

PART ONE

Explaining Poor Confidence

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No one gives you confidence. It's not a gift – perhaps bestowed by a guru or mentor, or even a higher power. And it's not innate. It's something *you* develop, almost from the day you're born. That said, significant others can play a major role in determining whether you develop strong confidence, or whether – like me – you become under-confident. Impatient parents, critical siblings, inept teachers: all can turn the impressionable and mouldable young child into someone lacking the basic tools for confidence (see Part Two). Yet this doesn't condemn us. It just means we have to develop the required attributes for confidence as adults. Of course, this is a deliberate endeavour and therefore a much harder pursuit. Nonetheless, confidence *can* be learnt.

Of the significant others I list, all three have a role in my story. Outwardly, mine was a normal upbringing in a typical 1960s-built exurban cul-de-sac on the edge of a 'village' (in fact a series of housing estates) in a dull Essex commuter town. My parents were typical of the area: two cars, two incomes, two children – in fact, doing rather nicely a generation on from their bombed-out East End heritage. Yet my family was divided. Dad played favourites, making my sister the apple of his eye: a position of power that confirmed my status as the 'annoying little brother'.

As we shall see, such a status provides the under-confident with their 'scripts' for life. Certainly, my script was written early on, with my mother's attempts at protecting me from both my father's and sister's disdain exaggerating the family divisions. These became a

chasm when the family split, with my father and sister going to live in a different cul-de-sac in a different patchwork of housing estates.

Yet, within a year they were back. And the script (which had been temporarily converted into the 'uncontrollable tearaway') resumed, though with my crimes broadening to include relationships beyond the house. My sister's friends, local hardnuts keen to win her favours, even my peers at school, all took their cues from my family dynamic – furthering my self-doubt. Indeed, by my teens my poor confidence was deeply rooted: so deep that I failed to develop an awareness of social norms. In fact, I constantly transgressed norms – often generating poor reactions without even realizing why. I was personally inept and verbally clumsy, with each *faux pas* compounding my poor confidence.

Supports for poor confidence

Geography didn't help. Our cul-de-sac was away from the others in the village – a distance from the housing estates full of normal children happily playing together. I was constantly on the edge of the gang. I felt marginalized – an outsider. And this led to further problematic behaviour as I tried to ingratiate myself (including shop-lifting and minor vandalism). Soon the local mothers despised me, which meant I became defensive – rude even – and further isolated.

Yet my father remained the key figure, and the one sending the clearest signals of rejection. Doting on the eldest – especially a daughter – is perhaps an inevitable and therefore forgivable trait for a man with no siblings of his own and with a strained upbringing involving a five-year abandonment when evacuated. This may have made him resentful towards my childhood comforts, or he may have had an anachronistic view of discipline and boys (even for the 1970s). Whatever the cause, when contrasted with my sister's treatment, I look back and observe an emotional neglect that left me bewildered, paranoid and, of course, deeply lacking in confidence.

As for the teachers – they should have known better. This was not a deprived area, although my own difficulties revolved around the fact I favoured more creative pursuits and disliked formal learning, which the low-grade teachers couldn't accommodate – especially when the lessons seemed so geared towards the well-behaved girls.

In fact, as a late-July baby I was potentially two years educationally adrift from the brightest girls in the class. Constantly behind, I again developed behavioural issues that meant I became disliked by the teachers (who were also local and therefore in tune with the views of the village) – to the point where I was falsely blamed for more serious incidents of vandalism, with the inevitable results for my embattled self-esteem.

A life sentence

While a distressing story for a child, however, it hardly stacks up as a justification for a lifetime disabled by poor confidence. It even reads as a pathetic self-justification for low attainment: a grown man unable to escape the scripts of his childhood – condemned to remain a small boy that's forever trapped in a place where he's misunderstood, disliked and emotionally neglected. Where's the abuse, the violence, the war or poverty?

But normality is the narrative for most lives in Britain and other developed countries. And poor confidence is as much bred among the carpet and curtains of suburbia as the dirt and deprivation of poverty. We should all be happy and well-adjusted, shouldn't we? So if we're not – well – the fault must be ours, which only compounds the divide between the haves and have-nots when it comes to confidence: adding guilt, confusion and isolation to our fear and timidity.

While the confident excel, the under-confident flounder in a sea of insecurities – blamed for our misfortunes often by the very people who robbed us of our confidence. While we struggle to be understood, they fall back on platitudes such as 'get over it' or 'buck

up' or 'you don't know how lucky you are': all of which add layers of self-loathing to our confirmed and deepening lack of confidence. While one group have their confidence constantly reaffirmed, the other have to suffer silently – with their doubts and uncertainty hidden or masked through avoidance tactics that can encompass a range of marginal behaviours.

