

# Climbing through fear

My name is Leon Vilagoš (Vi-la-go-sch). I am a Mental Health Ambassador on DoYouMind Project and for 9 years now, sports have been a great way for me to take care of my mental health.

The fact that sports have a positive effect on mental health is common knowledge by now. Since we MH ambassadors have the goal to offer support to young people with their mental health, I held a workshop „Bouldering for mental health “. The workshop was supervised by bouldering coach Dino Petrinšak (Pet-rin-schak). The goal of the workshop was to introduce young people to bouldering and point out the positive effects that this sport has on their mental health.

Dino Petrinšak is a personal fitness trainer, yoga instructor, cofounder of bouldering gym Momentum Boulder in Osijek, Croatia with seven years of bouldering experience. He is someone to whom physical fitness is part of the job and mental health is an everyday topic. Because of that I have decided to interview him so that he can share his thoughts about connections between bouldering and mental health.

## A talk with a bouldering coach

**Leon:** Among boulderers you can often hear how bouldering has a meditative effect on them. Also, there are often comments about how bouldering gym is someone's safe space because of the very supportive community in this sport. It is no wonder then that the topic of mental health is often associated with bouldering. Did bouldering influence your mental health in any way?

**Dino:** For me, bouldering has helped me to develop a capacity for deep introspection. I have become highly aware of the signals that are being sent from my mind and my body. This is because bouldering requires you to always be completely present and to always think about what you are doing and how your body feels. Once you develop this skill in bouldering you start to subconsciously apply it to other parts of your life. That has allowed me to not be controlled by my thoughts and bodily impulses. Instead I am able to be very conscious about them and calmly decide whether I want to act upon them or not.

**Leon:** How was your first time climbing outside on a natural rock compared to climbing on artificial rocks in gyms? I am personally very afraid to try climbing in nature even though I have been climbing indoors for more than a year now.

**Dino:** That's completely understandable. Every human has a fear of heights hardwired inside them so climbing outside is a battle with our survival instinct that comes from that fear. Because climbing forces you to develop tolerance to fear so that you don't get overwhelmed by it. Through that process your relationship with fear is changed and you can even see that in your everyday life. You acquire a new understanding of fear.

**Leon:** Whenever I see other people and even yourself on videos of you climbing on rocks in nature I often think “Wow, they are not afraid at all, they are so composed”. But hearing you say what you just said I get the feeling that that is not quite the case. It’s not that you lost that fear, it’s just that you have learned to tolerate it.

**Dino:** Of course, almost no one is fearless. Even us who have been climbing outside for years now, if we don’t climb for some period, we become afraid. It’s not something that you can just walk over and be done with it. You have to face your fears continually so that you don’t lose your tolerance to it.

**Leon:** I see. So, if you don’t climb outside for about a year you would probably feel like it’s your first time outside?

**Dino:** If you do not climb for one year that would be really bad haha. Even after two months of not climbing outside you will feel intense fear.

**Leon:** So that tolerance is something you have to keep up diligently.

**Dino:** Exactly. That, to me, is really the main beauty of climbing outside. I am not really drawn to boulders that are close to the ground no matter how interesting and technically difficult they are. I always miss that feeling of being up high and facing that primal fear.

**Leon:** You know, I was in Vukovar in a forest-park Adica where they have the highest artificial rock in Croatia. It’s a rock that is 15 meters high and I was peer pressured to give it a go. I’ve managed to climb to the top, but I was extremely afraid the entire time. It felt nice when I did it, however now that I think that I might do it again my mind just says: “Why would I go through this again? Is it worth it to do this? This is so scary”.

**Dino:** About a week ago when I was out on a climbing spot with a few of my climber friends who are also very experienced, we kept saying stuff like “Why am I making myself do this? I am so scared right now and everything hurts. Why did I even come here?” But that’s when you should rely on all your training to give you courage. Your fear can be lessened by the expectations that you set for yourself. When you have been training for a while, you start to set some goals, they can be a great source of motivation.

When all your fears, expectations, countless hours of training, awe of nature that surrounds you, self-doubt and adrenaline come together to form a mass of chaos, and you are in the middle of trying to navigate through it all is when you feel the most blissful. And I believe that through that process you can experience some healing of your mind or spirit.

In situations like that, rock really makes you give it your all and I find that really beautiful.

**Leon:** I think that you have successfully eased my fear of climbing outside for the first time. There is still one aspect of this sport that I would like to hear your thoughts on.

You know how they say that comparison is the thief of joy? I often compare myself to others and I am sure that I won’t be able to help myself once I am outside climbing with other people. Have you ever experienced something like that?

**Dino:** You can always compare yourself to someone else when climbing, but I think that you will very quickly find out that there are plenty of better and worse climbers than you out there and absolutely no one cares about your performance. The community of climbers is quite different from other sports communities, I think.

Climbing is by default a very individual sport. After all, the only thing you are competing against is yourself. It's you against the rock and rock could not care less whether you succeed or not. And every climber understands that. That's why they are always very welcoming and friendly.

**Leon:** What would you say to someone who wants to try climbing but does not think that they could do it?

**Dino:** There is no limiting factor in climbing. It is a sport for all body types and ages. Everyone develops in their own way, at their own pace.

It is perfect for someone who wants something physically and mentally challenging. This community will welcome them with open arms and make sure that they feel welcome.