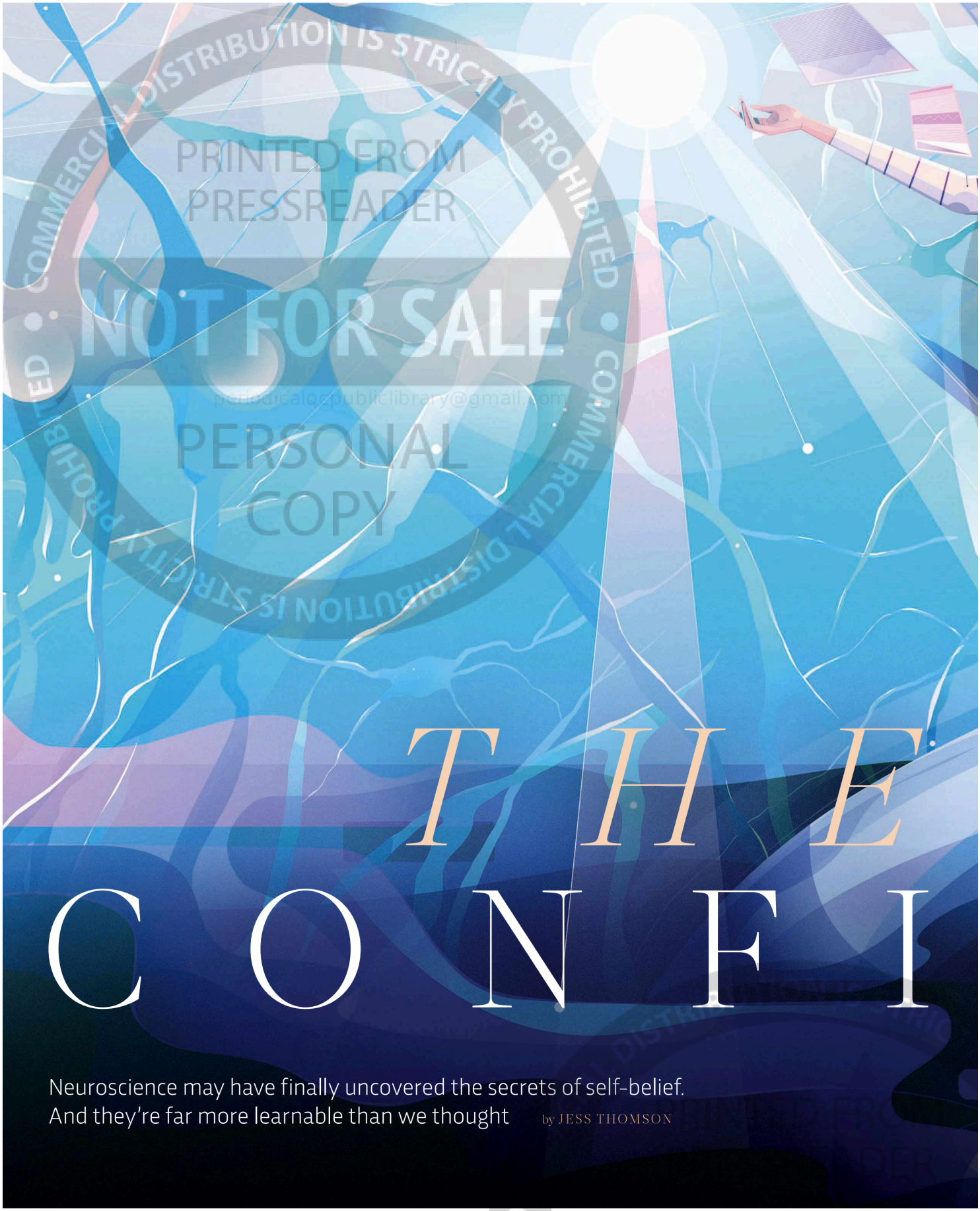
- Self-confidence



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THE CONFI

Neuroscience may have finally uncovered the secrets of self-belief. And they're far more learnable than we thought

by JESS THOMSON

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ILLUSTRATION: JOE WALDRON

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Somehow, we've seriously underestimated confidence. While most of us likely want more of it (only 16 per cent of us describe ourselves as 'very confident', according to a YouGov survey), many of us don't realise just how profoundly a bit more self-belief could change our lives.

