

# THE CONFIDENCE TRICK

Confidence can often feel like it's the holy grail of success and happiness – but is it a skill you can learn? **Lorna V** reveals what she discovered when writing *Psychologies*' new book *Real Confidence*

**C**onfidence can often seem to be the key to getting everything we want in life – but what if we feel we don't have enough of it? Moreover, what does real confidence actually look like? Can we cultivate it – and if so, how?

Students in my postgraduate journalism course often say to me: 'It's OK for you; you're confident.' Some people seem to see me as super-confident. Meanwhile, in other areas of my life, people see me as the one hiding in the corner with none. Confidence means different things to different people, as related terms – self-confidence, self-esteem, inner confidence, outer confidence – all play their own role within the spectrum of confidence.

In fact, confidence can seem such a huge, daunting and enigmatic subject that *Psychologies* decided to devote a whole book to the subject. I was offered the opportunity to research what we have called *Real Confidence*. And what did I learn? I have to confess that my overall feeling as the book developed and progressed was one of huge relief. What emerged was a perspective on confidence that departed radically from the conventional 'fake it until you make it' advice.

As I looked inwards at my own confidence, I realised that in the areas of my life where I'm considered confident, I have never faked a thing. I worked hard at what I loved, and still do, and I'd be prepared to bet that when you think about your own life, you know the areas where you feel truly and authentically confident, too.

So, how can we define that? Is it self-esteem or something more? After all of the studies and definitions that I researched within the realm of confidence, psychologist Dr Ilona Boniwell summed it up perfectly: 'Self-esteem is more about liking yourself. Self-efficacy is our belief in our capacity to try and accomplish something.'

Am I confident in the areas where I don't have to 'fake it to make it' such as writing, simply because I have put myself out there, tried it and given myself the chance to get good at it? Niki Flacks, acting coach and psychologist explains, 'When we are confident in doing something, it tends to be afterwards that we realise this. That's when we say, "Wow, I really did that, I was confident".'

Self-efficacy, coined by Canadian psychologist Albert Bandura, is the concept of simply giving something a go – to try something even if you don't know what you are doing. And it is from this point that confidence can be cultivated; confidence is a skill that can be learnt, as long as we are willing to try.

The consensus from the experts is that we can all develop confidence, that it's the experience of *learning* and *doing* that creates confidence, not some magical mystery formula.

Read on to discover what I learnt from the seven eminent experts I interviewed for the *Psychologies Real Confidence* book, and the seven secrets that have helped me become more confident in my own life. >>>

**“Self-efficacy is our belief in our capacity to try and accomplish something”**



>>>



**WHOSE EVENING CAN YOU LIGHT UP?**

I loved interviewing **Annie Ashdown**, business and personal development coach, clinical hypnotherapist, and author of *The Confidence Factor: The Seven Secrets of Successful People* (Crimson, £12.99). One of her big passions is empowering people to get over bullying because it's rife in so many organisations and situations.

I tend to forget the impact my earliest school years had on me, growing up in a small town in Essex where I was bullied for being fat and foreign (my parents are Greek Cypriot). One way or another, throughout my life, I've always felt like the outsider.

Sure, I can deal with it now, but it can still be painful in situations where I feel picked on. I realised, however, and I hate admitting it, that I can get a little self-indulgent with the 'feeling like an outsider' number. I explained to Ashdown that I'm shy and lack confidence when I go out socially. I've been learning the tango for years, surrounded by confident, outgoing women asking men to dance, yet I can't bring myself to do it. Ashdown came back like a boomerang: 'If you hide, you're hiding your light,' she said. 'There might be a man who feels less confident and more shy. Turn it around. Make someone happy.' **TRY THIS:** If you're nervous in any social situation, flip the attention to finding someone *more* nervous and making *them* feel at ease. 'Show up and see how you can be useful,' says Ashdown.



