

Melanie Fennell

Boost
your
Confidence



Improving
self-esteem
step-by-step

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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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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 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.

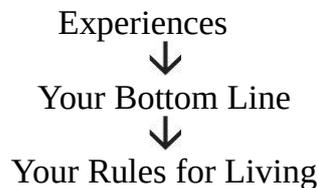
Why this book works

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.

WHERE DOES YOUR LOW SELF-CONFIDENCE COME FROM?

This chapter is about discovering where your lack of self-confidence comes from. Here's a quick overview of what you'll learn. The heart of the matter is old beliefs about yourself, learned through experience, but which are no longer relevant or useful. These old beliefs boil down to something that in CBT terms we call your 'Bottom Line' – a view of yourself such as 'I am unimportant'. But it's not quite as simple as that. If you believe your Bottom Line is an accurate reflection of who you are, you will have had to develop certain strategies to help you get by and feel OK about yourself. These strategies are your Rules for Living. You may feel that your Rules protect and support you, but as you'll discover later in the book, they actually keep your low self-confidence going.

Here's how it works:



THE POWER OF OLD BELIEFS

Did you grow up believing in Santa Claus? You had every reason to do so – after all, the people you trusted the most in the world, such as your parents and teachers, told you he existed. You even saw the 'evidence' with your own eyes at Christmas in the pile of presents he delivered. If you left a mince pie or glass of beer out for him, they'd be gone by morning, along with the carrots for the reindeer. It made perfect sense to change your behaviour based on this belief, by trying to be extra good in the days leading up to Christmas.

Now imagine growing up thinking you are a 'difficult and demanding' child and a lot of trouble for your parents. People you trust (parents and other family members) tell you it's true. You see the evidence – your mother shouting at you and often telling your father that you've been 'awful' all day. It would make perfect sense to try to change your behaviour by being quiet, less boisterous and more withdrawn, and trying to second-guess what people expect of you.

But a belief that you are 'difficult' is no more correct than believing in Santa Claus,

even if it feels as real to you as Father Christmas does to a four-year-old. An outsider looking on may see a normal, lively, demanding child and a mother who is under a lot of stress and often overwhelmed. But given this situation, chances are that you'd grow up with a deeply held belief that somehow you're not really worth the bother.

In this chapter you will learn ...

- What your own deeply held beliefs are and where they have come from.
- How your old beliefs have influenced the way you act and the decisions you've made.
- How, in turn, your actions and decisions have confirmed any negative beliefs, creating a vicious circle of low self-confidence.

Delving into the past can be hard, but it's the first step in letting go of these beliefs, finally accepting that they aren't true, and replacing them with something more accurate and more helpful. It's not about handing out blame or wallowing in self-pity, it's simply the first part of a fact-finding mission that will help you live the life you deserve.

The way you feel about yourself, the way you judge what's going on in your life from day to day, and how much you value yourself as a person – these are at the heart of self-confidence. Unless you challenge and replace your negative beliefs, there's not much chance of changing the way you feel about yourself, no matter how outwardly successful your life may be.

Tips for getting the most out of this chapter

- Keep a special notebook and write down the thoughts and feelings that come up.
- Stick with it – delving into unhappy memories is never easy, but if you want to make changes the first step is to understanding yourself better than you do now.

THE CYCLE OF LOW SELF-CONFIDENCE

First things first – your view of yourself is an opinion, not a fact, and there's a good chance that it's not very accurate. 'But I know myself better than anyone!' you may protest. Well, it's true that you may *feel* you know yourself better than anyone. But – since it's just an opinion – your view of yourself can be biased, exaggerated or just plain wrong. If you gave ten people the same set of facts about you – your relationships, personal characteristics, life history and achievements – chances are you'd get ten different 'opinions' of the sort of person you are. And you couldn't say one of them is 'the truth' – they're just different points of view.

The ultimate aim of this book is change – changing your point of view about yourself to one that is more accurate, supportive and helpful. And the first step in this is understanding. After all, your opinion of yourself didn't come out of the blue, you formed it as a result of your life experiences. By retracing your steps, and unravelling

this process, you will see exactly how this happened, and will understand why it is that this point of view feels so convincing and believable to you.

In many cases, although not all, it is childhood experiences that have the biggest influence on the opinions we hold about ourselves. What you saw, heard and experienced not just in your family home, but also at school, with your friends and out in the world in general has helped to shape the way you think about yourself today.

HOW POOR SELF-CONFIDENCE DEVELOPS

There's no doubt that experiencing abuse and neglect as a child can leave people thinking badly of themselves as they grow up. But far less dramatic experiences can also have a long-term effect. You may have lived in a comfortable home and had plenty to eat, nice clothes and regular treats like holidays, outings, Christmas presents and birthday parties, but still received negative messages about yourself that have become part of your Bottom Line. You may even ask yourself why you have such trouble valuing yourself when nothing really bad happened in your childhood. You may feel guilty thinking you have a 'problem' when there are so many people worse off than you. But if you're interested enough to be reading this book, chances are that you know there is something about the way you feel and think that's preventing you from being wholly content with yourself and your life.

