



‘Reinventing the wheel to run myself over’ – when you’re not feeling confident.

Fear, self-doubt and lack of confidence affect most people at some time in their life. I confess that when I was asked to put together this first chapter for the book, to prove that I had what it takes to actually get myself into gear and do something about my long held dreams...I froze. What made me so special that I could write a book? Doesn't everyone have a book in them? Why should mine be any better than anyone else's unwritten masterpiece? Why should anyone want to read what I have to say, and what if I got writer's block and just couldn't do it?

The fear went even deeper than that, and if I'm honest. I almost didn't send the proposal in the first place, for all the same reasons.

Even well-loved celebrities get attacks of self-doubt. Jason Orange nearly quit the Take That reunion tour because of last minute nerves in 2006. Just before the band went on stage, he was apparently standing behind the curtain wondering what the hell he was doing, and he had to be talked into going on stage by the rest of the boys.

Michael Jackson's attempted comeback, also in 2006, was completely ruined by stage fright. After 30 minutes of cowering in his dressing room, Beyonce managed to coax him out to give a somewhat lacklustre performance and he became the butt of several unflattering newspaper headlines the following day.

The point is – if a lack of self confidence can stop people who are already successful dead in their tracks, it's hardly surprising that gangly teenagers with nothing but a good school report and a place in the netball team to their name can feel the effects too. The trouble is that the effects can last well into adulthood.

Too shy?

I was a shy teenager. I led quite a sheltered life but I was very bright and interested in media, fashion, current affairs and of course - boys. The only problem was that I was scared of talking to people. I'd blush and stammer if I had to speak to anyone I didn't know, the effects would be magnified if the person was male, and more if they were attractive. If they were also part of the in-crowd I would do almost anything to avoid so much as looking at them.

I started off at a disadvantage, as I moved from a small village secondary school to one three times the size after the first year and by the time I joined the class most of the friendships and cliques had formed. I wasn't part of any

of them and to my horror I ended up being more or less adopted by the class nerds.

My situation wasn't helped by the fact that I was dressed in home made clothes, by a mother who insisted I went to school to learn, not take part in a fashion show. The school nerds may not have cared what I was wearing, but I did, and so did the in-crowd who teased me about my shoes or my clothes on a regular basis. I actually remember wearing my school jumper back to front one day because slash necked, v-backed jumpers were in fashion. After about six people helpfully informed me that I had my jumper on backwards, I decided that maybe my foray into eighties fashion knitwear was ill advised.

The way I overcame my shyness is so astoundingly simple that it's almost laughable. It was pure determination and a feeling that I had *nothing to lose* by trying it. I used what I now know was my own extremely primitive form of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, or CBT. I challenged my fears and then asked myself, "What's the worst thing that can happen?"

If I wanted to speak to someone who I thought was 'above me' in the school pecking order, I had to accept my fear that they might ignore me or laugh at me. If they ignored me I was no worse off, and if they laughed at me I'd have a witty comeback rehearsed and on standby. Even if they went away and talked about me behind my back – so what? I wouldn't have to know about that. It was hard – but I managed to build my confidence every time I forced the issue. When I realised that most people didn't ignore me, and that the

idiots who did were just too damn stupid and rude to be worth bothering with anyway, it all seemed to come together. Reading that back, it all sounds so childishly simplistic that I can hardly believe that it actually *worked*.

So – what's Cognitive Behavioural Therapy?

CBT is a combination of *cognitive* therapy – the type that makes people look hard at the unwanted thoughts, attitudes, and beliefs which are holding them back (called cognitive processes) and *behavioural* therapy, which focuses on ways of changing them. It's a simple concept but it can be very powerful.

CBT is based on the belief that most of our ways of thinking and behaving have been learned over a long period of time, and are still affecting us years later. It recognises that difficult events from our dim and distant past, and behaviours learned in childhood have shaped the way that we currently think and behave.

Using a set of structured techniques, people are encouraged to look at the thinking that causes the unwanted feelings and behaviour, challenge it, and retrain the brain to think in a more helpful and positive way. It doesn't dwell on the past, but helps find solutions.