**TRY, EVEN IF YOU CRY**

One of the best questions I'm so pleased I asked in the process of writing *Real Confidence* was 'Did you ever cry?'

addressed to positive psychologist, **Dr Ilona Boniwell**. She was Skyping from her home in France and I was relating/translating the scientific psychology concepts we were discussing into real life – my life and hers. This led us to talk about her quest to cook for French friends with French standards. As I noted earlier, Boniwell resonates with confidence as self-efficacy: mastering a given situation. We cried with laughter as she described the tortuous process of learning to cook for the French way of life and how, at times, this

reduced her to tears. I realised later, that even when something is hard and makes me cry – like overcoming my technophobia – this is something to be proud of and even laugh about. Hey, I'm trying! Tears are human, normal, and part of any difficult process. When you get through the tears (and fathom some aspect of anything you dread) it feels great.

**TRY THIS:** Identify something you consider a weakness that has reduced you to tears. Is it really a weakness on your part? Spend a few minutes thinking differently about it.



**STOP SETTING GOALS**

One of the most graphic images life coach **Dawn Breslin** left me with was her description of our culture becoming one of aspiring to material goods: 'Designer bags are leather sacks,' she said with full-throated passion. The quote didn't go into *Real Confidence*, but what did go in was her caution about our 'push, push, push' culture. It robs us of confidence because it can feel like we're running on empty, and there are times in life when we need to stop and recharge.

As I'm self-employed, that means that there are periods of having to 'push, push, push' but Breslin made me realise that it's OK to give myself permission to stop, reflect, consider what I need and, most of all, recharge. She was emphatic that pushing when exhausted is counterproductive, and that's a message I really needed to hear, as I'm not good at stopping. When there's a sticky patch, I draw up more goals and can end up feeling more stuck which can then affect my confidence. It's a relief to know this is normal.

**TRY THIS:** Take a break from setting goals. Set how you'd like to feel instead – fulfilled, respected, happy?



**CONFIDENCE IS HUMBLE AND CALM**

Just as I began researching the *Real Confidence* book, I taught a three-day writing workshop that **Dr Nitasha Buldeo**, research scientist in biophysiology, attended. When I looked up her student details at the end of the first day, I was pretty taken aback by her phenomenal academic accomplishments. In class, she was not only modest >>>

PHOTOGRAPHS: VICTORIA BIRKINSHAW, JAMES GLOSSOP

“If you hide, you're hiding your light. Show up and see how you can be useful”



>>> (by her own admission, an introvert), she also made everyone feel comfortable and helped the group bond. She's a smart, attractive woman who makes everyone around her feel smart and attractive themselves. I was witnessing real confidence in action.

I've often given myself a hard time about how I think I *should* be. I wonder if I should be tweeting, posting selfies, and advertising what I do non-stop. If that's confidence, I can't do it. It makes me cringe; it's just not me. Interviewing Buldeo about the biophysiology of confidence was illuminating. I learnt how confidence feels. Confidence, in short, feels calm. **TRY THIS:** Find a role model who embodies the confidence you respect and identify what it is about them you like.



**COMBINE WHAT YOU FEAR WITH CAKE (OR A BOX SET – OR BOTH)**

I was utterly thrilled when ex-Broadway actress, acting coach and psychologist Niki Flacks revealed that she had to overcome the fear of driving and gain the confidence to pass her driving test. I have zero confidence in driving, even though I passed my test while at university. I've had one refresher course since, which only managed to make me feel worse and increased my anxiety.

When Flacks said you shouldn't spend more than 30 to 45 minutes on an activity you dread, I wanted to jump for joy. No wonder I couldn't cope with two-hour lessons! Combining this half-hour with something that gives you pleasure, like cake, helps to retrain the brain. Flacks gained confidence by taking lessons with a younger woman who made her laugh and rooted for her. So I'm going to find a teacher who makes me laugh, is positive, does short lessons – and maybe I'll have an entire refresher course at a seaside location, or even ask her out for cake afterwards!

