



THE FLINCH

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by Julien Smith

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INTRODUCTION

There's this place near my house—a boxing gym called Hard Knox. Any day you want, you can go there, sit down, and watch people fight.

The sign above the door says “VIP ENTRANCE,” because anyone who enters can be a champion. But to become one, you have to learn how to get hit.

In a fight, there is a fundamental difference between boxers and everyone else. The guys who have trained are different. If you hit them, they don't flinch. It takes practice to get there, but if you want to fight, you have no choice. It's the only way to win.

This is a book about being a champion, and what it takes to get there. It's about decisions, and how to know when you're making the right ones. It's also about you: the current, present you; the potential, future you; and the one, single difference between them.

It's about an instinct—the flinch—and why mastering it is vital.

This book is about how to stop flinching. It's about facing pain.

flinch: /flɪnʃ/ - verb (used without object)

1. to draw back or shrink, as from what is dangerous, difficult, or unpleasant.
2. to shrink under pain; wince.

THE OPPONENT

Quitting smoking. Losing weight. Starting a business. Getting a date.

For anything you want to do, finding out how is easy. Do the research and make it happen—or so any book would have you believe. Yet every day, you smoke, gain weight, and stay at your old job. Every day, you do the exact opposite of what you plan to do. Why?

This is the Information Age. The steps to achieving any goal are easy to search for, come up with, write down on a napkin, and follow. But you're still not doing it. Part of the movie is missing. A page is torn out of the book. There's a big X in the equation. Do you know what it is?

The X is the flinch.

The flinch is your real opponent, and information won't help you fight it. It's behind every unhappy marriage, every hidden vice, and every unfulfilled life. Behind the flinch is pain avoidance, and dealing with pain demands strength you may not think you have.

The flinch is why the lazy actor never gets discovered—because she never really sweats to make it happen. It's why the monolithic company gets wiped out by a lean startup—because the big company culture avoids the hard questions. It's the reason you make the wrong decision, even though you may know what the right one is.

Behind every act you're unable to do, fear of the flinch is there, like a puppet master, steering you off course.

Facing the flinch is hard. It means seeing the lies you tell yourself, facing the fear behind them, and handling the pain that your journey demands—all without hesitation.

The flinch is the moment when every doubt you've ever had comes back and hits you, hard. It's when your whole body feels tense. It's an instinct that tells you to run. It's a moment of tension that happens in the body and the brain, and it stops everything cold.

When coming across something they know will make them flinch, most people have been trained to refuse the challenge and turn back. It's a reaction that brings up old memories and haunts you with them. It tightens your chest and makes you want to run.

It does whatever it must do to prevent you from moving forward. If the flinch works, you can't do the work that matters because the fear it creates is too strong.

Individuals have flinches, but so do organizations and cultures. They can invoke a fear of a certain kind of person, a kind of racism or xenophobia, or a fear of new technology or outside influences.

Whatever form it takes, the flinch is there to support the status quo. It whispers in your ear so you'll dismiss a good idea that requires a lot of change. It stops you from seeing an up-and-coming competitor as a threat. It's the reason most modern movies are remakes and most successful books are sequels. It hides under the guise of the hard-headed boss, the skeptical publisher, or the cautious friend.

But the problem with the flinch is that it's based in a brain that wants to protect you. It sees shadows as threats and creates blind spots. It's endemic to cultures that embrace the old, even though the old might not work anymore. Both individuals and groups must develop systems to handle the flinch, or they'll always fall prey to outside forces.

Everywhere your flinch avoidance hides, you have to find it, and face it. You need to take back control and stop the flinch, like the boxer in the ring, because you have a job to do—you have a fight you need to win.

For most of your life or your business's existence, the flinch has been there, guiding you. As you discovered your world and learned best practices from others, the flinch was learning too. It pushes you to judge some ideas as good and others as bad, guiding your behavior over time, until your decisions became streamlined.

Whatever you avoided, whatever you or authorities considered a threat, became a blind spot—it became something that could make you flinch.

The flinch has a complex history. It appears whether you want it to or not. Every day, you make decisions based on it. But you may not think much about it at all. But this is exactly what the flinch wants.

Facing the flinch is hard internal labor that comes with no up-front promise of reward. But one day, your world will change, maybe drastically, and it will do so without warning. On that day, you won't be prepared—unless you've fought the flinch before.

Do this work now, and your future self will thank you.

Finding the flinch reveals a secret passage, hiding in plain sight. It's why some people know how to sell, and others can't—because they see the flinch in others. It's why you can't quit your job or be the person you want to be—you can't see the flinch in yourself.

The flinch is why you don't do the work that matters, and why you won't make the hard decisions. It's why your organization isn't competing. It's why you don't lead the life you want.

Take this time to learn about it. It won't take long. Once you see it, it will be visible to you forever.

A LITTLE BACKGROUND

Before the bicycle helmet, the seat belt, and the bulletproof vest, there was the flinch.

The flinch is like the Moro reflex, which protects infants from falling. Flinching guards you from the unexpected. It protects your eyes and neck. It's one of the few instincts you're born with, and keep, all your life.

In any accident, the most lacerated, damaged parts of a victim's body are the hands. This is because the flinch is your personal goalie. It protects you from a bear, a bully, or a baseball. Anytime it's needed, the flinch surfaces, using your hands to protect essential body parts from damage.

Car crashes. Bike accidents. Explosions. In moments like these, you need the flinch. It's why you survive the unexpected. If you've ever been jumped, you know this. Human beings need the flinch to live.

Or do they? In your daily life, you might never experience anything dangerous at all. Your life is safe—but you're flinching anyway. You don't flinch at bears, because there are none. But you do flinch at the prospect of speaking publicly or joining a gym. You flinch at the doctor's office. You even flinch for sitcom characters. Anytime there's potential change, there's a flinch, whether it's a threat or not.

You think the flinch is natural, and part of your life, which it is. But have you ever asked yourself why your stomach tenses up and you can't watch imaginary characters on a television screen do awkward, embarrassing things? You should.

YOUR DEFECTIVE ALARM SYSTEM

Sitcoms are bad, but they're not dangerous. Neither is most of what makes you flinch. So you need to stop defending yourself. Focus your energy on the fight that matters.

