



Confidence trick

Self-belief, or the lack of it, plays a big role in many people's lives. But thinking about it in a fresh way could be the answer to harnessing its power

You're at a conference. Hundreds of strangers in smart suits. Important people, chattering over cups of coffee. Networking. Do you keep still and hope your plain white shirt will help you blend in with the minimalist surroundings? Do you hide in the toilets? Do you stand awkwardly on the edge of a group and say nothing, berating yourself for not having more confidence? Maybe this feeling is familiar from other times in your life. Perhaps it's made you decline the opportunity to give a speech or presentation, prevented you from going for a promotion or stopped you asking someone out on a date.

It's common to feel that confidence is needed to do all these things and be successful. And, often, it might seem as though more self-belief is the goal and that something has to be done to get it. But what if this trait isn't what you think it is? Broadly defined, confidence is the quality of being certain of one's abilities. But it's more than that, according to Ian Robertson, clinical psychologist, neuroscientist and emeritus professor at Trinity College Dublin, and co-director of the Global Brain Health Institute. He says it is linked to a certain action and the belief in how well that action will turn out: 'Confidence is essentially a belief about the future, a belief that you can do something and that the outcome you anticipate will happen.'

In other words, the ability to envisage something that does not yet exist and to work in a motivated way to achieve that thing. His favourite example is US President John F Kennedy's statement in 1961 that 'by the end of the decade we will put a man on the Moon'. On 20 July 1969, the US did just that, with Neil Armstrong taking one giant leap for mankind.

But Ian, whose new book, *How Confidence Works*, explores the science of self-belief, points out that confidence is not optimism (the belief that things will turn out okay) or self-esteem (that's ego, the belief about yourself) or hope (the aspiration that things will turn out better). What it does is empower action. It's a

bridge to the future. At a neuroscientific level, it's a combination of thoughts and physiological arousal, Ian explains. One part of the equation is the 'expectancy belief' that you can or can't do something (such as stick to a training schedule), the other is the 'outcome belief' that the anticipated outcome will or won't happen (that you'll run a marathon, for example). Together, these thoughts create different psychological states. For instance, if someone believes they can't do something and that the desired result won't happen, it produces a feeling of apathy.

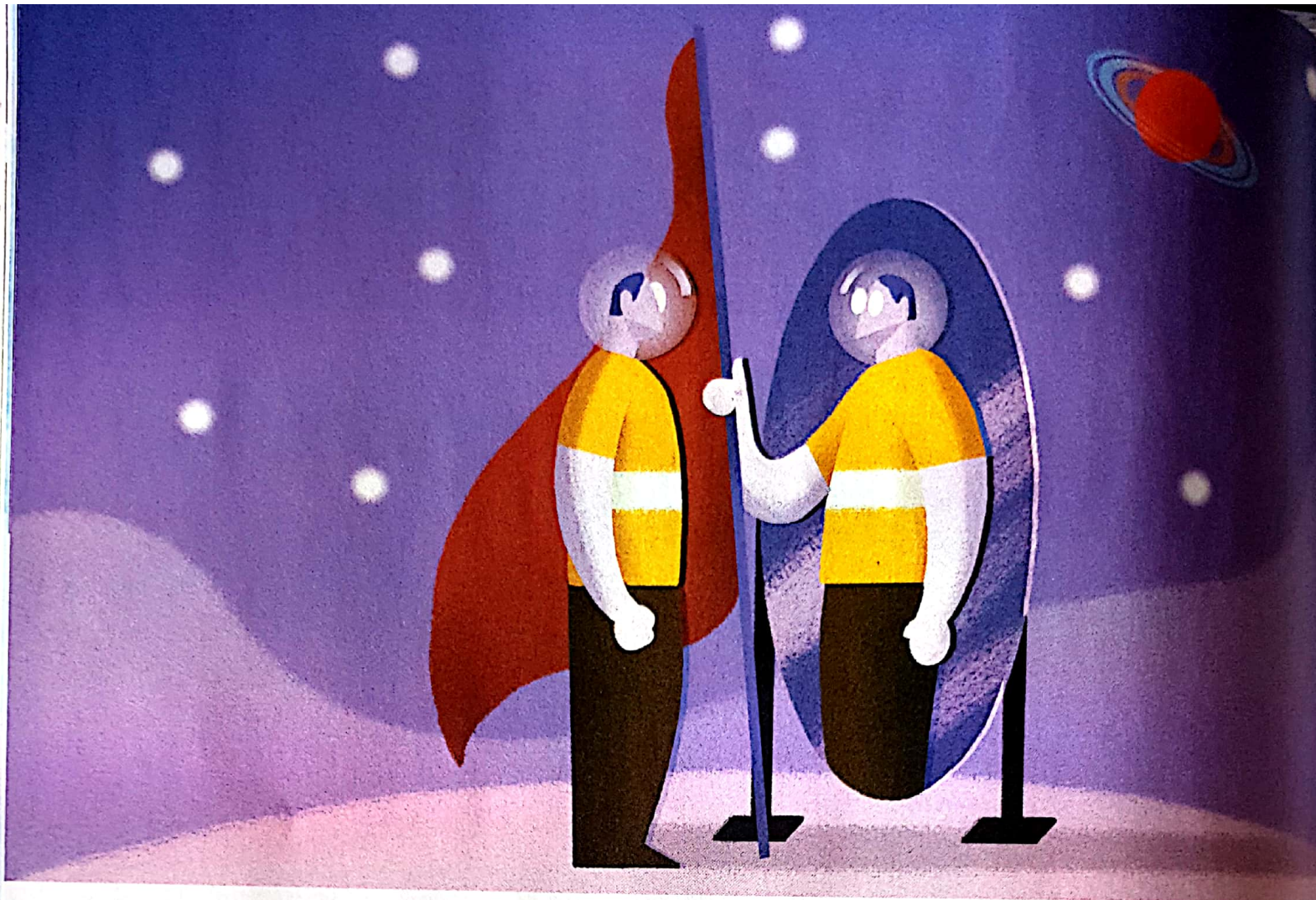
At the other end of the spectrum, the full whammy, as Ian calls it, is when someone believes both that they can do something and that the anticipated outcome will happen. This sets in motion a fascinating chain of events in the brain. Firstly, it increases the neurotransmitter dopamine. This improves mood and reduces anxiety, which enhances motivation and performance, increasing the chance of success. 'The brain works in such a way that if you believe you can do something, it will respond to that anticipated success in the same way as it does to actual success,' says Ian. 'Believing you can do something stimulates the feel-good activity in the brain, and you're more likely to achieve that thing because your mood is lifted.'

