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The Confidence Gap Russ Harris

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Understanding the Confidence Gap by Russ Harris: A New Path to Overcoming Self-Doubt

For decades, the conventional wisdom on building confidence has followed a simple, almost mechanical formula: think positive, visualize success, and push aside your fears until you become the confident person you wish to be. Yet millions of people who have faithfully tried these techniques still find themselves trapped in a cycle of self-doubt, anxiety, and hesitation. This persistent disconnect between knowing what to do and actually doing it is precisely the problem that Dr. Russ Harris, a renowned psychiatrist and author of the bestselling book *The Confidence Gap*, set out to solve. In his groundbreaking work, Harris challenges the very foundation of how we think about confidence and offers a radical yet practical alternative drawn from Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT). If you have ever felt held back by a lack of belief in yourself, understanding the confidence gap Russ Harris describes could be the first step toward genuine, lasting change.

At its core, the confidence gap Russ Harris identifies is not a lack of self-belief but a misunderstanding of what genuine confidence truly means. Traditional self-help often tells us that we must first feel confident before we can act confidently. Harris flips this equation on its head. He argues that waiting for the feeling of confidence to arrive before taking meaningful action is a recipe for stagnation. Instead, he proposes that effective action can—and should—come before the feeling. This shift in perspective is liberating because it takes the pressure off needing to control your internal state. You no longer have to banish fear, silence your inner critic, or pump yourself up with empty affirmations. You simply need to take committed action that aligns with your values, regardless of what your mind tells you. This ACT-based approach allows you to build a life of courage and purpose without first having to conquer every doubt.

What Is the Confidence Gap? The Crucial Distinction

Before exploring the solution, it is essential to define the confidence gap Russ Harris writes about. Many people equate confidence with an absence of fear. They believe that confident people are never anxious, never uncertain, and never plagued by self-doubt. In reality, this is a myth. Harris explains that the confidence gap is the space between your current level of self-assurance and the level you think you need to achieve before you can take action. It is the feeling that you are not good enough, skilled enough, or brave enough to do what you want to do. But the gap itself is an illusion—a story your mind tells you to keep you safe. The real problem is not your lack of confidence; it is your unwillingness to act without it.

Russ Harris uses the metaphor of a "fusion" with your thoughts to explain why this gap feels so vast. When you are fused with a thought like "I am not confident enough," that thought dominates your behavior. You stop applying for the promotion, you avoid social situations, or you hold back your true opinions. The confidence gap widens as you feed it with avoidance and inaction. Conversely, when you learn to defuse from such thoughts—to see them as mere mental events rather than absolute truths—the gap loses its power. You can acknowledge the thought of inadequacy and still choose to move forward.

Many popular confidence-building approaches rely on strategies like positive affirmations, visualization, and the classic "fake it till you make it." While these techniques can offer short-term boosts, Russ Harris points out their fundamental weakness: they ask you to pretend you are something you are not. The problem is that your logical mind knows the difference between a fabricated feeling and a genuine one. Forcing yourself to feel confident when you are scared often backfires because it creates an inner conflict. The more you try to push away self-doubt, the more it tends to return, sometimes even stronger. This is the "white bear" phenomenon: the more you try not to think of a white bear, the more the image intrudes.

Harris explains that the "fake it till you make it" approach reinforces the idea that confidence is a prerequisite for action. When you pretend, you are still operating under the belief that you cannot act authentically until you feel ready. Over time, this can lead to burnout, resentment, and a feeling of being a fraud. The confidence gap Russ Harris describes thus becomes a never-ending loop: you wait to feel confident, you try to fake it, you still don't feel confident, and you conclude that you are broken. The ACT model offers an exit from this loop by separating feelings from actions. You do not have to pretend to be confident. You can feel terrified and still give a presentation. You can feel inadequate and still ask someone on a date. The goal is not to eliminate discomfort but to develop psychological flexibility.

The ACT Alternative: Rethinking Confidence Entirely

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, the foundation of Russ Harris's work, is a third-wave cognitive behavioral therapy that emphasizes mindfulness, acceptance, and values-based action. When applied to the confidence gap, ACT asks a very different question: "What would you do if your fears and doubts were no longer an obstacle?" Instead of trying to reduce your doubts, ACT teaches you to change your relationship with them. The confidence gap Russ Harris explores is therefore not a problem to be solved but a pattern to be addressed through six core processes: acceptance, defusion, present-moment awareness, self-as-context, values, and committed action. Let us look at the most relevant ones for building genuine confidence.

Defusion: Unhooking from Negative Thoughts

One of the most powerful tools Harris offers is cognitive defusion. Imagine your mind as a radio that constantly broadcasts negative commentary: "You're not good enough," "You'll mess up," "Everyone will judge you." Normally, you listen intently and obey these commands. Defusion is the skill of turning down the volume of that radio or simply noticing the broadcast without letting it dictate your behavior. A simple defusion technique is to label your thoughts: "I notice I am having the thought that I am not confident enough." By adding this prefix, you create a small space between you and the thought. That space gives you the freedom to choose a different action. Over time, defusing from critical self-talk reduces its impact and shrinks the perceived confidence gap.

