

How tiny experiments can set you free | Anne-Laure Le Cunff | TEDxNashville | Transcript

[Applause] “One second. I need to check my calendar.” That’s what I said to the doctor while he was telling me that I might die. I was 26, sitting in a wheelchair, diagnosed with a blood clot that could travel to my lungs. They just told me I needed emergency surgery. And how did I respond? By trying to negotiate my to-do list. I know how absurd this sounds, but it does make sense when you think about it.

In that moment, despite the seriousness of the diagnosis, or perhaps because of it, I wanted to feel in control. I wanted to believe that I could stay in charge of what happened next. And so when I heard the news, instead of shifting my footing, I held on tighter to the calendar, to the identity of being the one who never falls behind.

I’m sure you’ve had your own version of that moment when something cracked open in your life and your first instinct was to ask, “How do I stay in control?” In those moments, we tell ourselves, “I’m the productive one. I’m the calm, the quiet, the supportive one, the one who never drops the ball, the one who always has it together, the one who keeps everyone happy.” We all carry these deep assumptions about who we are. And when life feels uncertain, we tighten our grip, not just on the situation, but on the identity we’ve built.

So, here’s the question I’d like to explore with you. What if the thing keeping you stuck isn’t your circumstances, but your grip on who you think you need to be? Let me explain how that works. Our minds crave a sense of order. So, when real control disappears, the brain will manufacture an artificial sense of control however it can. That’s why when things feel uncertain, we reach for anything, absolutely anything that helps us feel steadier. How many of us have added another app, another routine, another system when life felt chaotic? We all do this to the point where this behavior has a name.

Psychologists call it compensatory control, which is our attempt at restoring order by creating structure, even if it’s artificial. And we’re not just wired that way. We’re trained this way. Our schools and our societies reward us for being prepared, for being certain, for being right. And so when things feel wobbly, we try to escape that liminal space as quickly as possible rather than pausing to explore.

And now here’s the tricky part. In the short term, it feels like it works. Predictable structures help lower the perceived threat and downregulate the stress response. Planning feels responsible and productive, so you feel a bit calmer, and yes, in control. But over time, this artificial sense of control narrows your options.

You can’t receive what life is actually offering when you’re too busy managing what you think it should be offering. And when you’re trying to control everything, you leave no room for discovering anything, including about yourself. And that’s the real trap. Control doesn’t just keep us stuck in our circumstances, it keeps us stuck in our current identity.

So if control isn’t the answer, what is? That’s what I started wondering after this absurd moment at the hospital. And I know, I know that in that kind of talk, you’re supposed to say that you had a big breakthrough. But in my case, the shift came from something a bit smaller. It came from a little bit of experimentation.

See, as a neuroscientist, I’ve been trained to conduct experiments in the lab. But I’ve come to realize that experimentation is much more than just a scientific method. It’s everywhere. It’s how nature evolves. It’s

how species adapt. It's how we learn to walk and talk as children. Experimentation is the fundamental way life moves forwards.

And there's something in particular that's very interesting about experimentation, something that can help us move forward while loosening our grip. The thing is, we don't run experiments to get to a specific outcome. If we already knew the outcome, there would be no point running the experiment in the first place. We experiment to learn something new, whether that's a new data point, a clearer picture of reality. Instead of asking how can I stay in control, we ask what can I try?

So if compensatory control is really about clinging to what you know, or what you think you know, experimentation is about letting go of the illusion of certainty. So I started wondering, how can we take this experimental mindset out of the lab and into our daily lives? The beauty of lab experiments is in how actionable they are. You know exactly what you're going to test and how you're going to test it.

And it turns out you can bring that same sense of forward momentum to your everyday life by distilling your own experiments down to just two essential elements. Just like a scientist who needs to know, first, what they're going to try, and second, the trial period. You can choose a specific action to experiment with for a specific duration. I call these tiny experiments, and they follow a very simple formula. It's like a mini protocol where you just say: I will [action] for [duration].

That's it. This is not a habit. You're not committing to this for the rest of your life. This is not a goal either. You're not trying to get to a specific outcome. This is just an experiment. No targets, no success metrics, no illusion of certainty, just the courage to be curious for a moment and to step outside the story you've been telling yourself about who you need to be. Let me show you what that looks like in practice with a few examples from people I worked with.

I'm going to start with Jay. Jay was stuck in that familiar spiral that I think we've all experienced, so busy with work that he had lost touch with many of his friends. Weeks turned into months of radio silence. But every time he thought about reaching out, he'd freeze up and tighten his grip. He thought he had to craft the perfect message, to find the right timing, the perfect words to explain everything. And obviously all of this overthinking just kept him stuck. So instead, he said, "I will message one friend every week for four weeks." No perfect apology, no grand explanation, just a tiny experiment.

What happened? Well, his friends were generally happy to hear from him. Nobody demanded an explanation or an apology or made him feel guilty about the silence. And now here's what really shifted. Jay started seeing himself as someone who belonged in those friendships, even after the silence, not someone who needed to earn his way back in.

I have thousands of examples from people from my community. People who painted watercolor for 20 minutes every day. People who practiced saying no for just 24 hours. People who stopped consuming social media content for 5 days. And each and every one of them, in the process of experimenting, discovered something unexpected about themselves.

I'm actually one of those examples. When I started writing online, I was pretty anxious. I thought, I'm not a writer. English is not even my first language. And my instinctive response to that anxiety was control. To craft the perfect plan with subscriber targets, a content calendar, marketing strategies. But having learned everything that I had learned about the power of experimentation, I decided to apply an experimental mindset and I said: "I will write one short essay about neuroscience every day for 100

weekdays.” Again, no specific goal other than learning more about the world, about my work, and about myself and the process.

