

introduction

a daring adventure, or nothing

If only you had more confidence, how would your life be different?

Whether you call it ‘lack of confidence’, ‘fear of failure’, ‘performance anxiety’ or ‘self-doubt’, the chances are it’s cost you dearly in your life. Take a moment to consider: What have you given up? What have you missed out on? What opportunities have you lost because of it?

Over the years, I’ve worked with literally thousands of people who have put their hopes, dreams and ambitions on hold because they ‘don’t have enough confidence’. And the sad thing is, this lack of confidence is not due to any fault of their own. It is certainly not because of stupidity, or laziness, or negative thinking, or a deprived childhood, or a chemical imbalance in the brain. It is simply because they do not know the rules of the confidence game.

The Confidence Game

Yes, confidence is a game – a skilful psychological game. And unfortunately, our society gives us the wrong rules to play it. Over the years you may have read articles, bought self-help books, watched TV shows and listened to well-meaning advice from friends, family and health professionals on how to overcome fear of failure, eliminate self-doubt or boost self-confidence. And I’d guess that some of those ideas worked quite well – at least, for a little while. But I’d also be willing to bet that they didn’t ultimately give you what you wanted. So, are you open to something new? Something challenging? Are you willing to try playing with a radically different set of rules?

I’m not going to churn out the same old stuff you’ve heard a million times before: visualisation, self-hypnosis, positive affirmations, challenging negative thoughts, relaxation techniques, self-esteem boosting, ‘fake it till you make it’ strategies and so on. Nor will I deny reality and claim that you can have anything you want simply through asking the universe and believing it will provide. (Of course, I’d sell a lot more books that way – nothing sells as well as promising you can have whatever you want for virtually no effort!)

Instead, I’ll show you why it’s not your fault that what you’ve been trying isn’t working. Until now, you may have thought that you weren’t trying hard enough, or you weren’t ‘doing it properly’: that you weren’t thinking positively enough, or challenging your negative thoughts effectively enough, or practising your relaxation techniques/self-hypnosis/visualisation intensively enough, etc. But you’ll soon realise that while these popular strategies can often give us relief

from fear, anxiety and self-doubt in the short term, they rarely give us genuine confidence in the long term. Why not? Because they are based on the wrong rules for the confidence game. And there's no way to win the game if you don't know the rules!

Now just for a moment, stop reading and notice what thoughts you are having. Throughout this book, I'll be asking you to do this repeatedly: to increase your awareness of what your mind is doing; to notice how it's reacting and what it's telling you. The ability to notice your own thought processes is an important psychological skill. And the more often you do this, the more you will learn about how your mind works – which will come in very handy later. So please, just for a few seconds, put the book down and simply notice what your mind is telling you.

Are you noticing thoughts such as: 'How did this happen? Where did I go wrong? How did I come to learn the "wrong rules"'? The truth is, it's almost impossible that you could have grown up in our modern society without learning these rules. You've been learning them since you were a tiny kid. They are deeply entrenched and widely promoted through popular myths, Hollywood movies, glossy magazines, pop psychologists, self-help gurus, hypnotherapists, motivational speakers and the 'common sense' advice that we so frequently receive from professionals, friends and relatives.

It's clinging to these rules tightly that keeps many people firmly stuck in the 'confidence trap'. They keep trying to overcome fear and boost self-confidence using tools and strategies that are only effective for a short time, and keep them constantly striving for 'more confidence'.

So what are all these 'wrong rules'? And more importantly, what are the 'right rules' to help us win the confidence game? As you read through this book, you'll progressively find out. I don't want to lay it all out for you right now, before we've even reached the first chapter. Rather, I invite you to treat this book as an adventure; a voyage of discovery. I encourage you to savour the process of exploration, and to enjoy each new encounter along the way. On your journey, you'll discover a revolutionary new approach to maximising human potential: a model of change which is firmly based on cutting-edge research in human psychology. And you'll learn to develop a mindset known as psychological flexibility – a powerful mental state that enables you to respond effectively to fear, anxiety and self-doubt. You'll also learn to develop genuine, lasting self-confidence. And you'll learn to enhance your performance in any area of life – from sports, business and creative arts to socialising, parenting and sex!

Too Good to Be True?

