

# CONFIDENCE

What gives people confidence?

To answer this, it's easier to start with the things that may appear to give people confidence, but actually don't.

Success is one of those things. People often think that success should generate confidence. Yet some of the most successful people remain insecure about their achievements and always afraid of losing ground. Some successful people are driven, dissatisfied and self-critical, never able to enjoy their success. Some successful people are haunted by fear of failure. Some people whom others would call successful still call themselves unsuccessful. It is not often that other people's definitions of success match our own expectations or ideals.

Positive self-talk is another often mentioned confidence-builder. If life gives you lemons, make lemonade. Affirm your dignity and value with daily readings. Stuart Smalley, the Saturday Night Live character who floundered and flubbed every activity and then stood in front of a mirror and said to himself, "I'm good enough! I'm smart enough! And, gosh darn it, people like me!" portrayed the pathetic and comical aspect of positive self-talk. It doesn't ring true and affect your life outcomes unless you believe it. If you actually believed it, you wouldn't need to say it.

Image-enhancement is yet another often suggested confidence-builder. Change your shape. Get a nose job or a hairpiece. Change your wardrobe. Get your colors done. Carry a certain briefcase, or drive a certain car, or favor a certain drink. The choices presented to us offer the full range of swagger – from outrageous attitude to classy serenity. But the message is the same: Look confident, whether you are or not. Image enhancement has become a lucrative industry. Yet we all know, deep down, that playing a role doesn't make us the character we're playing. Image enhancement is like putting a new façade on a building with structural problems; the building may look really good, but it isn't any safer to inhabit.

Praise is one of the most mentioned confidence-builders. If you want to help others be more confident, praise them. If you want to feel confident, surround yourself with people who think well of you and consistently tell you that. Praise is paradoxical, though. We suspect cheerleaders who find something good to say and pour on the praise, no matter what the actual facts of the occasion. Genuine and deserved praise is heartwarming. Yet we know we can't become dependent on it. What would happen to us when we're facing something alone with no one to cheer us on? Worse yet, when we feel the least confident, we are least able to accept and appreciate praise, whether it's disingenuous or genuine.

All of the most frequently suggested means of gaining confidence involve input from outside. The successes against which we measure ourselves, the appearance of confidence with which we cloak ourselves, or the opinions of others with which we buttress ourselves are off-the-shelf items. We have to shop others' opinions and ideas to get them. Then we have to make them fit the opinions and ideas we already have about ourselves. The difficulty with any external input into what we call confidence is that it only connects with the ego. That ego, the personal thinking we have about who and what we are or should be, is like a castle in the sand. It is a loose structure created from imagination, easily damaged, and impossible to sustain in the face of ordinary natural events without constant effort and attention.

When we are focused on creating and maintaining confidence from the outside-in, we are forced to make an effort to think about ourselves a lot. How am I doing? How do I look? Who's noticing? What do they think? What should I do now? Confidence appears to be a special, personal state that requires us to calibrate our individual performance continually. For those who take this definition to heart, confidence is a form of self-absorption. When we're feeling confident, we think well of ourselves and feel proud; when we're not, we think ill of ourselves and feel distressed. But we're always thinking about ourselves.

This is normally unnoticed, however, because it becomes just part of the background noise of our everyday thinking. It always surprises people to find out how much thinking we all do about ourselves in this world that is so geared to self-monitoring and trying harder. Thinking about ourselves is the certain route to insecurity, however, which is why people's "confidence" can be "shaken" or people "lose their confidence" or people have to "bolster their confidence" in the face of doubt. When we are thinking only about our own, individual, special personal world, life in general is a mystery to us and we see only the limits and boundaries we have created, rather than seeing ourselves as part of the larger whole of humanity.

For a significant portion of my adult life, I lived in the world of "confidence" as we normally know it. To remain confident was to be in the question: "What have I done for myself lately?" Each success had to be followed by a greater success. Each challenge called for intense preparation and whatever rituals of self-esteem had been working best recently. If something I thought went well was not followed by praise or accolades, I was discouraged and crestfallen. I was driven to win. I had a paperweight on my desk that said, "Winning isn't something; winning is **everything**." People thought of me as confident and outgoing, but I was hounded, within my own mind, by images of possible failure and potential embarrassment. I was never, ever off-duty in my job of keeping myself going.

At a time when I was truly exhausted from this extraordinarily taxing effort and looking for a way to take early retirement or drop out of the rat race somehow, I met a group of friends in Florida who seemed to be to be supremely confident, beyond anything I could imagine. Yet they were completely at ease. Everything they did looked simple and straightforward and effortless. They bounced back from apparent disappointment and admitted mistakes with laughter and good heartedness and then went on to do something remarkable, yet talk about it in the most ordinary terms. They accepted kind words gracefully, but they tended to turn the kindness back on the speaker and create a warm connection between themselves and many others looking to do good things in life. They liked each other and looked forward to getting together, but they didn't spend much time together and they never sought each other's praise or advice. They seemed naturally confident in a way I could not understand. But when I asked them about it, they scarcely related to the word "confident."

I particularly remember one such conversation, when the other person said to me, "Confidence is our birthright. It's no big deal; it's just our natural state of mind, untroubled by personal thinking. You don't need to work hard to get what you've already got." That sounded pretty crazy to me.

But I couldn't just write it off because I was unhappy and trying to disengage from life, and they weren't. They were genuinely happy and fully engaged in life, and loving it. I longed to be contented and at peace in that way. It wasn't attributable to circumstances – they were in all walks of life, many in careers such as medicine, classroom teaching and community social work, which most others found discouraging and stressful at that time.

For quite a while, I went about trying to understand this phenomenon the same way I had gone about everything else. I asked a million questions. I found these people immensely patient with me, but strangely evasive. Rather than answering my questions, they would suggest I relax my mind and quiet down and see what answers might occur to me. They seemed quite certain I could think for myself and that I would have good answers. I noticed that, when pressed for details, they often honestly didn't know what they had thought or done in any given situation – they were absolutely uninterested in the kinds of self-examination and self-criticism that I believed were the only ways to improve.

It dawned on me, one day, that I was the architect of all my distress. I just suddenly saw how I had constructed the unstable structure of my personal confidence that was always teetering. I saw, too, that I could just stop doing that. From that day forward, instead of worrying about "my" confidence, I found confidence in humanity. I found certainty that my humanity, the essence of my soul as a human being, was just fine and so was everyone else's. It seemed increasingly clear to me that the common bond of human beings is that we are all the same in that way, regardless of the personal thinking that obscures our deep-down connection to each other.

Now, years later, I look back on my years of relentless and unfulfilling striving to get confidence and success as a strange interlude between the natural confidence of youth and the new-found confidence delivered by my unexpected insight. I am deeply grateful to the friends who pointed me in that direction and had unswerving faith that I would see it for myself.

What gives people confidence? The answer seems disarmingly simple. Everyone already is confident. And everyone can obscure and confuse their natural confidence with a lot of personal thinking about who they should be and what they should be doing. All people get their confidence back when that thinking stops.

The proof of that is simple, too. No matter how insecure a person may be, there is something each person does effortlessly and naturally. It might be walking the dog, or cooking spaghetti, or building model ships, or knitting sweaters, or playing with children or driving a car. The graceful state of mind in which that something occurs is always available. Because we're not noticing our thoughts at all when we're in that state of mind, it doesn't seem like anything at all to us. But it is **everything**. Everything we need.

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