That shift from control to curiosity changed everything. I discovered a new professional path and parts of myself I hadn’t fully known yet. All because I decided to let go of that limiting fixed sense of identity and to experiment instead.

[Pause] So, huh... Let me take a deep breath. That wasn’t planned but that’s experimentation too. When I started experimenting, I also experienced an immense sense of freedom... Just like what I just did. Because when you start experimenting, when you start approaching life like a scientist, you break out of binary thinking. There’s no success or failure, right or wrong, fixed or broken. All you do is collect data. There is no imaginary leaderboard. All there is is your own personal laboratory.

And now here’s the fun part. The uncertainty that once felt threatening starts feeling energizing. Just like a scientist, not knowing becomes exciting. There’s almost a sense of... An anticipatory quality, a sense of juiciness. What will I discover? What will I learn? And this is what makes those experiments very powerful.

In that way, experimentation rewires your relationship with uncertainty instead itself. Instead of trying to control everything, you let go of this illusion of knowing what happens next. Instead of forcing answers, you give yourself space to learn. And that very same uncertainty that once triggered your need for control becomes a doorway for discovery.

But now, what if you’re so frozen that even a tiny experiment feels impossible? What if the problem is so charged that you can’t even get close to it? This is when, and I know this is going to go against every instinct you might have, but this is when you need to loosen your grip even further by letting go of solving the problem directly.

Not all experiments need to happen inside the problem space. In fact, some of the most powerful ones don’t. Think of Julia Child, unfulfilled as a diplomat’s wife, who didn’t seek marriage counseling but enrolled in French cooking classes. Or Pierce Brosnan, faced with his wife’s cancer, who returned to painting. In both cases, the experiment seemed unrelated to the problem at hand, but not only did it help them cope, but it also reconnected them with their sense of agency.

Again, it might feel counterintuitive, but if the problem is too painful to touch directly, experimenting with something completely different can be more effective than pushing through. That’s because it bypasses resistance. By shifting your focus to a lower stake domain, your psychological defenses don’t get triggered. You’re not confronting the fear, you’re side-stepping it.

And this is where lateral experiments come in. Small tests in a completely different area of your life. They follow the exact same protocol, I will [action] for [duration], but with no attempt at solving the original issue. All you want to do here is try something new and observe what it opens up.

One woman I worked with had been trying to write to her estranged father for over a year. But every time she sat down, she froze. The stakes were too high. So instead, she decided to experiment for something unrelated. She said, “I will attend one pottery class every Saturday for six weeks.”

On the surface, this had nothing to do with family. But pottery is messy. You start over, you get it wrong, you try again. And slowly her belief that everything had to be perfect started to loosen. She discovered

she was someone who could tolerate messiness, and even embrace it. Until one day, she finally wrote that letter to her father.

Someone else was stuck in a job that wasn't right, but couldn't get himself to leave. Every attempt to plan an exit led to more paralysis. He was thinking, what about the money? What will my family think? So instead, he experimented with something uncomfortable. He said: "I will swim in cold water every morning for 10 days."

Turns out, he could handle it. This experiment was all about discomfort. Physical immediate chosen discomfort. And the cold water revealed someone who could choose that discomfort, someone braver than the person stuck in that job. And so two weeks later, he resigned.

As you can see, these experiments weren't aimed at solving the original problem. They were aimed at changing the conditions around it, at creating an environment where something new could emerge, at creating space for a surprising insight. And this is really what makes them so powerful.

By experimenting in this way, you interrupt the story you're stuck in, and you let a new story start to form. You surprise yourself not because you tried to change, but because you stepped outside of the frame that was keeping you stuck. And when you surprise yourself, you create a new insight which can become a new story about who you are.

Writing your own story and keeping that story alive, this is really what living an experimental life is all about. Every experiment brings you closer to becoming you. And this is how you become the fullest, freest version of yourself. Not through self-improvement, but through self-discovery.

Tiny experiments help you release control. They teach you that you can act without knowing the outcome, that you can learn from uncertainty instead of being paralyzed by it. They teach you that curiosity is the key and that every time you loosen your grip, you let life become your laboratory.

At a deeper level, they expand your sense of self. Every time you act outside of your usual patterns, you discover parts of yourself that were hidden or stuck. Parts of yourself you didn't even know were there.

Whether you decide to experiment directly or laterally, the result is the same. You stop trying to control who you think you should be, who you've trained yourself to be, and you start uncovering who you already are.

So now, here's my invitation for you. Design one tiny experiment that you can start this week. Not next week, not after you've planned it perfectly. Think of an area where you feel stuck, and then use the protocol that I shared with you: I will [action] for [duration].

If the problem is too painful, too overwhelming, too charged to approach directly, then forget about that problem completely. Don't try to be strategic. Pick something completely unrelated. Something where the stakes are low but your curiosity is high. Something creative, playful, physical, maybe a little bit uncomfortable. Something that has nothing to do with solving the problem at hand and everything to do with discovering who you are.

Know that the path to discovering yourself isn't straight. Sometimes you have to go to pottery classes to write a difficult letter. Sometimes you have to swim in cold water to quit the wrong job. But with practice, whenever you feel stuck, you won't panic about losing control. You'll take a breath. Maybe you'll smile. And you'll ask: "What tiny experiment could I try?" Because you'll know, you'll truly know, that control keeps you small but curiosity sets you free. Thank you. [Applause]