If at this point you're feeling doubtful or cynical, I think that's good – and I'd encourage you to maintain your scepticism. Please, do *not* believe anything just because I say it's so. After all, if 'believing what others tell you' were the best way to resolve your problems, you'd have sorted them out long ago. So rather than automatically

believing what I say, please always check your own experience and see if it is true for you.

Can I absolutely guarantee that the methods in this book will work for you? Well, if you ever encounter anyone who makes you a foolproof guarantee of success, then please – do not buy anything they are offering. A guarantee of this nature is a sure sign of insincerity (or self-delusion). Even a top surgeon would never guarantee that an operation would be a total success. He would tell you his best estimate of the odds of success, and then he'd get you to sign a consent form acknowledging the small but possible risks of all the things that might go wrong.

So what are your odds of success if you use the methods in this book? Very, very high. Why do I say that? Because this book is based upon a new model for changing human behaviour that is shaking the very foundations of Western psychology. In the worlds of sport and business, this model has various names, including the Mindfulness-Acceptance-Commitment Approach, Mindfulness-based Emotional Intelligence Training, or Psychological Flexibility Training. Most commonly it is known as Acceptance and Commitment Training, or ACT (which is said as the word 'act', not as the initials A-C-T).

US psychologist Professor Steven Hayes developed ACT in the early 1980s, originally to treat depression. (In the world of counselling and psychotherapy, it is known as Acceptance and Commitment *Therapy*.) Unfortunately, back then ACT was such a revolutionary concept, it took more than twenty-five years before the wider world of psychology was able to embrace its insights. Now, as ever more evidence accumulates to prove its effectiveness, ACT is rapidly spreading around the globe, having a powerful impact on many difficult areas of people's lives. And one key factor in its success is its innovative approach to developing mindfulness.

What Is Mindfulness?

Mindfulness is a mental state of awareness, openness and focus. When we are mindful, we are able to engage fully in what we are doing, let go of unhelpful thoughts, and act effectively without being pushed around by our emotions. Mindfulness has been known about in Eastern philosophy for thousands of years, but until recently we in the West could only learn about it through following ancient doctrines from the East such as yoga, meditation, tai chi, martial arts or Zen. ACT allows us to develop mindfulness skills in a short space of time, even if we don't follow these ancient traditions.

There are three key mindfulness skills that will play a major role in your journey to genuine confidence. These are known as defusion, expansion and engagement.

Defusion

Defusion is the ability to separate from your thoughts and to let them come and go, instead of getting caught up in them, or allowing them to dictate what you do. Defusion provides a powerful way to deal effectively with painful, unhelpful or self-defeating thoughts

and beliefs.

Expansion

Expansion is the ability to open up and make room for emotions, sensations and feelings, and to let them come and go without letting them drag you down, push you around or hold you back. Expansion provides a powerful way to handle difficult emotions such as fear, anger and anxiety.

Engagement

Engagement is the ability to be ‘psychologically present’; to live fully ‘in the moment’; to be fully aware of what is happening right here, right now, instead of being caught up in your thoughts; to be open to, curious about and actively involved in your here-and-now experience. Engagement is an essential ability if you wish to perform well, or find satisfaction and fulfilment in whatever you are doing.

But There’s More

There’s more to ACT than developing mindfulness skills; it also involves clarifying your core values – your heart’s deepest desires for how you want to behave as a human being – and using those values to motivate, inspire and guide your ongoing action. When mindfulness, values and committed action come together, they give rise to ‘psychological flexibility’: the ability to take effective action, guided by values, with awareness, openness and focus.

The ACT model is remarkable in its adaptability. The same tools that have helped tens of thousands of people worldwide to reclaim, rebuild and enrich their lives after many years of struggling with drug addiction, alcoholism, depression, panic disorder and schizophrenia are now being used to help professional athletes and businesspeople enhance their performance, to enable organisations to run more effectively, and to help all sorts of workers – from police officers and bankers to receptionists and dentists – to reduce stress and increase satisfaction in their work. In this book you will discover how to use those tools to develop genuine confidence, pursue your dreams and be the person you really want to be. But first let me tell you a little bit about myself.

My Story

Confidence is a topic that’s very close to my heart, because for many, many years I didn’t have it! As a teenager and in my twenties, I was incredibly anxious in social situations, full of self-doubt and terrified of coming across as dull, stupid or unlikeable. Long before I reached the legal drinking age, I started relying on alcohol to help me cope, and by the end of my first year at medical school, I was drinking heavily on a daily basis. This got progressively worse, and on one occasion, in my third year at medical school, I was admitted to hospital, via ambulance, with alcohol poisoning. (My embarrassment was intense, but not as bad as the hangover.)

