

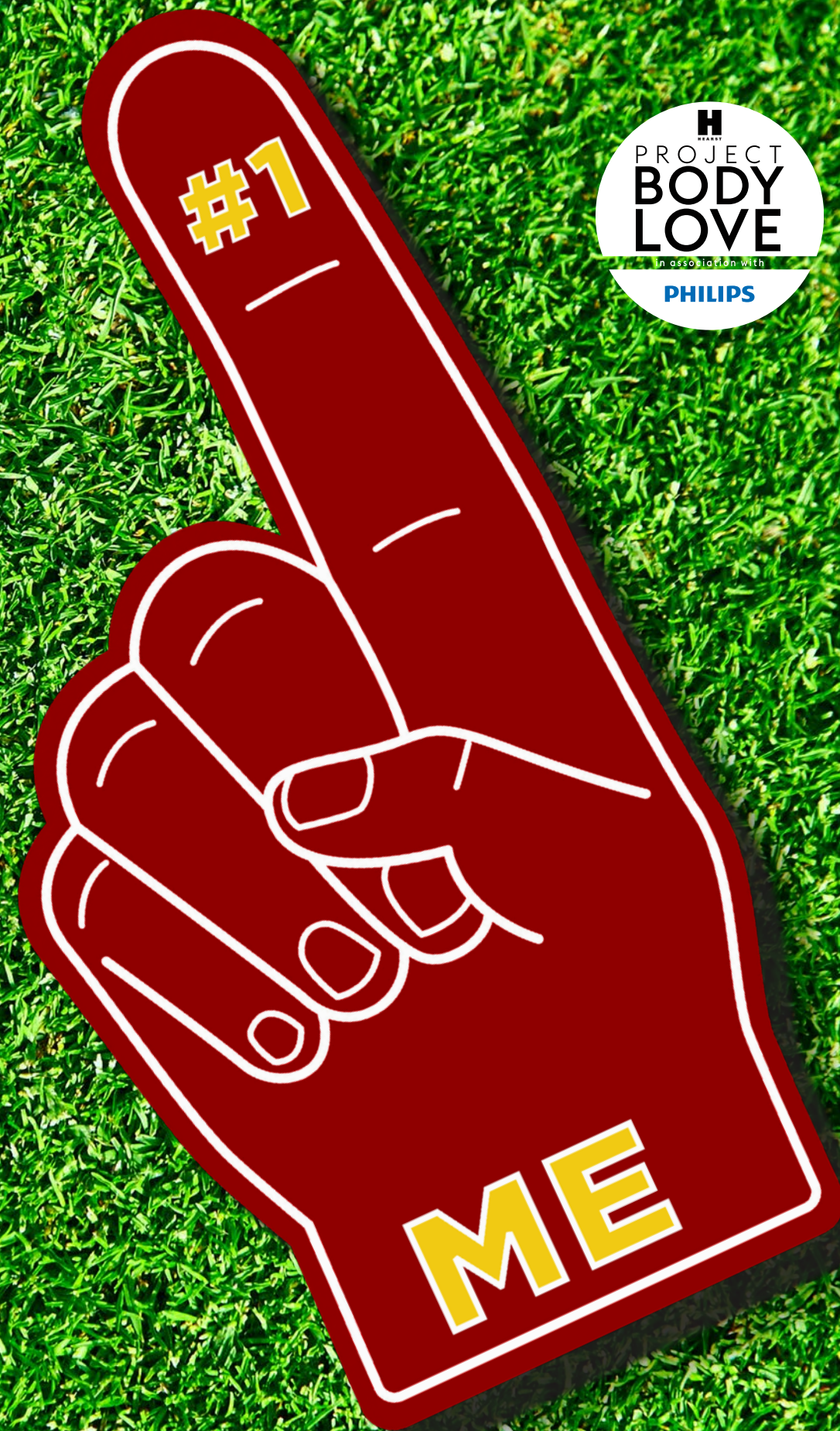
12

ways to
be your own

CHEERLEADER

If any year has the potential to leave you feeling as timid as those hand-sized baby bunnies filling your Instagram feed, it's this past one. And while self-belief isn't everything, it's an important ingredient in helping you unlock those new avenues that keep you feeling challenged, excited and alive. So if you take one thing from our Confidence Issue, let it be this: like a muscle, you can train your self-belief to become stronger and more flexible. And over the following pages, we'll be showing you how to do just that. Hand your inner critic her P45, it's time to promote your inner cheerleader to the top. Ready? Okay!

