" that may have been true once but don't have to be now.

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Ildiko Tabori, a Los Angeles psychologist, believes that hanging in there — with a purpose — is also a necessity after a setback. No matter how you feel, the world around you doesn't stop and wait for you to catch up. You'll just fall further behind.

Tabori is the psychologist-in-residence for Hollywood's legendary Laugh Factory, where many now-famous comedians got their start. There, the paradox of the constant, often-melancholy struggle to be funny plays out every day.

For comics, there's no worse feeling than when a bit doesn't go over and they're standing on a stage in front of a stone-silent audience. (Some comics have even had fruit thrown at them.) It's a time for intestinal fortitude. Many of those "overnight successes" barreled through these awful moments for years. By definition, if they "made it," it's because they hung in there — especially when times were bad.

Tabori says it's easier for aspiring comics who have support, which includes encouragement "to get up on stage and perform, networking, and getting feedback and help when they need help — whether professional help from another comedian or professional help from a therapist.

"The best thing they can do is continue to perform and get up on stage," Tabori adds, "even if it's an open mic."

It's a worthy metaphor for the rest of us.

It may also help to remember that nobody is happy all of the time — and we can't expect to be.

"There will be periods in our lives where we will be really down and some periods where we will be extremely happy," Tabori says, "but we need to accept those feelings and know that it is possible to move forward. You have to be willing to get yourself unstuck and take action daily."

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