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# Worth *the* Risk

How to Microdose Bravery to Grow  
Resilience, Connect More, and Offer  
Yourself to the World

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Disclaimer: This is a work of nonfiction representing a combination of clinical, teaching, research, and life perspectives. To protect the privacy of those featured, certain names and identifying traits have been changed. If it sounds just like you, don't worry, I haven't been spying. It's just that we have a *lottttt* to try and be brave with. This book is not intended to be a substitute for medical advice, or an end-all-be-all to risk taking. Like any work, there will be flaws and contradictions, since our understanding is always shifting, and perfect isn't a thing . . .

## NOTE TO READER

# You Are Not Here to Live a *What If* Life

Brave is not something you should wait to feel.

Brave is a decision . . .

GLENNON DOYLE

**T**here are times when it becomes clear that certain risks are worth taking. For me, it happened at 9:01 pm on a Thursday. Within .02 seconds, Ms. Pat has total command over the sold-out audience at Laugh Boston Comedy Club. Rips into a young couple in the front. Cracks jokes about being too old for blowjobs.

I am there with my comedian friend J. Smitty: he's hoping to get Ms. Pat to headline his show the next night. The ice has melted in our drinks. We are laughing too much for even a quick sip. He hadn't said much about her—just that she was funny and that “all the shit she talks about is true.”

Patricia Williams, whose stage name is Ms. Pat, has overcome *serious odds*. As in *being shot in the nipple, run down by a truck, raped, pregnant at fourteen, facing racism/sexism/classism, serving jail time kind-of-odds*. It's hard to believe the whole room is gasping for air, not out of shock, but side-splitting laughter while she drops one trauma truth bomb after another. But that is Ms. Pat's brilliance.

At the end of the performance, her tone changes. It is the first time of the night when the neon-blue room with the word LAUGH spelled out in globe



lights comes to a hush. She tells us to be brave, to tell our stories. No matter the cost. She tells us this is *what we must do*. That courage can pay off, even when it first seems like too big a risk. She is living proof that our own healing can inspire collective healing. We cheer wildly. Ms. Pat tells us to meet her at the merchandise table. She's holding up a T-shirt that says, "It's never too late to tell your truth." The laughs vanish—she's no longer joking.

When the lights come up, we jump off our metal swivel stools and wait in line alongside eager fans whose stomachs hurt from queso fries and uncontrollable laughter. I buy her memoir and thank her for her bravery. I awkwardly tell her that I too am a writer and speaker; that I've told my story publicly. Her polite smile is generous—the only guns I saw in my white, rural small town were for hunting, there was always food on the table, and the only time I'd been in a prison was while working in a minimum-security unit during my early clinical training. Not exactly comparative to her experiences as a Black woman on the streets of Atlanta. Ms. Pat signs my book and J. Smitty convinces her to do his show. We are both smiling as we duck through the Boston rain and smush into our Uber that smells like wet dog with a hint of Vanillaroma.

By the next afternoon, I'd already read every word of *Rabbit: The Autobiography of Ms. Pat*. It's a page turner.<sup>1</sup> Sadly, it is not unique. Her story is all too familiar for far too many Black women and BIPOCs (Black, Indigenous, Persons of Color).

In all my years as a therapist, social justice activist, and resilience researcher, this is the *very first time* I've seen someone tell their story of heartbreaking intergenerational poverty and trauma in a way that makes you laugh and cry at the same time.

By the end of the weekend, I'd seen Ms. Pat twice, read her memoir *without even getting up to go to the bathroom or checking my phone*, and binged on her expansive collection of podcasts and comedy specials. I couldn't help but see the connections between her story and what I've seen ring true in my clinical work and research on human resilience. That we are wired to digest small risks, and that over time microdosing bravery leads to the kind of resilience that not only positively impacts our own lives but has a collective contagion effect.

When a social worker saw Ms. Pat's talent for humor and storytelling and suggested she go into comedy, she originally hesitated. She'd been

in plenty of risky situations before, but laying out your life in front of strangers takes mad courage. She eventually took to the stage at open mics, building comfort in telling pieces of her story, generating momentum that's led to big impact for Ms. Pat.

This is more than just a feel-good story of a comedian with sold-out shows. Ms. Pat extricated herself from intergenerational cycles of poverty and became not only an influencer, but a *liberator*: one who has set herself and others free. She's one of many liberators throughout this book illustrating ways we can strategically decide what risks are worth taking to allow us to grow beyond our insecurities, labels, trauma, and what the world heaps on us, and choose a *what is* life over a *what if* life.

