

# #CONFIDENCE

How to build the confidence  
to succeed at love, life, work  
and play.

Su Birch

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## 2.9 Catastrophic thinking

'Of all your troubles great and small, the greatest are the ones that don't happen at all.' **THOMAS CARLYLE**

For some of us, negative thoughts take over, racing ahead to the future with a host of 'What if?' questions that torment us and eat away at our confidence. Thoughts like 'What if I fail?' 'What if this pain in my chest is a heart attack?' 'What if my partner leaves me?'

### **This is what a catastrophising thought pattern looks like:**

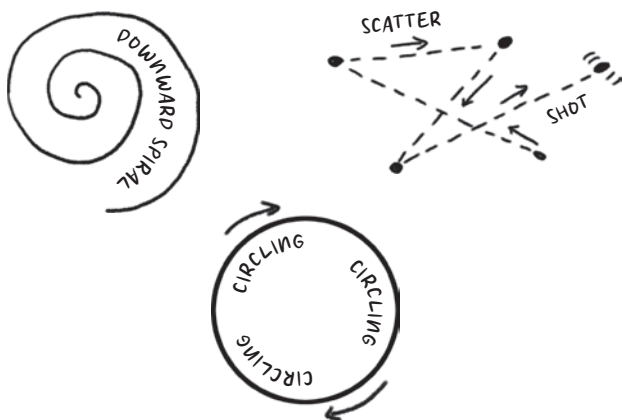
- ☹ The business isn't doing well.
- ☹ What if I'm retrenched?
- ☹ And what if I can't get another job?
- ☹ And then I won't be able to pay my bond and I'll lose my house.
- ☹ And then I'll lose my car.
- ☹ And what if none of my family and friends can help me?
- ☹ I'll end up homeless. And then ...

Anxiety can be a useful emotion if it spurs us into action, but catastrophising is decidedly not helpful. When we ruminate endlessly, continually imagining irrational worst-case scenarios, it depletes our energy.

Our body's response to these negative thoughts is to switch into fight or flight mode because it can't distinguish between real and imaginary threats. Our body releases adrenalin to make our heart beat faster and shunts blood to our muscles. It also releases cortisol, a stress-related hormone that helps us utilise stored energy, which is great if we are running away from a sabre-toothed tiger, but not so great if we have a constant build-up of cortisol in our stressed-out bodies, weakening our immune systems.

Psychologists have identified three different styles of catastrophising. Do you recognise any of them?

- ☆ One is described as a downward spiral where a story just gets worse and worse.
- ☆ A second is a scatter-shot style where all sorts of different dreadful outcomes are generated.
- ☆ And a third is called circling or ruminating, when one negative thought keeps going around and around in the brain.



The good news is that you can escape these thinking traps. How? The starting point is to immediately challenge them. Demand some hard evidence of what you are thinking; prove to yourself these thoughts aren't true.

- ☆ Say to yourself: 'That is not true because ...'
- ☆ Then you can take a more optimistic perspective, saying: 'A more useful way to look at this problem is ...' Try to reframe your thoughts (see 4.3).
- ☆ And then, make a plan. Take a second to stop, breathe and go forward with a plan such as 'If X happens, I will Y.'
- ☆ Your breathing is important because breathing deeply and slowly will restore your body's balance and help you think more clearly (see 3.6).

**When you challenge your catastrophic thinking, writing things down will help you.** Start with a short description of the problem and then draw three columns with the headings 'Worst-case Scenario', 'Probable Outcome' and 'Best Result', and fill in each column. Finally ask yourself 'What purposeful action can I take?'

Here's an example where you must give a presentation to the board and you are consumed with anxiety.

<b>Worst-case Scenario</b>	<b>Probable Outcome</b>	<b>Best Result</b>
I'll start shaking.	The board members listen politely.	I present confidently and with positive energy.
I'll dry up.		
I'll look stupid.	They ask difficult questions.	The board members listen carefully.
I'll get my figures mixed up.	I can answer most of them.	
I have the wrong data.	My director supports me.	They ask good questions.
People won't listen to me.	I am asked to revise certain recommendations	They agree with my conclusions.
I won't be able to answer the questions.	and bring the report back to the next board meeting for approval.	They support my proposals.
I'll be demoted.		They allocate the budget.
		I get recognition for my ideas.



