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Opening Extract from...

Boost Your Confidence

Written by Melanie Fennell

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Boost Your Confidence

Improving self-esteem
step-by-step

Melanie Fennell



ROBINSON

With gratitude for the wisdom and courage of the patients I have had the privilege of working with over the years; for the inspiration and support of dear colleagues; for loved family and friends and (last but not least) for Sally.

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Important note

This book is not intended as a substitute for medical advice or treatment. Any person with a condition requiring medical attention should consult a qualified medical practitioner or suitable therapist.

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WHY CONFIDENCE MATTERS

Do you have a secret vision of the life you feel you should be living? Perhaps you see yourself in a loving, supportive relationship with someone who brings out the best in you. Or maybe you dream of bounding out of bed in the morning, fired by enthusiasm for a job or vocation you're passionate about. Perhaps you simply picture a slimmer, fitter and healthier version of yourself, with energy to spare.

You might already have a theory about why your dream life remains tantalisingly out of reach. Perhaps you tell yourself it's unrealistic, and that circumstances, bad luck or lack of opportunity will always work against you. But maybe you also have a feeling that there is something inside you that's holding you back, a quality that you can't quite put your finger on, but that you know is there. Do you ever wonder whether there's something about the way you *are* that's influencing the way your life is shaping up? If so, your instincts could be right. There *is* something deep inside all of us that has a powerful effect on every aspect of our daily life. It's called self-confidence.

Think of a self-confident person you know or have met in the past. What is it that you admire about them? Do they make an instant impact when they walk into a room? Do they have an in-built resilience to life's ups and downs, and see problems as challenges to learn from? Are they excited by new experiences and adventures? Or perhaps they radiate natural warmth, genuineness and openness?

It's true that self-confidence allows you to push the boundaries and live a big life. But being self-confident is not about being an extrovert, or the life and soul of every party. It's not about thinking you're the most fantastic thing since sliced bread. It's about simply feeling happy in your own skin. Inner self-confidence is like being your own best friend and cheerleading team rolled into one – it allows you to treat yourself with kindness and compassion, and instinctively act in your own best interests. It helps you enhance the lives of those around you, by being the best partner, friend and parent that you can be. It allows you to maximise the opportunities that come your way, and fulfil your true potential.

If you've picked up this book, chances are you already have an inkling that lack of self-confidence is affecting your life. Perhaps you've asked yourself the following questions.

- Why don't my relationships work out?

Do you wonder why you're still single, long after all your friends have settled down? Do new relationships never live up to their initial potential? Or are you stuck in a destructive relationship – or pattern of relationships – that you can't seem to get out of? Do you feel crushed by criticism and disapproval, and can't bear the thought of anyone disliking you? Do you sometimes feel that friends and colleagues take advantage, because they know you won't

complain? Do you feel uncomfortably self-conscious in a group of people you don't know well? Do your friendships tend to get stuck at a small-talk level? Or perhaps you have an urge to please everyone, and feel that if you're not the life and soul of every party, people won't want to know you?

Meena grew up thinking she was inferior to other people, and had nothing worthwhile to say. Now as an adult, she has a pattern of falling for self-centred men who demand a lot of attention from Meena, but give her little in return.

- Why is my career going nowhere?

Are you frustrated, bored, under-appreciated, over-worked or underpaid in your job? Do you have a nagging fear of failure that never leaves you? Do you find it hard to feel satisfied or pleased with what you've achieved, and to recognise your efforts or talents, even though you put in 110 per cent? Or do you have a feeling that you're not quite reaching your full potential, and that you could, and should, be doing more? Are you aware of avoiding challenges and situations that take you out of your comfort zone? Is there something you'd love to learn or explore, but somehow, never get round to doing, in case you're no good at it?

Kevin struggled at school due to undiagnosed dyslexia and grew up believing he was 'stupid'. He's been in the same unchallenging job for years, and refuses his manager's suggestion of going for promotion, because he's convinced they'll find out how 'stupid' he really is.

- Why can't I lose weight?

Is your wardrobe full of clothes you can't fit into any more? Would you dress differently if you were slimmer? Do you avoid social events because you feel so fat and unattractive? Do your best intentions to eat a healthy, balanced diet inevitably fall by the wayside? Do you drink more than you know you should, smoke or take recreational drugs, even though you're well aware that it's bad for you? Do you struggle with low energy levels or seem to have one health problem after another? Do you rarely take a day off or ask for help when you're ill? Do you find it hard to treat yourself or take time to relax?