Here are some examples of common situations and experiences that can lead to low self-confidence.

You were the odd one out in your family

Were you the only non-sporty child in a family of fitness enthusiasts, or the only bookish or artistic type in a non-academic family? Did you grow up with a sense of being different, and of not quite fitting in, or being an outsider? This can leave children feeling that there's something about them that's just 'not normal'.

CHARLOTTE

Charlotte's parents were scientists and her two older brothers loved science too. But Charlotte's passion was for art. At school she was above average in everything, but her real talents were for drawing, painting and creating designs. Her parents never took her work seriously, and were upset when she took the subject to A-level – they said she was throwing away her chance of getting into a decent university and should regard her art as just a hobby. Well, Charlotte went on to study fashion design at a top college and got taken on by a well-known clothing manufacturer. But she's always felt that other people are cleverer than she is, and worries that people will think she's frivolous, that her job – much as she loves it – is a bit of a joke. She compensates by trying to meet other people's expectations in other areas of her life, and by her self-deprecating humour, in an attempt to head off the criticism and dismissive comments that she expects.

You struggled at school

Children and young people who stand out in some way from the group can be left out, and are often miserable at the thought of being different. Moving schools, or to an area with a different accent, having a different colour skin, coming from another culture, or just not being considered one of the cool kids can leave young people vulnerable to teasing or bullying.

KEVIN

Kevin had been a lively and happy toddler. He loved his first year at school, but then began to struggle with learning to read and write because, unknown to his parents or teachers, he had dyslexia. While the rest of the class seemed to race ahead, he just couldn't seem to get the hang of it. He started to fool around in lessons and became the class clown, since making everyone laugh made him feel better about being bottom of the class. The teachers at his overcrowded school began to lose patience with him, and his parents would tell him he was lazy and was never going to get anywhere in life. He left school at 16 and took the first job he was offered in a local packaging factory. Kevin is a reliable and popular staff member who does his job well, but despite encouragement from his boss, he refuses to apply for management positions because he's sure they'll find out his secret – that he's 'stupid'.

You didn't fit in at school

Peer pressure is a powerful force and a big influence in children's lives, particularly when they hit adolescence. At a time when you are naturally moving away from identifying with your parents, there's usually a strong need to conform with your peer group. And feeling that your peers consider you a 'loser', or that you're not on the 'A-list', can damage your self-confidence for ever.

NICKI

Nicki's parents had grown up just after the Second World War, when food was still rationed in the UK. To her mother, food was a precious commodity, and she loved to cook. She felt happy that she could make large, wholesome, delicious meals for the people she loved. In Nicki's house you had to have seconds, and you weren't allowed to waste food by leaving it on your plate. She soon got used to cramming in a few more mouthfuls, even when she felt full to bursting. As she got older, Nicki became aware that she was bigger than the rest of her friends and gradually gave up playing sports, which she loved, because she felt it drew attention to her size. She regarded a thin shape as the only kind that was attractive – and her friends shared these values, even if they weren't nasty to her about her shape. Although she was naturally sporty, by the time she hit her teens Nicki was very overweight. She couldn't find any clothes to fit her in the high street shops and felt too self-conscious to go out to parties and discos with her friends. At 16, she started a series of strict 'diets' such as living on cabbage soup, replacing meals with drinks, or cutting out all

carbohydrates. After two weeks of feeling miserable and deprived, she'd go back to the meals she loved so much – often eating more to make up for what she'd missed. She became a typical yo-yo dieter, alternately trying to 'be good' by eating as little as possible and then over-eating and berating herself for being 'greedy'. At 33, she's a busy working mother with a husband and two children who love her, and lots of friends. She has an active lifestyle, so she's slimmer than she's ever been, but she never has a day when she doesn't feel fat and ugly, regardless of her actual weight.

You weren't given enough attention

You may look back and think, 'My childhood was fine,' or 'My parents weren't bad people.' But you don't have to have suffered cruelty or deprivation to have missed out on all the supportive daily actions, signs and messages that tell children they are acceptable, lovable, and good.

ANNA

Anna was a middle child in a family of six children. Her parents were both respected academics and they lived in a large house filled with piles of books and papers, plants and pictures. The children had a lot of freedom – there were no rules about bedtime, or what they wore to school, and they had a huge garden to run around in. Both parents were very busy with their work, and taught the children to be self-sufficient from an early age – making their own lunch-boxes, getting their tea when they came home, and putting themselves to bed at night. But the children got little individual attention – Anna couldn't remember her parents ever coming to one of her school performances or sports days, and she never had a party or special treat for her birthday. At weekends, Anna would often take herself on solitary walks for hours and no one in the house seemed to notice. Her father was susceptible to stress, and when he was under pressure he would frequently explode, accusing the children of making too much noise or moving an important paper. Anna left home at 18 and moved to a big city, where she got a job working in local government, but she finds herself attracted to volatile men who can't commit to her, and has had a series of relationships that have caused her a lot of pain.

