



5 ways to improve your confidence

You don't need to wear sky-high stilettos to feel 10 feet tall. Instead, try these smart assertiveness-building strategies on for size—courtesy of a gutsy panel of experts, including a former police sergeant and a neurosurgeon.

WRITTEN BY Lindsay Van Gelder | ADDITIONAL REPORTING BY Julia Edelstein | ILLUSTRATION BY Leif Parsons



1 | Practice eye contact...

People often think self-defense classes teach only how to physically fight back against a predator. But the practice is also about becoming empowered. One way to do that is to project assertiveness with your body language. With people you converse with frequently, make it a habit to look at them directly in the eye and maintain your gaze while you're talking. This simple move shows that you're not weak and that you're engaged, and it's the first step to becoming less passive in the rest of your life. Keep it up and, with each interaction, you'll gain a little more confidence.

STEVE KARDIAN is a former police sergeant and the founder of Defend University, in Thornwood, New York, which certifies self-defense-training instructors nationwide.

2 | ...and curb your nervous tics.

When you're uneasy, your body often betrays you with actions that reveal your true feelings. Pulling your hair into a ponytail repeatedly or twisting a few strands between your fingers indicates that you might be skeptical of your own abilities. Talking too fast exposes your uncertainty, too. (These habits also detract from what you say.) Instead, walk or sit upright with your shoulders back, arms uncrossed, and head up. You'll appear confident to others and, as a result, feel that way yourself.

JAMES A. COHEN is an associate professor of law at Fordham University School of Law, in New York City.

3 | Psych yourself up with a ritual.

Everything comes naturally and you operate on autopilot when you're feeling good about yourself. To bring yourself into this mind-set, create a routine to go through before an important event. For example, a tennis player might bounce a ball four times before each serve. And before every surgery, my assistant and I follow a regimen. It slows down our minds, and we get into a natural rhythm—making us better prepared to handle any situation confidently.

ANDERS COHEN, M.D., is the chief of neurosurgery and spine surgery at the Brooklyn Hospital Center. He is a former tennis pro and a physician for the US Open Tennis Championships.

4 | Desensitize yourself to failure.

When people perform, things do not always go well. Maybe someone drops a cue or forgets a prop. Perhaps the audience doesn't laugh. But from those experiences, you can learn not to give failure so much power. Sure, after a weak show you may feel a bit of a sting, but you're still walking, still breathing. Once you bomb a show a number of times, you'll know that you can survive it. Take that knowledge and use it to fortify yourself the next time you're faced with a big challenge, like a presentation at work.

BRAD BARTON has been an improv performer and instructor in New York City for 15 years.

5 | Enlist others to help you.

In some cultures, there is a practice described as the bestowing of blessings, in which one person stands inside a circle of her closest friends or allies. Those on the outside share their wisdom with the person in the center. When you need the confidence to do something new or difficult, you can adapt this model. Over the phone, via e-mail, or on a social-networking site, ask your friends to express why they believe you will succeed. It's simple enough, but because there is power in numbers, you'll feel energized and more prepared to tackle the task at hand.

IVARS OZOLINS is a certified leadership coach based in Encinitas, California.