

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Perfect Confidence

Jan Ferguson

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About the Book

Do you find it hard to stay calm under pressure?

Are you worried that you don't always stand up for yourself?

Do you want some straightforward advice on overcoming insecurities?

Perfect Confidence is the ideal companion for anyone who wants to boost their self-esteem. Covering everything from communicating clearly to handling conflict, it explains exactly why confidence matters and equips you with the skills you need to become more assertive. Whether you need to get ahead in the workplace or learn how to balance the demands of friends and family, *Perfect Confidence* has all you need to meet challenges head on.

The *Perfect* series is a range of practical guides that give clear and straightforward advice on everything from getting your first job to choosing your baby's name. Written by experienced authors offering tried-and-tested tips, each book contains all you need to get it right first time.

About the Author

Jan Ferguson has spent many years working with individuals, groups and organisations to help them achieve their potential. She is an accredited officiant of the British Humanist Association and conducts funeral, wedding, civil partnership and baby naming ceremonies. Jan believes that happiness can be experienced regardless of circumstances not just because of them.

Other titles in the *Perfect* series

Perfect Answers to Interview Questions – Max Eggert
Perfect Babies' Names – Rosalind Fergusson
Perfect Best Man – George Davidson
Perfect Brain Training – Philip Carter
Perfect Calorie Counting – Kate Santon
Perfect CV – Max Eggert
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Perfect Numerical Test Results – Joanna Moutafi and Ian Newcombe
Perfect Party Games – Stephen Curtis
Perfect Personality Profiles – Helen Baron
Perfect Persuasion – Richard Storey
Perfect Positive Thinking – Lynn Williams
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Perfect Psychometric Test Results – Joanna Moutafi and Ian Newcombe
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Perfect Written English – Chris West

Perfect Confidence

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Introduction

As you read through this book it should become increasingly apparent that you are the main character of the plot. By the final chapter I hope you will understand and like that character more. If it has achieved its aim then the time you have spent reading and thinking about this book will have helped you to:

- understand more about confidence and its importance for leading a happy, healthy life
- understand more about your emotions and about why you behave in certain ways
- recognise the advantages of making a few changes in order to liberate your potential to be yourself
- use realistic tips for behaving and feeling more confident.

In order to get the most from life, whatever our role, we have to work at sorting out relationships with other people. Confidence helps us to do that and this book will give you lots of ideas on how to become more effective in relating to others in your personal life, at work and in specific situations. However, the first relationship that has to be addressed, often the one we neglect, is with ourselves. The exercises and 'pauses for thought' in these chapters will give you the opportunity to spend some time constructively working on your relationship with yourself.

Whatever we do in life, it is useful to have a 'toolkit' to help us deal with what comes along. In my kit, techniques for being more confident are major tools. In fact as I have learned more about confidence it has become such a light device to carry that I am often not aware of it being there.

Two cautionary notes before you go any further into these pages: first, it might seem that I am saying it is easy to be confident. Well, often it isn't easy at all. The important thing is that although it isn't easy it *is* worth it. When you get it right it is a great feeling and it gives you yet more confidence to tackle further issues. But, when it doesn't work, don't be too hard on yourself. Failing is bad enough without punishing yourself for it. Many people who are admired for their confidence confess to sometimes feeling far from confident. I occasionally remind myself of a swan, gliding serenely and calmly, while underneath, where nobody can see, I'm paddling like mad.

The second word of caution is not to take it all too seriously. That of course implies not taking yourself too seriously. Yes, we are looking at personal development, but it is essential to retain a sense of humour and perspective about the whole thing. We've all got hopes, fears, strengths, weaknesses, successes and failures, but we're only people.

Part one

Understanding confidence

1 What is confidence?

CONFIDENCE IS WHAT you see and what you feel. In the introduction I referred to the swan analogy: there are many people out there who, on the surface, look as though they are coping effortlessly but are in fact paddling hard. So what makes them look confident? It may be a calm self-assurance, it may be an assertive manner, or it may be an air of boldness. You will have your own answer to this question. We are all individual; each of us expresses and perceives confidence in a different way. It is not necessarily true that the most noticeable person in a room or the most talkative in a group is the most confident one.

It is important to establish that we are addressing confidence, not aggressive selfishness. True confidence is a happy, comfortable state of being; it doesn't rely on putting others down or measuring ourselves against other people. It involves respecting yourself and other people. It is possible to be 'overconfident' and that might have all sorts of results. When we are among other people it's important to be sensitive to the effect we are having on them. Sometimes people come over as arrogant and cocky, traits which sometimes mask lack of confidence. A measure of real confidence is how well people relate to others, their level of rapport and their awareness of how others are feeling. Rapport is a tool which will help you to behave more confidently and is discussed in chapter eight.

Another example of overconfidence is that people sometimes have unrealistic expectations of their abilities. I confess to sometimes underestimating how long a task will

take and therefore I'm occasionally under pressure to meet a deadline. This makes life harder for myself and it can also cause problems for others. It is therefore an aspect of confidence that I need to examine and modify.

Confidence that only considers our own needs can be selfish and aggressive. Healthy competition and personal ambition are acceptable and necessary in our society, but real confidence balances fairness and consideration with determination to succeed. It is neither passive, giving in to other people's needs, nor aggressive, only considering our own needs, but a comfortable, assertive and respectful centre from which we can be the best we can be.

