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How Can You Be More Confident?

by Dr. Doreen Stern

Have you ever admired someone as they strode across the stage to deliver a high-powered speech? Did he or she appear centered and self-assured, carrying a big smile? Did you wish you could be more like that person?

I'm here to tell you it's as easy as 1 – 2 – 3.

Sure, you may have fallen down before. You may even have felt so embarrassed that you told yourself you'd *never* humiliate yourself like that again. It's OK to have those feelings. That was the past, though. This time is going to be different, since you're going to have a *new* set of skills.

Here's what I want you to know about confidence:

1. It's a learned ability.
2. You can practice it, just like you may have practiced throwing a ball or skipping rope. Maybe knitting and crocheting. Perhaps hitting golf balls.
3. You can increase your confidence, no matter what your past experience has been.

To begin, I invite you to picture yourself when you feel discouraged. Are your shoulders slumped? Do you have a scowl on your face? Do you avert your eyes when you speak to someone?

Yes, I suspected so.

Let's change that image . . . together. I invite you to use a blackboard eraser to remove the downcast picture in your mind. Wipe it away completely, because in a moment we're going to replace it with a completely new one.

What kind of image will this new one be? In the revised picture, see yourself standing up straight, with your shoulders pushed back – comfortably. You're holding your head up high. Try it now.

Excellent work! Now, spice it up even more by smiling - a big wide grin that comes from your heart. I realize that your mind may resist this. It may say:

"I've got nothing to be happy about." Or "I've got a lot of important things to do: I'm too busy to be reading this silly article now."

It's OK to have these thoughts. Thank your inner critic for being concerned about your welfare. Assure it that you're in good hands and no harm will come to you. Tell your critic that reading this article will take only a few minutes and it can dramatically improve both your life at work and at home.

Good, I'm glad that's out of the way. Now let's turn on the sound in your picture. Do you hear yourself hemming and hawing? Saying *"I'll try"*? Or *"I gotta"*? Maybe *"I need to"*? Perhaps *"I should"*?

Noted psychologist "Dr. Albert Ellis" used to call phrases like these "musterbation." Only these words bring little pleasure; instead, they make us feel small by yielding control of our lives to someone or something outside of ourselves.

I invite you to banish them from your vocabulary. Replace them instead with more powerful words. *"What kind of words are these?"* you ask.

Do you know what are the two most compelling words in the English language?

At my presentations, many people raise their hands to offer *"I can."* Sure, *"I can"* is empowering; however, the very *most* powerful words are these: *"I've decided."* Say them out loud in a booming voice: *"I've DECIDED."*

Feel the difference? Yes, I see you growing in stature already.

Here are a few other effective words to add to your vocabulary: *"I intend to."* Also *"I plan to."* And *"I will."* These words will put you in the driver's seat in your life. That's where you belong.

Now that we've discussed the first skill, changing your mental picture, let's go on to the second: doing



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CONTINUED ON PAGE 26



something more difficult than you currently feel capable of doing.

Yikes! Why would you choose to put yourself in such an uncomfortable situation? There's a simple reason: to practice the skill of taking tiny steps to achieve a seemingly impossible goal.

Here's an example: Some *Stepping Stone* readers may recall an article I wrote nearly two years ago about my decision to attend "Trapeze School" in New York City.

Why did I go to Trapeze School? Ever since college, when I saw my boyfriend grasp onto a rope swing, glide out over the lake, and then release his grip and fall into the water below, I'd been yearning to do it, too. But I felt terrified. Absolutely apoplectic. Think about it: I was a girl from Queens who had never done anything intrepid like that.

Out of the blue, two years ago *The New York Times* featured "Trapeze School" in its Sunday "Style" section: it seemed the answer to my dreams. I'd be laced up in safety gear and an instructor would tell me what to do. According to the *Times*, nine-year-old girls were doing it at their friends' birthday parties.

I told myself I'd take a tiny step: merely call for information. That done, I walked to the park to see what it would feel like to turn myself upside down on a jungle gym. O.K., I could do that, too. After these small successes, I broke the project down into 19 other small steps: things like mapquesting Chelsea Piers, so I'd have directions to where I'd be going.

Eureka! I did the whole thing: I sailed through the air, shouting, "I'm flying; look at me!"

With that success in mind, I realized that I could live larger than I was currently doing. That led me to recently decide to compete in a "Ms. Senior Connecticut" pageant, modeled on the national Miss America competition. For the talent portion, I intend to act out my experience at Trapeze School. The bottom line is that one success provides the confidence to push forward into new, unexplored territory.

I invite you to ask yourself what dream lies deep within you just waiting to come out? This is the time to take tiny steps toward it. Doing so will make you feel more courageous and confident.

And here's the third skill: Create a confident mindset. Oftentimes we may say we want to become more confident, yet we also hold a competing belief that's holding us back. Think of yourself driving your car down the street with one foot on the gas pedal and the other on the brake. You can't get very far, can you? That's what happens when we hold competing beliefs.

I offer an exercise to help you resolve your competing beliefs, which I learned from Dr. Paul McKenna in his book, *I Can Make You Confident*:

- A. Identify the two conflicting beliefs or positions within your mind. (For me, these are to be successful and also to feel safe. As a result, part of me wants to continue feeling fearful because doing so will help me stay safe.)
- B. Place your hands out in front of you, palms out. Imagine the confident part in your dominant hand, the fearful part in your non-dominant hand.
- C. Ask each part in turn what its positive intention for you is in wanting what it wants. For example, what does my dominant desire for success want? It says it wants me to use my unique talents to inspire people to lead happier, more fulfilled lives. In doing so, I'll lead a happier, more fulfilled life.

How about my non-dominant fearful side? The one that desires safety at all costs? It says it wants me to lead a happy, secure life. One without gaping craters, where I could injure myself. *"I want you to be happy and healthy,"* it whispers in my ear. *"I love you, and I'm trying to look out for you,"* it reveals.

Suddenly, I see that both sides want the same thing: for me to be happy and have a wonderful life. Earlier, it seemed like my beliefs were

at odds, yet now I see that both want the same thing. This resolves my competing beliefs, so my right and left hands can work together to help me realize my dreams. In doing so, I'll feel more confident.

- D. Now cross your hands over your chest as you imagine a new "super part" of yourself with the combined resources of both your confident self and your fear. Feel these two parts uniting inside of you as they both wish you well -- and infuse you with positive energy.

By practicing these three simple skills: (1) changing your mental picture; (2) taking tiny steps to accomplish something larger than you currently feel capable of doing; and (3) resolving your competing beliefs; your confidence will soar. You'll soon see yourself living larger than you imagined possible. I've seen it in my own life, and I look forward to hearing from you about your own successes. ●

Warmly ~

Dr. Doreen Storm