



Your Survival Instinct Is Killing You: Retrain Your Brain to Conquer Fear, Make Better Decisions, and Thrive in the 21st Century

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Thanks to technology, we live in a world that's much more comfortable than ever before. But here's the paradox: our tolerance for discomfort is at an all-time low. And as we wrestle with a sinking "discomfort threshold," we increasingly find ourselves at the mercy of our primitive instincts and reactions that can perpetuate disease, dysfunction, and impair performance and decision making.

Designed to keep us out of danger, our limbic brain's Survival Instinct controls what we intuitively do to avert injury or death, such as running out of a burning building. Rarely are we required to recruit this instinct today because seldom do we find ourselves in situations that are truly life-threatening. However, this part of our brain is programmed to naturally and automatically react to even the most benign forms of discomfort and stress as serious threats to our survival.

In this seminal book we learn how the Survival Instinct is the culprit that triggers a person to overeat, prevents the insomniac from sleeping, causes the executive to unravel under pressure, leads travelers to avoid planes or freeways, inflames pain, and due to past heartache, closes down an individual to love. In all of these cases, their overly-sensitive Survival Instinct is being called into action at the slightest hint of discomfort. In short, their Survival Instinct is stuck in the "ON" position...with grave consequences.

Your Survival Is Killing You can transform the way you live. Provocative, eye-opening, and surprisingly practical with its gallery of strategies and ideas, this book will show you how to build up your "instinctual muscles" for successfully managing discomfort while taming your overly reactive Survival Instinct. You will learn that the management of discomfort is the single most important skill for the twenty-first century. This book is, at its heart, a modern guide to survival.

Your Survival Instinct Is Killing You: Retrain Your Brain to Conquer Fear, Make Better Decisions, and Thrive in the 21st Century Details

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From Reader Review Your Survival Instinct Is Killing You: Retrain Your Brain to Conquer Fear, Make Better Decisions, and Thrive in the 21st Century for online ebook

Lorie says

This is possibly the most important book I will ever read. Groundbreaking and surprising this book offers unique and powerful (yet simple) tools to deal with the discomfort in our lives that create anxiety, anger, depression and maladaptive behaviors at unprecedented levels throughout our modern society.

This is not yet another one of those New Age books with recycled ideas about how to talk yourself out of your problems. Dr Schoen backs everything up with scientific research and case studies. I found it fascinating and helpful and can't wait to read his other book, "When Relaxation is Hazardous to Your Health" about the letdown effect.

If you are remotely interested in how your brain works, read this book!

Marty says

talks about "agitation" rather than stress. We are always in a hurry, always expecting more, can't wait, can't tolerate discomfort. This kicks in our survival instinct which is hard on our bodies to be in a constant state of fight or flight. things to do about it - take a break from technology, tolerate imperfection, limit sensory input, regular schedule and bedtime, slow down, don't procrastinate, don't try to get it all done, embrace uncertainty, get rid of anger habit (always angry at something), expand your comfort zone, rest, don't expect instant gratification, chill out, exercise.

Good advice. Kind of a boring read. Repetitive.

Ashley Nelson says

A lot of very interesting information, however a lot of high school-esque term paper writing. Let me expound: Much of the writing involved a lot of "In this next section I will show you this..." And a lot of "pre-telling" of information without yet giving it and that to me reeks of a very immature writing style which was highly distracting.

The actual facts presented however were worth the read and the ideas being shown were enough to make me keep reading, highlighting, and underlining.

I enjoy learning new things and psychology books in general. This one felt a bit light on actual facts and included a lot of notes and asides from the author about his own life-which were interesting enough, just not what I figured this book would be about.

Still, overall it made me think and pretty much anything that makes me ponder is okay in my book!

Alberto says

Nice book, offered a valid point about how discomfort can be spur of growth rather than being something to avoid. The secret is how to live the discomfort.

