



# Farewell to **fear**

**Feeling uninspired?**  
It's time to step out of your comfort zone. We meet three women who did just that—and then some

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Hands up who hasn't, at some stage, felt unable to climb out of a rut in which the future is painted in very dull shades of grey and there seems no escape route? I know I'm not the only one. I knew things were bad when I had lost interest in peppermint chocolate, *Downton Abbey* and the Karen Walker sale. I cried a lot, slept badly and didn't want to get out of bed.

My joy bottle was empty, and as hard as I tried, I couldn't fill it up. Then one evening my husband suggested I join him in a jog around the neighbourhood. I wasn't convinced; as far as I was concerned, running was for catching buses, and crazy people. It was as far out of my comfort zone as I could get. But something happened that night as we pounded along the pavement: quite literally, I stumbled upon an interest that challenged me, put things into perspective and showed me trying something new wasn't as scary as I had thought. The blues melted away, along with the excess kilos.

As Wellington psychologist Karen Nimmo describes it, I'd "put an end to the fear".

"It's okay to stay in your comfort zone if that works for you," Nimmo says. "But comfort zones can turn into ruts and you start feeling stifled, miserable and desperate for excitement." Which can be a one-way ticket to the dreaded mid-life crisis, when a craving for excitement can lead some people into risky behaviour with potentially disastrous consequences.

Obviously, your ability to take on certain rut-busting activities depends on what else you've got going on in your life; the three women profiled in this feature don't, for example, have children. But, as Nimmo says, no matter what your situation, there are steps everyone can take to challenge themselves.

"Challenge doesn't have to be about taking huge risks. You don't have to do a bungee jump, have an affair or buy a sports car. Think small; aim to do one thing every week that you've never done before.

"Humans are slaves to routine and repetition, often just so we can cope with what life throws at us," Nimmo continues. "But when fear and the daily grind stop us from taking chances, we need to remember fear is only an emotion. It's as real and as big as you make it. If you're afraid of something you should walk towards it. Walk first though; don't run."

Too many women, she adds, get to old age wishing they had worn more colour, sipped more wine and done more crazy things. "You shouldn't wait until you're 80 to do that. The party starts now..."

### GINA HIGHAM RISK AND THE RISQUÉ

Gina Higham has always been the kind of girl who leaps, then looks. Spend time with the Kapiti graphic designer and you'll need a lie down; Higham's energy comes in extra large and there's little she won't try.

Scared of heights? Higham's solution was to throw herself out of a plane in the highest tandem skydive possible over Las Vegas. Wanting to overcome a fear of deep water, the 38-year-old learnt how to row and signed up for a diving course. And when she needed to shed a few kilos, Higham took up jogging and six months later, ran a half marathon in just over two hours.

You might suspect Higham is some kind of post-modern superwoman. "Not at all," she laughs. "I just believe in meeting things

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It wasn't always like this. Growing up in the UK, Higham was a shy child. "My father was an engineer and his work on submarines took him away for long periods of time. I became very clingy and introverted."

She graduated university with a degree in English Literature, and tried out jobs in the fashion and retail industry. But it wasn't until Higham was travelling through Australia with her former husband that she "stopped sleepwalking through life".

"I rediscovered my creative side and started selling jewellery and artwork at markets. One day, I had an epiphany where I realised I was really good at certain things and it was okay to be good at those things."

Having settled in New Zealand, Higham parlayed that discovery into her own web and graphic design business. She taught herself the online programmes, along with how to crochet, spin and dye yarn, print T-shirts and bake her own bread.

"The long list of things I've taught myself

over the years is rooted in my love of learning new skills.

"Once you try something and succeed, it gives you confidence to take on other challenges. I've got a 'how hard can it be?' mentality, which has worked pretty well for most of my adult life."

Higham is as fizzy as a human Berocca about her latest hobbies - karate, singing and burlesque.

"I've been in a few bands before but when my marriage ended, I shut down and stopped singing for about six months. A friend encouraged me to get back into it and my new band, The Polly Johnson Set, has just done its first gig."

As for the burlesque, Higham says the performances are about being comfortable in her own skin.

"I'm as insecure as the next person when it comes to my body, and burlesque has made me face that fear. Now I'm not afraid of my strengths and abilities, because I know what a gift they are and how hard I've worked for them."



### LIZZY CUNNANE EXTREME SURGERY

Eight years ago, Lizzy Cunnane's father used a .22 rifle to end his life. There was no note, no history of depression or mental illness.

"It was completely unexpected and totally out of character," says Cunnane, the middle of five children. The 52-year-old pilot's suicide sent her life careering into situations she'd never imagined.

"I was living in Whanganui at the time doing a fine arts degree. I returned to Hamilton to be with my family and didn't go back to finish my degree for another two years. They were pretty tough years for all of us. Dad was the last person I would ever have imagined would do something like that, so it was very hard to reconcile."

