

Becoming a Beginner Again

After a lifetime of building expertise, retirement invites us to start our learning journey over again



By Jennifer Shannon, LMFT, Cognitive Behavioral Therapist

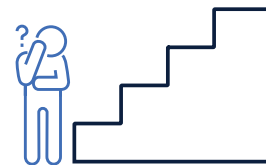
Recently, I was working with a client who had spent years preparing financially for retirement. He'd saved, invested, and worked hard to build a future with more freedom and more choice. Yet once retirement arrived, he found himself unexpectedly stuck.

One of his longtime goals was to learn Italian and eventually travel through Italy. He finally had the time. He finally had the resources. But every time he looked at classes, he hesitated. He worried about being the least experienced person in the room. What if he struggled? What if he felt awkward? What if he wasn't very good at learning Italian?

What surprised him was that retirement isn't only a financial transition; it's a personal one, too.

Many retirees find themselves facing a new question they didn't expect: What comes next? The answer often involves things they've wanted to do for years, such as taking a class, volunteering, joining a club, traveling, or building new friendships. Yet saying yes to those opportunities isn't always as easy as it sounds.

Retirement can be one of the first times in decades that we become beginners again.



We spend decades building expertise, confidence, and competence. Then retirement arrives and asks us to become beginners again.

— Jennifer Shannon, LMFT,
Cognitive Behavioral Therapist

From Expert to Beginner

Think about the moments that shaped your career. Chances are they involved uncertainty, new responsibilities, new skills, or new relationships.

Growth rarely happens when everything feels familiar.

Likewise, a fulfilling retirement often requires many of the same things: Meeting new people, forming new relationships, and finding new ways to use your time and talents.

I've seen how surprisingly uncomfortable this transition can be with my clients. After decades of building expertise and confidence, retirement asks them to become beginners again.

But that's often where growth happens. The same mindset that helped them navigate new challenges throughout their careers can help them create a fulfilling retirement.

Fortunately, becoming a beginner again doesn't mean starting from scratch. It means applying familiar strengths in new ways.

Why Trying New Things Can Feel Hard

Retirement often asks us to do things we haven't done in years: walk into a room where we don't know anyone, take a class where we're the least experienced person, or try an activity we may not be very good at. For people who spent decades building expertise and confidence, that can feel surprisingly uncomfortable.

When we consider trying something new, our brains often focus on what could go wrong. We imagine feeling awkward, looking inexperienced, making mistakes, or discovering we're not as capable as we'd hoped. Those worries are normal. They're part of the brain's attempt to protect us from discomfort. The problem is that they can also keep us from experiences that might enrich our lives.

There's nothing wrong with wanting to do things well. In fact, the drive to learn, improve, and succeed may have played an important role in your career. The challenge is that some of the very qualities that helped us succeed can make it harder to embrace new experiences.

Thoughts such as "Maybe this isn't a good idea," "Maybe I should wait," "Maybe I'll learn a little more first," or "Maybe now isn't the right time" can sound reasonable. They often feel like caution, preparation, or good judgment. But sometimes they're simply discomfort masquerading as good advice.

In my work, I've come to see this as the quiet urge to avoid situations where we might make mistakes, look inexperienced, or feel uncomfortable.

How Life Can Start to Shrink

The consequences usually aren't dramatic. They often begin with choices that seem harmless at the time. An invitation arrives, and we decline. A class sounds interesting, but we decide to wait. A hobby catches our attention, but we never sign up. A volunteer opportunity appeals to us, but we keep researching instead of committing. Each decision may seem small on its own, but over time they can narrow our world.