My low self-confidence also played out in intimate relationships. I

was so afraid of rejection, I never asked girls to go out with me unless I was drunk – and they usually only said ‘yes’ if they were drunk too! On those rare occasions when I did actually have a girlfriend, I would usually end the relationship after two weeks. I figured if I ended it quickly, she wouldn’t get a chance to realise how ‘inadequate’ I was; in other words, I got to reject her before she could reject me.

I had similar problems with studying. At medical school, I was convinced that I was dumber than everyone else in my year, and whenever I tried to plough my way through all those thick, complex textbooks of anatomy, physiology and biochemistry, all my self-doubt came gushing to the surface. So what did I do? Well, I didn’t like those feelings of anxiety, or those thoughts about being dumb, so to avoid them, I avoided studying! And the consequence? For my first two years at medical school, I failed every single exam, and had to resit them all. (Of course, the heavy drinking didn’t help.)

I was very lucky I didn’t get thrown out of medical school; at the time, I set a new record for failing exams. I always managed to do just enough work to pass them on the resits. Eventually, I learned my lesson. In my fourth year at medical school, I started to study sensibly, and two years later, I qualified as a doctor. Which gave me a huge sense of achievement. But did that boost my low self-confidence? Far from it!

Once I had graduated, my self-doubt went through the roof.

Working as a junior hospital doctor, I was constantly in a state of high anxiety. I was terrified of making the wrong decision, or giving the wrong drug, or missing the correct diagnosis. My hands always get sweaty when I’m nervous – but at this point in my life, they weren’t so much sweating as dripping. I would wipe them dry on the sides of my white coat, but within moments they would be hot and clammy again. And if I had to wear rubber gloves for medical procedures, the gloves would literally fill up with sweat. After a few weeks of this relentless sweating, I developed a nasty case of dermatitis: my fingers erupted into a mass of red blisters and required treatment with steroids

to settle down.

So I know what it’s like to lack self-confidence. I’ve given up on many things that were important to me. I’ve missed out on important areas of life. I’ve held myself back through self-doubt and fear of failure. And the good news is, I’ve been able to learn and change. These days I socialise with confidence – but hardly drink at all. I study with confidence – and then go on to write books about what I learn. I work with confidence – which includes speaking to audiences all over the world. So I trust the principles in this book not only because they are solidly backed by science, not only because I have witnessed them helping hundreds of my clients, but because they have worked so well for me in *my* life.

There’s No Such Thing as a Free Lunch

If you’re open to new ideas and willing to learn some new skills, then the odds are overwhelming that you’ll be successful in developing

genuine confidence. However, not surprisingly, like everything that improves your life, this will take time and effort. You'll need to invest time and effort not only to read this book, but also to practise these new skills and apply them in the relevant areas of your life. Take a moment to think about whether you're prepared to invest that time and energy.

We wouldn't expect to become a good skier or painter or dancer simply by reading books about it. Reading books about these subjects can give us plenty of valuable information, but in order to ski well, paint well, dance well, we actually need to practise the relevant skills. And the same holds true for developing genuine confidence. This book will give you both the tools you need and the instructions for using them – but you'll need to do some practice to reap the benefits. (And if you're feeling a sense of reluctance or hesitation – if your mind's saying something like 'But I don't have the discipline/motivation/willpower' – not to worry; those are all issues we'll cover in this book.)

So Where to From Here?

This book is structured in five parts. Part 1 is called 'Warming Up'. Here, I'll be challenging some popular myths around confidence, and you'll discover how we all learned to play by the wrong rules. In part 2, 'The Double-Edged Sword' you'll learn how to effectively handle those negative thoughts that all of us have (without disputing them or trying to replace them with positive affirmations, and so on). In part 3, 'What Gets You Going', you'll discover the fundamentals of self-motivation and how to overcome psychological barriers. In part 4, 'Taming Your Fear', you'll learn, step by step, how to fundamentally transform your relationship with fear and anxiety. And in part 5, 'Playing the Game', you'll discover how to bring all your new skills together for genuine confidence, ongoing success and peak performance in your chosen field of endeavour.