You lacked affection

Parents who have not learned from their own parents how to give love freely, or who are stressed, unhappy or preoccupied, may be unable to show the love and affection that their child needs. You may have received some, but not enough, praise, interest, encouragement, warmth and affection.

PAUL

Paul was born three months prematurely and spent weeks in an incubator. He caught a lung infection and for a couple of weeks the doctors warned his parents to expect the worst. He overcame the illness, got stronger and was

finally well enough to come home. But he still seemed fragile and tiny to his young mother, who was terrified he'd get ill again. She started getting up several times a night to check that he was still breathing, and became exhausted. Paul was a fretful baby who didn't feed easily and his frequent crying was difficult for his mother. She soon developed post-natal depression, and would leave him in his cot or playpen for hours. Paul's father worked long hours to provide for the family, and got into the habit of going straight to the pub after work to wind down and avoid the tension at home. Paul's grandmother tried to help, by visiting as often as she could and making a big fuss of Paul, so that Paul felt closer to her than to his mother as a child. But shortly after his tenth birthday, his grandmother died. His parents divorced soon after, and his mother remarried and had two more children. Seeing how warm and affectionate she was with them was a stark contrast to his own childhood. Paul did well at school and he left home at 18 to go to university, and later became an engineer. At 40, he often feels lonely – although he joins in with social events at work, he tends to hold people at arm's length and doesn't let anyone get too close.

Your parents had low self-confidence

Your beliefs about yourself and your place in society can be a reflection of how your parents feel about themselves. Unwittingly, they may have passed on their self-doubts or negative beliefs. It can be as simple as your mother saying, 'How could I be so stupid?' to herself every time something went wrong. Or maybe your parents didn't dare question the decision of those in authority, such as doctors or teachers, even when they had doubts about them – you'd hear 'The doctor knows best,' or 'Your teacher knows best.'

MEENA

Meena's father and mother emigrated to England from India and started a dry-cleaning business. Through hard work and good customer service, the business flourished, and soon they had a chain of dry-cleaning shops that provided a comfortable home and lifestyle for them and their two daughters. But they never lost their conviction that, deep down, they weren't 'as good as' the people they mixed with. So although Meena and her younger sister enjoyed a privileged lifestyle of private schools, ballet and horseriding lessons, they also absorbed their parents' messages that they were somehow inferior to the people in their social circle, and that other people's opinions and feelings were more valid than their own. That was the message Meena got from some of her schoolmates too. They overrode her in conversation, made fun of her accent, and giggled behind their hands when she spoke up in class. Meena felt she just didn't fit, and had nothing worthwhile to contribute. When she got a job in public relations, she never complained when more and more work was passed her way – she simply got on with it. Increasingly, she has noticed that her best ideas are hijacked by more confident colleagues in meetings and presented as their own. She has simply shrugged her shoulders and never

complained – after all, people will probably not pay much attention if she speaks up. She has never objected when her bosses present her with last-minute work, even though it means working late and coming in at the weekends. But she often feels stressed and wound up, and frustrated that, despite her hard work, her career seems to be going nowhere.

There was no praise

If you were treated as if nothing you did was good enough, and those closest to you focused on your mistakes and weaknesses and ignored your successes and strengths, you may have grown up with the sense that there was something fundamentally wrong with you, or that you were lacking in some way.

JACKSON

Jackson was a lively and boisterous only child whose parents were quiet and reserved. They both believed the worst thing you could do to a child was ‘spoil’ it, so they were careful never to praise Jackson, in case he got ‘big-headed’. His parents were actually very proud of him and between themselves they would talk about how good he was and how well he was doing, but they never said that to him. They would hold back when he came home with a glowing school report, discussing only the few things that needed improvement. Jackson learned that the worst crime in his parents’ book was being ‘full of yourself’. As he grew up, he tried harder and harder to please his parents and get the praise and approval he so craved, but no matter how hard he tried, nothing ever seemed good enough. By the time he left home, his parents’ standards had become his own. He had become a driven perfectionist. He has quickly climbed the career ladder, but is tormented by the sense that nothing he does quite measures up. He finds it almost impossible to relax and has a nagging sense of guilt whenever he is enjoying himself.

Shock or big changes as an adult

So far, we’ve concentrated on childhood experiences in this chapter, but in some cases poor self-confidence doesn’t develop until adulthood. Experiencing traumatic events as an adult can undermine even healthy self-confidence. Being intimidated or bullied at work, undergoing long-term stress or financial hardship, being in an abusive relationship, being a victim of crime or being involved in an accident – experiences like these can knock your confidence and your sense of your own worth.

CAROL

Carol was a kind and considerate person who was great at putting people at their ease. Although not particularly ambitious, she had worked her way up to become a staff supervisor at a large supermarket, because she was a good manager who always put 100 per cent into her work. Although she had lots of friends, she’d never married or had children. She joked that the people at work were like her ‘family’ and couldn’t manage without her. Her boss used to