WORDS GEORGIE LANE-GODFREY





IT'S ALL IN THE (BRAIN) CHEMISTRY

The neural gymnastics of feeling like you're going to boss it, decoded by neuroscientist-turned-executive advisor Dr Tara Swart

WH What's going on in the brain when you feel confident?

TS The bonding hormone oxytocin, which allows you to take healthy risks that are more likely to lead to success, is activated in the brain. This increases testosterone – in men and women – which raises your confidence levels. This makes you more likely to feel joy and excitement.

WH Can you make believing in yourself a habit?

TS Absolutely. Habits are deeply embedded neural pathways in the limbic system and brain stem. You can start a new pathway, but it will take practice to cement it. You need to make a conscious decision to change, focus your attention on that change and then practise it deliberately, holding yourself accountable.

WH Level with us, is there some kind of 'brain hack' for making yourself feel more confident?

TS Focus on your past successes. If you don't have a particular example, find a woman you relate to who has achieved what you want to and focus on believing it's possible. Confidence is usually self-rated and there's lots of research that shows women who rate themselves as more confident become more successful than those who don't, so building yours is a worthy investment.

WH Where does your confidence come from personally? Any tips?

TS I believe in asking for help when I need it and making sure I have positive people around me who want to see me do well. But I've also learned to turn the naysayers into my biggest motivators to succeed, because I believe that mental resilience is the key to confidence. Knowing that I have the resources within me to bounce back from adversity has been key.

The Source: Change Your Mind, Change Your Life (£9.99, Vermilion) by Dr Tara Swart is out now



'CONFIDENCE COMES FROM RESILIENCE – KEEP GOING'

Nesrine Daly, 31, Nike trainer and Muay Thai fighter

'One thing I love about Muay Thai is that it doesn't matter what your job title is, or what you earn; once you start sparring, everyone is equal. Knowing I can get in the ring and take on anyone makes me feel empowered. But when I started in the industry, there was no one like me – a Muslim woman who wears the hijab – represented. It was challenging to believe I could do something when there was no success story I could model myself on, and hard to gain respect without being judged on my appearance or my faith. While this could have really affected my confidence, I fought hard to avoid that happening. There were times of self-doubt – I think questioning yourself is part of being human – but how you deal with those thoughts is important. I knew this was what I wanted to do, and if there was no one there to open the door for me, I'd need to do it for myself. Being the first athlete to compete in a Muay Thai competition in Thailand wearing a hijab led to so many feelings wrapped up in one experience – a sense of accomplishment in opening the door for other women, pride that I was facing my fears, and, of course, nerves. My husband would always remind me of my mission and worth whenever I faced rejection and, as my resilience grew, so did my confidence. You're not going to feel like you can conquer your fears daily, but practice makes progress. And knowing you can show up and carry on, even when you don't feel like you can? That's when you can truly have faith in yourself.'

Nesrine is the founder of Health Hub, healthhubldn.com

FACT-CHECK THOSE CONFIDENCE CLICHÉS

Clinical psychologist Dr Therese Mascardo unpicks some pieces of received wisdom



THE CLICHÉ Some people are just born confident

THE VERDICT 'This is incorrect. Confidence is mostly taught through culture, experience and modelling,' explains Dr Mascardo. 'However, some traits that society tends to associate with confidence are more innate, like whether you're an introvert or an extrovert, and how open you are to new experiences. But, of course, you can have confident introverts, too.'



THE CLICHÉ Fake it till you make it

THE VERDICT 'This depends,' says Dr Mascardo. 'There are some things you just can't do without real skills and training, like being a racing driver. But in order to get to where you want to go, you often have to put yourself in situations where your confidence isn't quite where it needs to be. Visualisation can help with this, as being able to see yourself where you want to be is important. So pretending you've got what it takes whether you fully believe it or not – ie, faking it – can sometimes help en route to real confidence.'