At school, you probably learned about Helen Keller. Born in 1880, Helen was nineteen months old when she was struck by meningitis, which left her permanently deaf and blind. Against all the odds, she learned to read and write, and went on to become a great author, a powerful advocate for progressive social change, and ultimately a Nobel prize-winner. She is widely quoted in countless books, and probably her most famous saying is this: 'Life is a daring adventure, or nothing.'

Given these two options for your life – a daring adventure, or nothing – which do you choose? If you want your life to be a daring adventure; if you want to grow, explore and develop your full potential; if you're ready now to set out in a brave new direction, curious about what you will discover, and willing to make room for the discomfort that may arise . . . then what are you waiting for?

part one

warming up

chapter 1

why bother?

So what's in this book for you?

On one level, the answer is obvious: you want more confidence. But I want you to dig a bit deeper, because confidence is not the end of the journey, is it? Presumably you want that confidence in order to achieve something: to make changes that will improve your life.

Imagine that you magically have all the confidence you ever could have hoped for – but nothing in your life changes. You feel supremely confident, but you continue to act in exactly the same way as before, in every aspect of your life. There are no changes in your relationships, your work, your health, your social life or your recreational activities. You continue to go through the same old daily routine, doing the same old things. You walk and talk exactly as before. You don't start any new projects. You don't pursue any new goals. Your performance doesn't alter in any way. Your character doesn't change. You don't treat yourself or others any differently. You behave in exactly the same way as you did before. The only thing different is that you now feel confident. Would you be satisfied with that outcome?

I've asked hundreds of people that question, and no-one has ever answered 'yes'. This is hardly surprising. We don't want confidence just for the sake of it; we want it for a purpose. We want it to help us achieve our goals, follow our dreams or perform better in some domain of life, such as sport, business, music, the arts, public speaking, parenting or socialising. That's why I ask my clients, 'If you had all the confidence in the world, how would you behave differently? What sort of person would you be and what sort of things would you do?'

The answers I get to this question vary enormously. Below, I'll give you just a small sample.

- Dave, a 50-year-old physiotherapist, would be more creative, and start writing that novel he's been dreaming about for over a decade.
- Claire, a somewhat shy 33-year-old receptionist who hasn't been out on a date in more than four years, would join an online dating agency and start meeting some new people. She would also become more outgoing, open and talkative both at the office and amongst her friends.
- Ethan, a senior manager in a large corporation, would be more effective at making decisions under pressure and better at giving performance appraisals to his staff.

- Raj, the owner of a very successful restaurant, would take out a loan and open the second restaurant he's been dreaming about for over two years.
- Koula, an insurance-claims processor, would leave her empty, joyless marriage and start a new relationship.
- Rob, a 42-year-old real estate agent looking for a change in career, would enrol part-time at university and start studying for his MBA.
- Sarah, an unemployed dancer, would attend far more auditions and dance much better in front of the judges.
- Phil, a semi-professional tennis-player, would play better under pressure – and hopefully win more games as a result.
- Cleo, a shy 28-year-old scientist, would make more friends, spend more time socialising, and behave in a more genuine, warm and engaging way in social situations.
- Seb, a 44-year-old taxi driver, would start making love to his wife again. For the past three years, he has avoided all sexual activity for 'fear of failure'.
- Dana, a junior manager in a large manufacturing company, would contribute more in meetings, including sharing her genuine opinions and giving suggestions.
- Alexis, a 28-year-old mother of two young boys, would be more assertive with her domineering, hyper-critical mother-in-law.

Now you've had a glimpse of other people's desires, it's time to connect with your own. Please take as long as you need to read through and carefully consider the important questions that follow.

In a world where you had unlimited confidence:

- How would you behave differently?
- How would you walk and talk differently?
- How would you play, work and perform differently?
- How would you treat others differently: your friends, relatives, partner, parents, children and work colleagues?
- How would you treat yourself differently?
- How would you treat your body?
- How would you talk to yourself?
- How would your character change?
- What sort of things would you start doing?
- What would you *stop* doing?
- What goals would you set and work towards?
- What difference would your new-found confidence make in your closest relationships, and how would you behave differently around those people?

What difference would your new-found confidence help you to make in the world?

* * *

Please take some time to reflect on these questions before reading on. Get clear about the purpose underlying your quest for more confidence. Your answers to these questions are vitally important; they will provide the values and goals for your ongoing journey. And because so many people are unclear about the difference between values and goals, let's take a few moments to quickly explore it.