In my school example, my own unhelpful thoughts were telling me that I wasn't interesting enough to talk to people, and that I didn't fit in. I didn't believe I had the confidence to talk to people and I thought of myself as shy. I

was reinforcing this belief daily with my inability to talk to people. I examined my thoughts, identified that it was my fear of being ridiculed or ignored that stopped me making that effort, and I replaced that fear with the belief that actually, I was just as good as anyone else in that school, and that I could initiate a conversation with anyone I wanted. I backed this up with the teenage logic of knowing that if they ignored me, I would be no worse off anyway. Eventually I got a Saturday job, bought the same clothes from Ipswich market that all the other girls at school were wearing and fitted in just fine – but at least I can say that I worked on the inner Sarah before the outer one got trendy.

If you're unashamedly shy, at least you can find some solace from the author Jerome K. Jerome, a self-confessed shy man, who advised against trying to find a cure. He wrote:

"Your attempt to put on any other disposition than your own will infallibly result in your becoming ridiculously gushing and offensively familiar. Be your own natural self, and then you will only be thought to be surly and stupid."

When you know that you're just not good enough...

There are books and books about self-esteem, and I don't intend to tread on anyone's toes by trying to condense their advice into one short chapter. The single most important thing you can do for yourself if you are feeling low in confidence though, is *shut the hell up*.

Negative self-talk is the killer of many an ambition, and if you're going to make the most of yourself you are just going to have to learn to deal with it. I had a conversation with a friend at a wedding recently that illustrates how negative self talk can really ruin your day. We were hanging around after the ceremony, doing the typical girl thing of appraising the other guest's wedding outfits.

After a bit of Trinny & Susannah style fashion debate, my friend told me that she'd noticed an old workmate she'd fallen out with and no longer worked with. He'd completely blanked her, several times. I pointed out that, as she couldn't stand the man, that was no great loss, but she was still upset. She thought that the people she still worked with hated her, and blamed her for him leaving the company. Some of those people were also at the wedding, and she said it was making her feel uncomfortable. The annoying truth is, that it was only her own thoughts that were making her feel bad. To be honest, I suspect that if he had spoken to her she would have felt even more uncomfortable. I knew the guy she was talking about and he was no great loss to a conversation at the best of times.

If you're a negative self-talker - the first thing you need to do is to become more aware of it. You probably don't notice the incessant ramblings of your own personal critic as he or she is there all the time. Spend some time actually paying attention to what you say to yourself as you go about your day, and I'll bet that you find a lot of it is negative.

When you hear that whiny voice telling you that you can't do something, it will never work, or yes, your bum does look big in that, tell the voice to '*shut the hell up*' or whatever phrase works best for you. Another technique is to imagine your negative voice as a character. I sometimes think of Marjorie Dawes from Little Britain when I'm trying to stop myself from having a fat day. When I imagine the obnoxious dust-eating slimming class leader telling me that I can't *possibly* go out looking like that, having that awful image in my head really helps to intensify the '*shut the hell up*' response. If she's really insistent, I imagine myself beating her around the head with a packet of low fat biscuits and I find that helps too.

It's very effective if you imagine the negative voice in your head being someone that you just couldn't take seriously – someone ridiculous like Mickey Mouse, or the ever-critical Statler and Waldorf from the Muppet Show. The main thing is that you have something tangible, even though it's in your head, to argue with. I find it's best not to argue with them out loud though. As soon as you mention that you're arguing with your inner critic, you'll find that people start avoiding you in the canteen and that's never good for anyone's self esteem.

In the famous and often quoted words of Eleanor Roosevelt, "*Nobody can make you feel inferior without your permission.*"

Even Marjorie Dawes!

Think yourself confident

Another technique that helps me is a form of Neuro-Linguistic Programming. For this exercise, I have to thank Peter Farnsworth, who taught it to me. It's called anchoring, and it can be used for almost anything.

Neuro-Linguistic Programming, or NLP, is a process that enables you to break old patterns using posture, breathing, specific exercises, and awareness. If it sounds too much like hard work – it's not. It's actually very easy, and once you've done it a few times, you'll be able to apply this technique to almost anything.

I learned how to do this very recently. Right now, in February 2007, I'm going through an unsettling time, and the crux of the issue is that on the face of it I have very little control over what's happening to me. OK, so right now I'm sitting here, writing a book about how to be relentlessly positive. To get into a state of mind where I can realistically tackle a project like this, I have got to have some confidence-boosting tricks up my sleeve.

