

The Comfort Zone

Contributed by Allan Besselink, PT, Dip.MDT
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Perception is reality.

I know this sounds like a cliched, overused term - but I think it summarizes one of the biggest challenges we face on a day-to-day basis.

The comfort zone.

We can choose to push our level of comfort - our comfort zone - or not.
Ross noted in the "Fifth Discipline Fieldbook" (1994) that

"We live in a world of self generating beliefs which remain largely untested. We adopt those beliefs because they are based on conclusions, which are inferred from what we observe, plus our past experience. Our ability to achieve the results we truly desire is eroded by our feelings that:

• Our beliefs are the truth.

• The truth is obvious.

• Our beliefs are based on real data.

• The data we select are the real data."

Our perceptions are our reality. If we choose to believe something, then it is so.

And therein lies a big part of the problem. Humans do not operate directly upon the world, but rather through a map or model (a created representation) of what we believe the world to be. Many rarely test their perceptions, simply opting to find any information that supports what they already believe to be true. Those beliefs can have origins many years previous and can be deep-seated. Your beliefs are intimately related to your self image and your perceived self-efficacy. The existence that you've lived - is what makes you who you are today. It also establishes your belief systems, which drive your decisions on a daily basis.

I can remember when I took my first McKenzie class. It was back in 1994, and I went because my employer told me to do so. Yes, it was that simple. My thought was that I already knew what McKenzie was all about - so why spend 4 days in a classroom learning more about what I already knew from school? Weren't there better ways to spend that continuing education money?

On day one of the course, I was presented with a great deal of scientific literature that made me challenge all of my previous thoughts about patient care, about low back pain, about treating back pain. I remember being faced with a hard decision at the time - to listen and ponder, or to simply "put in my time" and go on doing what I'd been doing.

The latter would have been the easier option - perhaps the path of least resistance for my belief system and my comfort zone.

But I've rarely been one to go down a path just because it was easier.

After day one, I had a rather significant guttural response to the information we'd been presented. I remember it well. My comfort zone had been breached - big time. I've always tried to opt for science as a basic foundation upon which to make clinical decisions. But science also requires challenging your belief systems. Once I put it in those terms, it was a no-brainer for me - embrace it.

The problem is, it didn't come without a huge emotional response. This was information that was counter to what I'd learned or what I thought I'd observed in the clinic. I had been a PT for 6 years and certainly seen my share of successes. It forced me to push my comfort zone - and I am thankful that I did.

But this discussion isn't about McKenzie - it's about comfort zones. We face them in all parts of our world - daily, if not moment to moment. We have belief systems about everything - religion, politics, the war in Iraq, health care.

Take religion as an example. Is there one world religion that promotes killing thy neighbor? Nope. Not one. Is there one world religion that advocates peace? Yes - all of them. But the perceptions of religion - from the far right, the far left, the extremists and the moderates - drive our reality.

Our belief systems are what impair (or enhance) our ability to truly succeed and make an impact on our world. It is my belief, as a clinician, coach, and participant in life on planet earth, that this is the primary limiter of advancement of both health care and coaching, human performance and injury prevention - the inability to challenge our belief systems in the face of good scientific evidence.

Fortunately, we can choose to challenge our belief systems - and to expand our comfort zone. The mechanisms that are underlying the phenomena we perceive as our reality are key. The hard part isn't the science - it is, as Chuck Yeager noted, "pushing the envelope" of your comfort zone that can be distressing. Being exposed to different viewpoints, different data and research - these are the things that make us uncomfortable. But we can choose to embrace this, learn from it, build on it - or not.

As a species, our goal is survival. Fortunately, as a species, we are also capable of rational thought - and the ability to challenge ourselves and to experience the promise and beauty of expanding our comfort zones, embracing our capacity and seeking to make the world a better place - for all of us - together.

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