When fear rules, we miss out. We may think we're doing ourselves a favor when we "play it safe" or give in to anxiety, but instead we give up the many treasures life can deliver when we take strategic risks.

I've seen the consequences of misguided relationships to risk repeatedly in my professional and personal experiences. On one end of the caution continuum, there's the daredevil who takes wild chances for the sake of adrenaline and ends up repeatedly hurt. On the other, the dreamer who yearns to try something new for their whole life, but winds up stewing in regret and what ifs because they never pursued the ventures of their heart. Then there's the perfectionist who's consumed with what people think, hustling to please everyone else while stewing miserably inwardly. The person who stays in a toxic relationship, much to the detriment of their well-being. The creative who foregoes their spirit and sticks to society's script of success, leading to stagnation and emptiness. The irate citizen who salivates for social change, but is afraid to stick their neck out, remaining hopeless and horrified by the state of the world.

I've also seen the elation of those who've nourished their courage through small, intentional doses of risk that prove well worth it. Those who have engaged with risk strategically, opening doors for joy, adventure, and healing. Who are not held hostage by fear of embarrassment, scrutiny, and loss, but instead realize that playing it safe comes at the cost of being able to develop the stamina, momentum, and resilience that helps us grow and give. Who have discovered that bravery is a process worth engaging with, but are wise in how they calculate and maneuver risk.

Nourishing courage comes in many forms and circumstances, and often involves the beginning step of speaking up even when our instincts first tell us to hide. Take Sage, a patient of mine who has had an extraordinary legacy of impact, working at a high velocity through her career as leader in education, moving freely before the 2020 pandemic. In all her circles, she was seen as the model of courage, but as the world began opening up after the end of the initial COVID lockdowns, Sage found herself struggling to integrate back into society. She was in a state of overstimulation and anxiety, filled with fears, and unsure whether she could carry out her duties. Mostly, she was afraid to tell anyone what she was experiencing; that she felt the most anxiety-ridden and least resilient she'd ever felt in her entire life.

As a high achiever, Sage's pride in her grittiness made it almost impossible to become vulnerable enough to name what was going on. She was used to giving help, not receiving it. She considered resigning so no one would ever find out, but knew full well that an early retirement would have detrimental effects. Eventually, Sage bravely shared her situation with a close colleague who suggested she negotiate a hybrid work arrangement to balance her desire to break through her fear without totally overwhelming herself. This initial step helped her build the courage to come to me to therapy, where we focused on how safe exposure to what we're afraid of can help us to work through fear and build resilience. Sage began strategically using the tools of distress tolerance to nourish her courage rather than giving into fear.

The biggest lie anxiety whispers at us is that we're the only ones, that it's some sort of moral failing when we need help. Don't trade the short-term comfort avoidance gives for the long-term relief that comes with working through what's uncomfortable . . .

While I watched Ms. Pat at LAUGH Boston, I realized that she had taken countless steps to nourish her courage. Her ways of being brave are right in step with the discoveries of modern brain science, human behavior, and social consciousness that can help us grow our resilience and identify the *risks worth taking*. Her story, and the principles of *Worth the Risk*, are not exact templates for microdosing bravery, but reminders of what is available to all of us when we venture beyond our fears and hesitancy to take risks:

*Small doses of risk can lead to big impact.* A microdosing approach to bravery simply means we take on small doses regularly to experience the beneficial therapeutic effects of risk taking: resilience, greater connection, and being able to offer ourselves to the world. Microdosing allows us to digest and integrate experiences, rather than becoming oversaturated. Courage is not always found in grand and dramatic gestures or jaw dropping feats. It is the grassrootsy, unassuming brand of bravery that should not be underestimated. Microdoses add up.

*We must take risks.* Life is full of them; risk is unavoidable. We are hardwired to take them. Playing it “safe” doesn’t necessarily make life less dangerous. Many risks are worth taking. Risks can be highly nourishing, allowing for important growth to happen as we become more comfortable with the uncomfortable. We can leverage this feature of our brain to experience a bold, adventurous, colorful life.

*We are wired for resilience.* The human spirit is indomitable. We are not our trauma, our labels, fears, or raw emotions. We are adaptable as a species, capable of significant growth, healing, and momentum. Even when we have faced atrocities and what seems insurmountable, resilience can be cultivated.

