

MINDSET

Courage: The Risks You Take Shape Who You Become

Discover why courage isn't about fearlessness—it's about taking meaningful action despite fear.

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Illustration by Fei Meng.

By Makai Allbert | December 29, 2024 Updated: January 07, 2025

This is part 7 in “[Virtue Medicine](#)”

What medicine is safe, effective, free, and requires only a subtle shift in perspective? We welcome you to explore the neglected link between virtue and health—“Virtue Medicine.”

An eight-year-old boy sat quietly next to his six-year-old sister as she lay in a hospital room. She was dying of leukemia. Her only chance of survival was a blood transfusion. When doctors confirmed that the brother's blood was a perfect match, they asked if he would donate a pint to save her life. After a night of thought, he agreed.

The next day, the siblings were connected to IVs, and the boy's blood was transfused into the sister's sickly body. Then, in the quiet that followed, the boy turned to the doctor and asked, “How soon until I start to die?”

This moment, recounted by American writer Anne Lamott in her book “Bird by Bird,” is drawn from a true story told by Jack Kornfield of the Spirit Rock Meditation Center in Woodacre, California, and depicts a

child’s incredible courage and innocence in thinking that saving his sister would cost him everything.

While few of us may confront such significant decisions, the essence of courage remains relevant to our everyday struggles. Courage shows when we challenge ourselves to move beyond comfort, stand by our principles, or embark on new paths toward self-improvement.

What Is Courage?

The common understanding of courage is that it’s acting in the face of fear. According to Cynthia Pury, psychologist and courage researcher, three elements shape courageous acts: intention, a noble or meaningful goal, and some measure of risk.

Courage must be intentional; it cannot be accidental; it has to be a person’s choice, not something that happens to them. The voluntary act must also serve a meaningful purpose. Running into a burning building to save a child—most would call that courageous. Charging into the same flames to record a TikTok video? Not so much.

As Pury told *The Epoch Times*, “There are some actions that are universally seen as good or worthwhile.”

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However, she also emphasizes that courage has an inherently subjective nature. What one person perceives as a terrifying leap of

faith, another might consider a calculated step forward. This leads to a distinction between “general” and “personal” courage.

Invisible Risks

General courage often involves socially or culturally affirmed purpose and risks, like acts of heroism in a battle, marked by statues and medals and broadly celebrated.

However, personal courage is more intimate. For a public speaker, addressing a crowd is routine and devoid of risk. However, for a shy individual, stepping on a stage can feel like putting their life on the line.

A letter published in The Sun Magazine shared by Pury in her work illustrates personal courage:

“My 9-year-old had cried her heart out, saying over and over that she didn’t want to go to school because they were being given a big Social Studies test that day. She was afraid her learning disabilities would get in the way, and she wouldn’t even be able to read the questions, much less know the answers.

“Her fears grew and grew until they made her physically ill. It took me more than an hour to convince her to get dressed. ... When we arrived at school, she begged me not to make her go inside: ‘I just can’t do it, Momma. I can’t take that test.’ I was afraid I was going to have to physically drag her from the car when suddenly she wiped her tears, got out, and walked with me to the door. I marveled at her bravery... Will anyone ever understand how much courage it takes for my little girl to face a simple test?”

The Courage Gap

Our brains are hardwired for self-preservation and often default to the familiar, the predictable, and the safe, said Margie Warrell, a

leadership expert with a doctorate in human development, said in an interview with The Epoch Times. But real growth and true transformation blossom in discomfort, in going beyond our perceived limitations, she suggests.

Warrell frames the challenge of acting in the presence of fear as a “courage gap.”

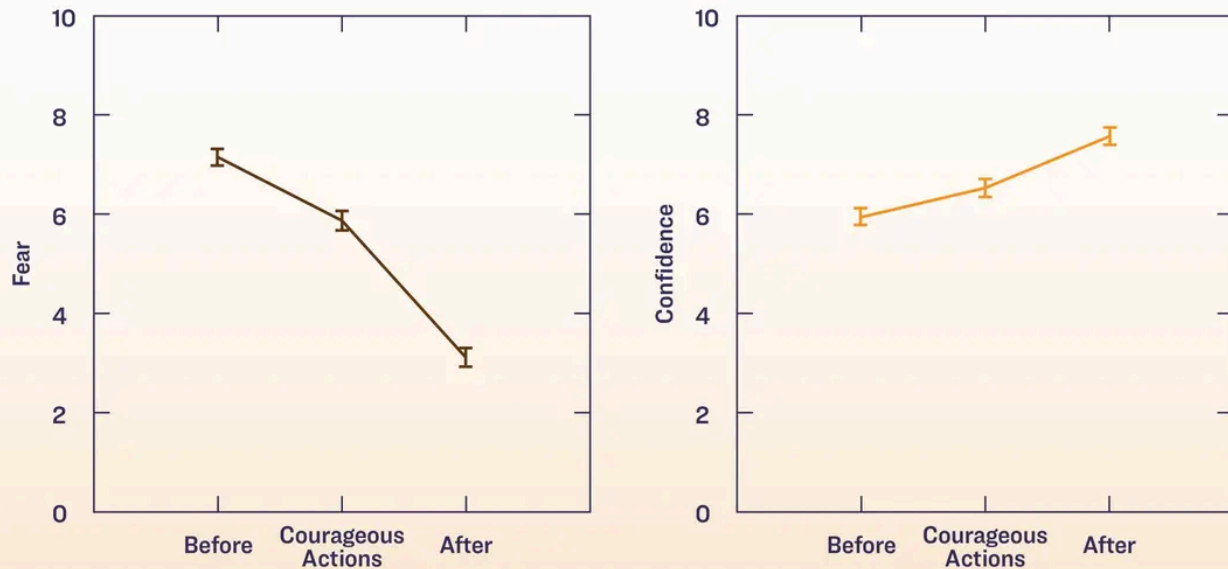
In her book, “The Courage Gap: 5 Steps to Braver Action,” Warrell recounted lessons from her childhood. Growing up on a dairy farm, she longed to ride a pony, but her dream was met with fear when her parents gave her Roby, an old and imposing horse.