Nicki was an energetic, sporty child but, by eighteen, she was very overweight. She's now been yo-yo dieting for more than fifteen years. How she feels about herself depends on what the scales say in the morning, and what she has and hasn't eaten throughout the day.

WHAT IS HEALTHY SELF-CONFIDENCE?

You don't have to be an extra special person to have healthy self-confidence – lots of normal, average people have it. Healthy self-confidence doesn't mean thinking you're great at everything. It's about accepting yourself for who you are, faults and weaknesses included, and living a life that's in line with your values and what's important to you. If you have healthy self-confidence, you'll . . .

- Want to be accepted and liked by the people you care about, but won't expect every single person you meet to like you.
- Feel open about expressing your needs and emotions

in relationships, and be able to both ask for and give help when needed.

- Know that negative emotions like hurt and anxiety are unavoidable in life, but have the tools to cope with them and learn from them.
- Set realistic, flexible goals for yourself and enjoy the journey of discovery as much as the achievement itself.
- Take care of yourself and make time for rest, relaxation and enjoyment without feeling guilty.

CAN PEOPLE REALLY CHANGE?

Yes, and we have proof, thanks to advances in neuroscience. Brain-imaging techniques have shown that changing the way you think and act can not only change the way you feel about yourself, but actually changes the structure of the brain. Scientists call this phenomenon ‘neural plasticity’. So although changing your behaviour and thinking habits can feel artificial and like hard work at first, take heart – it will feel more natural as time goes by.

HOW THIS BOOK CAN HELP

By reading this book, you’re opening the door to the possibility of a different future.

In this book you will . . .

- Start to understand what knocked your natural self-confidence in the first place, however long ago that was.
- Discover how low self-confidence can create its own vicious circle, making you think and act in a way that

stops your natural self-confidence from ever fully recovering and developing.

- Learn that being compassionate to yourself has a big role to play in building self-confidence, and how it can help you develop a new objective viewpoint of who you are – one that's more realistic, and helpful.
- Embrace your talents and strong points, and put your flaws and weaknesses into perspective.

The truly amazing thing is you don't even have to be fully convinced that this book will revolutionise your life and make a new person of you for it to help. You just need to be open-minded, curious about how your own mind works, and willing to invest time in finding out where your poor self-confidence came from, and how it's affecting your life. You need to take the plunge, throw yourself in the deep end and immerse yourself in the book – simply sitting on the side, dipping in your toes won't bring the same results!

So just reading isn't enough – you need to do your homework! That means making notes, filling in the worksheets and carrying out the practical exercises. Stick with it, and you'll start to undermine old, negative beliefs about yourself, however entrenched they may be. You'll start to become aware of self-limiting patterns of thinking and acting. You'll also work out – and put to the test – more helpful and realistic alternatives to your old habits.

The book is based on a form of psychotherapy known as 'Cognitive Behaviour Therapy' – or CBT. It's been much talked about in recent years so there's a good chance you've already heard about it. But it's not just the latest self-help fad – CBT has been around since the 1960s, long enough for thousands of psychologists and other mental health professionals all over the world to be convinced that it works. Unlike some talking therapies, CBT takes a very

practical, down-to-earth approach. Emotions, motivations, thoughts and feelings can be intangible, but CBT helps you pin them down, and really understand where they came from, and what keeps them alive.

CBT was originally developed as a treatment for depression by an American psychiatrist, Professor Aaron T. Beck. It's now used successfully to help people deal with a much wider range of problems, including phobias, stress, shyness, eating disorders, panic attacks, drug and alcohol misuse – and, of course, self-confidence.

With CBT, you can make small but meaningful changes within days. It works because it's interactive – you take a very active role, putting new ideas into practice on a day-to-day basis and experimenting with acting differently. This means you experience the impact of change for yourself, so it's more likely to have an effect. Taking a long, hard and objective look at yourself can be challenging, but CBT guides you through practical, step-by-step exercises that make it easier. As well as understanding yourself in new ways, it may leave you with a more questioning approach to life in general – CBT encourages you to question your thoughts, self-beliefs and self-image. But as it's solution-focused, the aim is not to simply uncover old wounds, but to teach you how to heal them.

Changing how you think and act from moment to moment can have an immediate effect on how you see yourself. But it's more than just a quick fix. CBT teaches you skills that you will rely on for the rest of your life.

QUIZ: HOW'S YOUR SELF-CONFIDENCE?

Take a look at the following ten questions. Next to each statement, put a tick in the column that best reflects how

8 BOOST YOUR CONFIDENCE

you feel about yourself. Be honest – there are no right or wrong answers here, simply the truth about how you see yourself. Then count up the number of A, B and C answers.

