

# SUMMARY THE COURAGE HABIT

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# **Summary of “The Courage Habit” by Kate Swoboda**

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Make bravery a habit.

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# Introduction

I suffer from Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, most commonly referred to as OCD. This means that I am often subjected to intense fears and intrusive thoughts that are paralyzing to me. Unsurprisingly, this means that I'm desperate to neutralize the fears, or at least feel as though I've made them go away. And as a result, I often engage in compulsive rituals that make me feel as though I'm fighting my fear, like checking that everything is okay, googling the worst outcomes of my fear, or asking a friend or family member for reassurance. Unfortunately, however, as you've probably guessed, these are simply band-aid fixes. Rather than solving the problem, my rituals only offer me temporary relief from anxiety. And because I've given in to these compulsions, I've communicated to my brain that my fear is indeed a very real threat. So, the next time my scary thoughts pop up again (and they always do!), the warning sirens are louder than ever and I'm even more scared.

Now, most people reading this probably don't suffer from OCD. But we do have some commonalities in that we're all afraid of something. And every time our fears resurface, we're desperate to do something that will make them go away. The author recognizes this and she wrote this book with fear in mind. So, over the course of this summary, we'll get to the root of our fears and learn how we can make a habit of beating them.



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# Call Out Your Fears

As an OCD sufferer, I have a few specific thoughts that cause me significant distress. And before I know it, I can find myself lost in my own head, desperately trying to remember the precise details of something that happened seven years ago or a conversation I had last week. My heart races, my stomach is in knots, and all I can think about is, “I need to know right now!” But even though that motivation might not be readily apparent on the surface, what’s ultimately driving my quest is fear. Fear that I said or did something “bad.” Fear that I offended someone I love. Fear that I seemed a little too awkward in one moment or another. Whether I acknowledge it or not, fear is what drives my anxiety.

And the same is true for you! That’s why the author believes that pinpointing our fears is crucial, especially in those situations where our fear doesn’t immediately identify itself. For example, if you feel overwhelming anxiety at the thought of moving to a new city or starting a new job, you might initially chalk it up to a variety of other motivations-- like the impracticality of the move or the fact that your new salary isn’t as high as you had hoped-- but fear is the ultimate cause. That’s why recognizing fear and its many disguises is an essential starting point. Self-awareness can also be a big help because this introspective insight can help you identify and call out your fears. That’s because self-awareness can help you understand that fear derives from a resistance to change.

For example, if I’m feeling otherwise happy and content, an intrusive thought that pops up and says, “Hey, remember this bad thing you did?” is a sudden and unpleasant change. It alters my reality in that moment because when the thought arises, I experience anxiety and start to feel like I’m a terrible person. Obviously, this is an upsetting change in my reality and it fills me with distress, even if (logically) I understand it isn’t true. The same is true for other common changes, like starting a new job or moving somewhere new. Because these things are unfamiliar and different and carry some legitimate risks, our instinct is to be afraid. But if we know that this fear is simply an instinctive response to change, we can understand that it’s not quite as real or scary as we feel like it is. Instead, we can confront our fears head on by telling ourselves that, first and foremost, fear is an overexaggerated signal from our brains; it can’t hurt us. This in turn can empower us to challenge our fears and refuse to give in by pursuing the predictable routes or reassurance-seeking rituals fear wants us to engage us. Putting these steps into practice is how we cultivate The Courage Habit.



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# Meet Your Superhero Self

However, having the right tools for the job doesn't mean the job is easy. (If you've ever tried to put together a child's dollhouse on Christmas Eve, you know just how true this is!) Challenging your fears is hard because it requires us to go against every instinct in our bodies. After all, it's pretty tough to march boldly toward the thing that terrifies you while your mind is screaming at you to run away! But fortunately, it's not quite as hard as we sometimes make it out to be. For example, we often make the mistake of thinking that if we want to challenge our fears and become courageous, we have to transform into somebody else: someone who's bold and brave and isn't scared by any of our worst fears. But the author wants you to know that nothing could be further from the truth!

To cultivate The Courage Habit, you don't have to be someone you're not-- you just have to unlock the courageous self that's been inside you all along! Let's think of them as your "superhero self"-- the version of you that's brave, ready, and able to tackle everything that scares you. So, how do you access that person? The first step is to identify what you really want. And if what you really want is a life free from fear, this is your opportunity to take a closer look and discover what that truly looks like. You can start by imagining what the author calls your "Liberated Day": the day where you finally feel free from every fear that has held you back. So, visualize your Liberated Day by asking yourself the following questions. How do you want to feel on that day? What fears are absent in your life? What do you feel like you can do? What is the first feeling you have when you wake up in the morning? What about the last feeling you have as you go to bed?

The author cautions that, as you envision your Liberated Day, it's important to avoid incorporating external factors like what you want others to do in your fantasy. Instead, focus solely on what you want and what you can do to make those sensations reality. Once you've appropriately visualized your Liberated Day, the next step is to dig deeper. Take a look at your life on the micro-level and identify what the author refers to as your three Primary Focus goals. These goals can be anything you want and they can take almost any form. For example, one goal could be a physical or social step that you take-- like going back to school-- while another can be cerebral, like untangling your complicated relationship with your parents.

To figure out whether these goals are truly what you want, you can ask probing questions like, "How will I feel if I do that? Will my life be better or worse as a result? What do I want my life to look like in 6 months? Will these goals help me get there?" Answering these questions will help you formulate a plan of action for your superhero self to put into practice.