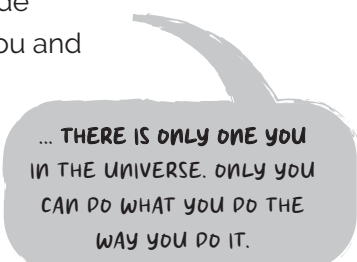
## 2.11 Your superpower

| 'Today you are You, that is truer than true, there is no one alive that is Youer than You.' **DR SEUSS**

You have a superpower. I call it your FU power and it is based on your knowing that there is only one you in the universe. Only you can do what you do the way you do it. Only you see the world through your eyes. And that gives you your unique power.

So, with that knowledge, your FU power must develop an FU attitude for when you need it.

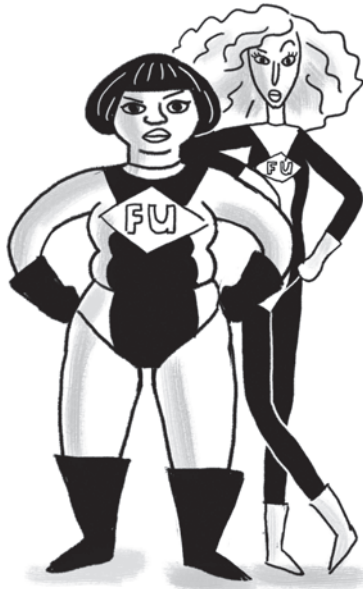
An FU attitude is staring your adversary or detractor in the eye as you smile sweetly. You roll your eyes marginally upwards, perhaps narrow them slightly or maybe lift your eyebrows the tiniest bit. You look at him or her long enough for them to feel uncomfortable. Most importantly, you don't say anything. Inside you are thinking 'FU'. You and the other person now both know you mean business.



... **THERE IS ONLY ONE YOU  
IN THE UNIVERSE. ONLY YOU  
CAN DO WHAT YOU DO THE  
WAY YOU DO IT.**

Silence is incredibly powerful. It makes people seriously uncomfortable. They rush to say something to fill the gap. And if you say something in that moment, you will ruin the effect and, besides, you might say something you will regret.

You need to practise this look in the mirror. Your FU is not the surly stare an angry teenager gives a parent. It is not a sneer, or a curled lip or a tight-lipped grin. It is a stare, with unblinking eyes. Your smile is soft but it doesn't reach your eyes. Everyone's FU attitude is a little different, but as long as it says 'I'm powerful and you are despicable', it will be a superpower.



## 3.7 Stand up for yourself

'When our body language is confident and open, other people respond in kind, unconsciously reinforcing not only their perception of us but also our perception of ourselves.' **AMY CUDDY**

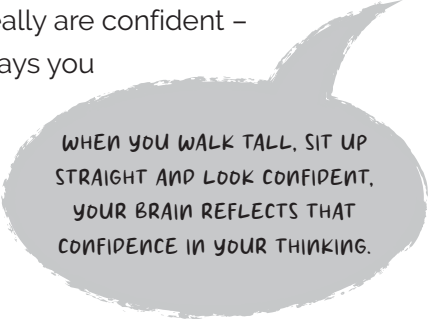
Physical poses can increase your power. It matters how you stand and how you sit. In a study conducted by professors from Columbia and Harvard, students who posed in high-power non-verbal displays experienced a rise in testosterone, decreases in cortisol, had increased feelings of power and a greater tolerance for risk, while those posing in low-power poses had the opposite.<sup>25</sup> The high-power poses were standing up straight and taking up space or standing up to lean across over a table towards someone, while low-power poses were seated, hunched up, arms folded, looking down.

In a different study, researchers at Ohio State University found that people who were told to sit up straight and write down why they were qualified for a job were more likely to believe

their thoughts about their qualifications than those who wrote while slumped over their desk<sup>26</sup>. So, it seems that posture affects how you think about yourself. **If you sit up straight, you will be more confident of your abilities** – something to remember for your next Zoom meeting!

Oscar-winning actress Helen Mirren tells this story: 'Fresh from a costume fitting, where I had been posing in front of the mirror assuming what I thought was a strong position – arms folded, butch-looking ... you know – I met with the woman in charge of Holloway police station. She gave me the most invaluable advice: "Never let them see you cry, and never cross your arms." When I asked why, she said "because it is a defensive action and therefore weak."

