

A close-up photograph of a person's hands cutting their hair. The left hand holds a ponytail of long, straight, brown hair. The right hand holds a pair of silver hair scissors, positioned to cut the hair. The background is a light blue surface. The text "We dare you!" is overlaid in the center in a black serif font.

We  
dare  
you!



*From cutting her hair short to racing a Ferrari, Sophie Vokes-Dudgeon, 40, broke out of her rut - and then some!*

**I**t's a warm summer's evening and, as I walk past the crowds outside my favourite bar, I wish I was with them. Instead, I'm off to the Methodist hall nearby, to join a gospel choir. Not a normal Tuesday for me.

After a breast cancer diagnosis two years ago (thankfully all behind me now), I grabbed this challenge - to take on five activities that scare me - with both hands. Post-cancer, I've worked hard to maintain a stress-free life, but things have also become a little samey and risk-free. It seems that I'm not alone.

Research shows that women, while often bold in social situations, are less likely than men to take recreational risks. And we're missing out!

'Life begins at the end of our comfort zone - that's when we grow and feel happier,' explains Susanna Halonen, happiness coach and author of *Screw Finding Your Passion\**.

Positive psychologist Dr Itai Ivztan, senior lecturer at the University of East London, agrees: 'You might feel nervous before a new event, but if you measure levels of self-confidence and courage at the beginning of the day, and then again after you've taken the risk, you'll see them go up.'

### Bye-bye comfort zone

I soon discover that Dr Ivztan is right. Walking into my first ever choir practice (singology.com), I'm so far out of my comfort

zone, I feel sick. Even though I can give Mariah a run for her money in the safety of my car, I feel so embarrassed making a noise in public that I barely squeak. Gradually, I realise that it's actually OK to mess up, and everyone around me is just doing their best. Soon, I'm attempting harmonies (even if they're not always the right ones) - and by the end I'm Whoopi Goldberg in *Sister Act!* It's intoxicating.

And it turns out that the nerves I had pre-practice don't even count as stress. Not the sort that could be damaging to your health, anyway. 'Research shows that some stresses can actually have a positive effect.'

says Nathan Smith, a sports psychology lecturer at Northampton University. 'When the stress is a challenge but we know we have the resources to cope with it, it's good stress. It's chronic stress that can be damaging, as it overrides our coping resources.'

Dr Ivztan adds: 'If an experience is unpredictable or uncontrollable, that's when you feel vulnerable.' So it's our perception of how we'll cope that shapes whether stress is good or bad for us. This →



Sophie finds her voice with a gospel choir



is something that I keep in mind as I approach my second challenge. My son Finn, nine, is desperate to visit Snainton Riding Centre ([snaintonridingcentre.co.uk](http://snaintonridingcentre.co.uk)), near my parents' house in North Yorkshire. He's horse mad but I'm terrified, having been bitten by a pony when I was eight. What's my cope-ability rating for this task? Well, we all know horses are neither



With son Finn and four-legged friend

predictable nor controllable, so I'm feeling seriously anxious! Reluctantly, I get on Wyoming, whose Wild West-style name does nothing for my nerves. Walking goes pretty well and I'd be happy to stop there.

But Wyoming has other plans and breaks into a trot. I start bouncing around on top, wholly unable to do that 'up-down' thing that I've seen on the TV. I yelp a little (OK, a lot), but when Finn rushes over for a photo at the end of our ride, his palpable pride is overwhelming. And that makes me feel totally brilliant.

## Sharing the thrills

It's not just Finn who wants me to cross my boundaries – my husband Richard does, too. Since becoming a mum (I also have Noah, seven), I've turned into an incredibly nervous driver, making Richard's passion for supercars a very lonely one – until now. Today, he has dragged me to Silverstone ([silverstone.co.uk/experiences](http://silverstone.co.uk/experiences)) to drive Ferraris. The very idea of driving so fast that your head vibrates renders me almost incapable of opening the car door, let alone changing gear! I do my first lap at about 40mph (I swear I can hear the sniggers from the start line), but eventually I speed up, before I floor it for the home straight. My vision goes fuzzy from the vibrations and I barely recognise the noises that come from my mouth. It's slightly terrifying – and I feel utterly exhilarated.