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# Squash the Fear Habit

If developing The Courage Habit is the focus of your self-improvement and your liberation from fear, then it stands to reason that you might have to break down old habits. And whether you feel paralyzed by your fears or not, the simple truth is that if you're not living into The Courage Habit, your life must be guided by a fear habit. That's why this chapter is going to focus on the necessity of breaking that habit. However, with that said, it's important to understand that breaking the fear habit isn't as simple as deciding, "Okay-- I won't be afraid anymore!" It would be awesome if the process was that easy, but sadly, it isn't. Instead, breaking the fear habit requires us to dwell in an uncomfortable part of our brains while we challenge some scary feelings. And that's why we need to investigate our relationship with habits and emotions.

To unpack that relationship, we're going to return to our earlier example about OCD rituals, which we discussed in the previous chapters. In my case, my brain motivates me to compulsively engage in those patterns because of a specific psychological cycle. It starts with a trigger-- that thought that pops up and says, "You're a really bad person for saying this to your friend." That trigger causes anxiety, fear, and distress, and motivates my brain to seek patterns that will relieve those sensations. For example, I might replay the conversation over and over in my mind to remember exactly what I said and consider the probabilities of my friend taking offense. I might ask another friend or family member if they think what I said was offensive. Or I might call my friend to ask her about the conversation and confirm that she isn't upset (even if the conversation occurred 7 years ago!)

All of these behaviors are a form of reassurance-seeking; they're my way of trying to neutralize the threat my brain has presented and alleviate my anxiety. And the surprising truth is that people who don't have OCD do the exact same thing! You might not do it as compulsively or as often as I do, but the core motivation is still there. Because whenever we're confronted with fear, our immediate objective is to flee that fear by finding something that brings us comfort. For example, if you have to give a big presentation at work and you're terrified of public speaking, you might neutralize the threat by calling in sick or coming up with another excuse that will get you out of giving the presentation. Once the threat has been eliminated, you're not scared anymore! And even though you might not seek the same coping mechanisms over and over again like someone with OCD would, you're still running away from your fear by finding comfort in a routine. This is how we create-- and feed-- the fear habit.



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So, how can you break this habit and replace it with courage? The author advocates a four-step process that will help you break free of your fears. Step One is to acknowledge the physical manifestation of fear in your body. Most of us feel our fear and stress somewhere in our bodies, so conduct a mental scan to see where that fear lives in you. For example, the most common manifestation that we're all familiar with is that sinking pit in our stomach. We know they're there but we often fail to do anything constructive with that awareness like acknowledging our fear or putting it into words. So, as a positive first step, the author suggests verbalizing exactly what that sensation means for you. For example, don't use vague generalizations like, "I feel uncomfortable." Instead, articulate exactly what you feel by saying something like, "Every time I have this thought, my stomach gets in knots. I feel like I'm a terrible person and I hurt everyone I love."

This vital first step serves as a springboard that will allow you to take the next step: identifying your Inner Critic. Verbalizing your physical manifestations of fear is awesome because it means you're halfway to identifying the voice of your Inner Critic. You can think of your Inner Critic as that pesky voice in your head that says all the things you don't want to hear: "You're a terrible person," "You're always going to fail," "You'll never measure up." It's important to know exactly what your Inner Critic is saying because that's how you can understand the stories that drive your fear habit. For example, if you're constantly receiving the message that you're going to fail or that you'll never measure up, you're unlikely to take risks and pursue new opportunities. Instead, you'll seek complacency, which will neutralize your fears for the moment. And once you recognize this, you can start to take positive steps toward building your Courage Habit.

The next step, therefore, is to identify the stories your Inner Critic is writing for you. We all have stories, for better or worse; these narratives inform our worldview and our understanding of ourselves. So, if your story hinges on the belief that you'll never be good enough, it's highly likely that you'll live into that-- unless you challenge the narrative. And that's exactly what The Courage Habit invites you to do. So, take some time to discover your stories and learn what they say. You can start by checking these stories against the Primary Focus we talked about in the earlier chapter. For example, let's say you dropped out of college as a young adult and your Primary Focus is to go back to school. If your Fear Story tells you, "You'll never succeed; you're always going to be a worthless dropout," then that's the obstacle that's holding you back. And unless you replace that narrative with something positive, you'll never pursue your Primary Focus!

So, think about re-writing the story to incorporate a positive and more inclusive narrative. For example, you can say, "I made a mistake or did some things that I regret. But I'm taking positive steps now to grow and achieve my dreams." By reframing your

Fear Story in the light of positive action, you can write a new and inclusive future for yourself-- one in which you're free from the burden of fear.



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## Final Summary

It's no surprise that cultivating courage is hard. Although it would be great to simply say, "Today I'm going to let go of my fears!" the truth is that it's much harder than that. Because courage is not our natural state; our lives are influenced by fear in ways we often don't acknowledge until they cripple us. That's why learning The Courage Habit means you must first unlearn the fear habit. To help you write a positive future for yourself, the author has provided a series of actionable steps you can take.

The first step is to visualize your Liberated Day. Ask yourself what you want to be free from and how you want to feel. Next, identify your Primary Focus, and then work toward those goals by locating the source of fear in your body, identifying your Inner Critic, and reframing the Fear Stories you tell yourselves.



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