



**THE ROLE OF RELATIONSHIPS,  
ACCEPTANCE AND  
RECOGNITION IN  
THE DEVELOPMENT OF  
SELF-CONFIDENCE**

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## **Introduction**

Self-confidence has become somewhat of an obsession in the West – a sort of magic dust that everyone seems to be looking for. Rosalind Gill (Professor of Cultural and Social Analysis at City University) and Shani Orgad (Professor of Sociology at the LSE) have termed it a “cult(ure) of confidence”<sup>1</sup>, and they’re right: the second most watched TED talk of all time is “Your Body Language May Shape Who You Are”<sup>12</sup> by American psychologist Amy Cuddy (with over 60 million views); the COO of Facebook, Sheryl Sandberg, sold more than 4 million copies worldwide when she wrote *Lean In*<sup>3</sup>; and bookshelves are bursting at the seams with titles such as *365 Steps to Self Confidence*<sup>4</sup>, and *The Confidence Code*<sup>5</sup>.

This essay considers what self-confidence is, and why it’s so important. It then goes on to explore the key issues with the way we currently try to develop self-confidence, and recommends an entirely different approach.

## **What is self-confidence?**

Self-confidence is defined by Oxford Languages as “a feeling of trust in one's abilities, qualities, and judgement.” The fact that it is a “feeling” certainly makes it difficult to measure, but we can all tell when we have it and when we don't.

## **Why is self-confidence so important?**

Abraham Maslow tells us that there is an end goal for all of us: self actualization is “the desire for self-fulfillment [...] to become everything that one is capable of becoming.”<sup>6</sup> How do we achieve this desirable state? Inevitably, we need to grow (we weren't “self-actualized” at birth) through action. But, importantly, what allows us to act?

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<sup>1</sup> Gill and Orgad, 2016, p.1

<sup>2</sup> Cuddy, 2012

<sup>3</sup> Sandberg, 2013

<sup>4</sup> Preston, 2007

<sup>5</sup> Kay and Shipman, 2018

<sup>6</sup> Maslow, 1943, p. 382

Self-confidence is the key: in her compelling TED Talk, educator and activist Brittany Packnett describes it as “the necessary spark before everything that follows [...] the difference between being inspired and actually getting started, between trying and doing until it’s done.” This notion is supported by Australian sociologist Dr. Jack Barbalet: “All action is ultimately founded on the actor’s feeling of confidence in her capacities and their efficacy. The actor’s confidence is a necessary source of action; without it action simply would not occur.”<sup>7</sup> This, Barbalet explains (leaning on John Meynard Keynes’ economic theory), is as true for the individual as it is for economies – we rely on investor confidence to invest, and consumer confidence to purchase.

### **Our current approach to the development of self-confidence**

Many of the confidence commentators out there seem to suggest that in order to be confident we have to be fake. Amy Cuddy’s “power poses” are proven to increase testosterone and decrease cortisol levels<sup>8</sup> but, through this hack, your mind and body are being *tricked* into believing you are more confident than you truly are. She’s on the same page as personal development trainer David Preston who simply recommends that you “pretend you’re confident, even if you’re not”<sup>9</sup>, with the support of British and American broadcast journalists Katty Kay and Claire Shipman (authors of widely-debated *The Confidence Code*), who effectively parrot Nike’s famous slogan with their reductionist message: “stop thinking so much and just *act*.”<sup>10</sup>

So, everyone’s looking to be more confident, and everyone’s being told to either “fake-it-till-you-make-it” or “just do it” – is it any wonder that up to 82% of people have experienced imposter syndrome<sup>11</sup>? Even if doing a load of “power poses” can

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<sup>7</sup> Barbalet, 2007, p.234

<sup>8</sup> Cuddy

<sup>9</sup> Preston, 2007, p.16

<sup>10</sup> Kay and Shipman, 2014

<sup>11</sup> Carpenter, 2021

momentarily paper over the cracks, surely there must be a better way – I’m not interested in a phony or superficial solution to building self-confidence which fails to get to the complex heart of the issue.