We can become the swot or the giver – existing only to please others. Or we can be the rebel pretending not to care. Yet these are the better responses. Anger, depression, violence or deviant behaviour – all can mask deeply-held insecurities when it comes to confidence. Certainly, the under-confident suffer more anxiety and stress than their confident peers, and endure higher incidents of mental illness. They're also more likely to divorce (or never marry), be made redundant, drop out of education, become destitute, develop dependencies on drugs and alcohol, become overweight and therefore more prone to heart disease, smoke (making them more prone to cancer), have major accidents, commit suicide or be convicted of a crime. Their life is nastier – brutish even – and their life-expectancy shorter. Meanwhile, they have to live with the nagging guilt that, somehow, this is *their* fault and, therefore, no more than they deserve.

Being under-confident can feel like a life (and sometimes a death) sentence – and one unlikely to find release via the strident and dismissive maxims of the confident.

Replaying the scripts of childhood

Yet there is hope. As stated, there's nothing innate about confidence. We *can* change, although we first need to understand our condition. As shown by my own case, it's most likely the nuances of those early relationships that drive the gulf between those with and without confidence. Our confidence (or otherwise) is developed in the tiny power plays between parent and child, between siblings or peers, and between teacher and pupil. It's these early experiences

that create the context for our later relationships, and just about everything else.

‘How we react to our friends as well as who we pick as a lover, our abilities and interests at work, in fact almost everything about our psychology as an adult is continually reflecting our childhood in our day-to-day, moment-by-moment experience,’ writes Oliver James in his widely acclaimed book on family survival called *They F*** You Up* (2002).

We live out the drama of our childhoods again and again – playing the same role, finding the same characters, forcing them (and ourselves) into the same responses: hence James’ use of the word ‘script’ when describing these early power plays. Our scripts trap us, seemingly forever, on a destructive and dizzying roundabout of triggered reactions – generating familiar results over and over until no relationship seems complete until it becomes aligned with our primary childhood dynamic.

My fear of rejection, my poor confidence with the opposite sex, my defensiveness with authority figures – and my propensity to see attack when there was only mild rebuke (or even positive advice) – all come from my early relationships with my father, my sister, my peers and those village school teachers. Everyone I come into contact with plays one of those key roles: if not immediately, then eventually.

Same parents, different parenting

Of course, while conditioning is important, we also genetically inherit personality traits from our parents: don’t we? Well, not according to James, who states that our personality is almost entirely influenced by our early experiences, *not* our genes.

‘The pattern of electricity and chemistry which makes the thoughts and feelings in each person’s brain unique is hugely influenced by the way that person was related to in early childhood,’ he writes.

Using depression as an example he notes that 'if one's mother was depressed, the thoughts and feelings that this engendered become established as measurably different electro-chemical patterns in the frontal lobes of the right side of the brain. Psychologists know that these patterns are not inherited because they are absent at birth, and only show up if the mother behaves in a depressed fashion when relating to the child'.

James also states that the earlier these patterns are established the harder they are to shift, and that – of course – these psychological dysfunctions go far wider than depression: encompassing feelings of anxiety, stress, defensiveness and rejection (all cued up from those early relationships and experiences). And while experiences in our teenage years – and even adulthood – are also important, it's our first six years that set the pattern, says James, meaning that our personality is hardwired during the period we are least able to influence it.

Indeed, this would explain why I'm now so different to my sister. Although physically in the same house at the same time, we were brought up by different parents. My sister was daddy's girl, constantly being reassured by his love, while I was verbally and sometimes physically rejected. He was a quiet, measured and inwardly-assured man, which hugely influenced my sister who also became quiet, measured and inwardly assured. Meanwhile, I was noisy, erratic and under-confident – with the noise explained as the 'annoying little brother' vying for attention.

'Each parent treats each child so differently that they might as well have been raised in completely different families,' says James. 'Believe it or not, our uniqueness has far more to do with that than with our genes.'

Playing favourites

Recent support for this view comes from psychologist Jeffrey Kluger, author of *The Sibling Effect: What the Bonds Among Brothers and Sisters Reveal About Us* (2011).

‘It’s one of the worst-kept secrets of family life that all parents have a preferred son or daughter,’ he says (in an article for *Time* magazine), ‘and the rules for acknowledging it are the same everywhere: the favoured kids recognize their status and keep quiet about it . . . the unfavoured kids howl about it like wounded cats. And on pain of death, the parents deny it all.’

Kluger cites a study of 384 sibling pairs and parents undertaken by Catherine Conger at the University of California. Over three years she questioned them about their relationships and concluded that 65 percent of mothers and 70 percent of fathers exhibited a preference for one child, usually the older one.

‘And those numbers are almost certainly lowballs,’ says Kluger, ‘since parents try especially hard to mask their preferences when a researcher is watching.’