*We must hold one another in reverence.* Moving from *me* to *we* is *the only way forward*. We must evolve from territory protection and “selective neighboring”—caring for those we look like, love like, and affiliate with—to a place of solidarity and holding one another in *highest regard*. For those holding dominant identities that carry privilege, it’s essential to stay accountable and seek ways to forge change, standing fervently with and for those who have been marginalized, oppressed, or discriminated against because of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, age, ability, country of origin, or other social identity categorizations. Resilience is activated in contexts that have moved from mere tolerance or acceptance to *human reverence*.

*We are liberators.* We are here to liberate ourselves and one another from shame, what ifs, fear, isms, oppression, and violence. To stop cowering in the face of ridiculous societal impositions. To reject so-called “leadership” that uses power over to destroy. Liberation happens through solidarity, consciousness, community, and creativity. It is the ultimate offering we can give to ourselves, and one another.

*We are inexplicable, creative sages.* The world doesn’t need our air-brushed stories or curated, scripted, boring, conforming selves. It needs

our truths, messiness, weirdness, creative energy, and resistance. Our authentic identities are art. We can express ourselves in many forms and mediums: stories, painting, music, dance, poetry, writing, and performance. Creative flow is contagious. Expressing our *true stories* and *essence* and *seeing one another* is *The Great Gift* we bestow on each other.

*We are here to live a what is life.* As the architects of our experience, we are here to design and live a *what is* life, not a *what if* life. Bravery is a choice, an active process of taking *psychological agency*—ownership of our path. We must identify what is within our locus of control.<sup>2</sup> This allows us to consciously choose risks that help us innovate, influence, lead, liberate, actively contribute to the world, and create a life of incredible experiences and impact, rather than living in regret, ruminating over what could've been. We can focus on *what is* possible, and work toward it so that we can offer ourselves fully to the world.

Greatness and  
madness are next  
door neighbors,  
and they often  
borrow each  
other's sugar.

JOE ROGAN

Risks can nourish us when we engage in small, strategic, values-aligned ways, allowing us to grow and give more, leading to deeper purpose and impact. By expanding the ways we offer ourselves, we deepen our capacity as active contributors in the world. Offering ourselves to the world doesn't mean we neglect our own needs, rather it allows us to nourish from an intentional place so that we can effectively and authentically contribute to the greater good.

Risk tolerance is different for all of us. Strategic microdosing can help us during times when we are grappling with loneliness, depression, anxiety, existential crisis, identity confusion, relationship distress, break-ups, adjustments, and opening our hearts to love and be loved—even after being hurt.

Incremental  
change is better  
than ambitious  
failure . . . Success  
feeds on itself.

TAL BEN-SHAHAR

Risk doesn't always have to be serious. It can pay off in fun ways. Take Jembi, who loved horseback riding as a kid but was extremely nervous to try again as an adult. He didn't want to let fear stop him from enjoying moments, especially when his career and personal stress was so high, and there were rare chances to cut loose. At first, Jembi was afraid he might get hurt, but once he mounted up, his fear quickly shifted to

deep, childlike joy. Jembi went on to make this a monthly ritual that turned out to be a powerful offset to the stress of his high-demand life.

Microdosing bravery can also help us while we're trying to learn new things, like leading teams, teaching students, parenting children, and caring for family members. Small acts of courage over time can help us build the resilience we need to navigate interpersonal and systemic traumas including global pandemics, conflict, climate change, economic crises, hatred, polarization, violence, illness, death, and combating racism, classism, sexism, heterosexism, ageism, ableism, and xenophobia.

The idea of being a risk taker and liberator might seem intimidating when there's so much at hand. Being brave doesn't mean you need to be a Nelson Mandela incarnate or Ms. Pat copycat. The prerequisites to bravery are not fancy titles or formal positions. You don't have to be a public figure with punchy one-liners or thousands of followers.

“Risk-taking behavior” tends to have a bad rap, carrying with it a strong negative connotation that conjures images of disastrous consequence. We can reclaim and allow it to take on a new meaning in our lives when we open ourselves to the healthy disruption it can bring. Many of us are sold limiting ideas about risk that perpetuate aversion to it, preventing us from seeing the many benefits of microdosing it. Risk is pictured as something of a self-destructive, impulsive, high-stakes nature. When we go through trauma and pain, risk aversion can interfere with our imagination's ability to envision, and subsequently, our ability to then take chances that can lead to healing. When we microdose bravery strategically and intentionally, we can experience the therapeutic benefits: fun, growth, freedom, and the connection that makes discomfort worthwhile, enjoying *what is*.