THE CLICHÉ Success breeds confidence

THE VERDICT 'Yes and no – it's more accurate to say confidence is bred from repeated success,' says Dr Mascardo. 'This is based on behavioural psychology and the concept of positive reinforcement – you're more likely to have momentary confidence after you win a match, for example. Since behaviours that are positively reinforced are more likely to be repeated, those repeated successes can lead to longer-lasting confidence.'

FAST-TRACK YOUR SELF-BELIEF

Tap into one of these hacks for a quick confidence boost

1 MIN Power up your posture

Put both hands on your hips, says psychotherapist and coach Deborah Maloney-Marsden. 'Your shoulders are back, making you feel and appear strong. Often, when you're nervous, your body becomes rigid and you may stoop or shrink, leaving you looking – and feeling – less confident. But, according to Harvard Business School research, adopting an empowering pose like this communicates a sense of strength.'

2 MINS Make a hype list

'In a notebook, write down three to five reasons why you're grateful to yourself first thing in the morning. This can increase both your confidence and your ability to focus on things you love about yourself throughout the day,' says Dr Sara Botto, developmental psychologist at Emory University in the US.

5 MINS Take a bounce-back breather

Not much self-belief in the tank? Psychotherapist Toby Ingham recommends taking a short, quiet break away from your phone or your inbox to regroup. 'Confidence slips tend to coincide with events that elevate your stress responses, during which you'll lose your sense of settled emotional and psychological stability, something increased by your endocrine system pumping out the stress hormones cortisol, adrenaline and noradrenaline at a higher rate than normal. These hormones take time to be processed and metabolised – so take a break and you'll be more confident and effective when you return.'

10 MINS Trigger happy memories

'A simple way to trigger feelings of happiness and confidence is to create an album on your phone with pictures and videos of times when you felt that way,' says transformational coach Audrey Zeitoun. 'Look at it when you're feeling low in confidence because it will reinforce the idea that you can build those feelings of self-belief and accomplishment – you've done it before and you can do it again.'



STRONG IN BODY, STRONG IN MIND

Resistance training: while you'll know it's important for building strong muscles and essential for maintaining bone density from your late twenties, it's also one of the best types of exercise you can do for your inner strength. Multiple studies have linked strength training with boosted self-esteem, while research in *JAMA Psychiatry* found two strength training sessions a week significantly improved symptoms of mild to moderate depression. PT Tig Hodson, founder of London's women-only gym StrongHer, sees these effects all the time with her clients. Here, she shares three moves to help you cultivate confidence (and amplify your workout wins).



1 | SNATCH

WHY? 'Activating your whole body towards a movement and lifting something over your head helps you feel forceful and accomplished. I like to imagine I'm lifting an award when I'm doing it.'

HOW?

1 | Start with your feet either side of a kettlebell and, making sure your back is flat, hinge at your hips (as if you're pushing a door open with your bum) and grab the weight, palm facing back.
2 | Pull the weight from the floor up your body, bringing your elbow into your waist and spinning your wrist round – like you're throwing a jacket over your shoulder – as you lift it over your head.
3 | Reverse the movement to bring the weight back down to the floor. Stick to one side to complete up to 15 reps before changing sides and repeating from the start.



2 | PRESS-UP

WHY? 'If you can master holding your own body weight, you can master anything. And once you've got press-ups licked, you can do them anywhere, any time you need a you've-got-this boost.'

HOW?

1 | In a high plank position, place your hands about half a hand's width outside of your shoulders and squeeze your glutes.
2 | Begin lowering yourself down by bending at the elbows, so your arms are bent to 90°. Make sure your chest touches the mat slightly, but your hips don't.
3 | Once at the bottom, breathe out and push yourself back up to the starting position, ready to go again.



3 | KETTLEBELL SWING

WHY? 'Swinging weights brings a great sense of freedom, and you're using your glutes here – the biggest muscles you have, packing plenty of power.'

