

## My Experience With Becoming More Self-Confident

Like everything else on this site, this article is based on my own experiences and shouldn't be taken as a set of laws that apply to the whole of humanity. This is also just a sampling of my opinions and isn't meant to be an encyclopedic entry on the topic. Confidence is a vague, tricky concept so what I found personally may not reflect your own experiences with it. Overall I found that a lot of the information on being more confident that I came across was definitely useful in a way, but wasn't capturing the whole picture.

So if you're anything like me, when you started looking on the internet for advice on making friends, or getting over your shyness, before long you came across some advice telling you that you had to work on being more confident. The implication was that your confidence level was at the heart of your problems (you were shy because you were unconfident, you would be able to meet people if you were confident, etc etc). If you could just be more confident then everything else would start clicking into place.

What probably followed were suggestions to do things like make positive affirmations to yourself, make a list of your strengths and review it regularly, learn to breath properly, or learn to act confident even if you don't feel it inside, and whatnot. Some of the articles I read veered into self-hypnosis/neurolinguistic programming territory.

I toyed with all this stuff on-and-off for a while, but I ultimately concluded it didn't really work. It wasn't that confidence was bad or that the individual suggestions were inherently flawed, just that confidence was more complicated...

### **There are two kinds of confidence. A short-lived emotional kind, and a stable 'logical assessment' kind**

I think the problem with the advice I was reading was that, whether it realized it or not, it was focusing on the temporary emotional kind confidence.

#### **Short-lived emotional confidence:**

You have this type of when you consciously feel psyched up and confident. You're likely to walk around feeling all strong and powerful. You may even be thinking about how confident you are to yourself over and over. It's great when you feel like this and your improved state truly allows you to accomplish more than you could normally. No matter what your abilities actually are in a situation, you feel like they're shaper than they were before.

When you listen to driving music before a speech or contest you're trying to invoke this state in yourself. You may spontaneously fall into this state after a run of good performance or when you realize you're in a favorable situation. If you read or hear a particularly motivating speech you may fall into this state as well. Maybe you'll have a little epiphany about life or your problems and feel more charged up about things than you were a moment ago.

But like all emotions this feeling can't last. Sooner or later you'll have to return to the baseline. There have been a few times in my loser years when for whatever reason I was abnormally confident for a day or two. For that brief time I was better with people. If it lasted forever my problems would have been solved. But it wore off. I think that's where a lot of the confidence advice falls apart. It seeks to invoke this short-lived emotional confidence in you at all times. That can't happen.

#### **Stable 'logical assessment' confidence:**

This kind of confidence doesn't really have an emotion attached to it. It's more of a logical statement-of-fact about yourself and your abilities. It's something that you just *know*, like you know the sky is blue. If you had to say it had an emotional component, it would be a kind of calm, solid, self-assuredness. You probably have this kind of confidence about something that you know you're better at than most everyone you've met (e.g., playing an instrument, drawing, math).

This kind of confidence is rooted in your life experience. You feel confident about your musical ability because all throughout your life you've only met a handful of people who were better than you on the instrument you play. The previous emotional kind of confidence is something that people think you can almost conjure out of thin air to aid yourself. This second 'assessment confidence' is more something that

builds up over time. The assessment you make about yourself doesn't have to be, "I'm the best ever at X". It could be something more realistic like, "I know I'm not the best in the world at tennis, but I've won tournaments and I know I can beat an average guy off the street".

As I get more confident, I'm finding it's much more of this second type. Before I thought lasting confidence consisted of the first emotional type, just that you felt it all the time. But I'm not walking around with my chest puffed out constantly like that. What I do have is a logical knowledge that I'm a relatively sociable, likeable person.

### **Lasting confidence has to be earned**

Anyone can psych themselves up temporarily, though not necessarily on command, but to have a lasting positive assessment of your abilities you have to earn it.

As I just said, I *know* that I'm relatively personable, cool, attractive, whatever. But it wasn't that I was a total dweeb one day and then I found the magical self-affirmation that made me confident forever more. I slowly worked on improving myself and gradually became a better person. I did better with people. People said things to me like, "Chris, you're a cool guy." People complimented me on how interesting or funny or well-dressed I was. Over a few years this objective evidence added up and at some point I could say to myself, 'I am relatively funny' or 'I am fairly good looking' or 'I am a pretty good person on the whole'. I said these things to myself in that knowing, matter-of-fact way because my experiences confirmed it. I can go into a party and feel confident about my chances of getting along with the people there because I've done it in the past and know my social abilities are at a level that can handle the situation. I don't think I'm a god but I know what I'm capable of.

Sometimes you'll lose your confidence in a certain area for a while. I've had this happen to me a few times and have found that I couldn't really talk myself into feeling better. I had to 'get back on the horse' and remind myself through experience that I did measure up in that area.

Or sometimes a person will have a lot going for them but not realize it themselves. They usually need to get some objective feedback from the world that they're money before they start to accept it on their own.