When I feel an attack of 'can't do it' coming on, I relax, close my eyes and start to visualise a huge circle in front of me. In my mind, this circle looks just like a doorway into another world, and inside the circle I can see myself being everything I want to be, how I want to act and look. I can imagine absolutely anything in the circle. I can make it anywhere, and change anything about

myself. I use it to imagine all the things I want – selling my house and moving; getting a better job; having more money; losing weight and emigrating.

How does this translate into a confidence boosting exercise? Well, if you've got a social occasion coming up, let's say, a wedding, and you are feeling nervous about it, conjure up a vision of the wedding in an ideal world. Do the exercise standing - you'll see why.

Relax, and breathe slowly. Conjure up the circle in whatever way feels good to you. See into this 'perfect world' and watch yourself being genuinely confident, talking to people and having a really great time. See yourself interacting easily, smiling and laughing. You can make the colours in the picture really bright and the voices loud. Imagine every detail of what's going on around you, and watch yourself enjoying the occasion.

When you have the image as bright and focussed as you can possibly get it...step into the circle you've created in your mind. Physically take a step forward, as if you are actually walking into it, and feel the situation as if you were experiencing it. This changes the focus from just observing what's happening to actually feeling what you'd feel if it were taking part. You should now start to imagine the way that being at this perfect wedding is going to make you feel. You're feeling happy and confident. You're really having a fantastic time, and you feel totally relaxed and at ease with all the people you meet.

You should be feeling really good now. Imagine the feeling a bit more; amplify it in your head until you just feel amazing. Now, take one of your hands and press the thumb and middle finger together really hard, while thinking about how good you're feeling. Got that? Hold it for a few seconds, maybe a minute. Even longer if you think you can. Hold that feeling!

Now let go, and bring yourself back into reality by remembering something mundane like your office phone number. What you should have done is 'anchored' that fantastic feeling to that physical gesture. From now on, with a little practice, just pressing your thumb and middle finger together should bring it flooding back. Practice the visualisation a few times before you go to the wedding and then when you actually get there, just keep pressing those fingers together discreetly and you should feel confident and at ease.

If you think the whole idea sounds unlikely – are there any songs that you only have to hear to be transported back in your mind to a holiday or special occasion? Does the smell of a particular perfume or food make you think of someone? Well, those are just simple anchors. The brain is full of them, and by creating them consciously; you're just setting up new neural pathways and training your brain to do what you want.

In 1989, Ellen Langer studied two groups of 75-80 year old men at Harvard University. For five days, both groups were isolated at a retreat. One group was engaged in a series of tasks encouraging them to think about the past in general terms – talking about their past and writing about their lives - and the

other group engaged in a series of tasks which took them back into a specific period from their past - they wrote an autobiography up to 1959, describing that time as 'now'. They, watched films from 1959, had music from 1959 playing and lived with 1959 style memorabilia.. Before and after the experiment, both groups took a number of physical and mental health tests for issues associated with ageing.

While the first group stayed constant (and some even deteriorated) on these issues, the second group dramatically improved on the physical health measures such as joint flexibility, vision, and muscle breadth, as well as on IQ tests. They somehow managed to anchor themselves back physically to being 50 years old, just by using by the sights and sounds of 1959.

(Langer, "Mindfulness", Addison Wesley 1989)

It works on animals too...just ask one of Pavlov's dogs!

Don't be so sensitive!

Society likes to label people, and shyness is something that's often used to label people who seem quiet or overwhelmed in social situations. Of course, some people are naturally that way inclined, but around 15 - 20% of people are - at the risk of swapping one label for another one - 'Highly Sensitive.' It's up to you if you think this is a blessing or a curse.

We live in a society where 'sensitive' is really a bit of an insult. We're all supposed to be tough and strong and take it on the chin. Weakness is bad, right? Well, actually, being Highly Sensitive isn't a weakness at all. It's a genetic personality trait that was first written about in 1996 by a psychologist called Elaine Aron, who is a Highly Sensitive Person (HSP) herself.

According to research, HSPs are very aware of the subtleties in their environment that other people don't pick up on - which can be a great advantage in many situations. It also means they are more easily overwhelmed if they are bombarded by sights and sounds. The trait isn't a flaw or a syndrome, doesn't need curing, and can prove to be quite useful in certain settings. Just not on packed trains, in busy shopping centres or noisy nightclubs.

