

**think**  
confident,  
**be**  
confident  
for teens

a cognitive therapy  
guide to **overcoming**  
**self-doubt** and  
**creating unshakable**  
**self-esteem**

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# Foreword

Adolescence is a confusing and unsettling stage of life for many people, as they struggle to figure out who they are, what their place in the world is, and how they should relate to others. Teenagers often focus intensely on how they believe other people—especially their peers—perceive them, and they frequently err in their assessments. If their perceptions are distorted, a cognitive approach can be quite useful in helping them correct their ideas and conclusions, allowing them to see reality more clearly.

If a typical teen, for example, is excluded from a party, her immediate thought is, *My friends don't like me*. A cognitive approach can help her in several ways. One, she can look for evidence that seems to support or contradict this idea. Have her friends, or some of them at least, done other things that make her think they don't like her? Have they showed her in different ways that they do like her? Two, the teen can look to see whether there are other likely explanations for why she might have been excluded. Three, she can decatastrophize the experience by asking herself, *If it turns out they don't like me, how can I cope? What can I do?* She can also consider the best outcome of the situation as well as the most realistic outcome. Four, she can assess the impact of telling herself that her friends don't like her and the impact of changing her thinking. Five, she can reflect on the advice she would offer someone else who was in this situation and had this thought. And, six, she can do problem solving, asking herself what it would be helpful for her to do, now and in the long run.

Whether or not her initial thought is valid, this teen will feel distressed if she overgeneralizes from this one situation, because it will affect her self-esteem and self-confidence. If she believes at heart that she is a likeable person, this situation may lead her to feel temporarily annoyed, hurt, or unhappy, but it will not change her basic view of herself. On the other hand, if she doubts her likeability, she may jump from *My friends don't like me* to *No one really likes me* to *I'm unlikeable*. Cognitive techniques can help her evaluate these conclusions as well.

This book, written by our two excellent colleagues, helps teens who may continually misinterpret situations and interactions and then see themselves in unrealistically negative ways. If only all adolescents were taught to identify their thoughts (especially the thoughts about themselves) that lead to distress, to recognize that their thoughts are ideas and not necessarily truths, to evaluate their thoughts, and to respond effectively to them. There would be far less emotional angst and dysfunction in adolescents and far greater opportunities to weather the usual storms of adolescence with equanimity.

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—Judith S. Beck, PhD, president, Beck Institute for Cognitive Behavior Therapy and clinical associate professor of psychology in psychiatry, University of Pennsylvania

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We would like our patients and supervisees to know that they are our greatest inspiration. We greatly value what we learn from

# Introduction

*“The greatest discovery of all time is that a person can change his future by merely changing his attitude.”*

—Oprah Winfrey

Confidence is one of the keys to success. If you have confidence, it means you believe in yourself—you know you have the brains, skills, talent, and know-how to get what you need and to handle whatever life throws at you. Unlike cockiness, which is an exaggerated view of oneself not based in reality, confidence gives you the real deal: an accurate mental picture of your strengths as well as the courage to ask for help, seek out the information you need, or acquire the skills you don't have. By learning how to generate confidence, you can unleash the incredible power of your own natural energy and, within reason, you can achieve practically anything you put your mind to.

This book will teach you how to conquer confidence's greatest opponent: doubt. Doubt—specifically self-doubt—weakens self-confidence. When you have self-doubt, you think you're in trouble when you're not, or think you can't handle things when you can. Self-doubt is the enemy in your head telling you that you fall short, that you will be rejected, or that you are a “failure.” This is the same voice that tells you that you are not being the “right” kind of friend or person, or that you are not “good enough” in hobbies, sports, or academics. Self-doubt unnecessarily drains your energy and leads you away from achieving your goals, such as happiness in your personal and social life and success in your athletic endeavors, your creative pursuits, and your efforts at school and at your job, if you have one. Negative thoughts driven by self-doubt put needless obstacles in your path.

Self-doubt has a significant impact on your moods and actions, on the way you feel in your body, and on your motivation. It leads you to believe you lack intelligence, abilities,

or skills even when the evidence shows otherwise. When you doubt yourself, you focus on your perceived weaknesses and don't fully consider your strengths. You unknowingly make things harder on yourself. You get in your own way.

There's good news. Self-doubt can be defeated. In this book we'll teach you how to get off the path of doubt and walk firmly on the path of confidence. With confidence, you'll feel better about yourself and experience all the rewards that go with these positive feelings. We'll show you how to retrain your brain based on the principles of cognitive therapy. Through this new system of thinking, you will develop and strengthen what we call your confidence mindset.