Your world has a safety net. You aren't in freefall, and you never will be. You treat mistakes as final, but they almost never are. Pain and scars are a part of the path, but so is getting back up, and getting up is easier than ever.

Still feel like you're in danger? Look at it this way. Early man's lifespan was about 35 years. If you got injured, you were done. No modern medicine, so each encounter meant blood loss, infection, or death. You can't relate to this. Your lifespan is double that. Science and technology mean you can survive almost anything. It may be expensive to do so, but that's still a significant improvement over death from an infected cut.

But despite this safety net, your flinch is still there, in the back of your brain—still a goalie, but a goalie for things that are nowhere near as dangerous as they used to be.

Think of a bear. You see it, and you react, instantly. You know how to deal because your brain is built to help you survive it: you run, jump, fight, or hide. But that's not the world you're in, so instead, flinching happens at job interviews or when you're asking a girl to the prom. Those things get magnified. Your privileged-world problems become the bear, and you treat them that way.

What these encounters have in common with bears is that they're changes in the status quo. This used to mean danger, so that's how your flinch reflex sees them. It attempts to stop the changes from happening, using the same fight-or-flight mechanism it always has.

So your heart starts beating fast. Your palms get moist. Time distorts. Not for bears, but for hard conversations and quitting your job. But that reaction is backwards. You don't need adrenaline to get through those things—you just need to do them. Crossing these obstacles will put the flinch in its place.

Your flinch has become your worst enemy. It should be a summoning, a challenge to push forward. Instead, the challenge is getting refused.

Listen: new does not mean bears anymore. The world is changing faster than ever. Now, new means business. If you refuse to face the flinch, it means the fear is choking you.

A LIST OF YOUR TRUE FEARS

Somewhere in the world, a lion wakes up every morning not knowing what it's going to eat. Every day, it finds food. The lion isn't worried—it just does what it needs to do.

Somewhere else, in a zoo, a caged lion sits around every day and waits for a zookeeper. The lion is comfortable. It gets to relax. It's not worried much, either.

Both of these animals are lions. Only one is a king.

You're dropped into a forest—alone—at night. Can you survive? Sure. Do you stop caring about your 401k? Definitely. Within 48 hours, you're left with the flinches that help you survive.

Everything but what's useful for survival drops away. The flinch is an ally again. This is what we're looking for—reprogramming.

Let's make a list of the fears you were born with: falling; abandonment; loud noises.... Yeah, that's about it. You were born with these fears because you need them to survive. These fears kept you safe.

The rest are just ghost stories that the flinch has taken over. They're signposts. Look for them. They point the way toward barriers you need to pass, to doors you need to open.

BUILDING THE PATTERN

Go to a playground and watch kids play sometime. What do you see? No fear, and no flinch.

Some kids aren't afraid of scars. They take risks naturally. They don't worry about pain; they just deal with it. Watch kids fall down and you'll see fearlessness in action. They land, it hurts, and they cry. Then, like lots of other kids on the planet, they get up and go back to playing.

There are other kids, though. They sit on the sidelines. They watch others. They're careful. If you have kids, you can watch your own and see how they behave. You could probably also label yourself. Cautious? Adventurous? Nervous? Bold? Which were you?

If you watch the playground over an afternoon, you'll see some kids making a lot of mistakes, getting hurt, and learning a lot. They use trial and error—the basic way you learned to walk, jump, and ride a bike. The process of trial and error is inherent to life. It's simple, and it works if what you want is to understand your environment.

This curiosity is why kids touch burners. They want to know how things work. They're interested, and they're not spoiled by the flinch. They just do it. They test their environment, and stop when it hurts. The scars they get are medals they've won, not deformities they need to hide. They use the scars and the pain to understand how their world works—to grow and get more confident. For a while, these kids think they can do anything.

The kids who don't fall down—how do they learn? Watch: he'll want to touch the burner; he might even go for it, but when his parents say no, he stops cold. He takes their word for it. So in the end, there were no consequences, and nothing was really learned at all. It's as if the warning were read in a book; it's secondhand, like a bit of wisdom being passed down from one generation to the next. But no personal stories come from it—no lessons, and no scars. Over time, as these kids learn more, they get more careful. Instead of climbing trees, they watch other kids climb. They decide it isn't such a good idea.

Here's the thing: the lessons you learn best are those you get burned by. Without the scar, there's no evidence or strong memory. The event didn't actually happen or imprint itself on your brain—you just trusted those who know better. Adults know what's safe, so you listen. Over a lifetime, those who listen too much build a habit of trust and conformity. Unfortunately, as time goes on, that habit becomes unbreakable.

This is dangerous.

Usually, this process starts slowly, and with good intent. Maybe, when you were a kid, your parents didn't want you to get dirty, or you didn't like heights. Avoiding dirt or heights built a pattern of pain avoidance, which added to the habit of flinching. Your parents' fears became your fears, their lives became your life. They flinched for some things, so you began to do the same.

But behind every undiscovered flinch is a lesson. If you do everything your parents' way, you'll never discover the truth. You'll never discover the edge. You'll never get the lessons you need.

TESTING YOUR LIMITS

Some things need to happen the hard way—but not all. You don't need to throw yourself into a fire to know it's bad. But most lessons aren't like this. They aren't fatal, and they'll make you stronger, not weaker. You should seek them out.

Forget secondhand learning. It leaves no scars. It doesn't provide the basic understanding that sits in the body as well as in the brain. There's no trace of its passing. It might as well have been a dream.

Firsthand knowledge, however, is visceral, painful, and necessary. It uses the conscious and the unconscious to process the lesson, and it uses all your senses. When you fall down, your whole motor system is involved. You can't learn this from books. It just doesn't work, because you didn't really fall. You need to feel it in your gut—and on your scraped hands and shins—for the lesson to take effect.

But if you're surrounded by padding, scar-free learning is all you have left. It defines who you are. It limits you, but those limits aren't actually yours—they're the limits of the men and women who came before you. But other people's limits will no longer do.