Far from being just a trait that's useful for delivering TED talks or impressing at dinner parties, confidence has long been known to be a powerful predictor of life outcomes. Truly confident people tend to be healthier, happier and more resilient. They perform better in school, report greater job satisfaction and career success, build stronger relationships and are often more effective team players.

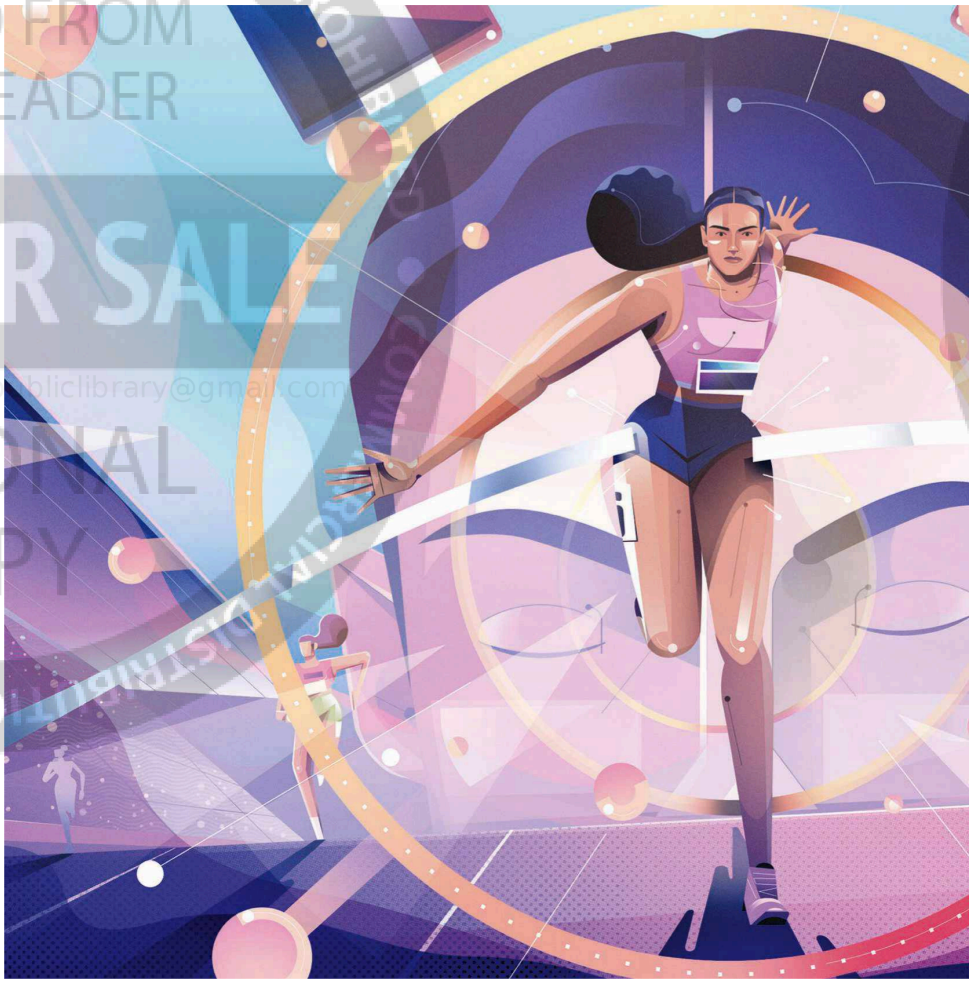
On the flip side, low confidence goes beyond occasional moments of self-doubt. It's associated with the fear of judgment, poorer mental health and even a higher likelihood of engaging in criminal behaviour.

In other words, psychologists have known for decades that confidence matters. A lot. Yet for a long time, its inner workings – the hows and whys of confidence – remained elusive.

That was before some bright neuroscientists had an idea. What if, they thought, brain-scanning techniques such as functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) and electroencephalography (EEG) could uncover the brain networks that 'generate' confidence? Could we watch how these feelings impact our decisions in real-time? And the big question: could we discover whether confidence is an innate trait encoded in our biology, or a quality we can learn?

Prof Ian Robertson, a clinical psychologist and founding director of the Trinity College Institute of Neuroscience in Dublin, is one of the scientists asking exactly these kinds of questions. With the help of the latest technologies, he's been studying how confidence acts in our brains and bodies. And his core message is a reassuring one: confidence absolutely isn't something some of us are simply born with.

"You normally can't see inside the heads of people who seem effortlessly confident. But they're acting more confident than they actually feel," Robertson says. "Confidence is not about feeling certain that our actions will achieve our desired outcome.



