

You knew the answer

A short book about self-doubt

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First edition

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Before you start

This is a short book. You can read it in three or four evenings.

It's for people whose doubt about themselves gets in the way of things they're able to do. You have the point and don't make it. You see the job and don't apply. You finish the work and then spend twice as long again checking it, or you ask three people whether it's all right before you let it go. Afterwards you're often cross with yourself, because part of you knew.

You've been told to believe in yourself. It hasn't worked, and I don't think it can, because belief isn't something you can produce on request. If someone tells you to be confident while everything in you says you aren't up to it, all you can do is pretend, and you already feel you do too much of that.

So this book doesn't ask you to feel confident. It looks at what you do when the doubt arrives, and at the beliefs that make doing it seem sensible. "If I doubt it, there must be a reason." "Doubt keeps me sharp." "If I don't try, I can't fail." "At least I'm not arrogant." Each of these is partly true, and I'll try to give each one its due before I argue with it.

Some of the arguments rest on research. The notes at the back say which studies, and how far I think they can be trusted. The rest is my own reasoning, and I'll say so where it matters.

The practical chapter is number 12. It comes late on purpose. The method is simple enough to fit on a postcard, and you could guess most of it now. What stops people using it is the set of beliefs in

chapters 3 to 10, so those come first.

You don't have to wait for chapter 12, though. If a chance comes up tomorrow to say the thing, send the thing or put your name down, take it. Nothing later in the book depends on you holding back in the meantime.

A few chapters ask you to check a claim against your own memory. Please do those. Your own history is better evidence than my say-so, and much of this book is an argument that you've been reading that history unfairly.

Ten minutes later, someone else said it

Here's an example. It's Monday, and the team is trying to work out why sign-ups fell last month. You noticed something on Thursday. The form doesn't load properly on a phone. You start putting the sentence together, and then other thoughts arrive. Someone must have checked that already. If it mattered, one of the senior people would have raised it. You might be wrong about what you saw.

You say nothing. Ten minutes later a colleague says, "Could it be the form on mobile?" The room turns to her, someone checks, and she's right. You knew the answer on Thursday.

A second example. A job advert has been open in a tab on your laptop for four days. You meet most of the list. There are two lines you don't meet, and those are the two you keep rereading. On Friday you close the tab, and you tell yourself it probably wasn't the right time anyway.

A third. You write an email to a client in fifteen minutes. It says what it needs to say. You then spend fifty minutes changing "I think" to "I believe" and back again, and in the end you forward it to a colleague with the message "does this sound OK?"

And one from outside work. You've been going to a drawing class for two years. Your drawings live in a folder under the bed. When a friend asks to see them you say "oh, they're not really anything", and you change the subject.

If some of these are familiar, look at how each one went. A doubt arrived. It may have come as a thought, such as "who am I to say this?", or as a drop in the stomach with no words at all. Within a second or two you'd done something about it. You stayed quiet, or closed the tab, or rewrote the email, or checked with someone, or kept the folder shut. I'm going to call that stepping back, because in each case you were on your way towards something and you withdrew.

The doubt and the step back feel like one event. They're two. The doubt is a thought and a feeling, and it arrives without your permission. The step back is something you do. This book is mostly about the second, and my argument is that it's a habit.

The usual explanation is "I lack confidence", said as though confidence were a substance and you were born short of it. I don't think that survives a close look at your own life. You probably don't doubt everything. There are things you do without a second thought that would frighten other people, such as calming a furious customer, driving in a strange city, or looking after a sick child through the night. Your doubt is selective. It turns up in particular places, around particular people, about particular kinds of task. Something that selective is more likely to be learned than built in, and I'll come back to where it was learned in chapter 11.

Habits last because they pay, and this one does pay. When you step back, you skip an exposed moment in which you could have been wrong in front of people. Nobody can find fault with a point you didn't make or reject an application you didn't send. The extra checking sometimes does catch a mistake. The doubt itself feels like modesty, and like protection against being the fool who was

sure and wrong. These are real benefits, and I'll go through them one at a time. I'll try to show that each is smaller than it looks, and that each has a cost you've stopped counting. The colleague who got the credit is one of those costs. The job somebody else now has is another.

Let me say what this book isn't arguing. It isn't saying you should be certain, or loud, or that you should stride into rooms. Plenty of loud, certain people are wrong, and you've noticed that, which is part of why confidence advice puts you off. It also isn't saying that doubt is always mistaken. Sometimes you doubt a piece of work because there's a fault in it. Chapter 3 gives a way to tell that kind of doubt from the other kind.