Kim Forney says

It was not one of my favorites. Another book with a lot of research from a clinical professor at UCLA on discomfort training. He has his own website and advertises in his book for additional assistance for personal discomfort, which manifests itself into addictions such as eating, drinking, sex, etc. His approach is to “rewire the brain” from the cognitive pairing operant conditioning. The author premises that when we are uncomfortable at work or in our relationships, we use compulsive behaviors to cope (using a computer, sex, drinking, alcohol, food, etc) He spends hours on describing patients with varying disorders. Externalization can enhance triggers of discomfort. “The more instant gratification is available to us the higher our levels of agitants and the more we need to seek relief.” Our impulses do not lessen; it takes more and more of our “drug” to satisfy the compulsion. The expectation of perfection is a trigger for the discomfort. Far too often, anger becomes an addiction; and it is difficult to give up. In order to let go of anger, we have to let go against the grain of the override limbic Amygdala Anger stokes the fire of agitants. Embrace forgiveness. The focus of this book is to encourage us to face discomfort and build up a discomfort management system.

Establishing routines can be helpful. Even though our outer mind or consciousness often lacks novelty and becomes bored with predictability our inner minds, or subconscious mind and body may seek predictability. Familiarity creates comfort. It is important to strike a balance between familiarity (predictability) and uncomfortable agitants or discomfort.

Experimenting with different foods and routes home from work can build patience and comfort. I learned a lot from the book that I recognized from other books. I would recommend the book if you are looking into the whys and how to overcome of personal demons..

Angie Brandt says

Some helpful strategies. Chapter 8 was probably the best chapter... there were more helpful tips and strategies there.

Alberto Laverán says

Another self help book

Another self help book, with a lot of pseudo scientific talking. A typical book to read on a commuter train...

Julie says

I think if you are under 40, this may be a more helpful read.

Donna says

This was an interesting read and kind of scientific. It is about why we do what we do, and also why we can't help ourselves, especially when it is tied into our Survival Instinct.

I liked his approach in identifying agitation. We are busy. The world is loud, and colorful. We tend to master our surroundings and constantly looking for something more interesting and as my mother would say, "More better". I have a son who suffers from anxiety. I've had to teach him coping skills through out the years. This book gave me some insights and ideas on that. So 4 stars.

Ryan Marchand says

Although the concepts and logical pathways make a compelling case for the author's positions, his explanations are long-winded, somewhat repetitive, and at times, hard to follow. I was hoping this book would offer more clarity to self-training techniques for handling instincts and learning to manage your responses to stress in beneficial ways. Instead I feel that I could have got the majority of the value from just reading the first couple chapters.

Carolyn Moor says

Highlighted a lot of sections of this book, then tweeted the author and we ended up connecting to see what could possibly be created for my organization Modern Widows Club. A community of women building resilience and yet, disadvantaged and often paralyzed by fear in small and great ways. Sure hope a partnership is fulfilled.

I enjoyed the science behind learning we all have the qualities to live a resilient life.

Paul Baker says

This is a truly insightful book. Dr. Schoen really nails modern issues of psychology and presents practical, easy, and free methods for dealing with discomfort and how to use discomfort to make your life more full.

I highly recommend this book!

Joshua Cartwright says

One of the most important books of our time

Increasing comfort levels are leading us to overreact to discomfort. This is activating our survival instinct for more and more trivial issues, increasing our anxiety and reducing our ability to perform successfully and use our resources.

This book reframes discomfort, pointing out what it is and managing yourself to perform while uncomfortable is so important.

I have had a hairtrigger reaction to certain situations all my life. I tried all kinds of solutions: mostly cognitive but also acupressure, and others. None did the job fully because they weren't directed at retraining the response of my limbic system, the 'reptile' part of the brain.

After using these techniques for three days I am significantly calmer and starting to look forward to discomfort as the waves on which I will surf towards success. Do I enjoy my discomfort? No, because it has been a problem for too long? Can I master it? For the first time in a while, I actually think so.