The flip side of this is that if you truly don't have a lot going for you then you won't have a lot of reason to be confident. Yeah, you can psych your mood up temporarily, maybe by looking at your life from a different perspective, but objectively you're not good with people, you're not good at making conversation, you're not good at asserting yourself, or whatever your problem is. Deep down you know this and you can only be so confident in yourself because of it. That sounds like a downer, but the good news is that as you get over your weak spots your self-esteem will naturally rise.

### **Lasting confidence is about being comfortable with yourself**

As I got more confident I found I was more comfortable with all my traits. I didn't feel like I was the greatest person in the world. I have a more realistic view of myself, but this is coupled with the belief that I can handle what life throws at me. Again, I gradually acquired this mindset through experience, not overnight.

For example, I'm a decent looking guy, but I definitely fall into the Average category. I'm one of those average looking dudes with a mix of good and bad features. But that's cool. I have enough supporting experiences that I can tell myself that even if I'm not perfect looking, I'm good enough to get by. Or as another example, I'm comfortable with the fact that I'm not great in certain intellectual areas but pretty good in other ones. Or one more, I realize my body (tall and skinny) isn't suited to every kind of physical activity in the world. That's fine. I have an advantage in some areas but can't compete in others.

### **You can improve the individual facets of confidence separately**

Most of the little articles on confidence that I read listed off some traits of confident people. Each list was a little different from all the others of course. The idea was that if you became more confident (through self-affirmations, lists of your strengths, etc.) that all these traits would fall into place as well. But if you think about it, you can work on these aspects of self-confidence individually. Here are some I've seen from the various lists:

**Being able to take a compliment:** If you have low self-esteem then you tend to be dismissive of compliments to yourself. I used to do this. I got over it just by getting into the habit of saying 'Thank you!' and nothing

over it just by getting into the habit of saying "thank you", and hearing more, when someone complimented me.

**Looking people in the eye when you talk to them:** Unconfident people are more likely not to make eye contact, but just because low self-confidence could be the root of the problem doesn't mean you need improved confidence to cure it. You can get yourself into the habit of making eye contact with people.

**Being outgoing and charming around people:** I think this is a more a factor of having a lot of social experience under your belt than anything. The more I've caught up in my ability to socialize with people, the more friendly and engaging I find myself being.

**Being comfortable with risks:** Again, confident people are naturally more at ease with risk taking, but it's also a trait you can cultivate on its own. Quickly, you take some risks, see that they're not so bad, and get used to it.

**Being able to take criticism:** I've found that this is an ability I've developed rather than something that flows out of my general confidence, though I'm sure the confidence contributes in some way. The more you're criticized, the more you get used to it. A turning point for me was when I received some valid criticism, implemented the suggestions, and was better off as a result. After that I started to see genuine criticism as a good thing.

**Being able to speak in public:** To risk sounding like a broken record, confidence helps you in this, but it's something you can hone on its own.

**Being able to take rejection:** Like with criticism, this is something you can get used to. Once you've been rejected enough you stop caring. Experience will eventually reveal that rejection doesn't really affect your life overall. There will be milestones like a time that someone initially rejects you and then changes their mind later, or you get rejected by one person only to go on and have success with your next attempt. All these reinforce the fact that rejection is no big deal.

### **Just becoming more confident isn't the total solution**

So from my reading of it, a lot of advice on confidence has this underlying message that being more confident is at the core of everything. Get over your low self-confidence and you're set.

This may be true sometimes, but at other times you also need some knowledge or skills. Like if you're awkward around people then you may need some specific advice on improving your social abilities. If you're bad at chess, just becoming more confident in your chess playing abilities won't cut it. You may have to read up more on strategy and get more practice under your belt.

And the thing is, when you have the skills or traits to get the job done, you often don't need to be confident accomplish your goal. Well, I guess with things like sales or getting people to like you confidence is a kind of X-factor, but you still need the prerequisite abilities before you can be in the game. I think when confidence comes to getting along with people, you need a solid foundation of that assessment confidence, plus the skills to meet your goals. If you happen to get a burst of emotional state confidence then so much the better.

This heading speaks to a larger self-help misconception that everything is within you and you just need the proper insight or motivational pep talk to bring it out of you. Like that there's a happy, well-adjusted, powerful person lurking somewhere in your subconscious and you just have to unleash them somehow. Like I got at before, that people can temporarily be more confident/happy/outgoing/fearless than they normally are seems to confirm this view. You can be in that state for half a day, so there has to be some way to evolve yourself to the next level and be like that all the time.

But it doesn't work like that. Yes, you can have fleeting moments of being fired up, but they never last. If you want to improve yourself permanently than you have to work at it and gradually add new strengths to yourself while chipping away at your weaknesses. There's no magic bullet. If you're looking for that one insight that will save you instantly, you're wasting your time. I used to be like that and really didn't start making progress until I started working on truly improving myself. Abstract abilities like social skills must be honed over time just like more tangible ones. You can't become an outgoing social butterfly overnight any more than you can become a great pianist overnight.