Different people behave confidently in different ways. It is not a skill for cloning. The glory of human beings is that we are all so different. Our uniqueness is a treasure to be celebrated. We don't have to portray confidence in the same way as somebody else does, but we can be aware of our own self, informed about the concept of confidence and determined to live our life in a way that allows us to achieve goals, fulfil our potential and be happy.

As you go through this book you will be invited to do some thinking about yourself and be offered suggestions on how behaving differently might be more effective for you. It is not, however, a step-by-step guide on how to run your life. Being yourself is the key to happiness and the more you understand about yourself, your behaviour and the behaviour of others, the more opportunity you have to be at your best.

Confidence and control

An important feature in our ability to be confident is having confidence in other people and in situations. Sometimes we need to trust that things around us will be all right. We can only control ourselves and by doing that we can hope to

have control of a situation. Often, though, people use energy trying to control another person's behaviour or even their thoughts. We try to control outcomes to situations, whether it be that everybody must enjoy a party or agree with our proposals. Yes, we can influence events in a positive way, but when we try to control them we run out of energy, we become critical and we lose confidence.

What you see

Take a few minutes now to think of somebody who you think looks confident. What is it about them that gives you that impression? Maybe it's to do with posture, the way they dress, their stature or a general presence. Maybe it's about how attractive you think they are. We often hold the misconception that somebody we perceive as beautiful or good-looking oozes confidence. This says more about us than the other person. Beauty is skin-deep, it may have several advantages but confidence is not necessarily one of them.

When people are confident they look as though they are in control of themselves and situations. Imagine the person who comes into a meeting, papers hugged to their chest, head down, muttering a greeting. Do you think, 'Aha! This person is going to have something interesting to say,' or do you dismiss them without a thought? Maybe you've not come across anybody like this, but then again, perhaps you haven't noticed them!

On the other hand, somebody who enters the room full of their own self-importance, hustling people to make a start and obviously determined to put their own needs first is likely to turn people off for different reasons.

When we behave confidently we give the impression of being comfortable with ourselves and happy to occupy the space we stand in. The effect of this impression on other

people is that they also feel happy and comfortable around us.

The person who walks into a meeting looking organised, making eye contact with a friendly smile and a greeting, is going to have a far more favourable effect. We are likely to warm to them and actually look forward to hearing what they have to say, not feel threatened by them. Of the three, this is the person who is most likely to achieve their aims confidently.

Exercise

What about you? Which one of these approaches is nearest to describing how you would behave? Write 'yes', 'no' or 'sometimes' in answer to the following:

1. Do you make comfortable eye contact with people when you greet them?
2. If you join a group of people do you scan round to acknowledge all of its members and establish your presence?
3. In general, do you stand or sit with your head up, shoulders relaxed, arms and hands in an open posture?
4. Do you show interest in people by smiling and responding to them?

Sometimes it can be helpful to consider specific situations in more detail. Think about the following questions:

1. What do you look like when you are confident?
2. How does that compare with how you look when you don't feel confident?

3. In which circumstances or situations do you feel confident?
4. When do you lack confidence?
5. What one circumstance would help you to transfer the comfort and confidence from one situation to another?

Perhaps your answer to the last question is that another person would not be present, or would behave differently. Well, sorry, that's not an option! You can only control yourself, not anybody else. Accepting and going with that concept is a big step towards confidence. It means there's less to do, and what a relief that can be!

What you feel

How do you feel when you are confident? Are you happy, relaxed, capable and valued? Maybe you answer 'yes' to some or all of these. On the other hand, maybe you don't really think about it. That's the point really: when we do feel confident in ourselves and in our circumstances we tend not to think about it.

Consider a time when you have done something well. Now think of a time when things didn't go so well. Which of these situations do you remember most clearly? Is it easier to recall the bad feelings left over from the negative experience or the good feelings from the positive one?

Most people would relate to remembering the bad things more strongly. That in itself is one of the reinforcements of lack of confidence. We need to learn from our mistakes, lick our wounds and move on, rather than allowing that critical little voice to creep in saying we've failed. The pattern of negative thinking is as follows: we have a bad experience, we dwell on it, we bring it to mind

when we've got something similar to do, it makes us nervous, we have a bad experience ... and so it goes on. It's important to break this chain and replace negative self-criticism with realistic, encouraging self-praise.

It's a fact of life that there are situations, circumstances and relationships which are difficult; this is true for everybody. Job interview, doctor's appointment, party, journey, meeting: it can be a very long list of challenges that have to be overcome. Some we sail through confidently with little thought, but others cause anxiety, nervousness and even dread. It's horrible when these negative feelings take over and can often lead to a feeling of being out of control.

So what does anxiety feel like? In extreme cases, anxiety can cause panic attacks and illness. Less extreme symptoms are butter-flies in the stomach, tense muscles and a dry mouth: you may have your own to add to the list. Alongside these physical feelings we also have to cope with our thoughts. Unfortunately, just at the time when we need a kind internal voice to reassure us that things will be fine, the opposite happens. We start to tell ourselves, very convincingly, that we won't cope, that we will look stupid, basically that we will fail. Why are we so cruel to ourselves? I hope that as you read further you will find ways of minimising the power of this negative self-talk and increasing your confidence.

Features of confidence

I have chosen not to talk specifically about 'confident people' and 'non-confident people' because I think everybody lacks confidence sometimes. Some find it easier than others, some days its easier than other days and sometimes lack of confidence creeps up when we least