Outdated university degrees, old-boy networks, retirement packages—these things won't save you anymore. The world has changed. Your map needs to change with it.

You can't settle for reaching other people's limits. You have to reach yours.

If you don't test yourself, you don't actually grow to your own limits. For you to map out this new world, you need to test it, and test what you're capable of inside it. You need to make mistakes, resist the flinch, and feel the lessons that come with this process.

Kids naturally begin this way. It's why their world is always growing. They find hurdles, jump them, and get stronger. When they see they made it, they move on to bigger hurdles. If they fall down, they try again later. It's a basic cycle. It's how kids figure out they can eventually change the world, found a startup, or build a house—by experimenting, learning, suffering, and growing. It's a process. But for that growth to continue, they need to avoid listening too closely to what they're told. They need to stay open-minded.

But there's a problem: as you learn, you're also falling down and getting scars. The pain repels you. You flinch so much that you start fearing and predicting pain. You combine it with the lessons you learned from other people. Finally, you start to protect yourself from things that haven't even happened.

At the end of this path, you go on the defensive. You give up on hurdles. Your world starts getting smaller, instead of bigger. You don't adapt to what comes at you. You stop following your curiosity and you start being safe.

From the inside, this feels like getting wise, but it isn't. Avoiding the flinch withers you, like an old tree that breaks instead of bending in a storm. Unfortunately, this is where most adults end up.

But there's an antidote. You can make your world get bigger again. The instinct you have is the seed—you just have to cultivate it.

The anxiety of the flinch is almost always worse than the pain itself. You've forgotten that. You need to learn it again. You need more scars. You need to live.

THE FORGE

Here's something you probably already know: the world is a furnace of constant, unrelenting pressure. Either you're crushed by it or it makes you into a diamond. Either you're burned by it, or it forges you into unbreakable steel.

However the world transforms you, it usually does it slowly, so you don't notice. You watch yourself the whole time, and you always think of this person as being you. But over the years, you change—so much, perhaps, that you don't get recognized by old friends anymore. You, yourself, don't see it either. You feel the same as you always have.

Ask yourself this: would your childhood self be proud of you, or embarrassed?

The world is a 7-billion-person final exam with little to no class time before it. You walk into the room, you're given a pencil, and you're told to take the test. Worse, the piece of paper you get is blank.

But passing the test—or not—isn't an accident. The test is largely about your flinch response; it's a challenge in which you are either beaten down and back away, or you hunker down and withstand it.

Whatever decision you make reinforces what you'll do next time. Then, whatever your habit is, you teach it to others. You convince them it's important. This is how strong fears can spread, creating diseased cultures inside of families, companies, or whole countries.

So, be careful what lessons you avoid and whom you listen to. Decide carefully what's dangerous.

Decide on your own.

BETWEEN YOU AND THE FIGHT

All this is easy to agree with in theory, easy to say yes to right now. But now is not your problem. Change is easy in principle but hard in practice.

The flinch is a chasm, with a rope bridge attached to either side. Your body does not want you to cross. You cannot look down. Every muscle is fighting against you. You feel it viscerally, in your head and your stomach. It halts you in your path. Your brain cannot force you through.

As you cross, you'll want to scream, cry out, and quit, because it isn't a natural place to be. It feels dangerous, and you can't be there for long. The flinch amplifies everything—failure, success, joy, or pain. If you quit, you'll justify it later by saying you worked hard and it was “good enough,” but you'll be wrong. You'll have quit.

Remember: no one has a problem with the first mile of a journey. Even an infant could do fine for a while. But it isn't the start that matters. It's the finish line.

Look at the finish line now. It's far and it seems impossible. Maybe it's up in the clouds, and the journey is treacherous, or the mountain is too high. You imagine that you weren't meant for this. You think you're not strong enough. In a sense, you're right. You're quitting before the pain even sets in. You're quitting out of fear of the flinch.

What you're missing is that the path itself changes you. You're weak because you haven't stepped on the path. When you do, a process will begin. As you climb the mountain, you'll get stronger. Your plastic brain will be shaped by the path. You might think this path isn't for you, but it is—you'll just change along the way. The path itself will toughen you up for the end.

Right now, you just need to start.

HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENT

Want a real, visceral example of what the flinch feels like? Try this.

When you're at home and have five minutes, go to your bathroom, walk up to your shower, and turn on the cold water. Wait a second; then test it to make sure it's as cold as possible.

Do you see what's coming?

If you do, you should tense up immediately. You should feel it in your chest. You might start laughing to release the tension—and you haven't even stepped inside. *You're predicting a flinch that hasn't happened yet.* You're already anxious about it—about something that hasn't happened and won't kill you—anxious about something that barely hurts at all.

Ok, do it. Now is the time to step in the shower.

As the cold water hits you, you might shout or squirm. But the discomfort lasts only a second. You quickly get used to it. You get comfortable with cold, instead of trying to avoid it. You put yourself in the path of the shower to speed up the adjustment process.

Remember your reaction. You can use this method for everything.

A moment before, the flinch seems so uncomfortable that you might talk yourself out of this. You convince yourself that it's pointless, but it isn't; it's training. You need to build a habit of seeing the flinch and going forward, not rationalizing your fear and stepping away.

Start doing the opposite of your habits. It builds up your tolerance to the flinch and its power.

Have you done the homework assignment? Good. Keep doing it, every morning, for the rest of the week.

Oh, and if you don't act—no matter the reason—let's be clear: you're flinching. This exercise has no consequences, physical or social. If you refuse to do it, ask yourself why.

Because the exercise is stupid, or pointless?

How will you know unless you've tried?

YOUR WORLD AS A CORRIDOR

Straight-A student. Straight to college. Straight to work. Straight up the corporate ladder. Straight to the suburbs.

Damn, you've been scared straight.

Is this you? Corridors lead you from bed, to breakfast, to your car, to work, and then home. You have a cubicle you come to every day. You go to the same lunch place. You watch the same shows. You like the same food.

They could replace you with a small, predictable robot. And one day soon, they probably will.

