

# The Courage to Face Our Fears

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Life presents each of us with our own unique set of challenges. While some tasks are easily accomplished, others can trigger our fears and insecurities and we may start to panic...

Our heart rate and breathing can feel like they are competing for speed. Our worries and doubts swirl like windswept leaves and we lose ourselves in the chaos...

The journey to and from this point is different for each of us but there are five steps that serve us all well along the way.

## Step 1

### Prioritise

**“Life's challenges are not supposed to paralyze you, they're supposed to help you discover who you are”**

Bernice Johnson Reagon

The first step when we experience a stress response is to consider what our body is trying to tell us.

**Could the source of our distress be that the task goes against our values?**

If so, we may wish to shift our focus to the true challenge of prioritising our integrity and aligning our actions with our ethics. Not every challenge is one we ought to push through, and our fear response may be a reminder to choose wisely.

Another possibility is that our body is signalling that it is ready to help us push past our comfort zone towards something greater.

**Sometimes stress can be healthy and positive.** Knowing we are about to do something important, our body releases adrenalin and other hormones so we are alert, energized, and ready to achieve our goals.

I recall a family member choosing to face her fear of flying in order to visit loved ones overseas. Connecting with family was a priority – knowing why she wished to embrace the challenge was an essential first step.

## Step 2

Believe

### “You have to believe in yourself”

Sun Tzu

**In order to face our fears, we need to believe we have the courage and ability to do so.** Professional athletes learn the power of a good pep-talk. They remind themselves of all the reasons they are up for the challenge. They leave “I can do this!” on repeat in their minds.

Enthusiastic cheerleaders and supportive crowds play an important role but nothing is as constant or as powerful as your inner voice.

Sadly, when we face difficulties, we are often quick to undermine ourselves. This was common practice for a teenager – let’s call her Aroha – who regularly called Anxiety NZ’s free 24/7 helpline (0800 ANXIETY; 0800 269 4389) in a state of panic. When

**Leave ‘I can do this’ on repeat in your mind.**

**Nothing is as constant or as powerful as your inner voice.**

## Step 3

Plan

### “Courage is resistance to fear, mastery of fear – not absence of fear.”

Mark Twain

Aroha was pushed past her comfort zone, instead of acknowledging her courage, she was unkind to herself. With words like loser/stupid/ugly/selfish on repeat in her mind, Aroha quickly lost faith in herself and felt extremely anxious.

Aroha has since learned the power of positive self-talk and how to support herself as a friend might. When difficulties arise, Aroha reminds herself that she is courageous, capable, and doing her best. She remembers that she has pulled through before and repeats “I can do this!” to herself until she believes it. Like professional athletes, Aroha is now able to face her fears with greater confidence and success.

When we experience our body’s stress response, it can be tempting to pull back from the challenge. This is especially likely if we feel like a ship tossed by a raging sea, without a sail or compass to guide us home. The more lost and powerless we feel, the less likely we are to achieve our goals and embrace the next challenge.

**But if we have a plan we believe in, and good support along the way, we can find the courage to face our fears.**

I recall another 0800 ANXIETY Helpline caller – let’s call him David – who was anxious about a big test at university and was considering skipping class. We had a chat about what he could do if he decided

to attend. David learned breathing and relaxation techniques he could use leading up to, and during, his test. We discussed the power of positive self-talk and other cognitive strategies to boost his confidence and reduce his fear. And I reminded him that our 24/7 support was just a call away.

As the plan took shape, David felt less afraid and more hopeful – this was now a challenge he could face. David rang the next day to report that he had gone to university and done well on his test. More importantly, David was feeling empowered and excited as he had discovered he was capable of more than he had given himself credit for – he just needed a good plan.



## Step 4

Do

**“Tūwhitia te hopo, mairangatia te angitū! Feel the fear and do it anyway!”**

**Whakataukī / Māori proverb**

One might expect taking action to be the most complex and frightening step but after addressing steps 1, 2, and 3, we may find ourselves pleasantly surprised by how much easier and enjoyable it can be to test our limits and achieve our goals.

**When we do the groundwork, we are ready to do our best when the challenge arrives.**

## Step 5

Reflect

**“Courage doesn't always roar. Sometimes courage is the little voice at the end of the day that says I'll try again tomorrow.”**

**Mary Anne Radmacher**

The real challenge is to reflect – with integrity, self-compassion, and patience – and learn from our mistakes. People fear many things but arguably the one that holds us back the most is a fear of failing and being judged by ourselves and others. But when we find the courage to risk falling short of our own and others' expectations,

and to reflect on our learnings, we create room for growth and self-discovery.

**When we PRIORITISE what is important, BELIEVE in ourselves, PLAN wisely, DO our best, and REFLECT without judgement, we are reminded of what we are capable of and why it matters that we try.**



### Anxiety New Zealand Trust

(also known as Anxiety NZ) is a nationwide not-for-profit organisation providing transformative support to kids, teens, and adults experiencing mental health challenges and their whānau. For over 40 years, Anxiety NZ has been helping people to improve mental health and wellbeing, increase resilience, and

reach their goals through a range of services, including face-to-face and online assessment and therapy, free peer support groups, workshops, community education, and a **free 24/7 National Anxiety Helpline (0800 ANXIETY; 0800 269 4389)**. More info at [www.anxiety.org.nz](http://www.anxiety.org.nz).