Jacob says

A very in depth look at the behavioral side of our brain. The main point is that being unable to manage stress results in survival instincts kicking in. The ability to thrive under pressure is a skill to develop. The author also focuses a lot on how modern convenience has altered our brains. If we are inconvenienced, we experience stress and other issues.

Alex Rubenstein says

I've just finished reading 'Your Survival Instinct is Killing You', by Dr. Marc Schoen. Let me preface this review by saying that I have a Ph.D. in Management, and am well-versed in common terminology in habit theory, the science of stress, and decision-making. I do not say this intending for readers to agree with my on an appeal to authority, but rather just to provide a foundation on which to base my critique.

I felt the general thesis of this book is fair: As a result of modern conveniences, we now live in a world where we are becoming less tolerant to discomfort. When this discomfort inevitably arises in our lives, our "survival instinct" sets in, leading to fear and panic. The book seeks to train individuals to better manage this discomfort, if even to avoid some forms of it altogether.

Part 1 of the book discusses the origins of discomfort, while Part 2 is the more self-help techniques offered by Dr. Schoen. I'll critique each part separately, for they are grounded in different issues.

PART ONE:

I was generally annoyed that this part committed such an atomistic fallacy. Too many case studies were used to draw general theoretical conclusions about the nature of discomfort. For instance, on p. 78 we are told that people "turn to medication, alcohol, and avoidant behaviors to deal with fear". Well, in some cases

medication IS valuable, but the tone is such that everyone is overusing meds to deal with fear, as per your later disclaimer in Part 2 which backs off this claim a bit, p. 166 (Note: I am seriously curious if the publisher required that disclaimer be put in before press). Rather than these cases, a stronger argument from theory and scientific findings would bolster the lead-in to later assertions. But these things are lumped together as poor coping mechanisms. Some are, no doubt, but medicine does have its place as valuable, just as it's unfair to also lump the discomfort of panic attack sufferers along with those of obese people seeking food to manage discomfort. Yet alas, readers may relate more to the stories and metaphors, and to the layperson "theory" has somehow become a pejorative synonym for "probably untrue". The book is 231 pages of what could be said in 50. Example (p. 49): "the more agitation we feel, the more out of sync we become with our inner and outside worlds. And the more out of sync we become, the greater level of misalignment." This reeks of tautology (i.e. this phrase is true by definition because agitation IS misalignment).

My next issue was what felt like a tone of narcissism and shameless self-promotion by the author. We are given numerous new terminology throughout the book, which I found confusing and unscientific. The author frequently says "what I call _____", when common terminology would certainly suffice, unless he can sufficiently argue for a different definition. Come on!: Agitation and Discomfort and Misalignment are the same thing (so the cycle of agitation seems weird)! Resonance is Comfort or Balance. Let Down Effect? Cozy Paradox? Lecturing Your Emotions (is this possible?)? Conditioned Powerlessness (i.e. learned helplessness)? Brain Community? Inner Core State of Balance? This is either pseudoscience nonsense, or already has a scientific basis, but the author prefers his own new terms. The Schoen Breathing Technique is called "Deep breathing and holding your breath at the top and bottom". The agitation checklist even feels impossible not to score highly on. First, a 33% yes score means you're in the danger zone. I won't copy questions out of his possible propriety, but uncertainty avoidance is too common (and also is in other existing measures...) I found it too bold a claim that this Survivalist Strategy of the 21st Century (which seems none other than to boost my self-efficacy, or to learn to enjoy discomfort) should somehow be more beneficial than scientifically-supported findings of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy and the like.