According to Kluger, zoologists often observe favouritism among animals (again, usually towards the larger or older offspring), often with fatal consequences: penguins removing the smaller eggs in order to concentrate on the largest; eagles allowing the largest chick to eat the smaller ones – the examples go on and on.

‘The function of the second chick is insurance,’ says Douglas Mock, a professor of zoology at the University of Oklahoma (quoted by Kluger). ‘If the first chick is healthy, the policy is cancelled.’

And the impact on confidence is obvious. Favoured children grow up with higher levels of self-esteem and therefore more confidence, with the reverse also true of less favoured siblings.

‘Kids who feel less loved than another sibling have a higher risk of developing anxiety, depression and low-self-esteem,’ says Kluger, with poor confidence its inevitable manifestation.

Winner takes all

Of course, it’s not just favoured siblings or neglectful parents that provide the roots for poor confidence, although it’s certainly a

common cause. Being the fat kid, or the small kid, or the gangly ginger thick kid (or the swot, come to that): all can single us out at home or school or in the street as beyond the mainstream. We are the outcast – the specimen to be sacrificed when the food runs out or the boat sinks or the gods require it.

We may be terrible at sports (I was). We may be profoundly unmusical (that was also me). Or we may be poor at formal studies (yes, that too). In fact, we may have lacked *any* prop for developing childhood confidence – not least because our low confidence meant our view of skill acquisition was the opposite of the confident child's. They had confidence, so approached tasks in the expectation of acquiring the reward from learning new skills (praise being a key one). Meanwhile, the under-confident child assumes failure as the likely outcome from any attempt at skill acquisition (with humiliation the likely result), which leads us to behave in ways that make failure almost certain – largely because we look for ways of avoiding participation.

This is a winner-takes-all scenario, or more likely a loser-loses-all. It's also a contrivance that we *must* reverse if we're not to spend our entire lives in the purgatory of poor confidence. A poor confidence, what's more, that will potentially destroy our career prospects, disable our relationships (with peers, partners, seniors, juniors and even our children), erode our happiness, and wreck our well-being.

Confidence is the lifeblood of self-esteem: both its cause and a result. It therefore cannot be ignored by anyone reaching adulthood and thinking there's a deficit in this respect. It's something we *must* tackle – head on – if we're to avoid a life filled with foreboding, angst, disappointment, distress and sadness.

The underlying malaise – low-self-esteem

Of course, what's wrong is not poor confidence, which is just a symptom (although a crucial one). The underlying malaise is low

self-esteem. And it's here we must start our journey towards redemption.

'If . . . you feel your true self to be weak, inadequate, inferior or lacking in some way,' writes Melanie Fennell in her bestselling book *Overcoming Low Self-Esteem* (1999), 'if you are troubled by uncertainty and self-doubt, if your thoughts about yourself are often unkind and critical, or if you have difficulty in feeling that you have any true worth or entitlement to the good things in life, these are the signs that your self-esteem is low. And low self-esteem may be having a painful and damaging effect on your life.'

Self-esteem is concerned with the judgements and evaluations we have of ourselves. We present these judgements as facts that brook no debate – that's just how we are, which results in us interpreting every event in our life as supporting evidence for our negative self-beliefs.

'Actually, however, they are more likely to be opinions than facts,' says Fennell. 'Summary statements or conclusions you have come to about yourself, based on the experiences you have had in your life, and in particular the message you have received about the kind of person you are.'

Of course, positive experiences – especially when young – lead to positive self-beliefs. Negative experiences, meanwhile, lead to negative self-beliefs. It's that simple, although the impact of each supposition couldn't be further apart.

'Negative self-beliefs about yourself constitute the essence of low self-esteem,' says Fennell. 'And this essence may have coloured and contaminated many aspects of your life.'

According John Caunt, author of *Boost Your Self-Esteem* (2002), low self-esteem can present itself in many ways:

- Doing things purely for the approval of others
- Constantly comparing yourself to others
- Resenting those that succeed
- Feeling like a failure
- Focusing purely on the negative (about yourself)

- Becoming upset by (even constructive) criticism
- Giving in to others' desires
- Not taking action from fear of failure and looking foolish
- Striving for unrealistic perfection
- Worrying excessively, but not asking for help
- Taking advantage of others – even bullying
- Putting others down and being abusive
- Putting yourself down – publicly and privately
- Feeling out of control and unable to make decisions
- Withdrawing into yourself and avoiding social events
- Becoming aggressive or even overly passive
- Becoming boastful or controlling
- Punishing yourself, or not allowing yourself to feel good.

