

There's No Escaping Discomfort

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I have become convinced that the escape button is both the blessing and the curse of today's world. On one hand, it provides us with the option to undo the everyday mistakes we make as we navigate through life. I can think back to a time, for instance, when writing all the words I do required a supply of White-Out, typewriter ribbons, carbon paper and such.

On the other hand, the escape key has promoted a belief among digital natives that life's choices don't have to be permanent, that a keystroke will eliminate discomfort. Even two-year-olds are learning that two plus two equals four, not through memorization but through the process of elimination. I've had a number of people argue that there are no negative consequences to this so-called menu-driven thinking because young people develop critical thinking skills through the trial-and-error process of choosing different options and hitting "escape" until they find the correct one. Of course, it doesn't work that way. The causes of this phenomenon, by the way, are not limited to technology. Helicopter parents, well-intentioned, but misguided legislation and our litigious society come to mind as other troubling influences.

At some point or another, every digital native begins to discover that most of life's meaningful decisions cannot be resolved with the click of a mouse, especially the ones that have permanent consequences. That's why airlines ask you two and three times if you really want to purchase the ticket. Once you click yes, there's no going back to escape.

But here's the thing, the existence of permanence elicits a natural sense of uncertainty about outcome. Uncertainty naturally promotes a desire for safety. The desire for safety, in turn, pushes one back toward desire for comfort. For those who refuse to leave comfort, the future is bleak regardless of your opportunities. Until you get used to dealing with the discomfort of uncertainty, you do not mature as a human being. Some learn to deal with discomfort through a lens of survival. Others deal with it through a lens of resilience. There are many degrees of this of course. But regardless of the lens or the challenge maturity does not begin until you face down these obstacles.

So ask yourself, "When was the last time I talked about discomfort with my young people? When was the last time I shared a short story or two about how I overcame the discomfort of a new job, a bad decision, or taking a calculated risk?" A little self revelation can be the therapeutic trigger get some people past their dependence on escape.

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