There will always be some uncertainty. Instead, confidence is about effectively coping with the anxiety that this uncertainty produces."

He says that, in this way, confidence isn't a fixed trait, but rather a way of thinking and behaving that can be learned. And with the right approach, understanding and practice, "it starts to feel effortless."

WHAT MAKES CONFIDENCE?

There are two big things you should know about the neuroscience of confidence. The first is that it's anything but simple.

"Confidence isn't housed in a single part of the brain," says Dr Stacie Grossman Bloom, a neuroscientist at New York University who studies the brain mechanisms behind confidence and self-belief. "It's the result of a network of regions working together."

Some of the brain's key players in this network may sound familiar – the prefrontal cortex, for instance. Located just behind your forehead, this area helps you assess yourself, weigh options and make decisions – all essential when you're about to take a risk or face a challenge.

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ILLUSTRATION: JOE WALDRON

"CONFIDENCE ISN'T JUST A FEELING, IT'S A LEARNED RESPONSE"

Then there's the amygdala, perhaps best known for its role in helping trigger emotional responses such as fear. But a well-functioning amygdala doesn't just sound your brain's alarm bells – it also helps you judge when things are *not* threatening, which is essential for establishing a sense of safety. "The amygdala can actually modulate emotional responses, which are deeply connected to feelings of confidence," says Bloom.

The second key thing to know about confidence in your brain is that it operates as a loop. Rather than a one-off spark, it's a self-reinforcing feedback system powered by action, reward and memory – a cycle that learns from success and strengthens your belief that you can do it again.

At the core of this loop is the brain's reward system and the neurotransmitter dopamine. You might know it as the 'pleasure chemical', but dopamine's full role is often misunderstood. Yes, it spikes when something good happens (like eating a great meal or having sex), but it also plays a crucial role in anticipation. Dopamine is released not only in response to rewards, but also in anticipation of them. In this way, it acts as a motivational signal, nudging you to repeat the behaviours that led to previous rewards and positive outcomes.

This process is part of what neuroscientists call 'reinforcement learning' – the brain's way of linking actions to results. When dopamine is released in anticipation of success, it helps strengthen the connection between what you do and the reward you expect.

That's where the hippocampus, your brain's memory hub, comes in. When you recall a moment where your actions led to success – like nailing a work presentation, for instance – the hippocampus helps reactivate the brain networks involved in that experience. You're not just remembering the event, you're reawakening the brain's 'confidence pattern', reinforcing your belief that you can succeed again.

In other words, confidence isn't just a feeling, it's a learned response. And the more your brain can draw on experiences of success, the more confident you'll feel next time you face a similar challenge.

"Success literally teaches the brain, 'This works – do it again!'," says Bloom.

THE WINNER EFFECT

You could be forgiven for thinking that all the above is just neurological smoke and mirrors masking the simple idea that past success builds future confidence. But that simple idea hides something powerful: the confidence loop doesn't just grow, it snowballs dramatically.

Enter the 'winner effect'. As Robertson explains, this phenomenon describes how winning once can actually make you more likely to win again, not just through improved skill or better odds, but because confidence reshapes the brain. Studies have observed this in tennis players, cyclists, financial traders and even animals: male mice that win a series of staged fights against weaker opponents become more likely to defeat stronger rivals later on.

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"YOUR SMALL SUCCESSES MULTIPLY INTO PROGRESSIVELY BIGGER SUCCESSES. SO, THE GREATEST ENGINE OF CONFIDENCE IS SUCCESS"

"Confidence is like compound interest," Robertson says. "Exponentially, your small successes multiply into progressively bigger successes. So, the greatest engine of confidence is success."

But there's more. Winning doesn't just fuel future performance – it can also shape how the brain handles stress.

"Each competitive interaction causes your body to generate some cortisol, the stress hormone," says Robertson. "At high levels, it's toxic to the brain and the body." However, confidence and winning can act as a kind of neural buffer against stress.

This accounts, Robertson argues, for how Oscar winners live on average five years longer than Oscar nominees, and Nobel Prize winners live about a year and a half longer than Nobel nominees.

"Because there are only very few people who get these accolades, their brains basically say, 'you're out of the rat race!'. Essentially, they no longer have to compete. They're effectively liberated from all these little toxic cortisol secretions." **SF**

by **JESS THOMSON**
Jess is a freelance journalist covering science, health, culture and lifestyle.