A common illusion is that failure undermines confidence. But Ian says this doesn't have to be the case. While hopes for success have a strong psychological association with fears of failure, it's how a person thinks about the latter that is the key. If they think it is attached to their self-esteem and ego, their confidence will be fragile, says Ian: 'Having a positive attitude to failure, looking at what you can learn from these moments rather than seeing them as a threat to your ego, can help you overcome setbacks and build confidence.'

This is why it's possible to be both confident and anxious. 'There is the illusion that people who behave confidently don't experience self-doubt. But confidence is a set of habits

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of thought, speech and actions. The notion that you have to feel right first before taking action is an illusion.' He says this can be mastered by taking incremental steps towards a bigger goal. The key is being willing to take the first step.

Sales and mindset coach Claire Sewell, who divides her time between New Zealand and the UK, says there is an even bigger and more powerful illusion at play. Claire, who is a practitioner of the three principles, or inside-out understanding, of how life works, says the mind tricks people into thinking the quality of their life is based on the quality of their emotions, which means they look outwards for good feelings, including confidence: 'We've been taught to think that things, people or situations give us a feeling. Just look at marketing – this product makes you feel great. But it's a hamster wheel and we can get caught in it. It can look like that red lipstick makes me more confident, but there will also be times when it doesn't make me feel confident.'

So, what's going on? In Claire's view, the illusion is that confidence comes from outside yourself and that it's a temporary state of mind. 'That's not the case,' she says, insisting that confidence is part of a person's innate being. What happens, however, is that anxious thinking sometimes gets in its way. 'I'm a confident walker, [for example],' she says, 'but if I'm crossing a plank between two buildings, I might have some worried thoughts about that, [including] "what if I trip or fall?" That can lead to a feeling of insecurity, which, in turn, leads to the belief I must lack confidence. But all that's happening is it's being veiled by my thoughts. Confidence is like the sun behind the clouds – it might sometimes be obscured, but it's always there.'

This is why a person can feel confident one day and not the next, have a sense of suddenly losing confidence, or feel self-assured about some actions and not others. 'It all comes down to what you're thinking and feeling in any moment, and that's changeable,' says Claire. If people are able to see through this illusion, the benefits are huge, she adds, with the big one being that someone can still take action despite not feeling confident, because they know that it's always there in the background. In other words, feeling confident is not a prerequisite for success or working towards your goals. And, according to Claire, knowing that it can't be sabotaged or lost is empowering: 'It's a constant, it's innate, always there inside us.'

It's also not a matter of trying to get more confidence because, as Claire says, you already have enough. 'If we can accept that confidence is innate, we can notice our thinking and the difference our thoughts make to how we feel. We need to look within to see through the illusion. If we can recognise our innate, pure potential, our confidence will rarely be veiled by our thinking, because we will know where it really comes from.'

Understanding confidence and its illusions can change your everyday behaviour. It might even change your life. Maybe you'll give that speech (see page 86) or go for that promotion. Who knows, you might even ask that person you like out on a date.

Words: Katrina Megget

To find out more about Claire's approach, go to swellcoach.co.uk; to hear more of Ian's thoughts, visit ianrobertson.org.

LOOK BEYOND THE ILLUSION

Here are a few of the myths about confidence that might hold you back, and the truths you need to bust them

Myth: It is derived from outside of yourself, from external things, people and circumstances.

Reality: *It's innate. It's always in there, regardless of what's going on outside, even if you don't always feel it.*

Myth: Confidence is essential if you're to take action and achieve goals or be successful or worthy.

Reality: *Ambitions and targets can be pursued without an overt feeling of self-belief.*

Myth: Getting more is essential.

Reality: *That's the insecurity talking. You are enough.*

Myth: It's temporary and can be lost or sabotaged.

Reality: *Insecure thoughts temporarily cloud it from view, but it's always there.*

Myth: Failure is the enemy.

Reality: *Setbacks offer opportunities to learn, which, in turn, can help reduce self-doubt and bring that innate confidence back into view.*

HOW TO TAP INTO YOUR INNATE CONFIDENCE

- **Make notes.** Use journaling to explore the underlying insecure thoughts that hide your confidence, by writing about times in your life when you have felt self-assured.
- **Take baby steps.** Set yourself easily achievable goals as you slowly work towards an end target.
- **Reframe failure.** Ask what you can learn from setbacks.
- **Ground yourself in your core values.** Following your principles will help you remove self-doubt.
- **Fake it till you make it.** Take action in spite of any anxiety and insecurities.