### **Where does self-confidence *actually* come from?**

Dr. Amy Adkins, Assistant Professor of Psychology at Virginia Commonwealth University, suggests that our genetic make-up has some role in determining our level of self-confidence: “your genes [...] will impact things such as the balance of neurochemicals in your brain”<sup>12</sup>. Of course, nature has a role. But what about nurture? She confirms that “how you’re treated” will impact your developing confidence, which is further supported by Barbalet's research: “*The feeling of confidence arises in the subject of a relationship in which participants receive acceptance and recognition*”<sup>13</sup> (my emphasis).

Barbalet’s research is supported by Gill and Orgad’s recommendation to look beyond self-blame and the tactical tools we may employ in an attempt to increase our temporary level of self-confidence. We need to *look outwards* and analyse the *context* in which we are all growing (the home, the school, the office or society at large) to find a systemic and sustainable approach that will support more people to develop self-confidence. The current approach “exculpates social, political, economic, cultural and corporate institutions for their role in maintaining and reproducing inequality and injustice”<sup>14</sup>.

The original definers of “imposter syndrome”, psychologists Dr. Pauline Rose Clance & Dr. Suzanne Imes of Georgia State University, observed in 1978 that “our ‘impostors’ typically fall into one of two groups, with respect to early family history. In one group

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<sup>12</sup> Adkins, 2015

<sup>13</sup> Barbalet, 2007, p.232

<sup>14</sup> Gill and Orgad, 2016, p.29

are women who have a sibling or close relative who have been designated as the 'intelligent' member of the family." In the other, "The family conveys to the girl that she is superior in every way – intellect, personality, appearance, and talents."<sup>15</sup>

In the first group, the children were only *recognised* in relation to another, and in the second, they were only *accepted* if they fulfilled their predetermined role within the family. If your true self is not accepted or recognised (or you fear it may not be), you will be inclined to submerge it below an alternative and more palatable facade, widening the gap between what you feel and what you seem. It is into the gap that imposter syndrome neatly slips.

Though Clance and Imes' original research involved women alone, they advocated for further research into the role of imposter syndrome in men. In 2018, a study was published in *Personality and Individual Differences* in which research concluded that "male IPs [imposter phenomens] react significantly more negatively under conditions of negative feedback and high accountability"<sup>16</sup> – though further investigation is still required, it appears that imposter syndrome can impact members of both genders.

From Layla Saad's essential and deeply challenging book, *Me and White Supremacy*, we learn that our level of self-confidence is not only determined by our parents, but also by our relationships outside of the home as well. She explains that "white supremacy is a racist ideology that is based upon the belief that white people are superior in many ways to people of other races and that, therefore, white people should be dominant over other races."<sup>17</sup> As a result, people of colour have been pummelled with microaggressions their whole lives: "slow-building, incremental damage that snowballs into something a lot bigger [...] low self-esteem, feelings of

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<sup>15</sup> Clance and Imes, 1978, p.3

<sup>16</sup> Badawy, 2018

<sup>17</sup> Saad, 2020, p.12

alienation and eventually even mental health issues”<sup>18</sup>. Across the last year and a half, women of colour were subject to explicit acts of racism: they were “more likely to have been laid off or furloughed during the Covid-19 crisis, stalling their careers and jeopardizing their financial security”<sup>19</sup>. And in the UK, “under regular suspicion-based stop and search, you’re 10 times more likely to be subjected to it if you’re black – even though the rate at which the police find prohibited items is broadly similar across all ethnic groups”<sup>20</sup>. Our successes and our failures can both increase our self-confidence if they are met with recognition and acceptance but, conversely, they *decrease* our self-confidence if they are not recognised or accepted. Indeed, in the examples above, we see a toxic environment in which people of colour are systematically denied acceptance or recognition, and their self-confidence is subsequently eroded during each experience of overt or covert racism.

Whether the result of poor parenting, racism or other undermining relationships, an individual can end up being placed in what I will call a “regressive confidence cycle”, whereby an individual takes action, and either succeeds or fails in their endeavour. If they succeed, they do not receive recognition for their success; if they fail, they do not receive acceptance for their failure. In both cases, they are pushed into a cycle of decreasing self-confidence (they feel less confident, so they take less proactive action, they subsequently have fewer experiences of both success and failure, they receive no recognition or acceptance on each occasion, and so they feel even less confident than the last time they went around the loop).

