

Pushing Past Mental Limits

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Pursuit of Health & Happiness

Your brain can be a real jerk sometimes. It regularly sabotages your goals and dreams by creating false limits within itself, causing you to hold yourself back when you don't really need to.

Wait...what? Why would your brain do that?

Sports psychologist Dr. Gloria Petruzzelli, owner of Life With No Limits Coaching, accomplished triathlete, Iron Man competitor, and race coach, says mental limits come from the brain's efforts to keep us safe. "Your brain wants to protect you. So any time you encounter an unknown, you experience anxiety, fear, or avoidance." An unknown? Yes, something like, "What will happen if I keep doing pushups even though my arms feel like jelly?" That's the moment your brain chimes in, telling you that you're at the limit, and bad things will happen should you continue.

How many times have you been working out and felt you couldn't go any further? Oh, just every single workout, right? I've been involved in sports and fitness my whole life, and have trained with some very accomplished athletes, including boxers and martial artists. Guess what? Everyone, even top athletes, hits their perceived limits at some point, regardless of the activity or situation. That's when the internal dialogue begins:

"I can't do anymore, I've got nothing left."

"You're fine, don't be such a baby, keep going."

"Nope. Nope. Nope. I'm done... something's wrong. I can't breathe. I hate this. My legs are going to give out. I'm going to pass out. No, I'm going to die."



"Come oooooonnnn, the cute guy's watching; don't quit!"

While you're inwardly negotiating using skills that would make the CIA proud, you're watching others calmly push through their workouts without batting an eye. They've learned to ignore perceived limits. How do you learn to do that? To keep running when it gets difficult? Keep doing pushups when your arms are jelly? Keep doing squats when your quadriceps are screaming?

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Dr. Petruzzelli says to remind yourself that everything's temporary, even the burning quads and jelly arms. "When you're thinking to yourself, 'I can't do anymore', counteract that with '30 more seconds', and then '30 more seconds'," she suggests, "and suddenly you've done another minute when you thought you couldn't do any more. Is it fact that you can't do it, or is it that you're feeling discomfort? You have to learn to be comfortable with feeling uncomfortable."

This is relevant far beyond just fitness. We encounter perceived limits in all aspects of life—for example, in our relationships and careers. We often feel pressure to fit our relationships into universally-accepted categories, complete with label ("boyfriend/girlfriend", "friend with

benefits", "significant other"). However, the most important definition for a relationship is the one understood by the people in it. As long as you are on the same page, does it matter if other people can understand or label it? Are you limiting your relationship by trying to fit it into a category? Are you limiting all your relationships by being afraid to explore feelings or situations outside your comfort zone—emotionally, physically, or otherwise?

Additionally, you should pick a stable career field, progress through its ranks, and then retire comfortably. Right? If that's what you really want, then yes. However, are you in a particular career field because it's what you were expected to do? Think outside that notion for a minute: do you even want a "normal" job? What do you really want to spend your time doing? What work excites you and gives you satisfaction?

Pushing past limits, whether in regard to fitness, relationships, career, or any other aspect of life, allows us to unlock our potential. It's true that sometimes our options seem limited if we want to "fit in". Social influences often suggest there is a standard, normal way of living life. This is another perceived limit; but is it true? I'd say no. You can live your life however you choose. To do that, though, you have to be willing to ask yourself critical questions, such as, "Do I care if I fit in?", "What do I really want?", and, "Seriously, what do I *really* want?"

The trick is you have to be deeply truthful when you answer, not default to answers that sound good, or fit the standard. Dr. Petruzzelli agrees, "If you really want to change, you have to be courageous enough to be brutally honest with yourself and identify where you're letting a perceived limit hold you back." She says that we tend to run on autopilot: reacting to situations, but not taking time to dig deeper and find the root of the unhappiness. "We don't change our patterns until something malfunctions," she says, "whether it's lack of job satisfaction or a relationship not working." We have to at least know what we don't want and have a general idea of what we desire in order to figure out how our current

situation isn't stacking up, because, "You can't change what you're not aware of."

Questioning your life isn't easy, especially when it may appear perfect. Not long ago, I had a great job with great benefits, a great guy, and a nice house. But something wasn't right... I wasn't happy. The job, the guy, the house—they were great, but not what I truly wanted. It took the sudden death of a friend to wake me up to the realization that life is way too short; you cannot spend it doing anything less than what you truly want.

In looking for motivation to make intimidating changes, I remembered my former martial arts instructor. He tortured us with exercises

designed by the devil himself, and at the peak of these classes, when our legs and arms were shaking and we were pleading to stop, he would yell, "You can do more than you think you can!"

Hearing that phrase used to really piss me off. "Easy for you to say, walking around watching us," I thought. But the phrase I once despised has become a mantra for me, because it's true; it helped me keep going (as did my instructor's threats of increased torture should we quit). And you know what? I did more than I thought I could. I kept pressing on through the feelings of discomfort, and limits started disappearing. That method also worked in other areas of my life. Remember that bit about reminding yourself discomfort is temporary? Embracing the discomfort, fear, and/or anxiety, and pushing through it, is how you eventually eliminate those perceived limits.

Concerned that in your quest to push past limits, you'll go too far? Dr. Petruzzelli says that in sports, injury occurs when we don't pay attention to our bodies' signals. "If you're honest with yourself, you know if you're making excuses or experiencing legitimate pain. Famed basketball coach John Wooden said, 'You may fool others, but you can never fool yourself.'" This can be applied to all areas of life; deep down, you know whether it's discomfort or danger.

Challenging your limits is scary, but so worth it! I quit my job last year to travel, skydive, visit loved ones, and pursue work in fitness and writing. While it hasn't been easy, it has been one of the best years of my life. So I implore you to not let your jerk brain hold you back. Go out, push past your limits and live the life you truly desire. Just keep reminding yourself: you can do more than you think you can!

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