**TRY THIS:** Pair up experiences in which you lack confidence with experiences you enjoy. Half an hour spent sorting your accounts, for example, followed by an hour indulging in what you love.



**NARCISSISTS ARE BAD FOR YOUR EMOTIONAL HEALTH**

When I started researching the book, I asked all my friends if there was

anything they would want to know about confidence. One said that she wasn't sure if her question had anything to do with confidence, but it was an issue that unsettled her all the same. She explained that she didn't mind the braggers in her circle so much, or even the attention-seekers, but she really got wound up by people falling for the braggers or fawning over the attention-seekers. 'Is it just me? Am I the only one who doesn't pander to these narcissists? Am I missing something?' she asked. No, she wasn't the only one feeling like that – I do, too.

So I was relieved to read in Dr Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic's book, *Confidence: the Surprising Truth About How Much You Need and How To Get It* (Profile Books, £9.99), that there is ample evidence for why people fall for narcissists. When we spoke about this in more detail, he made clear that this leads to our society valuing incompetence, and that overconfidence is not real confidence. My feelings of guilt for not playing the game vanished.

**TRY THIS:** Ignore somebody in your circle who is desperate for attention. Pay a genuine compliment to someone who deserves acknowledgement.



**MAKE REAL CONNECTIONS**

One of the things that voice and leadership coach Patsy Rodenburg talked a lot about was making real connections with people in our daily lives, especially in cities where we tend to lose confidence because we lose connection to ourselves and to each other. 'Oh yes, yes, good, good, I already do this,' I thought, listening to Rodenburg. Then I realised what she was talking about meant more than simply looking up and acknowledging someone. That might indeed be mannerly, however, it's not 'connecting'. Making a true connection means thinking about that person's circumstances: what time does their late-night supermarket shift finish? What time do they start work? Does the company they work for treat them well? It means truly stopping and focusing, even if that's for 10 seconds. Making a connection beyond a polite acknowledgement shifts me out of my head into a different energy. I feel more present in life, rather than floating in my head.

**TRY THIS:** Ask a stranger one question about themselves and really listen to their response.



**READ ON...**

**THE CONFIDENCE FACTOR: THE SEVEN SECRETS OF SUCCESSFUL PEOPLE**

(Crimson Publishing, £12.99) by Annie Ashdown, Harley Street business and personal development coach and clinical hypnotherapist, [annieashdown.com](http://annieashdown.com)

**POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY IN A NUTSHELL**

(Open University Press, £12.99) by Dr Ilona Boniwell, positive

psychologist. You can find out more and also buy Strengths Cards (a fun tool for discovering qualities) at [positran.co.uk](http://positran.co.uk)

**DAWN BRESLIN'S GUIDE TO SUPER CONFIDENCE**

(Hay House) by Dawn Breslin, author, speaker and coach. For more information on Dawn's five-day Harmonizing Retreat, visit [dawnbreslin.co.uk/harmonizing-retreat](http://dawnbreslin.co.uk/harmonizing-retreat)

**NITASHABULDEO.COM**

for more from Dr Nitasha Buldeo, research scientist in biophysiology at the University of Northampton

**CONFIDENCE: THE SURPRISING TRUTH ABOUT HOW MUCH YOU NEED AND HOW TO GET IT**

(Profile Books, £9.99) by Dr Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic, professor of business psychology, [drtomascp.com](http://drtomascp.com)

**PRESENCE: HOW TO USE POSITIVE ENERGY FOR SUCCESS IN EVERY SITUATION**

(Penguin, £12.99) by voice and leadership coach Patsy Rodenburg, [patsyrodensburg.com](http://patsyrodensburg.com)

**ACTING WITH PASSION**

(Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, £16.99) by Niki Flacks, acting coach and psychologist, [nikiflacks.com](http://nikiflacks.com)