Flinch avoidance means your everyday world becomes a corridor. Everything is on auto-pilot. Sure, you can live without being awake. There's more options available now than ever, but our habits are so ingrained that we don't explore at all. You're stuck in a hallway with a flinch behind every door. You can't turn corners or get surprised, so you just keep moving forward, in the same direction, until you die.

Ralph Waldo Emerson said, "Do not go where the path may lead; go instead where there is no path and leave a trail."

Consider this: in your corridor, every flinch is a door you can open with a new scar and lesson behind it, the same way a kid learns by touching the burner. It's an experiment—an attempt at something new. Not all experiments hurt, but all of them are valuable—and if you don't open doors, you'll never get the scars or learn the lessons. Open doors mean expanded options. The flinch will block you, but once the door is open, the threat vanishes. A new path appears.

Opening new doors means confronting a possibility of getting lost. Lost feels like failure, something that might leave a scar or be embarrassing. So the flinch starts its work, and pushes you back into the familiar to distract you. Before you can stop it, you're back in the corridor.

But every door, every unmarked place on the map, is also a dare. It means the territory is unexplored—sometimes dangerous or painful— but also a challenge. It's why so many want to see the Antarctic, or space, but so few actually do it, because you don't know what you'll find there. It both frightens and compels you, even though there could be anything, even death.

But there's a secret here, too: getting lost is not fatal. Almost every time, it will make your world bigger. You can look at the edges of your map, the places you were unsure about. Old explorers even had a phrase for it: "Here be dragons."

Most people look at the map and see danger. They stay home. Do you?

Now, frontiers have changed. Those who explore find things in themselves just as often as in the outside world. They find their own dragons, like Saint George did. They face the flinch and conquer them. Their maps become clearer.

You need to clear up your map, too.

You need find your dragons, look them in the eye, and destroy them.

GREAT STORIES WITHOUT FLINCHES

Guess what: there are none. If Luke Skywalker hadn't faced the flinch, there wouldn't have been a *Star Wars*. If Socrates hadn't faced it, most of Western philosophy never would have happened. Harry Potter without the flinch is just a sad kid in a basement.

"I saw her across the room at the dance, and she was very pretty. I was afraid. But I told myself I could do it, I went over there, and talked to her. We've been married 50 years." That, just then, was the flinch. Did you catch it? Every great relationship story has one.

Behind every moment of courage was a man or woman who faced a difficult internal struggle. When they face it, it becomes an amazing story. They become legends. But if they turn away from the flinch, their stories are unexceptional. They're like everyone else. They vanish.

Do you think that your great story is an exception to the rule? That you will get to the garden of delight without suffering as those who have passed before you? It never happens that way, because without those challenges, you have no resolve.

Samurai and their modern counterpart, kendo practitioners, say that fights are won internally, even before the killing blow is landed. They face an internal struggle before they ever face the enemy. So will you. Stop shying away from it.

FIGHTING THE FLINCH

The fear of the flinch gets built over time, by parents, schools, and careful friends. Based on what it sees outside, it builds an impenetrable fortress. It sits there, like an alarm system, watching for dangerous behavior, and warning you when it happens.

Unfortunately, it's often wrong.

Sometimes, it feels like the flinch has a voice. "You're not going to stick to this diet. You never do." "You're not going to get this job, because you're not really qualified, are you?"

It uses your own voice against you. It uses your judgment—but decides based on an outdated biological imperative. It's a construct with no scar tissue. So you avoid the flinch whether there are consequences or not.

Listen to it and you'll get nowhere. You'll never get hurt. You'll never learn.

You might even be holding back right now—holding back in fear of the flinch. You might be persuading yourself that reading this isn't important. Make no mistake; you need to keep going.

Fact: You can just watch yourself flinch. Act anyway. Forget the internal voice and go forward. Just deal with the consequences as they come. This is rarely fatal, and often, it doesn't hurt at all.

Anytime you flinch, you'll hear the voice or feel the sting of judgment. But despite how strong the feeling is, no lightning strikes you down. No floods, locusts, or first-born deaths. Nothing actually happens at all.

The truth is that judgment and fear will never stop, but they don't actually do anything. There are no negative consequences for breaking the habit of flinching. Nothing will actually happen if you stop being afraid. You're free.

LEARN ITS SECRETS

The fear of the flinch has been growing your whole life. It's made by every authority figure you know, so you've learned to obey it. It's natural. Its tactics work like a perfectly adapted animal inside you.

So how do you know when the fear means something, and when it's just pointless? How do you know when the flinch is protecting you?

There's a process for it. Here it is:

First, find a safe place to decide from. If you feel threatened by the man next to you on the subway, move away first. From this vantage point, a better decision can safely emerge. So your relationships, health, debt, everything—make sure none of them feel dangerous, because they are easy reasons to flinch. The less these situations provoke you, the more you can focus.

Then, once you're ready, listen to yourself. When you're facing the flinch, you use words like "stupid," "safe," "pointless," or anything else that is soft, judgmental, and blurry. The flinch thrives on making risks look worse than they are. So look for those words, act anyway, and judge from hindsight instead.

You'll know you've opened the right door when you feel a strong, irresistible impulse to do *something else, anything else*. This usually means that you're right at the threshold of something important, and you need to pay attention and keep going—*now*.

FIND THE CURE

The kid who wants to take over the world is still inside you. He wants to come out again. She wants to learn and grow. He wants to do something amazing.

Unfortunately, you don't follow through. Still flinching.

When you feel the flinch, you can shut it up by talking out loud. Ask a clear, strong question: "What are you afraid of?" Say it whenever you're avoiding the flinch; then force yourself to answer. Or just call it out: "Flinching."

Verbalize your excuse. It's often ridiculous, paranoid, or obsessive-compulsive. You sound like a drowning sailor when, in fact, you aren't even near the water.

Calm down and move forward.

HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENT, PART 2

You need more training. Let's take this further.

Ready? Go to the kitchen and grab a mug you don't like. Mug in hand, go to a place in your house with a hard floor. Hold the mug in front of you, in your outstretched hand. Say goodbye to it.

Now, drop the cup.

Whatever rationalization you're using right now is a weak spot for you. Flag it. You'll see it again and again.

Drop the damn cup.