The aim is accuracy. I'd like your view of what you can do to match the evidence, which I expect is better than your view. And I'd like what you do next to be decided by you, with that evidence in hand, and no longer by a feeling that hasn't checked anything.

I should add that doubt isn't always homemade. Some readers work or live among people who do question them more than they question others, because of their age, sex, accent, colour or background. If that's your situation, part of your doubt is an accurate reading of the room and not a fault in you. Chapter 11 deals with this, and I've tried not to write the rest of the book as if it didn't happen.

One more thing before we go on. Ordinary self-doubt attaches to tasks and situations. If what you have is a sense of being worthless in general, and it has come with low mood, poor sleep or a loss of interest in things for more than a couple of weeks, that may be

depression, and it's worth seeing a doctor. A book isn't the right tool for it. If you're having thoughts of harming yourself, contact a doctor or a crisis line today, or the emergency services if you might act on them.

What stepping back buys you

Go back to the Monday meeting and slow down the moment in which you decided not to speak.

Just before it, something was happening in your body. Perhaps your chest was tight, or your face warm, or your heart quicker than a person sitting in a chair needs. You had a picture of the faces turning towards you. Then you decided to let it go, and within a breath or two the tightness eased. You sat back and the meeting carried on without you.

That easing is the payment. It arrives at once, it arrives every time, and it costs nothing you can see. If you've wondered why you keep doing something that annoys you so much afterwards, this is why. The annoyance comes an hour later. The relief comes in two seconds, and habits tend to be built by whatever comes first.

Now look at what you were relieved of. You weren't relieved of a bad outcome, because there hadn't been one. You were relieved of a prediction. It went something like this. "I'll say it, it'll turn out to be wrong or obvious, and they'll think less of me." Stepping back didn't test that prediction. It removed the only situation in which it could have been tested. So the prediction left the meeting untouched.

In fact it left a little stronger. Your mind files the episode as a near miss. You nearly spoke, you didn't, and nothing bad happened. The credit for nothing bad happening goes to keeping quiet. Next

Monday the same prediction turns up with one more near miss behind it.

Therapists who treat anxiety have a name for this pattern. They call the things people do to head off a feared outcome safety behaviours, and the standard account is that these behaviours keep the fear alive, because the person never finds out that the outcome wouldn't have happened, or that they could have coped if it had. That account was built for clinical anxiety, and it's widely used in therapy. The experimental evidence is thinner than you might expect. Some small studies found that people did better when they dropped these behaviours, and a pooled analysis in 2016 leaned the same way without being conclusive. Applying the idea to ordinary self-doubt is my step, not the researchers'. I think it fits, and the exercise at the end of this chapter lets you judge for yourself.

If it does fit, then the relief you get from stepping back is relief from a discomfort that stepping back helps to maintain. I don't want to overstate this. Your doubt has other sources too, and some of them are outside you. But my bet is that a good share of next month's doubt is being manufactured by this month's step backs, because each one protects the prediction from the facts.

That's the hidden cost. There are plainer ones.

You collect no evidence. Your opinion of what you can do is based on a record from which the hard attempts are missing. You have no idea how your point would have landed, because it never landed anywhere. A person in that position can't have an accurate view of themselves, however honest they try to be.

You get no practice. Speaking up in a room is a skill, and so is sending work out when it's good enough, and so is applying for things. If you've been stepping back for fifteen years, you may have the practice of someone who's done these things a dozen times. They'll feel harder for you than for other people, and you'll take that as more proof.

Other people fill in the blank. Colleagues can only judge what they see and hear. If you're quiet, most of them won't conclude that you're thoughtful and cautious. They'll conclude that you had nothing to add, and after a while they'll stop turning to you. Then you'll notice that nobody asks your opinion, and you'll take that as proof as well.

You pay in hours. The fifty minutes on the email were real minutes. So were the evenings spent going over a presentation you already knew.

And there's a slow cost that's easy to miss. After enough years, you stop seeing the adverts. The wanting itself shrinks to fit what the doubt allows, and from the inside that doesn't feel like loss. It feels like being realistic.

There's a fair objection here. Sometimes you would have been wrong. That's true. Say that of ten points you hold back, two would have been mistaken or already known. The habit saves you those two small embarrassments, and the price is the other eight. It's also worth checking what the two would really have cost. Think of the last time a colleague raised something that turned out to be old news. I'd bet you gave it about thirty seconds of thought and have never held it against them.