Each day, she returned to Roby, facing her trepidation and the fear of failure. The process wasn’t glamorous—just repeated attempts, frustration, and small victories. Eventually, the fear that once overwhelmed her began to loosen its grip, replaced by confidence and freedom.

“Growth and comfort can’t ride the same horse,” she wrote.

Pury’s previous [research](#) reinforces that when people act courageously, fear lessens, and confidence increases.

Courageous Actions Lower Fear and Increase Confidence



Source: The Journal of Positive Psychology

EPOCH HEALTH

Illustration by The Epoch Times

Warrell reasons that the willingness to face risk despite uncertainty can shape our entire trajectory, as success in life is proportional to the willingness to be uncomfortable.

“The [courage] gap,” she said, “is the distance between who we are and who we could be if we consistently practice courage.”

In the short term, avoiding risk feels safe. In the long run, it confines us, limiting our potential and freedom.

Courage Pays Off

Courage brings measurable dividends. [Studies](#) of entrepreneurs find that courage contributes to higher levels of psychological capital (PsyCap)—a blend of confidence, hope, optimism, and resilience.

Researchers have documented that entrepreneurs who demonstrate courage and, as a result, have higher PsyCap report significantly greater fulfillment, even amid the inherent uncertainties of entrepreneurship. Furthermore, these entrepreneurs experience lower, rather than higher, levels of stress and anxiety than the average population.

This benefit is not limited to business founders. A 2022 [study](#) found that courage accounts for nearly a quarter of the differences in job performance.

According to the study, published in the European Journal of Investigation in Health, Psychology and Education, courage helps employees tackle challenges, take initiative, and make bold decisions. It also has advantages in social situations, such as giving honest feedback or addressing conflicts, which boosts teamwork and productivity.

Courage yields benefits in academic settings as well. In a large [study](#) of more than 7,600 high school students, courageous behavior correlated with better academic performance and greater persistence in the face of difficulty.

The Close Companion of Courage

Pury defines courage as “taking a worthwhile risk.” She shared a story about a family that stopped their car along a West Coast highway, scaling a cliff to retrieve their child’s lost teddy bear that flew out the window.

What began as a seemingly manageable risk soon escalated, leaving both parents stranded on the edge of the cliff—ultimately calling for a helicopter rescue. The perceived value of the goal (retrieving the teddy bear) may not have justified the actual risks taken. This reflects another aspect of courage: Goals and risks should be carefully—and constantly—reassessed.

Aristotle [described](#) courage as the “golden mean” between cowardice and recklessness. The courageous person not only fears rightly but is also confident about the right things, in the right way and at the right time, according to Aristotle.

“[Thus,] courage and wisdom should be best friends,” Pury said.

“[Courage] is like learning to bake a soufflé or play piano,” Warrell said.

It’s a learnable skill that can be improved through practice, yet early efforts may feel contrived. For example, if your goal is to lose weight, stepping into a gym might bring fear of judgment or embarrassment, and rearranging your lifestyle to support healthier habits may involve social and financial risks. But as you push beyond those discomforts, you learn that persistence makes way for progress. Start small. Embrace manageable risks. Try that new recipe, initiate that difficult conversation, speak up in that meeting, and apply for that dream job.

Pury encourages asking yourself: “Why do I want this? What will happen if I take this risk? If I look back at what I’ve done, will I be proud of it?”

Over time, these actions build confidence and clarity, [lowering](#) anxiety and helping us distinguish between what is truly meaningful and merely appealing—with time, courage will simply flow.

Warrell suggests cultivating a supportive community around you—people who champion your growth and celebrate your courage. Recording your courageous acts in a journal can serve as evidence of your progress and [develop](#) a courageous identity within you. When you [see](#) yourself as courageous, you will become more so in the process.

From the hesitant child facing a test to the entrepreneur forging new paths to the person at the gym stretching beyond comfort—each courageous step bridges the gap between aspiration and actuality.

“The quality of your life will increase in proportion to the courage you bring to every decision,” Warrell wrote.

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Share Your Story: health@epochtimes.nyc

Have you experienced personal transformation or improved health through cultivating virtues? Please share your experience with us.

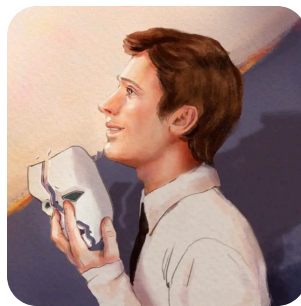
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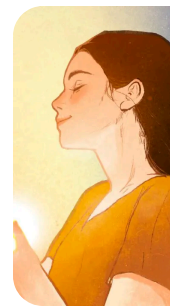
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