A *confidence mindset* allows you to have both the most positive *and* the most accurate view of yourself and any given situation. Giving yourself the credit you have earned and going after what you want are signs of confidence. When you acknowledge your shortcomings and appreciate your strengths, you can free yourself from doubt and insecurity and your confidence will soar.

Our program helps you weaken and eventually erase the opposite of the confidence mindset: the *self-doubt mindset*, which involves seeing yourself in a negatively biased and inaccurate way. We'll show you how to put yourself on an even playing field with everyone else so that you stop ignoring or minimizing your assets and strengths, second-guessing and criticizing yourself, and getting paralyzed when you're trying to come up with a plan of action or a decision.

## How Cognitive Therapy Concepts Can Help

Cognitive therapy is based on this basic rule: how we think influences how we feel, how we behave, and even how our bodies react to our circumstances. In other words, situations don't make you feel or respond in a certain way. It's how you interpret each situation that affects how you feel or respond. Thus, a situation may *feel* upsetting, but it's actually your thoughts about the situation that drive your distress. So if you want to change your reaction, start with your thinking.



Suppose, for example, that it's the end of summer with two weeks left until school starts. You want to get in shape so you won't suffer on the athletic field; or maybe it's time to tackle your required reading before there's no time left. But you may find that shifting your behavior requires a change in thinking.

Your thoughts can interfere with your ability to take action. You may have thoughts that give you permission to put things off, such as "It can wait; I still have plenty of time; I want to enjoy every minute left of my summer, because once school starts it's going to be torture." These types of thoughts can lead you away from your goals and toward trouble.

Changing the way you think can alter the way you act. Imagine thinking, "I can get on top of things by starting today. I can't wait around to want to. Starting now will be a warm-up and will make returning to the athletic field so much easier. I might even get ahead and be able to wind up with a few days of fun or chilling out before school starts rather than scrambling at the last second." Thoughts are powerful tools that play a major role in whether we take action or not, and they determine what action we take.

The doubt-driven thoughts that interfere with appropriate or effective action are what we call *give-up thoughts*. We define give-up thoughts as biased perceptions of the truth. They often reflect how you feel rather than the factual reality of any given situation. You can learn to identify these give-up thoughts and, instead of blindly accepting them as true, you can learn to carefully examine their validity. We'll teach you to replace give-up thoughts with *go-to thoughts*. Go-to thoughts are accurate, clear, and unbiased perceptions of any given situation, and they are always more helpful than give-up thoughts. Go-to thoughts are essential tools for a happy, successful life.

Sometimes when your thinking gets you into trouble, it is because you are looking at the world through a clouded lens—what we call a *doubt distortion*. Doubt distortions are ways in which you unknowingly filter information in a negative way to fit a negative way that you feel. Instead of seeing the facts, you believe the distortion—and the distortion is untrue. For instance, you may believe that someone is not interested in you when there is no information to support that thought, or there is information

to the contrary. You simply cannot see and believe in the facts because your feelings—of fear or self-doubt, for example—are so strong they cloud your judgment.

These sorts of distorted views tend to be worse when we're stressed out or upset. Stress can be divided into two kinds: genuine and artificial. *Genuine stress* happens when a real, difficult situation shows up in your life. An example might be if your car gets a flat tire when you are rushing to an important event, or if you find out at the last minute that you have a test you did not know about.

In contrast, *artificial stress* happens when we create a stressful situation in our own minds. For example, you may push yourself to finish a paper two weeks ahead of time to give yourself a lot of time to proofread it, or you may become overly concerned about what your hair looks like when you're headed to the gym. Placing unrealistic or overly harsh demands on yourself can lead to stress just as surely as having to deal with something hard that happens to you.

Stress, whether genuine or artificial, becomes stronger when we think we can't handle the difficulty. When stress gets the best of us, our insecurities come to the surface, and self-doubt can take over our thoughts, leading us to be unreasonably hard on ourselves. This happens to all of us from time to time. Self-doubt makes us assume the person we like won't like us back, that we won't be invited to the party, or that we won't do well on a test, get the part, or make the team.

The tools of cognitive therapy that you'll learn in this book will teach you to identify self-doubt and transform it into confidence—to replace give-up thoughts with go-to thoughts. One of the simplest ways to begin changing your thinking is to remember that thoughts aren't always true. Have you ever seen that bumper sticker "Don't believe everything you think"? Well, it is true that you can't always trust or believe your own self-doubting thoughts. When you learn to identify your own self-doubts and understand the types of thinking that are getting you in trouble, you can replace these self-doubting thoughts with confidence-boosting thoughts that actually help you reach your goals.