Did you do it? If so, you'll notice one thing: breaking your programming requires a single moment of strength.

Now, clean up the mess. That wasn't so bad, was it?

If this was too easy, because a cup is simple to replace, try something harder, like your Blackberry. The strength you gain by letting go is more important than any object you own.

THE PARADOX

If you don't flinch, you probably don't even know why. You think it's natural to go rock-climbing, do parkour, or meet new people all the time. You assume everyone is like you, but you're wrong.

If you're flinching all the time, you think that's natural, too. You think everyone is like you. The flinch is so innate you don't consider it a problem. But it is, and you're stuck with it unless you start to resist it.

The ability to withstand the flinch comes with the knowledge that the future will be better than the past. You believe that you can come through challenges and be just as good as you were before them. The more positive you are, the easier it is for you to believe this. You move forward and accept tough situations, so no matter the breakup, the job loss, or the injury, you believe you'll recover and end up fine. If you believe this, you're right.

If you don't have faith, you believe that every potential threat could be the end of you. You aren't sure about how to handle challenges, because you question your ability to overcome them. If you believe this, you're right, too.

This is a chicken-and-egg scenario, or in our case, an action-and-faith scenario. You don't know which one came first and made someone confident, but you can be sure of one thing—there is only one side of the equation you can control. You can't make yourself feel positive, but you can choose how to act, and if you choose right, it builds your confidence. Over time, this process becomes a positive cycle. It builds on itself, just as kids in the playground gain confidence as they climb higher and higher on the monkey bars. Next thing you know, your whole way of thinking has turned around.

HOW TO GET HURT

In a fight, a good opponent watches for patterns and is waiting for you to flinch. It is the point at which he can hit the hardest.

In rugby, I was told, “Show me a guy who flinches and I’ll show you a guy who gets injured.”

In mountain biking, they say the best way to get hurt is to brake. Riding fast helps.

All of life is like this. You’re only as strong as your weakest moments. Learn to reinforce those weak spots before they cut you down.

HOW NOT TO BE BORING

You don’t know anyone at the party, so you don’t want to go. You don’t like cottage cheese, so you haven’t eaten it in years. This is your choice, of course, but don’t kid yourself: it’s also the flinch.

Your personality is not set in stone. You may think a morning coffee is the most enjoyable thing in the world, but it’s really just a habit. Thirty days without it, and you would be fine. You think you have a soul mate, but in fact you could have had any number of spouses. You would have evolved differently, but been just as happy.

Krishnamurti, a great Indian sage, once said: “You can take a piece of wood that you brought back from your garden, and each day present it with a flower. At the end of a month you will adore it, and the idea of not giving it an offering will be a sin.” In other words, everything that you are used to, once done long enough, starts to seem natural, even though it might not be.

The flinch doesn’t want you to change. Its agenda is to keep you in status quo. It believes your identity is what’s kept you alive and stable, and that settling is better than dead. But it’s a trap, because almost none of the risks modern man takes are fatal at all.

Every time you give in, you actually make the wrong path easier to follow. But every time you go the right way, you get stronger. Eventually, the new habit becomes automatic. Bingo.

You can change what you want about yourself at any time. You see yourself as someone who can’t write or play an instrument, who gives in to temptation or makes bad decisions, but that’s really not you. It’s not ingrained. It’s not your personality. Your personality is something else, something deeper than just preferences, and these details on the surface, you can change anytime you like.

If it is useful to do so, you must abandon your identity and start again. Sometimes, it’s the only way.

HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENT, PART 3

Perform this experiment whether you like it or not. Agree now, before reading the next sentence.

You are going to speak to the next stranger you come across.

Whether he looks interesting or not, whether you are attracted to or repelled by him, or whether you can think of anything to say—none of these things matter. Strike up a conversation, even if it's just for 15 seconds. Look the person in the eye as you do so. Smile.

Do this to test your ability to force yourself through discomfort.

As you perform this exercise, one of two things will happen. First, you may just start a conversation quickly. "Excuse me, which direction is this subway going?" You'll notice that the faster you do this, the easier it is. That's the trick—pass through the flinch quickly.

If you find it easy, try the exercise again with someone else.

What happens when you get to someone you cannot talk to—that you don't want to talk to, or you intend to talk to but can't? The feeling is actually quite primal—you feel that you *want* to talk to the person in front of you, but you literally *cannot*—as if a force is stopping you.

As this happens, watch carefully as your failure walks away from you. Don't hide from it. Observe the missed opportunity as it walks away and leaves you alone with your inadequacy. Don't turn away. Feel the anxiety in your chest as you watch the opportunity vanish, forever.

What the flinch just did to you, it will do to your whole life, until you stop it.

IN TIMES OF STRESS

In times of stress, whatever pattern you're used to taking emerges. If you're used to running, you run. If you're used to getting defensive, the same thing happens. It's how you act under pressure. For ancient man, this tendency was a protective mechanism

that worked well for escaping bears. Reverting to workable patterns means faster decision making, which during a real threat is the difference between life and death.

But this reversion is also why an argument with your spouse can feel like a fight with your parents—because it is. Going back to your old pattern of arguing is easy, so you do it over and over again, the way water always flows in the same path down a mountain. In your brain, the grooves are already deeply embedded, so the behaviors are automatic. They're corridors.

Most of your flinches don't protect you from fire, bears, or death. Reverting to a fight-or-flight response, even when physical threats aren't present, isn't useful. This response defends you pointlessly, raising your blood pressure and cortisol levels for no reason, and maybe taking years off your life. It also prevents you from learning what's necessary to adapt.

So you need to start recognizing your fight-or-flight response. This is the real challenge—what you'll spend most of your time on—because it is such a strong instinct. Every alternative you develop is highly valuable because it opens your options dramatically.

Thankfully, you can train yourself into new patterns, and you're not the first to do so. New patterns can include learning things that are better adapted to certain situations, and will happen automatically when you're put under duress, whether that's martial arts or new ways of communicating with your spouse. The training isn't about fighting at all, but something more important: pattern-breaking.