Chapter 4 was just a very weird shift to a biochemical discussion of the "survival instinct", with impressive medical discussion about dopamine regulation and this and that. Despite this discussion, I am forced to ask: is this book REALLY about a survival instinct? What IS the survival instinct? I feel we never got a clear understanding of this, other than thinking of it as getting a panic attack from a cusp-catastrophe of discomfort. To be clear, the book is about discomfort and managing that, not managing your survival instinct itself. However, Part 2 speaks too openly about retraining your limbic system--which is unconscious, by the way--and finding harmony by making your brain work together. I'm jumping the gun on this section, but the science is too thin and the foundation of these claims too precarious to start a sound argument, though I agree with the ultimate point. (jenga)

Ch. 5: I'll define habits as repeated patterns of learned behavior. I don't really think there are Sick Habits, and an Insomnia Habit is just called insomnia. and protective/avoidance habits are phobias, not habits. I feel like medicine is really given short-shift here, where the author frequently gives examples of medicinal abuse (which no doubt, is true for many), but shouldn't be foregone in favor of willpower alone. I think many manage fear poorly, but the argument for willpower alone was disconcerting--and likely ineffective for many.

This leads me to PART TWO:

The contribution of this book NEEDS to be: what are some viable techniques to manage this growing (or lowered tolerance of) discomfort in our lives?

My main problem with some of recommendations is that many have unfounded bases on which to build

arguments. If we can change our discomfort, we should be good, right? We just have to change our emotions by lowering our agitation, or by managing it (p. 132). I like some of the points to manage our comfort, but 15 points should really be like six (seriously, point 12 is the exact same as points 1, 3, 4, 5, 7 and 14, while some points are just weird, like 9 [well, just don't get agitated!]; same for the later list in Ch.10, and in an earlier list about conditioning...smh, pairing IS association). Moreover, many are just common knowledge, like other reviewers note (breathe, exercise, limit the amount of time spent on technology). I don't think we can control our limbic brain as simply as the author suggests, and the limits of willpower to manage truly stressful situations--beyond those that are just challenges. Neuroplasticity is an interesting field, but Dr. Schoen ***REALLY*** stretches to the malleability of many predispositions. But hey, self-help books can't profit unless people think they can make easy changes. I just wish there were a closer connection between the scientific findings presented, and the application Dr. Schoen makes to the concept of consciously managing discomfort for positive results. The jump from those studies to his assertions was too wide for me.

The point is, some events are ****predisposed, chemical imbalances**** to the way we live our life, imbalances that require professional and medicinal attention. Ultimately I would recommend many of these tools like breathing and yoga and tech-fasts, but this book shouldn't be considered a catch-all solution, and certainly we shouldn't think it so easy to really change our habits and just **FEEL THE OPPOSITE!** or **EMBRACE IT!** whenever we do feel discomfort. I don't think it's impossible, but more discussion of the fine-grained habitual changes in our life should be discussed, rather than redundancies, or trying to convince us--and weakly in my opinion--that we can consciously alter our brain physiology. Example: Simply because a study finds amygdala size is associated with social network size, doesn't mean increasing my social network size will increase my amygdala size. Correlation doesn't equal causation.

CONCLUSIONS:

I agree that discomfort is an issue with our lives, and books like The Shallows and Amusing Ourselves to Death have made that point more clear with regard to our attention and its relation to digital technology use. The tools suggested here, like "don't use technology if technology is keeping you wired at night", are nothing new. Though I did think some points are valuable, it takes until Part 2 to really get to the meat, especially given that I think the scientific arguments offered in Part 1 were a bit loosely connected, and based on case studies and conjecture rather than theory. Don't think that the techniques offered here are going to be the quick fix you seek, because such a thing doesn't exist, and reinforces his point about instant gratification. If you want to change your agitation, change your habits causing your agitation. Follow some steps in this book on the habitual changes to make. But to start setting better habits (and don't shirk this point, because habits are HARD to change), I would start by reading The Slight Edge, by Jeff Olson, which helps you to really work on getting to the core of changing your habits first. And as the author concedes in the end, simply because many people do overuse medications to get a short-term fix (leaving the underwater iceberg untouched), there is still value in professional help and many people do need medicine to deal with anxiety/discomfort. But if you are willing to work hard and fundamentally change how you approach situations, this book offers a couple good pointers.