“The very idea of driving so fast that your head vibrates renders me almost incapable of opening the car door!”

As we compare notes on the way home, I realise Richard is buzzing that we've shared the experience. 'Being invited to move outside our comfort zone by people who are important to us is very helpful to our relationships,' Dr Ivtzan says when I tell him later. 'If couples support each other in new experiences, it leads to greater trust, warmth and communication.'

## Swishing and swaying

My fourth and fifth challenges are viewed by most women as being pleasurable things to do. I'm dreading both. First, I'm off to Trevor Sorbie's Covent Garden salon for a radical haircut. My long mane has become my trademark and I've never dared risk anything beyond a trim. 'Don't





Showing off her fab new 'do

worry, it'll look fabulous,' says stylist Petros, seeing my nervous face. 'People who find the courage to do this never look back. It's my job to make sure they're ready.'

Apparently, I am... and an hour later, I'm

dumbfounded. 'I feel like a movie star!' I squeal, and I can't stop grinning. My new choppy bob drags me into the 21st century and makes my face look instantly brighter and fresher. Feeling brave, I post the photo on Facebook and bask in the positive comments that follow.

My joy is short-lived as I prepare for challenge five – I've saved the worst for last. Even with my new hair 'do, as I step into Bar Salsa in London's Soho (bar-salsa.com), the thought of dancing in public is almost unbearable. I'm so uncoordinated, I make David Brent look like Wayne Sleep.

We have to line up, women opposite men, and wait for a stranger to take our

“Thinking about dancing in public is almost unbearable. I'm so uncoordinated, I make David Brent look like Wayne Sleep”

hand. A young Australian is lumbered with me, so I give him an apologetic smile and do my best to keep up. 'Move your hips like Beyoncé,' our instructor yells. I've never felt so British in my life. Turns out my partner's got great rhythm and, although I'm stiff and counting out loud, we manage our first routine without disaster. I'm no J.Lo, but I'm far from the only one. Every few minutes we rotate partners and each time it becomes slightly less horrendous. By the end, we've all sort of become pals. United in mutual nerves and high on having overcome them, perhaps?

The following morning I feel somewhat deflated. The challenge is over and, while I'm looking forward to a few quiet nights in, overall the experience has left me feeling invigorated, inspired and younger. I desperately want to keep up the momentum, but I don't know how.

'Commit to doing one thing a week that makes you nervous,' Susanna advises. 'It becomes easier with age, as you're more confident in your own skin. Go on, make the effort.'

And I will. This challenge has given me a taste for adventure, so I'm game! Watch out world, here I come...

## Time for your shake up!

Beauty director Donna Francis shows you three ways to breathe new life into your look

SAY YES TO...

### Corkscrew curls

'All hair types can be styled in tight curls – you just need a tong and some hairspray!'

**Trevor Sorbie**  
**Keratin + Argan**  
**32mm Hair**  
**Tong, £49.99/**  
**4,999 points;**  
**Tresemme**  
**Extra Hold**  
**Hair Spray,**  
**£5.25/525**  
**points (500ml).**



SAY YES TO...

### Ombre nails

'Paint on three shades – one on the bottom, one in the middle and one on the tip. Then, before they dry, sweep a sponge over all three to merge for an ombre effect! Or cheat it with **Elegant Touch Express Trend Ombre Blue Press-On 3 Minute Manicure** (24 nails), £8.99/899 points.'



SAY YES TO...

### Glitter

'Sparkly make-up isn't just for teens, you know; glitter has been all over the catwalks and is surprisingly sophisticated. Try lining your upper lashes with **NYX Glam Liner Aqua Luxe Collection in 24 Karat**, £5.50/550 points, for an easy, shimmering style update!'

