



Tales From the Edge of Competence

She breathed deep, donned the blanket like a superhero cape, and went back to face the GPS and her future.

by **Tammy Kennon**

Writer, sailor, traveler, photographer and blogger

© Tammy Kennon

The ominous blue glow of the new GPS was the only brilliant thing in the cockpit. It was 8 p.m., and I stood shrouded in doubt and a blanket, trying to ward off a late October chill.

The grand launch of my new sailing life was a few hours away, and I had chosen this moment to learn how to use the technology that would guide me from the dock in North Carolina to southern latitudes, dreamy white sand beaches, and turquoise water. I know, it was embarrassingly late to learn how to plot a course, but somehow with all the other mission-critical things on the To-Do list, like *installing* the new GPS, *learning how to use it* just never made it to the top of the list.

I entered the waypoints according to the manual, and everything was humming along ... until it wasn't. The manual and the GPS were at odds. Or maybe it was the middle-woman. Something wasn't right. Every time I finished the route and hit save, it didn't. One time, the screen filled with capital As and foreign symbols and then froze.

This was my first inkling that I was nearing the outer edge of my competence. In just a few hours, I would break the competence barrier and sail well beyond it — at 5 knots.

With five decades of life experience under my belt, I knew myself to be a competent “land” person with a successful career and a thriving business. I lived in a house that I had designed. I drove a car with confidence and knew lots of useful things, like how to use a stove and unclog a toilet. What I didn't know was that the seemingly small step from the dock to the boat was shockingly large. I emerged on the other side a complete amateur. All my old, reliable competencies were utterly useless.

My comfort zone and my competence were left in the dirt.

Our comfort zone is simply that behavioral space where routine and pattern minimize fear, anxiety and risk. We invest much of our lives in crafting that comfort zone, creating a nesting space with a

comfy bed, a just-right chair, and all the daily belongings that grease the skids of everyday living. We eat “comfort” foods, often sharing them with our group of much-loved friends. We nurture an area of expertise, gaining confidence in our abilities.

It's called comfort for a reason; when we lean back and kick up our feet, stress and anxiety kick back too. Unfortunately, so does the brain.

People who study the inside of our heads tell us that our regimented lives lull our brains into repose. Trudging through the same routine day after day digs ruts in the gray matter. Researchers say the best thing for brain health is to get our bodies and our brains moving in new directions.

It sounds easy, but it's not. The brain has three parts, the reptilian, the limbic and the neocortex. The reptilian is the oldest part of the brain, and it has one mission: survival. It is the mental equivalent of the boy who cried wolf. It sees danger and potential death everywhere, imploring us to stay in a safe place, repeat the routine, eat the same foods. It wants us to continue replicating patterns, because they are safe. They haven't killed us — at least so far.

International bestselling author Seth Godin calls the reptilian brain “the resistance,” an apt title for the naysayer in our heads perpetually opposing everything new. In his book *Linchpin*, Godin says, “The resistance would like you to curl up in a corner, avoid all threats, take no risks and hide.” (Godin, 2010)

This constant reptilian voice nagging us about dubious dangers causes us anxiety, usually for no good reason. As Godin notes, anxiety doesn't really protect us from danger, but it does keep us from doing great things. In its worst form, it keeps us from doing anything but slogging through our same routine, day after day, year after year.

Quieting our internal lizard and kicking our brain out of the proverbial recliner has the same positive benefits for brain health that regular



“Great experience takes place at the edge of our competence.”

— Diane Sawyer



© Tammy Kennon

exercise does for the body. The good news is that it takes only a little newness to start burning new neural pathways.

It might be as simple as playing Monopoly or learning to knit. In an extensive study of people between the ages of 75 and 82, the Mayo Clinic found that those who engaged in even the mildest mentally stimulating activities were less likely to develop Mild Cognitive Impairment (MCI), a condition that increases the risk of developing dementia. And the results were decisive. In the four-year study, they found that those who played games lowered their risk of developing cognitive impairment by a remarkable 78 percent. While playing games had the most impact, other activities, such as social interaction (77 percent), crafts (72 percent) and computer use (70 percent), were also shown to significantly lower impairment risk. (Owens, 2017)

Even doing a routine thing a bit differently can put your brain on alert. That could be as simple as eating something different for breakfast every day for a week or as gutsy as learning to speak a foreign language. Our daily tasks get so routinized that even using the other hand to brush your teeth or sitting in a different chair at the dinner table can cause a noticeable brain shift.

In other words, you don't have to upend your whole life, like I did when I moved on-board a boat.

That night in the cockpit, when I was wrestling with my screaming lizard brain, I almost lost the fight. After three hours of repetitious failure, I took a break. The lizard and I had a little chat; I did some deep breathing, donned the blanket like a superhero cape, and went back to face the GPS and my future.

There was no immediate magic. I failed a few more times, but eventually, of course, the GPS worked. The first baby steps into my new world were mapped, and I dropped into my bunk exhausted. Five hours later, my husband and I untied the lines and set off for southern climes and the edge of my competence, towing my squawking reptile brain in our wake.

And you know what? Diane Sawyer was right. Sailing to the edge of my competence and beyond was among the greatest experiences of my life.

Read more:

Godin, Seth. (2010). *Linchpin: Are You Indispensable?* London: Penguin Group. (Available on Amazon)

Owens, Sarah. (2017). "Learning a New Activity May Ward Off Cognitive Decline, Study Suggests." Read more at www.tinyurl.com/wise-brain.



© Tammy Kennon

Five Simple Ways to Push Your Limits

(From Easiest to Hardest)

Read.	Change your routine.	Learn yoga or a new dance.	Learn a foreign language.	Travel.
If you are already an avid reader, mix up your genre. If you typically read crime novels, try a biography or a self-help book.	This can be as simple as reversing the order of your daily routine or rearranging the furniture in your bedroom.	Getting your heart rate up while learning a new skill amplifies the effect, so get moving in a different way.	Because language is a complex task for the brain, learning a new one is an effective mental workout.	Leaving your physical and mental comfort zones has the greatest impact, but you don't have to go far. Being a tourist in your own city is a wonderful place to start. ♦

Advertisement

Travel by Leisure Care Presents:

Executive Salute to Veterans Cruise

7-Days Round Trip From Honolulu | November 11-18, 2017

Contact Carol Dennis for more information or to make a reservation.
1.888.468.2010 | cdennis@twisttravel.com