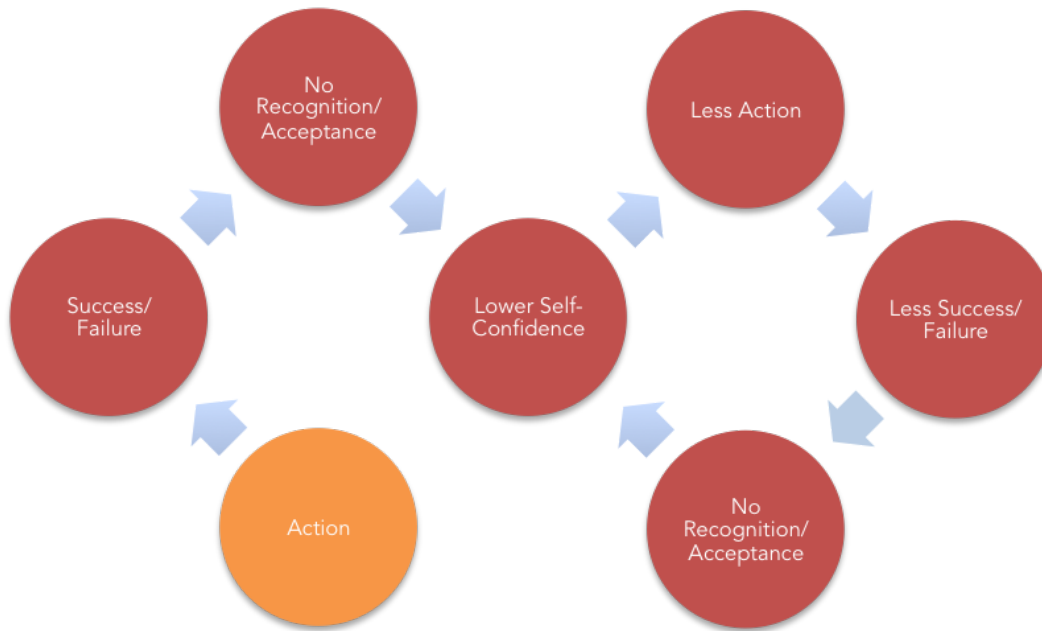
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<sup>18</sup> Lufkin, 2018

<sup>19</sup> McKinsey, 2020, p.6

<sup>20</sup> Liberty, 2021

## Regressive Confidence Cycle



### **A new approach to developing self-confidence**

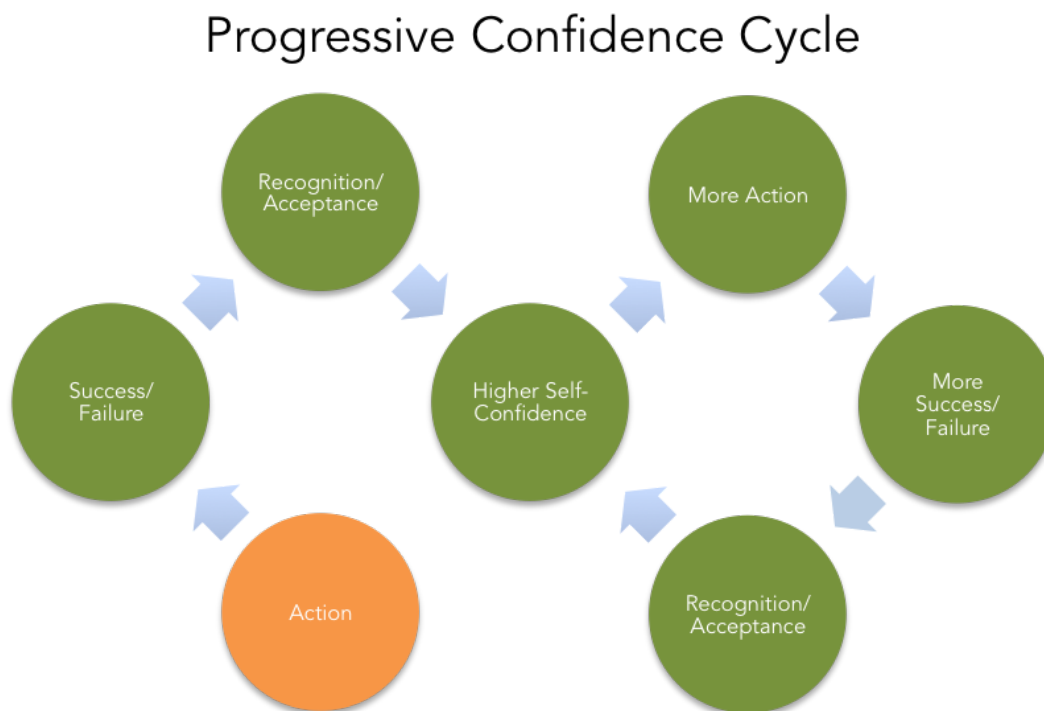
There is a way for an individual to transition out of the “regressive confidence cycle” into a more hopeful “progressive confidence cycle”: but they need your help.

