

Boosting Self-belief and Debunking the Confidence Con

I learnt that courage was not the absence of fear,
but the triumph over it.

Nelson Mandela

Could you get turned down dozens of times every day, week after week after week, year after year?

I couldn't. In fact, when I was at university and needed a temporary job, I tried my hand at telephone sales.

I lasted one day.

But that's the reality of life for most salespeople. And that's why it takes bundles of confidence to approach dozens or maybe even hundreds of people every single day and get knocked back by most of them.

Permit me to introduce you to a dogged sales manager I'll call Julia Kryger. I clearly remember the first time we met because I wondered if she might be trouble. I was running a workshop – the first of five leadership development boot camps – and she was one of the half-dozen senior managers I was working with.

Nearly everyone else in the workshop seemed chatty, friendly, engaged. They listened attentively as I presented. They reflected on the questions I asked them. They took part in the discussions and raised sensible queries. But not Kryger.

She sat with her legs crossed, checked her smartphone every few minutes and said almost nothing. With her tanned, athletic frame and North American accent, I imagined she was probably a cheerleader or even a mean girl at school. She came across as aloof, tough and iron-lady confident. I wondered if she might be a sceptic, thinking she already knew it all or didn't believe that leadership was a teachable discipline.

Fast forward nearly a year and she laughed warmly as I shared my recollections of my first impressions of her.

“If you were to do a survey of my colleagues, they would probably say that I'm one of the most confident people in the business. They would describe me as really ambitious, confident, on it, quite matter of fact, very business oriented, just like a bulldozer,” she told me.

Kryger is Head of International Sales for a UK-based “audience technology” start-up. The fledgling business uses clever algorithms to help advertisers target people online. Within the space of just over a year, she has already recruited a sales squad of three people who report to her and she has landed deals with top brands, including Adidas, British Airways, Volkswagen and Marriott Hotels, to the tune of £2 million. She's the youngest person on the management board too. Not bad for a 28-year-old.

“I say this not to toot my own horn but I do feel I’ve excelled really quickly. I’ve moved up the ranks pretty quickly and on minimal experience,” she said.

She had just got back from a business trip to Germany where she and her boss were pitching to a major advertiser. She was in France and the Netherlands not long before that too. Clearly, she’s the kind of strong-willed individual who just loves high pressure and landing big deals, right?

“Even [my boss] said this to me: ‘You must love presenting in front of a room full of people. You’re like this power woman. You eat people alive.’”

But it’s an impression that conceals an emotional battle raging secretly within her. Only a handful of her closest compatriots know that she has wrestled greatly with fear, suffered overwhelming panic attacks and has even sought medical help for anxiety-related health issues.

“There are people that mask anxiety really well and others that cower and hide and I’m definitely one of those people that puts on a face when I walk in the door at work,” she admitted.

There are people that mask anxiety really well and others that cower and hide.

Kryger experienced her first panic attack three months into her current role. Ironically, her boss had that day told her how proud he was of her rapid success. He had initially set her a target of bringing in £25,000 of revenue and she had brought in over £50,000.

In celebration, she went shopping for a new pair of jeans in Top Shop when she suddenly noticed that she felt really “spaced out”. She rushed home with the sense that something terrible was

happening. The moment she walked through the door, she was hit by a wave of new crippling sensations. She was so scared that she asked her flatmate to phone for an ambulance.

“I thought I was dying,” she remembered.

Later, a doctor explained that she had experienced a panic attack. Unfortunately, it wouldn't be her last.

Like many people, she experiences the greatest anxiety when she feels she is being judged. That's tough given that, as a representative for her business, she is naturally being scrutinized by every prospective client she meets.

“Sitting down in a board room can produce a physical response in me that's almost like I'm fighting my body. Elevated heart rate, shortness of breath, sometimes fully fledged panic,” she said.

“It's not the kind of job where you come in and you have a job description and a daily to-do list. It's being in the middle of this massive, fabulous storm that you're incredibly passionate about, but that can be quite overwhelming. So overwhelming,” she continued.

Advertisers often pull out with little notice, leaving the business with gaping black holes in its finances. When that happens, she has to scramble to bring in sales from elsewhere.

“There are days when I feel like I'm really on top of my game but it's like the more success I have, the more the pressure mounts. And I can't live up to this. The bar just gets set higher and higher – if that makes any sense?”

She understands that the pressure doesn't come from her boss. She is savvy enough to recognize it comes from herself – that the standards by which she judges herself are far tougher than those of her

workmates or clients. When she does make the smallest mistake or gaffe, she punishes herself more harshly than anyone else, too.

The easy option would be to quit and seek a less tempestuous, more predictable job, perhaps working for a large, established corporate media business rather than a fiery young start-up. But no, she is determined to soothe the madhouse of her emotions.

Over the last year, she has worked on her confidence. As well as making lifestyle alterations – cutting out caffeine and alcohol, exercising more and meditating – she has sought the counsel of a psychologist and regularly practises mindfulness techniques.

She has learnt to divorce her personal identity from her professional highs and lows. Yes, a bad meeting with a client may hurt. But it's still only a job. It may make her feel anxious, but there's nothing there that can physically harm her. It's not the end of the world.

“There's two ways that you can look at it,” she concluded. “You can either be one of those people who shrivels in a corner and says, ‘I can't do it, I'm going to give up’ or you're the type of person like me who tries to calm this inner shaky little lamb.”

So don't expect Kryger to chicken out of the fight any time soon. She is growing her department by grooming the next generation of talent. She is working with some of the most enviable brands in the world. She has calmed the shaky little lamb inside her and may one day turn it into a tiger.

Being both successful and scared

Julia Kryger is succeeding *in spite* of how she feels. And you may be surprised to learn how very many people are in exactly the same situation.

Take north-London-born singer-songwriter Adele as a rather famous example. Despite having released her debut album only in 2008, she already has an enviable collection of awards and even world records to her name. Her 2011 album *21* topped the chart in more than 30 countries.

The first time I really noticed her was when watching her sing *Someone Like You* at the British music industry BRIT Awards in February 2011. Singing live under a spotlight accompanied only by a pianist, she cast a spell over an audience of thousands of the British public as well as hundreds of music producers, record label heads and other industry bigwigs. Her emotionally raw performance was possibly the highlight of the award show.

As I write this sentence, the YouTube video has racked up over 156 million views. Tap the words “Adele performing *Someone Like You* BRIT Awards 2011” into YouTube and you’ll find the video.¹ Despite the less-than-perfect sound quality and the slight graininess of the images, I defy you to watch the performance and not be mesmerized.

So does she sing effortlessly? No. In an interview with *Rolling Stone* magazine, she confessed: “I’m scared of audiences. I get shitty scared. One show in Amsterdam, I was so nervous I escaped out the fire exit. I’ve thrown up a couple of times. Once in Brussels, I projectile-vomited on someone. I just gotta bear it. But I don’t like touring. I have anxiety attacks a lot.”²

Despite feeling anxious, she has managed to get on with her singing career. She even won an Academy Award for the theme song to the 2013 James Bond movie *Skyfall*.

In fact, there are many actors, performers and entertainers who suffer great fretfulness: actors Sir Derek Jacobi and Dame Judi Dench, the comedian and TV presenter Stephen Fry, to name but a few. But they all get on with it anyway.

Then there's a client of mine, a 50-something advertising executive who admitted that he was wracked with insecurity. He frequently woke at four or five o'clock in the morning obsessing about the tasks that he had to do the next day. Yet he had created some of the most talked-about advertising campaigns of the 21st century.

Understanding the confidence con

We'll encounter further examples of successful but less than entirely confident individuals throughout this chapter. All of them – famous and less famous – have succeeded in spite of their fears, their doubts, their worries. And they all illustrate what I call the confidence con: the external appearance of confidence in others deceives us into believing that they feel confident internally. The reality is that people often appear confident by how they behave publicly but can be afflicted by anxiety and doubt privately.

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It's a terrible state of affairs because it isolates the innumerable people who feel less than 100 per cent confident. When we feel worry, doubt or even dread and outright panic, we are conned into believing that we're alone, that we're losers and that few others can feel the same way.

But that's not the case, as demonstrated by scientific surveys. For example, a posse of social scientists led by Alexander Jordan at the Tuck School of Business conducted a nifty series of studies delving into this very issue. In an enlightening study, they asked participants to guess the extent to which their friends experienced negative emotions such as sadness and anxiety. The scientists then asked their friends to disclose their actual emotional experiences.

Immediately, the researchers spotted a clear disconnect. Most participants underestimated their friends' negative emotions by 17.2 per cent. In other words, most of us probably feel that our friends are nearly 20 per cent less unhappy than they actually are. On average, other people are almost 20 per cent more anxious, lonelier and more distressed than you think.³

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Why does this happen?

It doesn't help that most of us are socialized to believe we shouldn't reveal exactly how bad we feel. Alexander Jordan's group calls this "the preferential suppression of negative emotion". Unspoken rules dictate that it's fine to showcase positive emotions such as enthusiasm or joy – we're allowed to laugh, whoop and celebrate life's pleasures – but those same unspoken guidelines discourage us from being killjoys; so in public we tend to downplay our worry, loneliness and frustration.

As a result, Jordan's team makes the case that most of us live in a state of "pluralistic emotional ignorance". We are blind to the true feelings of those around us. We underestimate the extent to which others feel the same way. And if you think other people are less anxious and unhappy than they actually are, you may fall into the trap of believing that the rest of the world is calmer, happier and more confident than you.

So remember, remember, remember: many standout individuals appear unruffled on the surface while being shredded internally by nervousness or worries.

If that's the case, then what does the path to success look like? Well, I believe that achieving anything comes from taking appropriate action however challenging it may feel at the time. It's about

doing what's needed in order to pursue your long-term goals, even if taking action feels rather worrying or uncertain in the short term.

So, sure, you may be anxious about having to give a presentation to colleagues, but you do it *in spite* of your worries. Or you fear rejection when asking that attractive person out but you do it *regardless* of how you feel.

This certainly applied to Julia Kryger, the sales chief we encountered at the start of the chapter. She feels gripped by fears and anxieties about her work. But despite her inner turmoil, she gets on with her high-pressure job, pitches to clients and pushes herself.

Many standout individuals appear unruffled on the surface while being shredded internally by nervousness.

But the good news is that there are ways to quell unruly feelings and jumpstart our confidence. So let's look at what the latest science has to say about combating nerves and building the kind of standout demeanour that might help us all achieve our goals.

Performing mind over matter

Every day, we and so many people around us are confronted by anxiety-provoking situations. Consider some of the following that I came across in just the last month or so:

- Anwen, a 17-year-old daughter of a friend and would-be concert pianist, is about to play three technically demanding pieces of music to a panel of musical connoisseurs who have gathered from all around the country. If she performs well, she may be offered a scholarship at a prestigious school of music. If she fumbles things, her dreams of a future in music may be crushed.

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- Eric is a finance manager in his early 50s. He worked for a major oil and gas company for over 25 years but was made redundant well over a year ago. Despite having applied for dozens of jobs, he has been invited to only a handful of interviews and has received only fairly menial job offers so far. He fears that recruiters consider him too old to be employable. A friend has personally recommended him for a role and he is now waiting in the lobby of his potential new employer, about to be interviewed by the chief financial officer of the company. He feels that this could be his last chance of finding meaningful employment.
- Susannah, a shy human resources executive in her late 20s, has been chosen to give a 10-minute presentation on behalf of her department at the company's quarterly conference. There will be a crowd of nearly 120 in the audience, including the chief executive and all of the directors of the business. She worries every time she has to give a presentation and feels nervous when speaking in front of even a half-dozen workmates. And in less than 24 hours she will have to speak in front of the largest audience of her life.

In those critical moments, what advice would you give these three individuals? Would you perhaps recommend they try to relax and calm down?

If so, you would be in splendid company. When Harvard Business School professor Alison Wood Brooks surveyed 300 people, she found that the vast majority – 84.9 per cent, in fact – said they would encourage anxious friends or co-workers to relax and calm down.

That's sensible guidance right?

Trying to calm down may be rather terrible advice.

Actually, no. It's very badly wrong. It turns out that trying to calm down may be rather terrible advice.

A rising star in the research firmament, Brooks formulated a cunning experiment to test the effects of different instructions on the anxiety levels of 140 participants. She began by explaining to all of them that they would be given a couple of minutes to prepare a two-minute persuasive speech on the topic “Why you are a good work partner”. The participants were told that their speeches would be both delivered to an experimenter and recorded for scrutiny later by a committee.

Immediately before delivering their speeches, the participants were split into two groups and told to repeat either:

- “I am calm.”
- “I am excited.”

Immediately after the presentations, Brooks asked the participants how they felt and found that both groups reported feeling equally uneasy. Neither instruction helped to diminish their anxiety.

However, the difference was clearly detectable when she showed the video recordings to three independent judges who hadn’t been present at the actual presentations. The participants who had said to themselves “I am excited” were rated more highly in just about every conceivable way. These speakers who tried to get fired up were judged to be more competent, more confident and more persuasive than those who had told themselves “I am calm.”⁴

This finding clearly has profound implications for would-be public speakers. Don’t try to calm down. Tell yourself you’re excited instead.

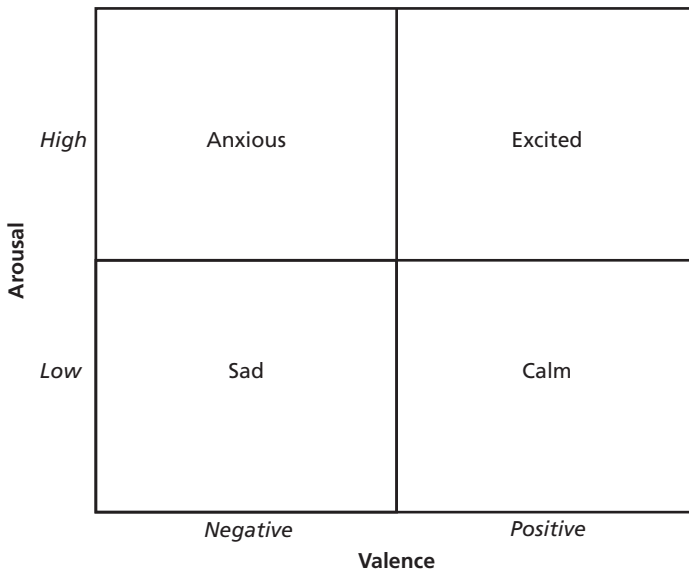
Why doesn’t trying to calm down work? Psychologists categorize emotions along two different dimensions. One of these dimensions is the valence of an emotion. So feelings such as contentment,

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exhilaration and optimism are positive emotions. Guilt, shame, anxiety and frustration are negative emotions.

The other dimension is the physiological arousal associated with the emotion. So both excitement and anxiety are characterized by high arousal – that means a pounding heart rate, faster breathing, perhaps a sensation of sweatiness and so on. On the other hand, emotions such as sadness and contentment are associated with low arousal – these emotions slow us down.

Plotting valence versus arousal gives us a two-by-two matrix of the types of emotion that we can feel:



You can see that feeling anxious is both high arousal and has a negative valence. Attempting to turn anxiety into calmness means having to move across two categories – it involves both trying to shift from a negative to a positive valence as well as having to reduce the arousal from high to low.

But now look at where excitement sits in the matrix. Both excitement and anxiety are already high-arousal emotions. So turning anxiety into elation involves moving across only one boundary – from a negative to a positive valence. And that seems easier for our mental operating systems to handle.

Putting it another way, trying to steer our emotional state from anxious to calm is like making a 180-degree turn in a car at high speed. It's nigh on impossible. But making the shift from anxious to excited is more like a sharp 90-degree turn and eminently more doable.

I recently applied this particular technique to exquisite effect. I don't feel anxious giving presentations, but there was one situation that scared me: the thought of having laser eye surgery to correct short-sightedness.

For most of my life since my late teens, I wore glasses or contact lenses. I was so short-sighted that I struggled to see objects that were further than an arm's reach away from me. I couldn't cross the road safely because I couldn't see cars. I couldn't even sit on the sofa and watch TV – all the faces blurred and I couldn't tell who was speaking.

I had been mulling over laser eye surgery for about 10 years. But I was deeply apprehensive. Reading about the operation, I learnt that the surgeon clamps your eyelids open, applies a suction device to the eyeball and cuts a flap in the front of the eyeball. All of that sounded bad enough. And that's all before the laser fires up and starts vaporizing – yes, literally vaporizing – your eye. Some patients say they can actually smell burning. And you're awake, fully conscious throughout the whole ordeal.

But eventually I decided to at least have an initial meeting with a surgeon. And in order to keep my anxiety at bay during all of the

consultations and even the surgery itself, I told myself that I was excited. I kept thinking about all of the benefits of not having to wear glasses and being able to discard my contact lenses.

Don't try to calm down. Tell yourself you're excited instead.

It worked. I hardly felt anxious. I was a model patient and I even weirdly quite enjoyed the surgery itself! And all because I kept telling myself "I'm excited."

Dispelling illusions

If you've ever felt worried or scared about anything in life, remember that you're not alone. In fact, you're probably surrounded by folks just like you.

We already discussed the confidence con: the fact that the fears of others aren't readily visible to us. You categorically can't see into other people's heads to know what they're actually feeling. Conversely, though, we worry that the crowd around us *can* see into our own heads.

Take an individual I know who I'll call Ralph Dixon. A slim 35-year-old with a wholesome air and a genial smile, he strikes me as likeable, grounded, confident – even a tad cocky. I could imagine him being cast in an American TV drama as the lead character's best buddy or a good cop.

"Day to day, I have no issue in social situations, meeting new people and sharing my experience, thinking about things to talk about," he explained in a languid drawl.

As I listened to him speak about his career, I built up a picture of him as a bit of a hotshot. When he was in his 20s, he applied for a job that specifically asked for candidates with seven plus years of

experience. He only had two-and-a-bit years of experience at the time but he applied anyway. He got the job.

Now he's a founder and director for a technology start-up. The business started up less than three years ago and has just over a dozen employees. As an investor in the business, he's on course to make his millions before he turns 40 should things continue to go well.

"I've always wanted to be an entrepreneur," he told me.

"That means you have to envision a certain amount of success for yourself with a huge, huge, huge high probability of failure. You know when you start in business that you have an 85 per cent chance of failure or probably higher."

To add to the pressure, he has a family who depend on him. He is supporting his wife and a two-year-old son. Rather than being able to buy a house, he has staked his savings on his business venture working out.

That's confidence in abundance, right? Not everyone could cope with the pressure of putting their life's savings in a business and betting that it will pay off.

But what the world can't see is the doubts that he faces on the job. When his work goes well, he's calm and collected. But when he feels too stretched or projects fail, he has his doubts.

"You get a voice that says, 'You can't do it. You're not going to be successful. You're going to fail. Things aren't working in this, this, this and this area. It's too hard. It's not for me. You can't do it. You're not smart enough.'"

A major worry of his is what his buddies and his peers would think of him should he screw up. Like most people, he can't help but want to be successful in the eyes of those around him.

“One of the things my wife pointed out to me is that [I have] this desire to prove to everyone that I’m successful,” he added.

“If your peers don’t feel you’re successful, then you get really upset about that.” He pauses, his mind drifting to some darker place. “Get really upset.”

On the surface, hardly anyone can detect the upheaval within Dixon. He confides in a tiny circle of his most trusted confidants – he says he has only three individuals in this inner circle. However, to the rest of the world he continues to appear gregarious, focused and effective in his work. It’s only in the unseen places of his own mind that the doubts can have him in a spin.

Thankfully, he has come to realize that he isn’t the only person in the world to feel this way. He understands that confidence can often be a mask that people wear in public even though they may privately be feeling tremendously burdened and completely fraught.

“You could look at the most successful people and they appear to be the most confident people and that they’ve always been that way,” he said.

“I just don’t believe that’s true. I think we’re all human and we all suffer from moments of self-doubt and issues like that.”

We’re tricked into believing that everyone else must feel more confident than we do.

Sage words indeed. *We’re all human. We all suffer from moments of self-doubt.* These words apply to so, so many successful individuals. They appear confident on the surface. But that’s all it is: the *appearance* of confidence. We can’t know how they’re feeling. Dixon is another example of the confidence con: that we’re tricked into believing that everyone else must

feel more confident than we do – simply because we judge them on their appearance, their behaviour, how they seem outwardly.

Think about your own experience when you're giving a big presentation or speaking in public. Think back to a really huge event. Maybe having to speak at your best friend's wedding or a presentation to a roomful of bigwigs. What goes through your mind when you're feeling nervous? Perhaps you can feel your heart pounding. You may notice how dry your mouth feels but at the same time how sweaty your palms are. Does that make you worry more that the audience can see how edgy you are – and that they will therefore take you less seriously?

Or say you're on a date with an attractive lady or gentleman but quivering inside that you'll say or do something wrong. When there's an awkward silence in the conversation or you make a comment that doesn't go down well, do you worry that the object of your affection can tell how nervous you are?

Our physical sensations are so vivid. The thoughts and feelings crashing around in our heads are so rampant. It's perfectly natural to worry that we're more nervous than the rest of the world – and that they can detect how we're feeling.

However, a psychological saviour and professor at Cornell University, Thomas Gilovich, has documented across numerous studies that most of us overestimate the extent to which other people can sense how we're really feeling. He calls this effect the “illusion of transparency”: a belief that our thoughts, feelings and emotions are more apparent to others than is actually the case.⁵

In one experiment, Gilovich asked pairs of volunteers to give three-minute presentations to each other. To illustrate how it worked, let's

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walk through what may have happened to one pairing that we'll call Beatrice and Sukesh.

Gilovich explains to the pair that the study is about impromptu public speaking. He explains that he will flip a coin to choose one of the two. That person will then have to go to the front of the room and stand at a podium to deliver a speech on one of two topics. The topic will be handed to him or her on a piece of card.

Gilovich flips the coin and Beatrice wins – or loses, depending on how you look at it. She has to go first.

She moves to the front of the room and is handed a card saying “The best and worst things about life today”. And with no further time to prepare, she has to give a three-minute speech on her allotted topic.

Immediately after she has finished, it's over to Sukesh. He gets given a different card saying “The most important moral lessons to teach one's children”. Again, he has to speak immediately and for three minutes.

Immediately afterwards, both Beatrice and Sukesh are escorted to separate cubicles to complete a short questionnaire rating not only how nervous they felt but also how nervous they thought the other person looked.

At the end of the questionnaire, they are also asked to tick one of two statements:

- “I appeared more nervous than the other participant.”
- “The other participant appeared more nervous than I did.”

When Gilovich ran this experiment with 20 pairs of volunteers, he found that the vast majority of participants ticked the first

statement, believing that he or she was more nervous than the other person. More interestingly, though, in 40 per cent of the pairs, *both* participants ticked the first statement, believing that they had appeared more nervous than the other person.

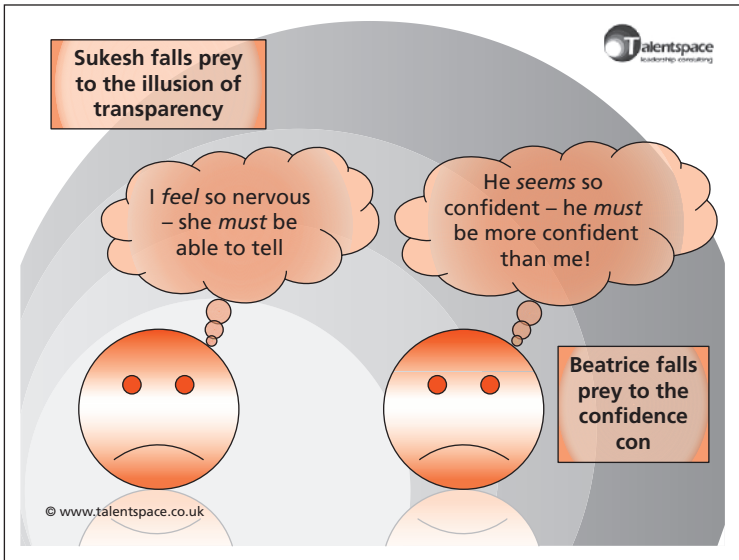
That would be like Beatrice believing she was the more nervous performer while at the same time Suresh knowing with full certainty that he was the more nervous of the two. Clearly, both individuals in a pair can't have been more nervous. So that means that a significant proportion of people massively overestimate how nervous they appear to others.

That's excellent news for a start. We may believe in the illusion of transparency but the key word here is "illusion". It's not true that we are transparent, that our true sentiments are as visible as we may feel. Translation: we probably *appear* less nervous than we *feel*.

I think of the confidence con and the illusion of transparency as being two sides of the same coin. The confidence con leads us to believe that other people are more confident than we are – that their outward appearance of confidence must mean they feel confident inwardly too. On the other hand, the illusion of transparency leads us to believe that our *lack* of confidence is more visible to others than it is.

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When running workshops on confidence, I often show a single slide that neatly summarizes the tragic repercussions of these two states of mind. As you can see, Suresh believes his anxiety must be noticeable, which only makes him more tense. But his nervousness isn't actually as readily apparent to Beatrice as he reckons, so poor Beatrice believes that she is the nervier of the two. So everybody loses.



But let's focus for now on the illusion of transparency. If we think about it more carefully, the fact that we may feel more anxious than we seem to others may not actually be so surprising. After all, when we can feel our trepidation, we may worry that it is visible in our body language: the slight shake of our hands, perhaps the look on our faces or even a tone of uncertainty in our voices.

Regrettably, obsessing about how worried we look can trigger a downward spiral. It can make us worry even more.

Mercifully, there is a solution. In a follow-up experiment, Gilovich and a collaborator took several dozen students and randomly assigned them to one of two groups. The first (experimental) group read a paragraph about the illusion of transparency. The second (control) group read a paragraph telling them that it was natural to feel nervous and wishing them good luck.

Participants in each group were videoed giving three-minute presentations and then debriefed as to how they felt. Interestingly,

participants in the experimental group felt just as nervous as those in the control group. Informing them about the illusion of transparency had *not* made them feel less nervous.

Huh? What's going on? How does this supposed illusion of transparency help us – if at all?

Here's the useful bit. When the researchers showed the videos to viewers who had not been present at the video recordings, they found that these independent observers tended to rate the presentations of participants from the experimental group more highly than the presentations of control participants.

In other words, understanding the illusion of transparency helped experimental participants deliver objectively better presentations *in spite* of how nervous they still felt. Perhaps even more remarkably, the onlookers rated the speeches of experimental participants 20.9 per cent more highly than those in the control group – that's a fairly impressive improvement for an intervention that takes only minutes to perform.

Audiences can't pick up on your anxiety as well as you might expect.

Giving yourself an instant communications boost

To be clear then: understanding the illusion of transparency will not necessarily make you feel any less nervous. However, it can help you deliver a show-stopping presentation or be a better date or conversationalist in spite of how you feel. And all you have to do is read the following paragraph that Gilovich and his fellow investigator Kenneth Savitsky shared with participants:

I think it may help you to know that research has found that audiences can't pick up on your anxiety as well as

(Continued)

you might expect. Psychologists have documented what is called an “illusion of transparency”. Those speaking feel that their nervousness is transparent, but in reality their feelings are not so apparent to observers. This happens because our own emotional experience can be so strong, we are sure our emotions “leak out”. In fact, observers aren’t as good at picking up on a speaker’s emotional state as we tend to expect. So, while you might be so nervous you’re convinced that everyone else can tell how nervous you are, in reality that’s very rarely the case. What’s inside of you typically manifests itself too subtly to be detected by others. With this in mind, you should just try to relax and try to do your best. Know that if you become nervous, you’ll probably be the only one to know.

So this may come in handy the next time you have to perform in front of an audience – whether that’s an audience of one or a hundred. Just re-read this paragraph and remind yourself that you are *not* transparent.

Powering through job interviews

As an organizational psychologist, I often get asked to tutor job hunters, to prep them to cope with the onslaught of questions that may come during a job interview. It’s probably the single most common issue that clients raise with me in one-to-one coaching.

Take a client of mine I’ll call Lucy Grimes, for example. A modest woman in her forties who had spent over 10 years working contentedly enough as a marketing manager for a private healthcare provider, she unexpectedly found herself out of a job. With less than a

month's notice, her department was restructured. She and over a dozen colleagues were hastily paid off and found themselves looking for new jobs.

She had a solid track record in planning and running events so she got invited to a fair few interviews. But she just wasn't getting any offers. Neither did she know where she was going wrong. Despite her best efforts to ask for feedback from interviewers on why she wasn't successful, she found that interviewers simply weren't interested in furnishing her with constructive criticism. As a result, her confidence was slipping and she didn't quite know how to turn matters around.

Of course her situation is hardly unique. The job interview can be a scary situation for many people. And that's hardly surprising. There could be any number of other candidates vying for the position. It's a competition in which there will be many losers but only one winner.

Could simply feeling more in control boost your chances of getting an offer?

And we all know that interviewers can be somewhat capricious in their decision-making. No matter how much experience you may have and how well qualified you may be, even the smallest blunder can spell rejection. You're being judged on everything you say, how you come across, even what you're wearing and *who you are*. Ultimately, no matter how badly you may covet the job, it's totally and completely out of your control whether you will be offered it.

But could simply *feeling* more in control boost your chances of getting an offer?

This was the quandary that social and political psychologist Joris Lammers of the University of Cologne in Germany set out to answer in collaboration with a cadre of international collaborators from business schools in both France and the United States. The

team gathered together a group of undergraduate students who wanted to apply for entry to business school and invited these participants to attend mock interviews by expert interviewers as part of their preparation for their real business school interviews.

Just prior to the interview, the participants were split into one of three groups:

- The first group was asked to spend a few minutes writing about a situation in which they had felt powerful.
- The second group was asked to spend a few minutes writing about a situation in which they had felt powerless.
- The third group acted as a control and was given no further special instructions.

The interviewers were not told which participants had been given which set of instructions. These specialist interviewers were merely told to grill the candidates hard and then answer a single question: “Would they admit the applicant to business school? Yes or no?”

Remember that these participants were all genuinely applying for entry to business school so they saw these mock interviews as a quintessential part of their preparation. Given the stakes, they were all highly motivated to perform well. But only 47.1 per cent of the participants in the control group passed the interview.

As you can no doubt guess, the participants that wrote about a high power situation did better. How much better? An impressive 68.4

per cent of these participants passed the interview. Pity the participants that wrote about feeling powerless, though. Only 26.3 per cent of them passed the interview.⁶

Write about a high-power situation and you give yourself a colossal boost.

The headline from the study should be clear. Write about a high-power situation – a time when

you had influence and control over another person or persons – and you give yourself a colossal boost. You put yourself into the right frame of mind: you feel strong, in control, confident.

Now, you may be wondering why the instigators of the study included a group in which participants wrote about a time they felt powerless. Clearly, no one would voluntarily spend five minutes immediately prior to a job interview reminding themselves of such a bleak moment.

But in real life many job hunters *do* genuinely feel powerless. The job market of the 21st century has become so competitive that innumerable people have felt hopeless, out of control, unable to get the jobs they feel they deserve. I've coached so many job seekers suffering from flagging levels of confidence, often reeling from the gut punch of having been made redundant in some cases even a year or more previously. I've supported individuals returning to work after extended periods of illness and women looking for jobs after having taken years off to raise families. I've worked to buoy the self-confidence of job hunters in just about every occupation and industry you can imagine, from cabin crew for airlines to managing directors in investment banking.

You can understand how easy it is to go into a doom spiral. Get rejected just a handful of times and you start to wonder if something rather fundamental is wrong. Perhaps your skills are out of date. Maybe your experience isn't quite relevant. Maybe you're not being assertive enough – or you're being too pushy. Oh no, what if it's your personality that interviewers don't like? So yes, vast numbers of people do feel powerless.

In real life many job hunters *do* genuinely feel powerless.

Remember that the study by Lammers and his colleagues found that powerless participants passed the interview only 26.3 per cent

of the time. In contrast, participants primed to feel powerful were successful 68.4 per cent of the time. That's a gigantic difference. And all thanks to a mere five-minute intervention.

The researchers wrapped up their research by saying that their discovery “seems to offer hope to millions of job and school applicants around the world – tap into your inner sense of confidence by recalling an experience of power”. I couldn't have put it better myself.

Giving yourself a power-up

Doing an exercise to feel more powerful sounds like the kind of rubbishy advice that a self-help quack would recommend. You know: the kind of alleged guru who believes in chanting, psychic energy and harnessing the cosmic forces of the universe. But studies conducted by reputable scientists at top universities and business schools suggest that feeling powerful may have very quantifiable benefits.

For starters, the research does *not* tell us that we should simply repeat over and over again a mantra such as “I am powerful.” No, the so-called power priming technique takes at least several minutes of quiet thought and reflection to write what I have dubbed “power paragraphs”.

To help you feel powerful when you need it, I recommend a two-stage exercise. The first part is to spend some time thinking about a handful of situations in which you have felt powerful.

Make a short list of three to five different occasions when you had power over another person or persons. That could be at work, at home with your family, socially or in any other situation you choose. The point is simply to make sure you have a

handful of powerful situations at the ready for when you may need them.

Then, to stoke your feeling of power – perhaps you have an interview or a crucial meeting coming up – the second part involves writing about one of those situations. Based on objective studies demonstrating the benefits of so-called power priming, use the following instructions the next time you seek to give yourself a shot of confidence:

- Take a few moments to recall a situation in which you had power over another individual or individuals. “Power” is defined as control over the ability of another person (or persons) to get something that he/she/they want. Power could also include being in a position to evaluate someone else.
- Spend five minutes writing about this incident.

Want to know something quite odd, though? Power paragraphs work for written job applications too. Lammers and his conclave of scientists ran a second experiment, this time asking participants to submit written applications for a real job. Participants were, as before, asked to recall and write about a time they felt either powerful or powerless. And then they wrote an application letter for the position before putting the letter in an envelope and handing it over for analysis.

Two recruitment experts waded through all of the letters and judged them on their expressed self-confidence. How confident did each applicant seem – based purely on the written application?

Again, the experimenters were able to detect a small but significant effect of the power paragraph intervention. Participants who first wrote about a time they felt powerful wrote letters that were judged by independent raters as being more self-confident.

Gosh.

That, to me, is pretty mind-boggling. You can understand how feeling more powerful during a face-to-face interview will lead to more eye contact, more confident body language and perhaps more assertive dialogue. But in a *written* application?

Even more uncannily, when the scientists tried to understand in what way letters written by power-primed participants were more successful, they couldn't figure out why. The researchers digitally scanned the letters and analysed them for content. The letters of power-primed participants were of the same length as measured in three different ways – the number of sentences, the number of words and the usage of longer, six-or-more letter words. Their letters did not employ the first person singular any more or any less. They did not use any more or less positive language; neither did they utilize any more or less negative language.

I'd love to be able to give you a simple explanation. But that's not the way science always works. The messy truth is that we don't know exactly in what way power helps us to communicate more confidently in writing. Freakishly, it just does.

We can answer another question, though: "Why does feeling powerful help us?"

A whole raft of studies illustrates that the feeling of power – or powerlessness – actually affects the brain's functions. For example, a team led by social psychologist Pamela Smith at Radboud University Nijmegen in the Netherlands demonstrated in one experiment that powerless participants made more mistakes when given computerized tasks to complete than participants who felt more powerful. In a further investigation, the same group also found that powerless participants were less able to make effective plans.⁷ Elsewhere, British experimental psychologist Ana Guinote at the

University of Kent has similarly found that powerless participants tend to be more easily distractible.⁸

Taken together, these studies suggest that feeling powerless doesn't just crush motivation – it may actually reduce the ability of our mental machinery to function productively. To use psychological jargon, feeling out of control impairs executive function.

The feeling of power – or powerlessness – actually affects the brain's functions.

Daily life is often characterized by setbacks, rejections and obstacles. A project flops. A colleague blasts you for a mistake. A customer decides to dump you. Your partner chides you yet again for not having done a household chore. Whether such knocks are big or small, conventional wisdom tells us that we should simply dust ourselves off, see them as a necessary part of life and get on with things.

But a convincing body of studies suggest that's not all we should be doing. We may also need to protect our confidence, our sense of being in control and in command of our own destinies. Feeling powerless as a result of the daily grind and little setbacks we experience could have supersized connotations for our ability to be at our best. Don't let that happen to you.

Nurturing deep-rooted confidence

I run a fair number of workshops on confident public speaking and presentations. Some of these are for inexperienced people who need some basic rules to follow; some of these are for veteran sales professionals and executives who want to hone their podium presentations to perfection. But the same question crops up over and over: can people ever truly change? Is confidence really something that can be honed and developed – or are we just born and then stuck forever with either lots or not so much of it?

Confidence is something we can all cultivate.

Not long ago, I met a managing director who is a sterling example that our level of confidence isn't something that is immutable and unchangeable. No, confidence is something we can all cultivate.

Claire Mason founded public relations agency Man Bites Dog 10 years ago. Her 30th birthday had been a real milestone. "I thought I have to be brave and it's a now-or-never situation," she told me.

Since then, she has grown the business into a multi-million-pound concern with 30 employees. She lists businesses such as the law firm Linklaters, healthcare business Bupa and technology firm Google amongst her clients.

Mason cuts a tall, imposing figure but this is offset by smiling eyes and a self-deprecating sense of humour. She describes herself as ultra-confident when she's in a room consulting with clients. She can sit with a chief executive and a half-dozen senior executives and happily discuss their business needs and what they must do to continue being successful. That's no trouble for her at all.

As her business grew, though, she was increasingly asked to speak at seminars and conferences to audiences of dozens of people at a time. However, she kept turning them down.

"I started to realize I was being asked to do speaker engagements and I was always finding excuses not to do them," she said.

"So I thought, actually that's not good enough. I wouldn't accept it from a member of my team. I'd ask, 'What support do you need to be comfortable in doing this?' and help them in getting there."

For most of her adult life, Mason had managed to evade any proper public speaking. The first time she spoke, she was racked with anxiety.

“I felt huge amounts of adrenaline, tension. For me, I don’t sleep the night before. I can’t eat. I feel quite sick. And my calf muscles become really tense so I can’t really wear heels if I’m public speaking. I need to feel more grounded,” she said.

The thing is: she didn’t die. Not even metaphorically. In fact, she was great. When audiences rated her, she was stunned to find out how much they valued hearing her speak.

“I’m scoring 9s and 10s out of 10. So actually, although at the time I might feel I’ve not done a great job, I must have done better than I thought I had,” she added.

She spoke at eight events over 12 months and began to feel less nervous about it. I asked her to rate how nervous she felt on a scale of 1 to 10 at that very first speaking event. Widening her eyes, she said, “10!”

But after just seven more events – and remember that these were the first eight times she had *ever* spoken in public – she said that she’d experienced an 8 out of 10 in terms of her anxiety levels.

Sure, she still feels nervous, but it’s beginning to get easier. She’s seeing her confidence blossom.

“It gave me confidence to have the evidence that I performed better than I thought I did. I think your own assessment is probably always quite harsh and critical. I would come out thinking about all of the things I hadn’t said or missed or perhaps didn’t handle as well as I would have liked to have done. But when you see the feedback coming back from other people, actually the feedback was very good.”

**Practice is
nature’s own
beta blocker.**

That’s a lesson worth learning by itself: that many of us are more picky and disparaging of our own performances than those of the people around us. But there’s another takeaway too.

Whatever your situation, you *can* feel more confident about it.

Mason was 39 years old when she began speaking in public. She had been working for nearly two decades before she decided to tackle her fear of public speaking. And after only eight such events over the course of less than a year she felt noticeably more secure. Practice is nature's own beta blocker.

Over the years I've worked with leaders and executives in charge of guiding businesses and other organizations ranging in size from dozens to thousands of employees. Many of these individuals confessed privately that they dreaded having to stand up and speak. Perhaps, like Mason and countless others, you too feel anxious about standing up in front of crowds and sharing your thoughts. Maybe your bugbear is dating or job interviews. Or networking with strangers, confronting bull-headed people, lecturing students or something else. But whatever your situation, you *can* feel more confident about it. If Mason can do it, so can you.

Mixing and matching to find what works best for you

Being able to speak with confidence is a prerequisite for standing out. You can't make a splash unless people – colleagues, friends, potential romantic partners, whatever – feel comfortable around you. So hopefully I have given you some practical techniques that you can use to hone your confidence and leave people with a great impression.

I recently ran a workshop on the topic of confidence at the Royal College of Physicians, an organization that represents tens of thousands of doctors and medical professionals both in the UK and abroad. We discussed topics such as how to phrase requests

assertively but not aggressively. And we covered just two confidence techniques: Alison Wood Brooks' "I am excited" reappraisal technique and Joris Lammers' power paragraphs.

At the end of the workshop, one of the participants asked: "Should I use one or the other technique or can I combine the two together?"

I said *it depends*.

Allow me to explain. Sure, all of the interventions in this chapter have been shown to work in experimental trials. But you still may find some more useful than others.

The analogy I use is that it's like deciding what pill to pop to treat a headache. Some people swear by ibuprofen. Others prefer good old paracetamol. A few will stick with aspirin. And there are those who crave the double whammy of paracetamol mixed with codeine.

I suggest that you test-drive the assorted techniques to see what works best for you. Think of it as your own series of experiments. Keep trying different things and reviewing the results until you find the ones that feel the most comfortable and effective for you.

You may find that writing power paragraphs gives you the lift you need while re-reading about the illusion of transparency leaves you cold – or vice versa. You may discover that telling yourself "I'm excited" helps during a big presentation, job interview, date or whatever. But you will only discover such lessons by *trying* all of the techniques, actually putting them into practice on multiple occasions.

Consider also how a shot of confidence will help those around you to make an impact. If you're one of the lucky few for whom self-confidence isn't an issue, think about spreading the message. Whether it's friends who need more social confidence or fellows at

work who could do with being more assertive, what mental manoeuvres could be of benefit to them?

Onwards and upwards

- Understand that being in the right mental state can make an absolutely real difference to your performance, your standing, your persuasiveness. Whether you're dealing with one person, many or – heck – even someone reading a written application, there are proven techniques that can combat anxiety and help you to stand out for the right reasons.
- Remember the confidence con: other people may outwardly appear confident, but you can't know how worried or intimidated they may feel inwardly. So don't believe for one moment that you're the only person in the world who ever feels panicky or lacking in confidence. There are probably large numbers of people around you right now who appear confident but who don't feel confident at all.
- Bear in mind also the illusion of transparency. Just because you are so aware of your own physical nervousness – the racing heart, sweaty palms, the worrisome thoughts swirling in your head – doesn't mean others can see it. Simply reminding yourself of this illusion of transparency can help you appear more credible and eloquent to others.
- Remember that you will get the benefit from *applying* the techniques, not merely understanding them. Several of them require putting pen to paper because that is the proven way to get benefits. Don't make the mistake that simply reading the chapter will give you the swashbuckling confidence you seek.
- In your quest to stand out, test the different techniques within this chapter and see what works best for you. If one technique feels clunky for you personally, try something else. Have a go at marrying different ones together to see what gives you the biggest lift.