The first step is to stop seeing everything as a threat. You can't will this to happen—it requires wider exposure. If you've been punched in the face, you won't worry as much about a mugger, for example. If you face the flinch in meditation, you don't worry about a long line at the bank. Build your base of confidence by having a vaster set of experiences to call upon, and you'll realize you can handle more than you used to. Doing the uncomfortable is key. It widens your circle of comfort.

Second, rework the pattern of threat response. Learn habits that move you out of a fight-or-flight choice and into another pattern that's more effective.

Start with the one below. It should help.

USE THE FLINCH

Flinching cannot be eliminated. This is a basic fact.

No matter how strong you are, a butterfly in your field of vision will always startle you. This is biologically programmed. So flinching cannot be undone, but it can be transformed. Fighters train for years to learn. Here's how it's done.

In a state of fear, most people put their hands up to defend themselves. They back away—this is the flight response. But the real trick is to do what the professionals do. They use the speed of the flinch—they use its intensity—to their advantage.

Law enforcement officers, professional fighters, and members of the military—all of them learn systems that leverage the flinch. They use it to react faster than their opponents even realize. Instead of flinching back, they flinch forward—toward their opponent, and toward the threat.

When you flinch forward, you're using the speed of your instincts, but you don't back off. Instead, you move forward so fast—without thinking—that your opponent can't react. You use your upraised hands as weapons instead of shields. You use your fear to gain an advantage.

Imagine using this tactic against the schoolyard bully. Or the marketplace.

Train yourself to flinch forward, and your world changes radically. You respond to challenges by pushing ahead instead of shrinking back. You become bigger instead of smaller; you're more stable and more confident. Your world becomes a series of obstacles to overcome, instead of attacks you have to defend yourself from.

You go on offense instead of defense. You can change the world again, instead of protecting yourself from it.

USING YOUR ENVIRONMENT

An acrobat isn't born walking on his hands. The process for learning is slow, and only later does it become effortless.

Flinching forward, like walking on your hands, is a test of your environment. Learning to balance means falling, and when the acrobat does it, he sees what's dangerous and what isn't—after the fact. As he gets better, he starts to understand the method. If his environment pushes back by making him fall, he begins to understand his limits. As he

practices, he gains ground and makes his world bigger. Eventually, he's doing handstands naturally.

Most people look at walking on their hands and think: "I can't do that," but they're wrong. You can use this same process to get anywhere you want to go. Those who learned did it by flinching forward—through the initial reaction—once, and then again and again, until it became second nature. You can do this with anything.

Flinch forward in nature, at home, in your workplace, anywhere. Try whatever you like or find interesting. Climb trees, eat new food, or learn to dance. All are provocations to the status quo that you use as stepping stones to larger explorations.

Start with small threats in safe environments. They'll build confidence for your larger jumps.

Eventually, you'll get used to it. You'll find yourself flinching forward toward everything, as a habit. It will be part of your process, the same way an acrobat can try a new move or a dancer can learn choreography.

Then, you're ready for any flinch. Then, you can get in the ring.

THE RING

It's time you found out what you are made of.

It's time you made the world flinch, not the other way around.

Fact: Those who face the flinch make a difference. The rest do not.

Those who leave the corridors find new frontiers, avenues for growth and happiness that most never encounter, while the rest will be left in old deserts, like vultures picking on scraps.

Facing the flinch, and being willing to get the scars that come with it, is the only thing that divides your present from your future. Those who fight it are easily identified—you can see the fire in their eyes and the determination that practically courses through them. Their determination is like an aura; it can be felt just by being near them.

Those who are unwilling to face the flinch are obvious, too. Their eyes are dead. Their voices sound defeated. They have defensive body language. They're all talk. They see

obstacles as assailants instead of adversaries. Their flinch is the elephant in the room, and they don't want to hear about it.

Any fight you want to win, a habit of pushing past the flinch can make it happen. Once you have adjusted to the pressure, once you learn to flinch forward, you have the resolve to pass through the impassible. In fact, it becomes certain that you will—it's only a matter of time.

Then, you need to decide what to fight for.

GET IN THE RING

Ready? Let's begin.

You say you want to be successful. You see yourself as a future Richard Branson, an Oprah, or a Bill Gates—someone the world will remember. Someone you can be proud of, who does work they love and changes the world.

You think you're working hard. You think all you need is your lucky break.

Wrong. You haven't done what's necessary at all.

You haven't made the sacrifices. You haven't put in the time. You haven't learned the lessons and you don't have the scars. Not for the fights that matter.

Look, there's a fight happening right now—quite a few, actually. You can turn on the TV and watch them on any channel. World hunger, AIDS, the next billion-dollar business, even in your own family—they're all there. You watch these fights all the time, but are you actually fighting right now?

Most people rarely get in the ring for what matters. Instead, the fight gets fought by other people, elsewhere. Everyone talks about it like they want to be involved, but it's just talk.

The truth is that they can't handle the pressure. They're not in the ring because they aren't ready to do what's necessary to win. They're not ready to fight for what matters.

Most people don't actually want to face the flinch; they just want to be in a movie about it. They want the glory, not the suffering. They don't want scars because they like being soft. They don't want to be humiliated; they want respect—they just don't want to *earn* it. They want the keys handed to them. But it doesn't work that way.

If you choose the ring, you're already better than most. Why? Because you chose to fight. You're a contender, and almost no one can say that about themselves.

The ring is different for everyone, but wherever yours is, it's where real risk happens and where the spoils are huge. It's where you the fight is won, yes—but it's also where can you lose everything. Inside, you'll face pain again and again with no promise of reward, but it doesn't matter, because in the ring, you'll know you can make a difference.

Stepping into the ring means you can call yourself a contender, maybe even a champion. It's where kings are made and where those who enter are forged, like weapons. Rich or poor, smart or slow, anyone can go, any time—no matter where or who they are.

Welcome to the ring. Enter those who dare, and let them share the spoils. Only they have earned it.

Will you win? The ring offers no promises. But one thing's for sure: unless you get in the ring today, you don't even stand a damn chance.

Decide what really matters, and get in the ring for it—*now*.

Today, right now, eliminate all excuses from your vocabulary. Refuse to mince words or actions. Refuse a scar-free life.