## How to Use This Book

In the first three chapters, we'll act as your personal confidence building coaches, helping you retrain your brain to move from doubt to confidence. Chapter 1 will show you how to identify doubt and understand how it operates and interferes with confidence. Chapter 2 is designed to help you begin to really notice your thinking and develop a more accurate view of yourself and the world around you. In chapter 3, you will learn to take action to build greater self-confidence.

Then, in chapters 4 through 7, you'll find stories from other teens about typical situations that stress them out. The teen stories in these chapters will give you an opportunity to learn from other teens' experiences. Reading them, you'll become familiar with "give-up" or self-doubt thoughts that can sabotage you. Then you'll learn alternative ways of thinking about the situation to free you from self-doubt and allow you to consider the path of self-confidence. You'll see how to replace your give-up thoughts with confident go-to thoughts. Finally, you will use what you've learned to develop a confidence mindset—the ability to see yourself and situations in a positive, accurate, and realistic way—that you can call on at any time, in any situation.

We encourage you to read the stories even if they're not about issues you're struggling with. It doesn't actually matter if the give-up thoughts aren't the same as yours: they will still help you learn to recognize and replace give-up thoughts with confident go-to thoughts. For instance, even though it wouldn't matter to you that your friend didn't pick you as a lab partner, another person might think, *I wasn't smart enough. My friend is not the friend I think he is. My friend thinks he'd get a better grade without me.* You can see how a person's thinking can generate a lot of distress. In this case, maybe the facts really are that the friend simply asked the person sitting next to him and didn't think anything of it, or maybe the friend didn't have the chance to ask this person because his neighbor asked him first. Seeing how these sorts of mistaken thoughts and behaviors get started, you may be able to better understand a situation that you're struggling with.

Finally, chapter 8 guides you to grow unshakable self-

confidence through exercises designed to assess, repair, grow, and maintain your confidence. At the same time, we review specific strategies you can use to stop doubt from getting in your way.

## Let Us Know How You're Doing

It can be helpful to share your successes and struggles with others. Let others know how this book has helped you. Let us know which strategies have made a difference for you. Join our blog at [thinkconfidentteens.blogspot.com](http://thinkconfidentteens.blogspot.com) or e-mail us at [info@thinkconfidentbeconfident.com](mailto:info@thinkconfidentbeconfident.com). That way you can hear from us and from other teens as well.

## Chapter 1

# What's Going On? Understanding Self-Doubt and the Confidence Mindset

*“If you don’t have confidence, you’ll always find a way not to win.”*

—Carl Lewis (multisport Olympian)

Have you ever felt down about yourself? Self-critical? Lacking in confidence? Uncertain or insecure? Then you’ve felt self-doubt. We all feel self-doubt sometimes. You may not be aware of it because you haven’t labeled it as such before. Self-doubt impacts how we think, how we feel, and how we act. It gets expressed in lots of different ways.

For example, consider Meghan, a girl in her first year at college. She wants to try out for the field hockey team. She held her own on her high school team—and she knows it—and she loved the camaraderie she felt on the team. She’d hoped she would get to play in college, but now that she’s competing against the top girls for a few spots, she’s not sure she can do it.

Instead of heading to the try-outs thinking she has what it takes and that she just needs the opportunity to show it, she is full of self-doubt. It shows up in her body: her stomach is queasy, her muscles feel tight, and her legs feel shaky. It dominates her feelings: usually outgoing and comfortable in her own skin, she feels shy, awkward, worried, and even a little ashamed as she steps out on the field for try-outs. It poisons her thoughts: her mind works double-time to convince her that the situation is unwinnable, that she doesn’t measure up, that she’d be happier doing something else—anything else. Her self-doubt makes her very uncomfortable, even miserable, and it saps her ability to do

her best at the try-outs—or even to show up for them at all.

Or consider Joe, a sophomore in high school who denies he has self-doubt. He says, “My group is really tight.” Yet when his friends make plans for the weekend, he often feels anxious, lonely, and left out. He wants to have friends over but thinks, *Why would they want to hang out here?* When Joe does hang out with his friends, he rarely takes an active role in making plans and just follows along with the crowd. He holds back because he secretly fears his friends won’t think he’s cool. He hasn’t put a name to it, but it’s his self-doubt that makes him question whether people like him, making him watchful and worried instead of being able to just let go and have a good time with people *he* likes—his friends.