The 'what should be' never did exist, but people keep trying to live up to it. There is no 'what should be,' there is only what is.

LENNY BRUCE

## Architect a *What Is Life*

Know the difference between a *what is* vs. *what if* life

*What is* life:

- Refuses to base identity and sense of worth on socially constructed ideals about what is cool, acceptable, or desirable. Is led by values, not comparison to false and harmful standards of so-called “success” and “worthiness.”
- Demonstrates investment in identifying what’s within and beyond our locus of control. Carefully evaluates and radically accepts what can’t change and focuses attention on what can. Adopts a strengths-based approach: appreciating what is and practicing gratitude for it.<sup>3</sup>
- Acknowledges difficulties as an inherent part of the human condition. Understands the realities of impermanence: that nothing stays the same; works to relish in positive moments and cope with challenging ones.
- Asserts psychological agency to architect a life marked by intentionality, authentic identity, presence, creativity, joy, and awe.
- Willing to take strategic microdoses of bravery, tolerate discomfort, integrate the discoveries, and forge ahead. Acknowledges difficult emotions and sensations but refuses to let them interfere with actions that lead to growth. Remains curious and open to evolving learning processes.
- Leverages strengths, resources, and possibilities through incremental, strategic risk-taking within a supportive, conscious community.

- Seeks opportunities to add positively to the collective, given the realities of systemic injustice. Even when circumstances are complex, works imaginatively towards active contribution in the world.

The *what if* life:

- Fixates on past regrets, stays stuck in a state of unsettledness and hindsight bias, embodying the fallacy that “If only I’d done this or that, or if that awful thing didn’t happen to me things would’ve turned out better,” or “When this or that passes or happens, or some kind of Golden Ticket arrives, things will be fine.”
- Fantasizes about a better future without tangible plans or actions to advance goals. Engages in magical thinking without putting in the work to bring about progress.
- Engages in social comparison, experiencing someone else’s success as threatening, while remaining blind to one’s own potential. Has contingent self-esteem and fixates on what people think rather than ways we can co-inspire, motivate, help, and learn from one another.
- Hesitates to take chances, and stew in a state of analysis paralysis. Has difficulty seeing the law of averages in taking chances. Does constant mental gymnastics over which approach is “right” or “wrong,” remaining in a state of rigidity.
- Holds back on trying new things and putting oneself out there while wondering what the experiences and outcomes would’ve been. Is mistake averse and often terrified of failure.
- Passively bystands, wishing things would be different, but struggles to operationalize plans, act, and contribute in impactful ways.

Every act of creation is first of all an act of destruction.

PABLO PICASSO



- Haphazardly engages with maladaptive, risky behavior that contradicts personal values and ethos. Feasts off dopamine rushes that temporarily numb discomfort but fuel a deeper state of discontent and demoralization. Fails to recognize consequences of actions on individual and collective well-being.

Shri, a student of mine, inspired me with his efforts to move from a *what if* to a *what is* life. While painfully shy, he craved social interactions after moving abroad to study. Though nervous to initiate social conversations, his loneliness was getting to him, and he knew he couldn't stay stuck any longer. Shri finally took a chance and introduced himself to someone new, which evolved into one of his closest friendships. He was beyond glad that he shifted his thinking and behavior. It doesn't mean his introversion was magically cured; it's still hard for him, but he's more compassionate towards himself and knows that he's building a stronger stomach for risk, rather than letting fear immobilize him.

This isn't to say that all risks have a happy ending. Sometimes disclosures of vulnerability exacerbate vulnerability, pursuits don't go as planned, and

One of the most calming and powerful actions you can do to intervene in a stormy world is to stand up and show your soul.

CLARISSA PINKOLA ESTÉS

we get bucked off horses, figuratively and literally. It's why we need the right support, so that we enact a strategy that helps mitigate anxiety, rather than ramping it up. When risks align with who we are and what we hold most central to our lives, the law of averages can pay off, and we wouldn't be able to imagine our life if we hadn't been willing to go beyond discomfort.

There is no doubt that the painful rites of passage across our lifetime can cause us to clam up in the face of ongoing risks and decision making. As a psychotherapist and human resilience researcher, I worry that the myths surrounding risk prevent people from taking important steps to grow. It's easy to go all or nothing in the face of pain and trauma. Getting back on the horse is tough. But I've seen many times when avoiding risks creates