

# THE CONFIDENCE TO MAKE IT HAPPEN

Three women share their personal experiences of finding the self-belief to overcome obstacles – either in work or their personal lives – and to lead the lives they want to lead

INTERVIEWS LORNA V PHOTOGRAPHS LEONIE MORSE

## ‘I overcame my stammer to speak in front of hundreds of people’

NIKI NATARAJAN IS A FINANCIAL WRITER AND PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT BLOGGER

‘I became aware of my stammer at secondary school in London when we were asked to read out loud in English classes. My turn was always cut short by the teacher, who was impatient with me. I began to freeze when talking, and had no confidence speaking in front of any group.

I was confident writing however, and I carved out a career in financial journalism which led to editing a leading publication for hedge-fund investors. In March 2003, I had to host my publication’s first awards dinner in front of 250 people in the New York Public Library. I was so terrified, they might as well have been sharks. My nerves were not helped by my boss urging me to speak louder, then slower.

However, making speeches was now a part of my job, so there was no shying away. I had to face this demon. I would write my speeches word for word and practise reading them but, in front of a group, I always stammered.

The turning point came when I was invited to speak to a room of investors in Milan – I didn’t have a stammer; I was speaking confidently in Italian. My mother is Italian, my father was from India and I was born and went to school in London. I realised that during my summers growing up in Italy, I was a confident child who didn’t have to deal with

prejudice. But at school in the UK, despite explaining that my dad was from southern India not Pakistan, I was called a ‘Paki’.

I then discovered that it’s common for bilingual children to hesitate from one language to another, which was why I was slower in those English classes, developing the habit of a nervous stammer.

My interest in personal development led me to study NLP (neurolinguistic programming), and one of the bonuses was learning to overcome my fear of public speaking. Techniques I learnt included choosing a couple of friends in an audience and speaking to them rather than the whole room. Also, I tried asking myself who was in the audience and why they were there, rather than ‘seeing’ sharks. Slowly, I got better and better and I started to gain confidence.

I have since hosted that same awards dinner nine more times, as well as annual conferences where I have moderated panels in front of 400-plus people. At one industry dinner I was on stage in front of more than 900 attendees, and this summer, I was invited to be a keynote speaker at an industry event in the Bahamas. The funny thing is, I’m now often told I’m a natural!’

For more about Niki, see [thelifedetective.com](http://thelifedetective.com)

HAIR & MAKE-UP: SADAF AHMAD

## ‘Setting up a support group for single parents gave me confidence’

NATALIE TIMOTHEOU IS AN ENGLISH TEACHER, BLOGGER AND CAMPAIGNER FOR MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES

I’ve never been confident, and becoming a single mum made it even worse. Although I was the one who decided to end the marriage because we weren’t happy, I still felt sad, depressed and confused. When I left with our nine-month-old son, some people told me it’s better to stay together for the child; there’s still a stigma about single-parent children not being as happy.

Only when the divorce came through after two years did I feel I could start to move on. My ex-husband was my first and only boyfriend; we’d been together for almost eight years, so the idea of dating was petrifying. I doubted it was possible to meet someone in my age group who’d be able to accept my situation. As a woman, I felt frumpy and unattractive. The idea of trying online dating was such a huge step. I’d lost confidence with little things, including driving. I had panic attacks.

The turning point was a hypnotherapist who helped me shift my mindset from negative and depressed. I set up a Gingerbread charity support group for single parents in my local area. Organising that gave me confidence. My friendship groups changed as I met people who did understand – people like me from all walks of life and age groups. I realised anyone can end up in my situation and I didn’t have to feel guilty. I read biographies and self-help books; did an online mindfulness course and took writing classes. I changed my appearance to suit the “new me”. As I’ve felt better about myself, dating has got easier.

Now I feel strong. I know there aren’t many 30-year-olds with my life experience. I look at my happy son and feel so proud I’ve shaped this little boy’s life. He’s my biggest confidence-booster.

Follow Natalie on Twitter @natsy\_tim

HAIR & MAKE-UP: HAYLEY MCGREAL

## ‘Doing what I love has boosted my confidence after redundancy’

LORETTA MANSON IS AN ALEXANDER TECHNIQUE TEACHER AND DANCE CLUB ORGANISER

‘After nearly a decade as a PA at an international hotel group, I felt like I was going nowhere. But although I didn’t want to stay, when I was made redundant four years ago, it was as if I’d been left on the scrap heap.

I knew this was the chance I’d been waiting for to relaunch my career as a teacher of the Alexander Technique [a method used for tension and pain relief, improved posture and mindfulness]. I hadn’t had the resources or confidence to set up in business when I first qualified. Now, I refreshed my skills and began teaching. Working in hectic offices for years, seeing people slumped over their desks under pressure, had brought home to me how much the Alexander Technique had to offer.

Pursuing what I believed in gave me confidence. I started doing other things I would’ve found terrifying in the past, like teaching swing-dancing, and opening a club night with a leading dancer. It felt great to do things I was enthusiastic about, even if I was nervous. I started a Facebook group – Lootie’s Free Kicks – a year-long exercise in appreciating free everyday experiences. Writing the posts daily helped me realise how rich my life is – love, friendship, dance, music, nature. And I had so much support, humour and camaraderie from people. Life before redundancy was dominated by a sense that I couldn’t fully be myself. Now everything has come together. When you feel so full of joy and gratitude, lack of confidence doesn’t come into it.’

HAIR & MAKE-UP: CAROLINE PIASECKI

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