When you walk tall, sit up straight and look confident, your brain reflects that confidence in your thinking. Standing up straight activates the sympathetic nervous system, which is associated with feelings of excitement and energy. It doesn't matter whether you really are confident – your body language says you are and that makes you powerful.



WHEN YOU WALK TALL, SIT UP STRAIGHT AND LOOK CONFIDENT, YOUR BRAIN REFLECTS THAT CONFIDENCE IN YOUR THINKING.

## Being your power

- 😊 When you join a meeting, don't tuck yourself in at the end of the table; rather sit down in the middle.
- 😊 Enter with a smile for everyone – smiling suggest you are relaxed and in charge.
- 😊 Don't volunteer to take the notes – only do it if asked.
- 😊 Don't volunteer to pour the tea.
- 😊 Don't end your suggestions asking for affirmation with words like 'Right?' or 'At least that's what I think'.
- 😊 Finish what you want to say and don't let anyone interrupt you.
- 😊 If you are interrupted, pick up the conversation again or ask the person to let you finish.

'Confidence is everything, and the way you carry yourself, your posture, eye contact, all of that is such a big role in impressions, regardless of your size.' **CAMILLE KOSTEK, MODEL**

This is the look you bring out when you know the resistance to your ideas is resistance to you rather than your actual ideas. It's the look you use when someone makes a sexist or racist remark. It's the look you give when someone you're not interested in makes a pass at you. It's the look you have when someone makes a rude personal remark about you. It's the look you bring out when a colleague makes a spectacularly stupid remark. But because you are smiling and staying quiet, no one can accuse you of being rude or cheeky or insubordinate.

Don't use the FU power too often. It will lose its power if it is seen as your usual attitude. Use it when everyone is expecting you to explode. It needs the element of surprise.

| 'The things that make us different, those are our superpowers'. **LENA WAITHE**

## 4.4 Imposter syndrome

| 'When you undervalue what you do, the world will undervalue who you are.' **OPRAH WINFREY**

I'm sure there isn't a person anywhere who hasn't at some stage thought: 'I shouldn't be here. I don't belong here with all these clever people. They're going to find out I don't know what I'm doing'. Feeling like a fraud is common, and for some people it is almost impossible to shake it off, no matter the situation. The psychologists have named this the 'imposter syndrome' and I have seen so many people, especially women, battle with it. If you are always thinking that you're a fraud and likely to fail, you should know that you aren't alone.

Psychologist Pauline Rose Clance<sup>28</sup> first identified imposter syndrome in 1978. Here's what she writes about those who have it: 'Even though they are often very successful by external standards, they feel their success has been due to some mysterious fluke or luck or great effort; they are afraid their achievements are due to "breaks" and

not the result of their own ability and competence. They are also pretty certain that, unless they go to gargantuan efforts to do so, success can't be repeated. They are afraid that "next time, I will blow it." Her research found that imposter syndrome is present in all genders, races, ages and occupations but it is more prevalent in disadvantaged or underrepresented groups and seems to affect them more.

Here's what Valerie Young, who wrote a book on imposter syndrome, says: 'People who don't feel like impostors are no more intelligent or capable or talented or qualified than those who do. The only difference between them and us is that in the exact situation that triggers an impostor response in us ... they are thinking different thoughts. That's it.'<sup>29</sup>

And here's what Adam Grant, professor of psychology at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania, has to say: 'Impostor syndrome is not a sign that other people are overestimating you. It's more likely that you're underestimating your potential. Confidence is often a consequence of growth, not a cause. Believing in your ability is less important than believing in your ability to improve.'



## What can you do about imposter syndrome?

- ☺ As with most problems, the best way to deal with imposter syndrome is to talk about it.
- ☺ Open up to your colleagues and friends for support. You'll find many of them, even the most senior and experienced, feel or have felt the same way that you do.
- ☺ It's important to acknowledge your successes and stop undervaluing yourself.
- ☺ Recognise your own competence. If someone else thinks you can do the job, never doubt yourself.
- ☺ Remember you are in your position because someone thought you had the talent or skills to be there.
- ☺ Remind yourself every day that you belong.

'I have written eleven books but each time I think "uh-oh they're going to find out now. I've run a game on everybody and they're going to find me out."' **MAYA ANGELOU**