Choose the flinch. Choose what matters. Get in the ring.

CLEAR THE PATH

The ring is different for everyone, but it's always made of places, people, and projects that are worth the flinch. Habits obscure it.

Open your eyes. Block all escape routes. Eliminate all noise.

The common will capture your attention as long as it's allowed in the room. Whatever you are used to, whether cigarettes, shopping, or Twitter, must be eliminated in the quest to get in the ring. You must make a sacrifice on the altar of greatness and be ready to perform acts that others will not.

If you aren't willing to sacrifice your comfort, you don't have what it takes.

Set fire to your old self. It's not needed here. It's too busy shopping, gossiping about others, and watching days go by and asking why you haven't gotten as far as you'd like. This old self will die and be forgotten by all but family, and replaced by someone who makes a difference.

Your new self is not like that. Your new self is the Great Chicago Fire—overwhelming, overpowering, and consuming everything that's in its path.

HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENT, PART 4

Take a moment to breathe.

If you've gotten this far, you should appreciate the strength you've built. You should be more confident, more determined, and maybe even more outgoing. All of these are good things and more. Keep going.

The next homework assignment is simple. The next time someone asks for a volunteer, for anything whatsoever, say yes.

If a panhandler asks for change, give him the largest bill you have. If someone needs help moving out of his house, offer immediately. If you see an advertisement for a kids' help line, call the number from your phone. Do it as soon as you feel the flinch.

Don't wait until you can talk yourself out of it—you're too good at that already. Instead, act before your self-talk overpowers you. Get yourself into a position where you can no longer back out. Your old self would back away here—instead, burn your bridge so you can no longer retreat.

Flinch-breaking is all about eliminating the pointless, cowardly, and habitual, and choosing what's useful. But useful cannot be discovered in the abstract. It has to actually happen.

BEHIND DOOR NUMBER 1

Behind every flinch is a fear or an anxiety—sometimes rational, sometimes not. Without the fear, there is no flinch. But wiping out the fear isn't what's important—facing it is. It shows you that you can handle the pressure and challenge of a new environment, putting the fear in its place—as an advisor, not a captain.

Sometimes what's behind the flinch hurts—like when you have “the talk” in your relationship. It might lead to a breakup, or big changes that you find uncomfortable. That's fine—you should probably have the talk anyway, even if it makes you squirm to do so. Other times, what's behind the flinch doesn't hurt, like when you have stage fright. You get on stage, do your acting or public speaking, and everything goes fine. The anxiety was just about the possibility of public embarrassment. No big deal.

Both of those flinches need to be faced. Whether there is pain behind the flinch doesn't matter. The only thing that does is the habit of crossing difficult internal terrain simply because it is tough to do. Judging the flinch beforehand, asking whether it's going to hurt or not, isn't the point. You can only judge from experience.

THE UNCOMFORTABLE TRUTH

This pressure you feel—this flinch you encounter every day—there is no end to it. After you deal with one, another will come your way. The pressure increases as you go on. Whatever tension you can handle, the ring will provide just a little bit more than that.

Adjust to it. You will never be entirely comfortable. This is the truth behind the champion—he is always fighting something. To do otherwise is to settle.

Success works as a cycle—growth and contraction, balancing and unbalancing—all while you're encountering hurdles that get higher and higher over time. Before jumping a hurdle, you have to balance, then unbalance, which is the jump itself. Then you repeat for the next hurdle. This is what happens when you learn to walk as well. It's natural, but the uncomfortable part is necessary for progress.

This means that if you're heading the right way, the pressure will never entirely disappear. If it does, you're on the wrong path. You're in the corridor. It's that simple. You need to find a door again. You need a bigger fight.

A SURE-FIRE PATH TO FAILURE

At this point in most books, the authors promise you that if you do what they say, you're sure to succeed.

In this case, you're sure to fail. To be rejected. To discover wrong paths. To see what humiliation is like, firsthand.

You're sure to live.

And then yes, maybe, you might reach your goals.

Would you have it any other way?

JOIN US

Everyone in the ring feels alone. You want to change your company's culture, but it seems like no one will support you. No one wants to talk to you at a party, or so you believe, so you don't talk to anyone. No matter what the flinch is, you need to face it on your own. It can be lonely. This is a hard truth.

From the outside looking in, everyone looks like a conformist. But really, no one is; they're just waiting for another person to speak up.

The question is, why isn't it you? Do you feel like you'll be judged, or ostracized? Do you think you'll be ignored and humiliated? Do you feel impotent? The truth is likely quite different.

Everyone wants progress but very few want to lead. So a whole group waits for the first hand to go up before their hands go up, too. Suddenly, a vote goes from a unanimous NO to a unanimous YES. All it took was one voice of dissent—and suddenly, everything changed.

The secret to overcoming the flinch is that everyone wants you to succeed. People are looking for proof that you can be amazing so that they can be amazing, too. The Web is so great because you can see others being truly themselves, and succeeding at it. This diminishes the power of the consensus. The pressure diminishes. You can be who you like. Getting in the ring becomes easier because you have supporters.

So if you see no one like you, no one who agrees, don't worry. There are actually hundreds of people like you, and they're waiting for a leader. That person is you.

Stop flinching. Speak up. Join us.

100 KINDS

There are a million ways to avoid the flinch, a million ways to do wrong by yourself in evading it. There are a hundred names for those people and behaviors: lazy, avoidant,

cynical, arrogant, and anything in between. All of these names convey attitudes that encourage you to avoid seeing what is right in front of you, all in a different way, and each of the people who has one of these attitudes defends it.

In contrast, there is only one way to do it right and to see the truth. It is to look at these ways of acting in yourself or others and cross through their verbal defenses, and not to believe them at all.

Every person has his own way of being avoidant and overly confident. It's impossible to name all the ways people do this. But the solution is always the same: ruthless yet compassionate honesty in the face of all the lies you tell yourself.

The flinch will keep you avoidant your whole life if you let it. You will see nothing of the magic or serendipity or incredible experiences that others have if you keep your blinders on. For this reason, taking them off may be the single most important challenge you ever face.