- **Relationships.** Retirement often comes with fewer built-in opportunities to meet people. If we repeatedly avoid situations where we're the new person, whether it's a club, a class, a volunteer organization, or a community event, we may miss opportunities to build new friendships and connections.
- **Growth.** One of the greatest opportunities in retirement is the freedom to explore interests that may have been pushed aside for years. But every new interest begins with being a beginner. When fear of looking inexperienced keeps us from trying, we may never discover a hobby, skill, or passion that could become an important part of this stage of life.
- **Well-being.** Many activities that support healthy aging involve stepping outside our comfort zone. Learning something new, meeting new people, and staying mentally and socially engaged can all contribute to overall well-being. When we continually avoid unfamiliar situations, we may miss some of the very experiences that help us stay active, connected, and engaged.

The goal isn't to stop feeling like a beginner. It's to keep that feeling from holding you back.



Two Ways to Move Forward

1. **Expansion Strategies.** I call these expansion strategies because they help expand your world rather than shrink it. Instead of automatically stepping away from something that feels uncomfortable, you take a small step toward it.

Most of us naturally develop ways to protect ourselves from discomfort. When we're nervous about something, we stay home, put it off, or avoid it altogether. I call these safety strategies because they're designed to help us feel safe in the short term.

The problem is that avoidance reinforces the fear. Expansion strategies do the opposite. They encourage us to take a small step forward, even when some uncertainty remains.

For example:

- **Scenario:** You're considering signing up for beginner golf lessons.
- **Safety mindset:** I'll probably be the worst person there.
- **Safety strategy:** I'll wait until I know more first.
- **Expansive mindset:** Everyone starts somewhere.
- **Expansive strategy:** I'll register and attend the first lesson.

So what happens if you try this strategy? When you show up for the first lesson, some nerves may still be there. That's expected. You're practicing a new way of responding to uncertainty rather than avoiding it. By showing up anyway, you're proving to yourself that you can handle the discomfort of being a beginner.

2. **Thank Your Amygdala.** Another helpful tool is what I call "Thank Your Amygdala." The amygdala is the part of the brain that scans for threats and sends up those warning thoughts when we face something unfamiliar. Its job is to keep us safe, so it chatters away with reasons to hold back and makes us second-guess ourselves. Over time, those warnings can keep us from trying new things and fully engaging in life.

Notice the thought, acknowledge it, and thank the amygdala for trying to help. For example:

- **Situation:** You're thinking of taking a photography course.
- **Amygdala's message:** "Everyone else will know what they're doing. You'll be the only one struggling, and you'll feel embarrassed."
- **Thanking the amygdala:** "Thanks for trying to keep me safe, but I'm taking the class."

That's it.

The goal isn't to argue with the thought or convince yourself it isn't there. It's simply to recognize what's happening. Your brain is trying to protect you from the very feelings that come with growth: uncertainty, vulnerability, and the experience of being new at something again.

Many people find that acknowledging the thought, rather than fighting it, creates a little distance from it.

"What If I'm Not Good at It?"

You probably won't be, at least not at first.

That's true anytime we learn something new. The goal isn't to perform perfectly. The goal is to stay open to growth.

Every skill, hobby, friendship, and meaningful pursuit begins with a period of not knowing. Retirement doesn't change that. It simply gives us new opportunities to embrace it. The willingness to be a beginner again may be one of the most important skills retirement requires.

The Bottom Line: The Courage to Be a Beginner Again

The warning thoughts never disappear completely. But when you learn to acknowledge them without automatically listening to them, you're more likely to keep growing, building connections, and creating a retirement that's rich with purpose and possibility.

Next Step

The next time you're thinking about trying something new and the warning thoughts start to chatter, thank your amygdala for trying to keep you safe, then take one small step forward anyway. You don't need to feel fully confident. You just need to be willing to begin.



Jennifer Shannon, LMFT, Cognitive Behavioral Therapist

Jennifer is a licensed psychotherapist and author specializing in anxiety treatment. She co-founded the Santa Rosa Center for Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy and has written several books, including "Don't Feed the Monkey Mind." Jennifer combines clinical expertise with practical tools to help people manage worry and live with greater confidence and ease.

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