Willingness: Embracing Discomfort as a Companion

Another key principle is willingness. Harris openly admits that acting confidently does not mean acting without fear. Willingness means making room for uncomfortable feelings—anxiety, self-doubt, embarrassment—while still pursuing what matters to you. He calls this "the art of allowing." Instead of struggling against your nervousness or trying to distract yourself, you simply acknowledge it and take it with you. The confidence gap Russ Harris defines disappears when you stop waiting for the discomfort to vanish. Willingness is a skill that can be practiced in small doses: feel the fear and do it anyway, but do not pretend the fear is not there. Let it be there. And then take action.

How to Bridge the Gap: Practical Steps from Russ Harris

To truly benefit from the insights in *The Confidence Gap*, you need to move from theory to practice. Harris

offers a set of actionable strategies that help you build confidence from the outside in. Below are some of the most effective ways to apply ACT principles to your daily life.

- Clarify Your Values: Confidence without direction is hollow. Identify what truly matters to you—your core values like connection, contribution, creativity, or courage. When you act in line with your values, you automatically feel a sense of purpose, regardless of how you feel about yourself. Harris emphasizes that values are like a compass; they guide your actions even through stormy emotional weather.
- Set Committed Actions: Break down your values into small, concrete, committed actions. If your value is "being a supportive partner," a committed action might be having a difficult conversation even if you are nervous about it. Do not wait for the perfect level of confidence to do these actions. Just start, even if it feels awkward.
- Practice the "And" Strategy: Instead of saying "I want to speak up, but I am too anxious," say "I want to speak up, and I am anxious." This simple shift acknowledges both realities without making one a barrier to the other. The confidence gap Russ Harris describes is built on "but" statements. Replace them with "and" to open up possibilities.
- Use Anchoring with Present-Moment Awareness: When you feel overwhelmed by self-doubt, anchor yourself in the here and now. Notice the sensation of your feet on the floor, the pattern of your breathing, or the sounds around you. This grounding technique helps you step out of the mental stories about your lack of confidence and into the present moment, where action is possible.
- Develop the Observing Self: Harris teaches that you are not your thoughts or emotions. You are the one who notices them. This perspective, called self-as-context, allows you to observe your lack of confidence without being defined by it. You can see the confidence gap as a temporary mental event rather than a permanent flaw.

Overcoming the Trap of "Not Good Enough"

One of the most common manifestations of the confidence gap Russ Harris addresses is the "not good enough" story. This narrative can be deeply ingrained from childhood or cultivated by a competitive society. Harris advises against trying to argue with this story or prove it wrong. Instead, he suggests acknowledging it with compassion and then shifting your focus to what you can control: your behavior. Ask yourself, "What would my life look like if I stopped believing that I am not good enough?" The answer often reveals that the story is just an old tape playing in your mind, not a truth that needs to be validated. By committing to actions that contradict the story—such as applying for a job you think you cannot get—you weaken its hold over you.

The Role of Self-Compassion in the Confidence Gap

Although not always highlighted in traditional confidence literature, self-compassion is a central theme in Harris's work. Beating yourself up for lacking confidence only widens the gap. Instead, treat yourself with the kindness you would offer a friend who is struggling. When you notice you are hesitating or avoiding, do not add a layer of self-criticism. Simply note it, and gently guide yourself back to your values. This supportive inner voice helps you take risks without the added weight of shame. The confidence gap Russ Harris analyzes is often maintained by a harsh inner critic. Replacing that critic with a compassionate coach can dramatically reduce the emotional resistance to action.

Real-Life Application: A Case Example

Imagine someone named Sarah who dreams of starting her own business but feels paralyzed by a lack of confidence. According to the traditional model, she might try to visualize herself as a successful entrepreneur or repeat affirmations like "I am confident and capable." Yet every time she faces a potential client, her mind floods with thoughts of inadequacy. Using Harris's approach, Sarah first clarifies her values: creativity, contribution, and independence. She then commits to one small action—reaching out to one potential client—even while feeling terrified. She practices defusion by labeling her thoughts ("I notice I am having the thought that I am not

good enough for this"). She does not try to make the fear go away; she accepts it as a natural reaction to uncertainty. Over several months, Sarah takes dozens of small, committed actions. Her confidence grows not because her doubts vanished, but because she built evidence that she can act courageously despite them. The confidence gap she once felt has been transformed into a willingness to live fully with all her emotions.

Why This Approach Works: The Science Behind It

ACT is backed by a substantial body of research showing that psychological flexibility—the ability to stay in contact with the present moment and change or persist in behavior when doing so serves one's values—is a key predictor of mental health and well-being. The confidence gap Russ Harris highlights is essentially a problem of psychological rigidity: being fused with thoughts of inadequacy and avoiding the discomfort of fear. By learning to defuse, accept, and commit, you build flexibility. Studies have demonstrated that ACT can reduce anxiety, depression, and social anxiety, and increase quality of life. For confidence specifically, this approach is superior to suppression or positive thinking because it does not demand that you control your inner

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