And if some of these seem contradictory, it's because they are. It's the middle ground that causes problems for those with low self-esteem. For instance, Fennell agrees with Caunt that those with low self-esteem are often self-critical – even publicly – while also over-boastful when something does go well. It's quiet confidence that's missing: the inner knowledge that we are competent and therefore have no need to make public statements about our abilities or achievements.

Equally, we may be shy or withdrawn, but also pushy and self-promoting – with us potentially swinging between the two. Again, what's missing is the inner regulator: the person able to communicate effectively without crossing the social boundaries – indeed, knowing these boundaries exist and where they lie.

Sadness is also easily triggered by those with low self-esteem, which can quickly lead to depression (see Part Five). But equally – thanks to our poor emotional regulation – we can become elated, even overjoyed by a particular event. Low-self esteemers can also be fearful, shying away from risk. But we can then be foolhardy – happy to take ridiculous gambles (even with our personal safety) – because it's our assessment of risk that's the problem (as well as the value we put on our own well-being). Blame is another one. We

absorb blame and are strong apologists (usually). Yet we can also blame others almost instantly. We think others conspire against us, but can also be far too trusting – often investing faith too readily, even in objects or mysticism. We can be fiercely loyal, but also too critical; poorly behaved, but also very moralistic; wildly generous, but habitually mean; empathetic, but also cruel.

In short, for those with low self-esteem, it's our evaluation that's gone awry. We have poor judgement and therefore no ability to regulate our feelings, our reactions and even our thoughts. No wonder our confidence is shot.

The development and maintenance of low self-esteem

Fennell helpfully breaks low self-esteem into two parts: how it develops (usually in childhood) and how it's maintained (usually in adulthood). She describes the following dynamic for development:

- *Early experiences*: events and relationships that engender ideas about 'self' such as rejection, neglect or being the 'odd one out' – which lead to . . .
- *The bottom line*: an assessment of our worth or value as a person, including feelings such as 'I am worthless' and 'I am just not good enough' – which leads to . . .
- *Rules for living*: guidelines for coping or survival, such as 'I must avoid this', or 'I must always put others first' or 'if I am myself I will be rejected' – which leads to . . .
- *Trigger situations*: in which the rules for living are transgressed, resulting in feelings of rejection or failure, or of being out of control.

Yet such a dynamic needs to be maintained via a self-supporting mechanism, which Fennell plots thus:

- Activation of our feelings of worthlessness (our bottom line), leading to . . .
- Negative predictions, leading to . . .
- Anxiety or unhelpful behaviour (such as avoidance or disruption), leading to . . .
- Confirmation of the bottom line, leading to . . .
- Self-critical thoughts, leading to . . .
- Depression, which (again) activates the bottom line.

Those early experiences have not only remained unchallenged into adulthood, they have generated a self-reinforcing and therefore self-fulfilling mechanism that's regularly triggered – generating a seemingly-unstoppable vortex of destruction for the under-confident person.

Sound familiar? It certainly did for me. My early-life experiences set the course until my late 30s when I finally decided to seek professional help. But as both Fennell and James point out, low self-esteem is a learnt condition. There's nothing genetic about it – it's hardwired into us from our first breaths. Indeed, James goes to some length to refute those famed 1990s studies into similarities in personality found in twins separated at birth (which suggest genetically-based personality traits) – even going as far as suggesting the research was funded by pro-eugenics agencies that advocate racial differences. Certainly, more recent studies (including those analyzing the impact of trauma while in the womb) back up James' thesis that, when it comes to our personalities and especially our outlook on life, it's conditioning that matters, not genes.

Self-esteem is a journey not a destination

Genes or otherwise, it *is* hardwired. So can our low self-esteem – and therefore our poor confidence – be undone? Is a rewiring possible? What matters, it seems, is not the final destination but the direction of travel. There's no moment when you'll wake up shout-

ing ‘*eureka, I’m cured*’, not least because such feelings could be a sign of hubris (see Part Five). Start heading towards a more positive place, however, and you immediately reverse the self-fulfilling negativity of low self-esteem, whether you end up at a destination called *High Self-esteem* or not. And the realization that your genes are not responsible – you developed these beliefs and responses from negative experiences – can help you to switch trajectories.

It’s depressing to realize that, in part, we did this to ourselves. But it’s also a liberating thought. In fact, it’s a fantastic moment because it confirms that *nothing* is ordained. We’re not condemned to this path. We learnt this when we were helpless and can therefore learn something new now we’re more capable. Sure, some of the damage might be permanent. But less than we think, not least because our self-knowledge regarding how we got here means we can stop adding to the damage. In fact, we can start undoing some of the harm right away.

What’s Stopping You Being More Confident? *Confidence is something you develop from birth based on your relationship scripts, which can condemn you to a life playing the same role. The underlying malaise is low self-esteem. No sustainable instant cure is available but you can reverse the direction of travel.*