HOW?

1 | Stand with your feet wide, shoulders back and your kettlebell on the ground by your feet.
2 | Push your hips back and bend your knees to grab the kettlebell. Keep your arms relaxed and don't try to lift – let the weight hang.
3 | Swing the kettlebell back through your legs as you exhale. Imagine there's a wall behind you to keep you from hyperextending.
4 | Push your hips forward and inhale as you swing the weight up to shoulder height in front of you. Then use the momentum to keep on swinging.



'WHEN YOU DON'T FIT THE MOULD, YOU NEED TO SHIFT YOUR OUTLOOK'

Yomi Adegoke, 29, journalist and author

'As a young Black woman who wasn't privately educated, my presence in a lot of newsrooms feels like an aberration. Most workplaces are built around the default worker, which in my industry is a white man – journalism is 55% male and 94% white, and gets even more male towards the top. Because I knew that my workplace wasn't built with me in mind, I spent a lot of time trying to assimilate, playing down elements of my identity to try to fit in. I started every meeting on the back foot, desperate to prove why my idea was interesting to someone with whom I had nothing in common. I spent so much energy trying to make sure that my colleagues and bosses wouldn't simply focus on the things that made me different. Speaking to British *Vogue's* publishing director Vanessa Kingori helped disrupt this draining habit. She told me to lean into my difference, because by being Black and female, I'm hyper visible anyway – nothing's going to change that – and there exists real value in a unique perspective. This shifted my outlook, helping me to feel comfortable enough to speak up in meetings, and show up at work as my entire self. The lesson? If you don't feel like you fit in, remember that you wouldn't be in that position if you hadn't earned your stripes and proved your worth. And that's where true confidence comes from.'

Yomi Adegoke is the co-author of *Slay In Your Lane: The Black Girl Bible* (£16.99, Harper Collins) and co-editor of *Loud Black Girls* (£14.99, Harper Collins)

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THE CONFIDENCE COACH WILL SEE YOU NOW

Situations that can rattle you (and how to ace them)



When you're... Starting a new job

What you're experiencing: First-day nerves, imposter syndrome
The fix: 'Remember to listen more than you talk,' says confidence coach Erica Wolfe-Murray. After all, these first few days are for them to explain the work and for you to receive that information. 'Understanding the MO of your new workplace is a fast-track to feeling more comfortable, and that includes watching the dynamic of the team, which can be harder to pick up if you're joining remotely – so pay close attention, and ask questions if you're confused by anything.' If you're struggling to summon the relaxed, warm and engaged vibe you'd like to bring, Wolfe-Murray urges you to remember the following: that you've been hired because you've got the right skills and experience and will be a good fit for the team, so you 100% deserve to be there.



When you're... Not feeling body-confident

What you're experiencing: Comparison anxiety, poor body image
The fix: Life coach Lucy Keaveny recommends planning a workout that helps you feel strong and accomplished. 'For some, that might be running or HIIT, while others might get this feeling from a vinyasa flow or doing an upper-body workout with heavy dumbbells – it's about what helps you feel great,' she says. It makes sense: you'll get a dose of feel-good neurochemicals, the productivity and energy boost that comes from working out, and the powerful reminder that feeling body-confident isn't simply about how yours looks, but what it can do.



When you're... Going on a date

What you're experiencing: Social anxiety, nerves rooted in low self-esteem
The fix: 'Identify whatever it is that's causing you to feel low in confidence and think of a phrase that directly contradicts what your inner critic is saying, then write it on Post-it notes to reinforce the message,' says Keaveny. Whether that's, 'You have a beautiful smile,' or, 'You are fun and engaging', repeat them out loud to yourself regularly on the days before. On date day? Cue your confidence with rituals – be that a bath, a blow-dry or blasting out music that makes you feel great – and remember the other person will likely feel the same jitters, advises Wolfe-Murray. 'Take a deep breath and remember that it's a conversation – not a performance – so, ask about them, don't just talk about yourself.' You'll appear at ease and they'll mirror your vibes – whether your meet-up is Zoom-enabled or IRL. **WHY**