I only came across the subject recently, and realised that I probably ticked most of the boxes. Sensitivity to any kind of noise particularly affected me in my childhood, when I had to be taken home from parties wailing because I was so petrified of balloons. The horrid boys would threaten to burst them and I just hated it. As a toddler I used to sit in my Nan's lounge with the door shut and my hands over my ears because I was scared of the noise that her spin drier made. Fireworks and thunderstorms made me hide under the bed covers and quake. I thought I was just a big scaredy-cat, and while there might have been an element of that in it, it wasn't until I started researching the whole HSP phenomenon that I realised I wasn't the only weirdo who was still nervous around balloons at 35!

Are you Highly Sensitive?

So, how can you tell if you're officially Highly Sensitive? Elaine Aron's website and books are a good start.

- Do bright lights, strong smells, coarse fabrics or sirens easily overwhelm you?
- Do you get stressed out when you have a lot to do in a short amount of time?
- Do you make a point of avoiding violent films and TV?
- Do you need to withdraw during busy days, into bed or a darkened room or some other place where you can have privacy, peace and quiet?
- Do you notice delicate scents, tastes, sounds, or works of art? And do strong smells and tastes irritate you?
- Do you have a vivid imagination?
- When you were a child, did your parents or teachers see you as sensitive or shy?

Full test available at: <http://www.hsperson.com/pages/test.htm>

I'm guilty as charged on most of those criteria, and when I took the test which is also on Elaine's website, I scored 26 out of a possible 27. Oh dear. The only trait that I disagreed with was being particularly sensitive to the effects of caffeine – I only seem to get sensitive to caffeine when I *don't* have any.

I decided to treat this as a bonus. It's apparently 'not something to brag about' but so what? I quite like the fact that I'm highly sensitive, and when I looked into it further and realised that some people think HSPs evolved as 'lookouts' – there to keep watch and to prevent the rest of the warriors from coming a cropper when they went rushing in, throwing spears left right and centre, I felt better. Basically, some of us held back and assessed the situation to avoid a massacre. That sounds pretty sensible to me.

Of course, being highly sensitive can feel like a problem if it affects you socially. HSPs have been called shy and introverted, but the labels are unfair, and inaccurate. HSPs only seem inhibited because they are so aware of all the pitfalls and possibilities around them. They pause before acting, reflecting on their past experiences. So they are hardly likely to be the one interrupting the work meetings with constant ideas, or butting in to someone else's conversation at a party. An HSP is likely to have all their best ideas after the meeting has finished, by which time, they've processed all the information, taken in everybody's point of view, and come up with a considered idea rather than a knee-jerk reaction.

This trait can leave HSPs open to accusations of fence sitting, confrontation avoidance, and being passive. I'm one of the world's worst fence sitters, but it isn't because I'm too scared to offer an opinion, it's because I usually find myself empathising with both points of view and then get all confused about what my own opinion actually is. I can be indecisive and very irritating in that regard. But nobody can accuse me of being insensitive or arrogant.

A life less ordinary...

There are ways to make life easier if you think you're an HSP, but to be honest it's a bit like being born with ginger hair or a big nose – you're always going to be a bit different, even though your sensitivity is a perfectly natural inherited trait. On the positive side – HSPs are more likely to have empathetic and psychic abilities – so they will naturally pick up on other people's moods and feelings without even knowing why. They can be more creative and are usually drawn to writing, painting, and music. They have powerful imaginations, and are known for being hard workers (most of the time, when they aren't day dreaming) and problem solvers.

Whether you're naturally introverted, a Highly Sensitive Person or, like most of us, just need a boost from time to time, it's just normal.

RESOURCES

Books:

- **The Highly Sensitive Person: How to Survive and Thrive When the World Overwhelms You** – Elaine Aron
- **The Highly Sensitive Person's Survival Guide** – Ted Zeff
- **How to Raise Your Self-esteem** – Nathaniel Branden
- **Instant Confidence (Book & CD)** – Paul McKenna

Websites

<http://www.hsperson.com> - Elaine Aron's Highly Sensitive Person website

<http://www.more-selfesteem.com/> - Does what it says on the tin

<http://www.anlp.org/> - for more NLP resources, exercises and techniques.