How's your self-confidence?	A – Yes, most of the time	B – Yes, sometimes	C – No, very rarely
1 I tend to be compassionate and encouraging towards myself, rather than self-critical.			
2 I generally have a good opinion of myself.			
3 I think it's right that good things and pleasure are a part of my life.			
4 I like myself.			
5 I can list my strengths, skills and good points just as easily as my flaws and weaknesses.			
6 I feel good about myself.			
7 I feel I deserve other people's attention and time.			

8 Health and wellbeing are important to me and I make an effort to look after myself properly.			
9 I judge myself by the same standards that I apply to other people.			
10 On the whole, my experience of life so far has taught me to value and appreciate myself.			

Scoring

Mainly ‘A’s: Congratulations! If you’ve answered honestly, you have the gift of self-confidence. You are generally comfortable in accepting yourself as you are and your self-respect is likely to be reflected in the way you live – you’ll have healthy relationships, will prioritise taking care of yourself, and make sure there’s enough time for fun and relaxation, no matter how busy life gets. You’re not blind to your weaknesses, but you know that you have intrinsic value and worth as a human being. But that doesn’t mean this book isn’t for you! Even the most self-confident people experience occasional moments of self-doubt (for example, at a job interview or on a first date). It’s worth reading on for ideas on overcoming occasional nerves or feelings of apprehension, and ensuring your self-confidence remains robust, whatever challenges you may face in the future.

Mainly ‘B’s: You have a generally realistic perspective on yourself, and can cope with life’s ups and downs by talking

through your feelings with a good friend, partner or close family member, or by dusting yourself down and picking yourself up. But you may find that in certain situations – whether related to work, relationships or your social life – your confidence deserts you and you begin to feel anxious or self-critical. You may have used avoidance tactics to cope with this in the past. Are you terrified by meetings or at the thought of presenting your ideas to your boss? Do you avoid seeking promotion or a new job because you can't face interviews? Are you great at one-to-ones, but hate socialising in a crowd? Or are you happy to be one of the gang, but experience stumbling blocks that stop you from building a long-term, one-to-one relationship? Are you successful and well-loved, but feel like you've failed in life because you're not your ideal weight? Working through this book will help uncover the source of these elements of self-doubt and highlight the thoughts and behaviour that feed into them. You'll also learn how to build a new perspective that will help you overcome your stumbling blocks.

Mainly 'C's: Well done for picking up this book – you now have the power to change your life in your hands. Your answers suggest that lack of self-confidence is already having a limiting effect on your life. You have an inner conviction that deep down, you're somehow lacking or inadequate. You probably have a very vocal inner critic, or carry round feelings of guilt at generally not being good enough. You are troubled by uncertainty and self-doubt, and when things go wrong you blame yourself. You're harder on yourself than you'd ever be on other people in your life, and have difficulty in feeling that you have any true worth, or that you deserve to treat yourself with respect and kindness. You may find it hard to get really close to other people. Perhaps you've always felt this

way, or came to feel like this after a major event such as a bereavement, the ending of a relationship, the loss of a job, or other life changes such as becoming a mother, or experiencing severe stress or illness. Indeed, you may have experienced serious psychological health problems such as problem drinking, eating disorders, depression or suicidal thinking. But it's gone on long enough and, deep down, you know that something has to change. This book is here to help you understand why you feel the way you do, and show you the changes you need to make to feel differently. You've found your way to the right door to greater contentment – are you ready to step through?

IMPROVE YOUR SELF-CONFIDENCE, CHANGE YOUR LIFE

Here are just some of the ways you may benefit from taking the time and effort to improve your self-confidence.

- You'll meet challenges head-on. You may feel mildly apprehensive in a challenging situation, but you won't have any trouble managing the apprehension. You'll find it easy to reassure yourself.
- You'll have a sense of perspective. You'll see difficulties in life as problems to be solved, rather than a sign that there is something fundamentally wrong with you as a person.
- You'll have the ability to both recognise and answer self-critical thoughts and to be kind and compassionate to yourself, especially when times are tough.
- You'll find it easier to relate to other people, and feel comfortable about asking for help.
- You'll have a more balanced self-image and come to

accept and appreciate yourself, fully, warts and all, for who you really are.

- You'll have more respect for your personal strengths, abilities and skills.
- You'll have a feeling of self-worth and feel entitled to a happy life.

WHAT CAUSES LOW SELF-CONFIDENCE?

You'll explore in detail the reasons behind your own low self-confidence throughout the book. But in general, the causes of poor self-confidence come into three main categories . . .