HOW TO GET MORE CONFIDENCE

What if you don't have an Oscar at home? Or you can't remember the last time you felt confident? No problem. You can still tap into the winner effect to start building confidence from scratch. Here's how.



1. ACT THE PART

It's the kind of advice you've likely heard from an Instagram 'charisma coach', but surprisingly, there's real science behind the 'fake it 'til you make it' mantra.

"Faking it is absolutely central to confidence," says clinical psychologist Prof Ian Robertson. "Taking action in spite of feeling anxious can activate the 'success mechanisms' in your brain."

Robertson suggests thinking of yourself as an actor in a play, with your character being 'Confident Person'. Speak up in a meeting the way Confident Person would, hold eye contact, take up space. Eventually, your body starts to believe that you are Confident Person and the behaviour comes more naturally.

"This feels fake because there's a discordance between your behaviour and what you feel," Robertson says. "But all confidence feels fake at the beginning because confidence is a series of habits of thinking and behaviours. It's only once you've done it 100 or 200 times that it starts to feel effortless."

In short, you might not feel much of a difference after your first attempt at faking confidence, but each time you pull it off, even in a small way, it counts as a win. And over time, those small wins build into real, lasting confidence.

"Confidence is a skill, not a fixed trait," adds neuroscientist Dr Stacie Grossman Bloom. "Start small. Set goals that are realistic, achieve them and take the time to consciously celebrate your wins. This isn't self-indulgent – it's neurological training."

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2. REFRAME ANXIETY

Trying to feel confident before that big meeting, but your nerves are taking over? Instead of suppressing those jitters, try reframing them as their close emotional cousin: excitement.

"Any situation that activates the sympathetic nervous system – our fight-or-flight response – can be interpreted in different ways," Robertson says. "And that interpretation shapes the emotion you experience."

In other words, you have more control than you think. A racing heart, dry mouth, and churning stomach might scream anxiety in one context, but in another they can signal readiness or excitement. It's the same physiological response, just seen through a different lens.

Research backs this up. In one 2014 study, participants were asked to say "I'm excited" before a stressful performance task (karaoke singing, public speaking or a maths challenge). Compared to those who said "I'm anxious" or received no instruction, the "excited" group felt more confident and performed better.

"Choosing to adopt a 'challenge mindset' – focusing on the potential rewards instead of possible failures – actually puts you in a confident state," Robertson adds. "And that mindset makes success more likely."

3. VISUALISE THE WIN

Similar to acting confident, visualising yourself confidently handling a conversation with the in-laws or sinking a hole-in-one can replicate the effects of real past successes.

That's because, as research has found, the brain can't accurately tell the difference between a real memory and a visualised scenario. This means that imagining yourself succeeding can replace a lack of real successes and helps your brain to build confidence.

"We can actually train our brains the same way we build muscle," says Bloom. "Techniques like visualisation – mentally rehearsing a successful outcome – activate many of the same neural circuits as real experience. Similarly, regularly challenging yourself in even small, achievable ways trains the brain to associate effort with success."

Better still, frame your visualised success in terms of your values. For instance, imagining yourself doing well in a job interview isn't just about landing the role – it's about what that success means to you. Maybe it's being able to support your family, having your talents appreciated or just proving you can rise to a new challenge.

"When you reflect on your values and strengths, you engage areas of the brain linked to motivation and reward," Bloom says.

4. SHORT-CIRCUIT THE SPIRAL

Even if we manage to play the role of the Confident Person throughout a party or meeting, many of us still go home and binge-watch our mental blooper reels, convinced we said something weird, cringey or catastrophically stupid.

That post-event anxiety isn't just uncomfortable, it can actually ramp up stress in the brain. Overthinking social interactions triggers the release of noradrenaline, the brain's fight-or-flight chemical. The more you stress, the more you overthink. And the more you overthink, the more noradrenaline you produce and further down the neurochemical doom spiral you go.

"Too much noradrenaline will impair your ability to think clearly. You'll very easily go down rabbit holes, get things out of proportion and not be able to think clearly," Robertson says.

However, if you adopted the actor's mindset discussed above (see 'Act the part'), there's a good chance that's exactly how you came across. Even if you felt like a mess on the inside, other people likely saw someone who was composed and self-assured.

"You're beating yourself up for little reason," Robertson says. "But if I asked the people at that party what they thought of you, most of them would probably say, 'Oh yeah, she was great – really confident!'"

In other words, confidence is first a performance, then a feeling. And consider this your stage cue.

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