Stress can intensify feelings of self-doubt until you feel overwhelmed by self-criticism, second-guessing, and negative thoughts about many aspects of your life. Stress-fueled self-doubt can lead you to feel afraid, anxious, sad, and irritable. It can cause you to respond to situations more intensely than you need to, and to draw conclusions that don’t really add up—for example, thinking either that your teacher doesn’t like you or that you’ll get a bad grade because the teacher yelled at you for talking in class.

## How Self-Doubt Can Affect You

Self-doubt can lie dormant for long periods. It can operate quietly, slowly and systematically affecting your whole identity in a negative way. It may also suddenly attack and destroy the factually based realistic and positive thoughts you have about yourself. Self-doubt:

- skews past, current, and future information;
- colors in a negative way how you think, feel, and act;
- causes you to feel uncertain or insecure about how to face or respond to a situation;
- bombards you with self-criticism, second-guessing, and

negative thoughts;

- causes you to take the blame for things, even when you know you've done nothing wrong;
- leads you into fear, anxiety, sadness, or irritability;
- causes your emotional reactions to be way out of proportion to the situations you find yourself in.

## Where Self-Doubt Comes From

Self-doubt arises from our genetic makeup as well as our life experiences, the messages we hear, and our social interactions. Your own temperament has been part of you since birth. Did your parents or other adults ever tell you what you were like as a baby? For example:

- Were you a baby who slept through everything? (And are you still a deep sleeper?)
- Were you an easily startled baby? (And are you still awakened by the slightest disturbance?)
- Were you a baby who had to be held all the time?
- Were you a baby who sat contentedly in your stroller entertaining yourself?
- Were you a baby your parents could take anywhere?
- Were you a baby who was always screaming, or described as “difficult”?

Your answers to these questions are clues to your temperament. Babies who cling and cry are normal; babies who are mellow and calm are normal: they simply have different temperaments.

Think about how you react to situations now. What are you like? Do you consider yourself easygoing, or overreactive? These

are ways to describe and understand your temperament, and they are a part of the definition of who you are. For example:

- Are you one of those people who jumps out of bed in the morning full of energy and crashes at night?
- Are you the type who wakes up, moves in slow motion until fully awake, and then needs to wind down before you get to sleep?
- Do you let people know how you are feeling?
- Do you keep your feelings to yourself?
- Do you like being around a lot of people?
- Do you prefer to be alone, or with a few close friends?
- Are you the eternal optimist always trying to make the best of any situation?
- Are you the perpetual pessimist always seeing the worst in every situation?

Your answers to these questions tell you something about how you're wired: how you express yourself and your social and individual nature.

Now think about grade school. If you had to leave the classroom for extra help (in reading, say), what were your thoughts and feelings? Were you upset because you were being separated from your friends? Were you okay with being pulled out of class because you had friends who were also getting extra reading help? Were you distressed because getting extra reading help made you feel stupid? What about if you were the last one picked for the team on the playground? Did you think it was because someone didn't like you? Did you think it was because you weren't good enough?

How you react to life situations tells you important information about how you define yourself. Your yes or no answers above paint a picture of who you are: tightly wound or



relaxed, fiery or slow burning, a social butterfly or an independent, an optimist or a pessimist. Who you are plays a role in how situations affect you. Although all situations have the potential to generate doubt, most often it is not really the situation itself that upsets you but your interpretation of what happened. In the situations given above, needing extra reading help or not being picked for a team is a problem only when you allow it to mean something negative about you. When situations lead you to draw personal, negative conclusions about yourself, then you know your self-doubt has been activated. Your answers tell you where your doubt lies, whether it is doubt about your ability to perform or concern about being liked.

Clearly, if you experienced a lot of difficulties while growing up, you are more likely to experience self-doubt—though not everyone's self-confidence is compromised by difficult life events. Here are some examples of life experiences—some very serious and even tragic, others less so but still important—that can plant the seeds of self-doubt, or make them grow:

- Conflict or even violence in your home
- Parents separating or getting divorced
- Significant illness or injury—either your own or that of a family member or friend
- Death of a family member or friend
- Transferring to a new school or moving to a new area
- Perceived favoritism of you or a sibling
- Difficulties with your siblings
- Not making the team
- Auditioning for a part in a play or a place in a musical group and not getting it
- Having no one to sit with at lunch; feeling like you don't