As part of the healing process, the 27-year-old chose not so much to come to terms with her grief as to stomp all over it. "I needed a way to re-balance my life, to make something good from something so bad."

For the glass artist and art gallery manager, that meant donating her left kidney to a stranger.

"I'd thought about altruistic donation

prior to Dad's death, but after he died I wanted to do something that really made a difference."

And that took her so far outside her comfort zone, she almost needed a map to get back.

"It was physically and mentally tough, probably one of the hardest things I've ever done. But on a personal level it gave me peace and an odd sense of stability. I knew there was a family out there who, because of what I'd done, wouldn't have to deal with the loss that my family had."

The surgery, which took place three weeks after Cunnane finished her degree, was a salve to the helplessness she'd felt after her father's death. "All these things had happened which were beyond my control, whereas giving someone a kidney was something I could control."

Her father's death was also the catalyst for the collection of short stories she wrote, which proved an outlet for her thoughts and feelings about coping with loss.

Redundancy from the gallery Cunnane had worked at for five years freed her up to attend a writers' residency in the Wairarapa. "It was such an incredible privilege to be there and to focus on my writing," she says. "I never anticipated the project going any further but with the support of some wonderful people it is being published."

While shaking hands with her fear hasn't been easy, Cunnane says it's taught her there is "unexpected joy" to be found in nudging the boundaries.

"I'd like to say donating a kidney and writing a book have made me completely fearless, but that's not entirely true. I'm still scared of being outside my comfort zone but now I have a good reference point for when things get a bit shaky.

"I woke up after the surgery and had to find my way through the unknown so I know I'm capable of doing it again. And once you know that, there's some pretty amazing joy to be found in that place on the edge. It makes you want to go back there." >>



SUE COLLIS  
WALKING THE WILD SIDE

Auckland commercial property executive Sue Collis is the very epitome of urbane. It's hard to imagine this poised, professional and immaculately dressed 43-year-old living in the jungle, cleaning primate poo and sleeping on the floor.

But last November, that's what she did. It was, she says, a decision prompted by a desire for adventure and spontaneity.

"The sluggish economy was having a negative impact on my business and I felt overwhelmed and trapped by boredom. My back seized up and I couldn't walk or get out of bed. I was desperate to feel happier."

Most people would remedy that with a week on a Pacific island, but Collis, who has made an art form of squeezing the marrow out of life, needed a challenge.

"I get bored easily and am addicted to

challenges, so the idea of working with wild animals, living with the local Dayak tribe and coping with the heat and the unknown was exciting to me."

Nor did she let a needle phobia put her off the seven vaccinations required for the trip.

Leaving behind husband Matthew Harley, Collis traded the concrete jungle for the Borneo jungle, where she spent a month volunteering at the Matang Wildlife Centre in Sarawak. The centre focuses on rehabilitating Borneo's endangered animals such as orangutans, gibbons, macaque monkeys and sunbears.

"Volunteers spend the day cleaning the animal enclosures, buying and making food parcels and providing games to keep the animals stimulated, while learning about these animals and the threat to their habitat."

Sydney-born Collis, whose childhood

dream was to become a park ranger, also got to see some of the world's rarest animals in their natural habitat, such as the proboscis monkey and silver-tailed langurs.

Nestled on the couch of her comfortable city townhouse, Collis says her month in the Borneo jungle was an experience that was as exhilarating as it was eye-opening.

"It enabled me to look past the unnecessary killing and capture of orangutans and focus on the positive conservation work being done by volunteers."

Not only has the trip turned the former snowboard instructor a deeper shade of green ("I want to make a difference to how we're treating the planet and its wildlife"), Collis has now committed to taking an eco trip every year. Next up is swimming with whale sharks in Western Australia. She is also busy corralling a group of like-minded friends to join her in conservation and sustainability projects closer to home.

"These days I feel settled, at peace and happy again. Friends and family were amazed by what I did but anyone can do it. Stepping outside my comfort zone gave me the energy, motivation and desire to carry on with life." □

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WHAT TO DO IF  
YOU'RE STUCK IN A RUT

● First consider the benefits you'll get from pushing your boundaries. Recognise that to challenge yourself is to grow. Trying new things can be difficult, but they can also be fun, stimulating and a huge boost to your self-esteem.

● Book something new into your diary, forget about it and when the day arrives and you're feeling nervous, trick yourself into doing it by breaking it down into smaller goals: 'I'll go but I won't join in'; then 'I'm here now, so it would be rude not to participate'; and then, 'I've paid for this so I may as well get my money's worth'. Before you know it, you'll be in the thick of things, having a blast!

● Remember, the only thing stopping you is you. Take on the challenge of your dreams because you will never regret challenging yourself. What you might regret is NOT challenging yourself.

Take the first step: see Lifestyle Toolbox, page 130

The right

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