In 2017, psychology Professor Janine Jones of the University of Washington was particularly interested in what could be done to increase the confidence of African-American girls. When, in her study, she had them “participate in an after-school program designed to create community around and pride in black culture and identity, those who did expressed greater confidence and reported, both on their own and through teachers, more connection to and involvement with school.”<sup>21</sup> Again, in alignment with Barbalet, we see the power of a relationship (or a *network of relationships* – a community) to imbue self-confidence through acceptance and recognition.

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<sup>21</sup> Eckart, 2017, p.2

In the progressive confidence cycle, an individual takes action, and either succeeds or fails in their endeavour. If they succeed, they receive recognition for their success; if they fail, they receive acceptance for their failure. In both cases, they are pushed into a cycle of increasing self-confidence (they feel more confident, so they take more proactive, they subsequently have further experiences of both success and failure, they receive recognition or acceptance on each occasion, and so they feel even more confident than the last time they went around the loop).



It is everyone's responsibility to support individuals to transition into this progressive confidence cycle and so support their journey towards self-actualisation. American psychologist Susan Jeffers worked to do this through her seminal book, *Feel The Fear and Do It Anyway*. The famous self-help title sold millions of copies and was translated into more than 35 languages – it clearly struck a note with a global audience. Her central message is one of trust in her reader: she encourages us to know that



“WHATEVER HAPPENS TO ME, GIVEN ANY SITUATION, I CAN HANDLE IT!”<sup>22</sup> In her relentless cheerleading, *she lends her reader the confidence that they currently do not have*, in a belief that they will develop it over time: "Every time you encounter something that forces you to ‘handle it’, your self esteem is raised considerably."<sup>23</sup> What we learn through Jeffers work is that people need to act, succeed or fail, handle the outcome *and* be recognised and accepted (either by Jeffers herself or a partner, family member, friend or colleague) in order to grow in confidence.

## **Conclusion**

If you are looking to increase your self-confidence, the first thing you need to consider is whether or not your community accepts you and your failures, and recognises you and your successes.

If it doesn't then you need to do one of two things: either take action to get your community to begin to accept and recognise you (most likely through candid conversation) or, failing that, change the make-up of your community – find a new partner, create distance from your family, make new friends, or secure a new job.

And if you're struggling to do any of that, consider hiring a professional coach. Acceptance and recognition is baked into the heart of the coaching profession: it's an International Coaching Federation requirement that a coach “acknowledges and supports the client's expression of feelings, perceptions, concerns, beliefs and suggestions” (they must *accept* the client) and “celebrates the client's progress and successes”<sup>24</sup> (they must *recognise* the client).

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<sup>22</sup> Jeffers, 1987, p.16

<sup>23</sup> Jeffers, 1987, p. 19

<sup>24</sup>International Coaching Federation, 2021

As we see above, if a coach continues to practice these core coaching competencies with their client, their client's level self-confidence will organically and authentically increase as they begin to step into a progressive confidence cycle.

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