- Incidents in the past, such as childhood bullying or a difficult relationship with a parent.
- Aspects of your current life, such as problems in a close personal relationship, workplace pressures or conflicts, or just ongoing stress.
- A side-effect of another psychological health issue, such as depression, anxiety or panic attacks.

Low self-confidence or depression?

Sometimes low self-confidence is a side-effect of clinical depression, a condition which requires treatment in its own right. Consult your GP if you have experienced five or more of the following symptoms for at least two weeks:

- consistently low mood, or feeling 'empty'
- loss of enjoyment or interest in things that normally give you pleasure
- changes in your appetite or weight

- changes to your sleep
- restlessness, or else feeling like you've gone into slow motion, so much so that others have noticed
- feeling tired all the time
- feeling guilty or worthless
- finding it hard to concentrate or make decisions
- thoughts about death or suicide

If you recognise these symptoms, seeking treatment may well also restore your self-confidence, because negative thoughts about yourself are a key feature of depression. Nonetheless, the ideas in this book may still be useful to you – research shows that low self-confidence can make people vulnerable to becoming depressed. If you feel a bit daunted by the prospect, try focusing on Chapters 5, 6 and 7. They deal with silencing self-critical thoughts and focusing on positive aspects of yourself, which may strike a chord with you.

Ten top tips for getting the most out of this book

- 1 View it as a project. Set aside 20 to 30 minutes every day for the next month to read, reflect, and complete the exercises. It's a big commitment, particularly as it may be hard going at times, when you're uncovering issues that feel painful or uncomfortable. But it's a commitment that could have a life-changing pay-off.
- 2 Have a sheet of paper or a notebook by you and note down anything that occurs to you as you read – ideas, memories, hunches.

- 3 Try to keep an open mind, and approach the ideas and techniques you will find in the book in a spirit of curiosity. What might there be for you to discover? How can you apply what you read in your own life? Think of yourself as an explorer, investigating the territory of your own mind.
- 4 Take part. If you really want to make changes in how you feel about yourself, it's important to realise that reading and rethinking are only part of the story. The best way to change things is to be willing to experiment with new ideas and skills in everyday life. Direct experience is the best teacher.
- 5 Work in a way that suits you. Some people prefer to skim-read the whole book first, or glance at each chapter heading, before working through the book systematically.
- 6 Keep notes. As you go, you will find various worksheets designed to help you to notice, question and test old patterns of thought. Many people find these sheets helpful in providing a sort of framework for their investigations – filling them in helps to keep things on track, and remind you of the changes you want to make. Just doing the work in your head, or perhaps keeping your own notebook or diary, may turn out to be all you need. Or why not experiment with the worksheets to see whether you find them useful?
- 7 Let it sink in. Resist the temptation to move on to the next chapter too soon. The ideas in the book build on each other so you'll get the best results if you take the time to understand each one properly before you move

on. Don't rush, or the ideas presented won't significantly affect the way you feel about yourself. There's no 'right' timeframe for completing the book – it might take a week, a month or six months. Go with what feels right for you.

- 8 Work with a friend. Some people are better suited to working in a team. If that's you, consider buying a copy for a friend and working through it chapter-by-chapter together, perhaps using email to discuss your insights and challenges. It can help you stay motivated and you may find an outside point of view helpful if you struggle to be objective about yourself.
- 9 Get the help you need. For some people, working through this book won't be enough and they may need help from a professionally trained counsellor or psychotherapist. This may be the case if you find focusing on your self-confidence is making you feel worse instead of better, or if your negative beliefs about yourself are so strong that you find it impossible to apply the ideas and practical skills suggested in the following chapters. Seeking psychological help is a wise and courageous thing to do, and nothing to be embarrassed about. Your doctor is a good starting point, or see pages 242–3 for a list of organisations that can help you find a qualified therapist. If you like the approach described in the book, your best bet might be to look for a cognitive behaviour therapist.
- 10 Chart your progress. Keep a note of your score from the *How's your self-confidence? quiz* you've just done, then retake the quiz at the end of book. You should end up with more 'A's and few, if any, 'C's.

Why this book works

The difference between this book and lots of other self-help books is that it's not about convincing yourself that you're fantastic, or amazing, or that you can do anything you set your mind to. It's simply about shifting the balance in the way you perceive yourself. It's not about pretending your faults and weaknesses don't exist, it's about accepting them as a part of yourself, along with your many strengths, talents and good qualities. By doing this, you can overcome the low self-confidence that has been hampering your ability to enjoy life to the full and achieve your true potential.