There are enough viewers. There are enough cheerleaders. There are enough coaches and enough commentators. What there isn't enough of are players.

Do not put this down and return to your normal life.

Fight. Don't flinch.

Don't ever be afraid again.

ABOUT ELLA

Ella is a friend with an amazing story.

When Ella was four years old, she was happily cooking in the kitchen with her mother. Then, in an instant, everything changed.

Ella was curious about what was on the stove, and she reached up. By accident, she put her elbow in the pot, which was full of boiling water. It hurt her, so she pulled back, dragging the pot off the stove and pouring the water on top of her.

Ella had third-degree burns on over 30 percent of her body. Surgery needed to be done, with doctors cutting into her body again and again so she wouldn't lose mobility from all the scars.

Now, there's an intensity in Ella's eyes that you don't see in a lot of people. She's unashamedly political. She faces life with a courage that few people can understand. She didn't flinch about the life in front of her. She embraced it.

But this isn't about her story at all. It's about you.

Here's what happened next. Ella started doing fire performance. She embraced the thing that hurt her. She figured out how to use torches and alcohol to light parts of herself on fire as part of a show. She did this on stages all across Canada.

Think about it for a second. The girl who got burned at the age of four, with scars all over her body, turned fire into her weapon. It sounds like a movie.

But there are people like this. They're different. They've made a choice about where they want to go. Life teaches them lessons the rest of us don't have a chance to learn. They take paths that others don't.

You know what else? You can be one of them, if you want.

THE FLINCH, A CHECKLIST

1. Challenge yourself by doing things that hurt, on purpose. Have a willpower practice, such as very hard exercise, meditation, endurance, or cold showers. Choose something that makes your brain scream with how hard it is, and try to tolerate it. The goal isn't just to get used to it. It's to understand that pain is something you can survive.
2. Remember things that are easy to forget. Upgrade your current relationships. Create un-birthdays for your friends and stick to them. Go through old text messages to rekindle dormant friendships. It can be awkward, but that's the point. You will make an impact by choosing to do what makes others nervous.
3. Read more. Not just current blog posts and tweets and Facebook updates online, but other sources that take more consideration than blog posts or news. Find thorough and in-depth analyses of subjects you find interesting, or irreverent stuff that makes you feel alive. Read things you disagree with. Read things that are too difficult for you to understand, and then overcome your discomfort by pushing yourself to understand them.

4. Get some scars by working with your hands. Try to understand how things in your world work, like your car, your stereo system, or even your kitchen. Have a garden or a dog to help you stay grounded in the real world.
5. Turn your mobile phone off for a few hours each day. Having nothing to do while you're waiting for a bus can be boring, but it's only when you're bored that the scary thoughts come to the surface. Use a dumb phone on the weekends to prevent yourself from checking your messages.
6. Find new friends who make you feel uncomfortable, either because they have done more than you or because they have done nothing that you have. Meet tattoo artists or homeless people, millionaires or best-selling authors. Host dinner parties for them. Serve them bizarre food. Why the hell not?
7. Renegotiate your work. If you achieve X, then will your employer do Y? Ask beforehand and deliver, or if you can't get permission, go for it anyway and ask for forgiveness. Create a new job title for yourself; then carve out the job.
8. Start dressing as if you had a very important job or meeting, or as if you were twenty years old again and thought you were the coolest person on Earth. What would you do differently? How would people treat you once you did?
9. Imagine that you have to leave a legacy, and everyone in the world will see the work you've done. Volunteer. Create something that lasts and that can exist outside of you, something that makes people wonder and gasp. Build a support structure for others. Devote some of your time or money to it.
10. Make something amazing, something that's terrifying to you. Stay uncomfortable. Fight the flinch wherever you see it. Leave no stone unturned.

HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENT, PART 5

Congratulations. Almost no one knows their flinch this well, sees it as often, and fights it as often as you.

You know yourself better, and because of that, you know your world better. You can grow now without limit. You are a conqueror and a champion. But there's one more thing.

Fear of the flinch is still spreading. It's like a disease, traveling throughout society, through media and word of mouth. It's everywhere, and it infects everyone differently.

It's why parents refuse to vaccinate their kids, and why neighbors and family members don't talk to each other anymore.

They want safety. But you now know that safe is anything but.

We can't fix this alone. For this to make a difference, it needs to be a movement. The flinch is a virus, so learning about it needs to be a virus, too.

So your final assignment is to give this book to another person. Maybe choose the person who needs it most. Or choose a stranger. Choose the person who you think will really get it, or the person who's already in the ring and needs some help.

It doesn't matter where the book goes. But you need to abandon it. Forget your fear of loss. You've learned what you need to know—now, give someone else the chance to do the same.

That's why we made this book free.

So send it out. Spread it. Or tell us your story -- stories@theflinch.com -- and we'll do something cool with the best ones.

Go ahead. Do it right now.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Julien Smith is a New York Times bestselling author and speaker who has been involved in organizing online communities for over 15 years, from early BBSes and flashmobs to the social web as we know it today.

Along with being the co-author of *Trust Agents*, one of the social web's most recognized books, he is a contributor to publications such as *GQ*, Sirius Satellite Radio, *Cosmopolitan*, the CBC, and more.

Julien's work is often about leaning into discomfort and pain, into self-examination and discipline, intending both to provoke and unbalance. The lessons from *The Flinch* came from self-defense professionals, security experts, weightlifters, parkour practitioners, and more.

You can learn more about Julien by visiting his [blog](#).

ABOUT THE DOMINO PROJECT

What happens when a publisher has a tight, direct connection with readers, is able to produce intellectual property that spreads, and can do both quickly and at low cost? A new kind of publishing, the brainchild of [Seth Godin](#), and powered by Amazon.

The Domino Project is named after the domino effect—one powerful idea spreads down the line, pushing from person to person. The Project represents a fundamental shift in the way books (and digital media based on books) have always been published. Eventually consisting of a small cadre of stellar authors, this is a publishing house organized around a new distribution channel, one that wasn't even a fantasy when most publishers began.

We are reinventing what it means to be a publisher, and along the way, spreading ideas that we're proud to spread.

Here are excerpts of our some of our books:

