



# 1. Childhood

Underconfident people are not born, they're made – and the more we find out about how they are made, the better our chances of reshaping ourselves in the direction of greater freedom and strength.

To generalise hugely but usefully, underconfidence tends to have its origins in a deficit of love. Probably someone, somewhere in the past, did not give us quite the support, attention and kindness we needed. Someone who should have been patient raised their voice instead. Someone who should have been tender towards our weakness decided to ignore it. Someone who could have offered their sympathies opted to stand back and let us stumble. And so we developed patterns of timidity and fear, and became much less than we could have been.

All children are, at the outset, shy. How can they fail to be a little frightened of the world, given how tiny they are and how large everything else is by comparison? Trucks that rumble past the house, trees, dogs, grown-ups ... One would have to be very odd not to be – by inclination – slightly terrified. But the good-enough parent knows how to appease this vulnerability of origin. They are attuned to the child's fears. They gently give them their hand when crossing the road. They draw the curtains when they are exhausted and everything has become too much. They don't blame the child for behaving 'badly'. They know that it's too damning to call the tears 'a tantrum'; they only stem from despair at a complexity that the child doesn't yet know how to handle. The parent is sufficiently adult to tide the young one safely over to the bank of maturity.

But not all parents are quite as grown up or sane; a lot of mental illness is in circulation in undiagnosed forms. Our image of such illness associates it with people who are talking to themselves and declaring that they are Napoleon. If only the problem were so easy to spot, we would know what to look out for and whom to treat – but it is far more widely

and insidiously distributed through the population than that. The polite manager with impeccable manners and a suave air might, at home, turn out to be filled with fury and sadism. The elegant lawyer with an expensive suit and a flirtatious smile might, in her role as a mother, be consumed by self-pity and selfishness.

Children offer an unbearably tempting target on which to play out neuroses. An ill parent may attempt to escape from all that is fearful, incompetent, sad and lonely in themselves by displacing it onto the child. The bullying may be minor: an undermining tone, an unwillingness to help out, a distance or coldness. Or we may be talking about something much more serious.

Children have no firm idea of who they are and what they are worth: they look to the outside world, especially their parents, to give them an impression of themselves. Are they kind little people or hateful nuisances? Do they deserve to exist or not entirely? Parents give answers to such questions that shape whole lives.

When we see a class of children and spot the ones who are shy, who don't cause trouble, who are keen not to be noticed and who would never stand up to sing or dance, we may suspect a history at home that is more complicated than it should be. Perhaps both parents keep telling the child to be 'good' in a way that precludes authenticity and joy. Maybe they stem from a culture in which being too much oneself quickly becomes a problem. Perhaps a father has repeatedly lost his temper in front of them, or broken furniture while calling their mother names. Perhaps the mother is never around and doesn't have time for hugs and sorrows.

The school system is geared towards identifying obvious troublemakers. It has a lot of time, and considerable resources to spare, for people who flunk exams, graffiti the toilets and smoke behind the bike sheds. But there is almost no attention or imagination directed at that equally or arguably needier group: those who never cause any trouble at all; those who rush to do their homework and want to please the teachers so much that they underline their answers in fancy colours and try very hard to win all the prizes.

These are, perhaps, the ones who are really in need. Their real selves are seldom heard. If we could open their hearts, they might tell us something like: 'I never want to put a foot wrong. I must be good all the time. Please approve of me. Please tell me what I can do to win your affection ...'

Of course, such underlying intentions can hardly be expected to trip off the tongue of even the most articulate 8-year-old. We might be over 50 before we have the encouragement and wherewithal to step back and become conscious of who we have grown up to be.

There is never any point in directly attacking suboptimal parents. However, neither is there a point in pretending that all parents do their job more or less well when, in reality, some of us are walking proof of complicated legacies. It helps to have the problems squarely in our sights, and if we have suffered in our early lives, we should be aware of that narrative – in order to feel appropriately enlightened and then, in time, generous and sweet towards our younger selves who continue to live within us.

A self-esteem audit

To remind ourselves of what we might have gone through and why we have ended up thinking about this topic, it can be helpful to take a self-esteem audit. Indicate how much you agree or disagree with the below statements:

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
I characteristically feel pleased with myself.					
I am easily able to relax.					
I feel generally good about my own appearance.					
I think I am essentially a good person.					
I am pleased to exist.					
I mostly like being me.					

If many of our answers tend to lean towards the negative, we should take note. It can be hard to know what is 'normal' in this area; people don't generally go around discussing their levels of self-esteem with others. And yet it can orientate us to take a reading with the little home-made barometer above in order to take the first step towards greater balance.

The next move is to dig a bit deeper into the family history:

I broadly feel my father was on my side.					
I broadly feel my mother was on my side.					

My parents were essentially supportive.

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My parents helped me to feel good about myself.

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More specific incidents might be summoned up in a sentence or two:

If I was sad or in despair, my father would ...

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If I was sad or in despair, my mother would ...

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If I really needed help, I ...

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If I could comfort my younger self, I would ...

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Deep down, my parents made me feel like ...

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If such enquiries ring no sad bells, we are in a fortunate cohort. But if the answers are bleak, there is perhaps no point in being too brave. We may be dealing with something genuinely difficult, and the time may have come to take stock, stand back and wonder how we might alter our sense of ourselves in the direction of greater confidence and security.

## Sharpening our sense of the past

The most fundamental idea at the heart of modern psychotherapy is that, in order to heal ourselves from our neuroses in the present, we have to understand what went on in our childhoods.

Though this thesis makes impeccable theoretical sense, there can be a problem with it: even though the past may have been extremely strange and regrettable, it will also – in key ways – now be hard to ‘see’ because it can appear entirely normal and therefore beyond easy analysis or questioning. Our childhood is – quite literally – what we’ve grown up with and, as we know, what has always been around has a habit of not signalling its presence or oddity. We might sense that something was peculiar around our caregivers, but really getting a proper understanding of what was at play can be beyond us.

However, there is one useful way to make progress: we can look at ourselves in the present and start asking ourselves questions about how we are right now. A lot that we need to know about the past is already contained in what’s going on for us in the day to day. We don’t need to try to remember all sorts of things from scratch; we just need to check in on our current feelings and take our guidance from them. The legacy of the past will be active, rich and vibrant (for better and for worse) at key moments today.

One of the most important questions we need to ask ourselves – as archaeologists of our underconfident pasts – is what, in the adult realm, we are afraid of around other people.

Let’s imagine that someone is asked to complete some sentences that begin ‘I’m scared of ...’, and they answer as follows:

- I’m scared of ... being thought of as an idiot.
- I’m scared of ... being found ugly and unacceptable.
- I’m scared of ... being arbitrarily humiliated, mocked and rejected.
- I’m scared of ... other people, who I feel will be extremely nasty to me.

What we fear at the hands of everyone we meet nowadays is likely to be a version of what we once feared at the hands of certain people in a hazier childhood. This gives us clues to go on.