I'm not saying you should always speak, always apply and never recheck anything. Sometimes it isn't your meeting. Sometimes the point is minor or the timing is poor. Holding back can be a judgement. The test is whether you made one. A judgement weighs the situation and can come out either way. If yours has come out the same way every time for years, then the feeling is deciding and you're supplying the reasons afterwards.

Here's something to try before the next chapter. Think of the last three times you stepped back. For each one, write down in a single sentence what you predicted would happen if you'd gone ahead. Then write down what happened instead, because you didn't.

Many people find the first part hard. The prediction turns out to be something like "it would have been bad", with no detail. That vagueness matters. A prediction that never says what it expects can't be shown to be wrong, and that's a large part of how it has lasted this long.

"If I doubt it, there must be a reason"

This is the belief that holds the rest up. You feel doubtful, so you assume the doubt has noticed something. Feelings often have. Unease on a dark street is worth listening to, and so is the sense that a deal is too good. It seems reasonable to give self-doubt the same respect.

And sometimes it deserves it. You doubt the figures in your report because you put them together in a rush on Wednesday. You doubt your French because the last time you used it was at school. That kind of doubt is useful, and I don't want you to lose it.

The trouble is that the feeling of doubt doesn't come only from faults in the work. Look at when yours is loudest. For most people it rises when the task is new, when the stakes are high, when someone senior is watching, and when the thing matters to them. It rises when they're tired, and for a few days after any mistake. It's often worse in a room where nobody else looks or sounds like them.

Go down that list and ask what each item measures. None of them measures your ability. They measure how exposed you are and how much you care. That explains something odd you may have noticed. You often feel the most doubt about the piece of work you prepared most carefully, because that's the one that matters most.

Your own history will have counterexamples in both directions. You've doubted things you had done well fifty times. Plenty of people who passed their driving test twenty years ago still can't

park with someone watching from the pavement. And you've been calmly sure of things that turned out to be wrong, as everyone has. If the feeling tracked ability, neither would happen.

There's a piece of research that speaks to this. In the 1990s a Dutch team gave anxious patients and other people short written scenarios, some describing danger and some not, and some mentioning that the person in the story felt anxious. The patients rated a scenario as more dangerous when the character felt anxious, even when nothing in the facts was dangerous. The other group mostly went by the facts. The researchers summed it up in their title, which was "If I feel anxious, there must be danger". I think self-doubt runs on the same inference. "I feel inadequate, so I must be." The feeling is treated as a witness when it's really just the thing to be explained. That comparison is mine, and the study was about anxiety, not doubt.

So the feeling alone can't tell you whether there's a fault. What can is the content of the doubt, and here there's a distinction I'll use for the rest of the book.

A specific doubt names something you could check. "I'm not sure the March figure includes refunds." "I haven't tried this page on a phone." "I don't know if the client saw the earlier version." A specific doubt points at the work. It can be settled, usually quickly, by looking something up, testing something, or asking a question that has an answer.

A general doubt names you. "I'm not good enough for this." "Who am I to say?" "They'll see through me." It points at the person. There's nothing to look up. No amount of checking settles it,

because it wasn't about the thing you checked. When you deal with one worry it moves to the next.

You can sort them with a two-word question. When the doubt arrives, ask it "what exactly?" If it answers with something you could test, look up or ask about, it's specific. Treat it as you'd treat a note from a careful colleague, and go and check. If it answers with an adjective about you, it's general, and it has told you nothing about the work.

There's one trap. General doubt is good at dressing up as specific doubt, by producing an endless run of small worries. You check the figures, then the formatting, then the figures again, then the wording of the second paragraph. The sign is that the check you've just done brings no relief, or relief that lasts a minute. A specific doubt, once checked, stays checked. If you're going round again, the work isn't the problem.

That leaves the hard question. "Perhaps I really am not good enough." You might not be, for a given task. Ability is real, and people differ. But you can't answer that question by consulting the feeling, for the reasons above. You can answer it with results, with the judgement of people who know the work, and with your record. Chapter 8 looks at what you've been doing with that evidence, which I suspect is throwing out most of the good part.

It also helps to make "good enough" specific. The general doubt says you aren't up to the job. The job, looked at plainly, is a list of things to be done. You can do most of them now, and you can ask of

each remaining one whether you could learn it in the time you'd have. That's a question with an answer, which is more than the feeling ever gives you.

For now, the practical step is small. The next few times doubt arrives, ask it "what exactly?", and notice which kind you've got. You don't have to do anything different yet. I expect you'll find fewer specific doubts than you expected, and that the general one says nearly the same sentence every time.

"Everyone else seems so sure"

Look round the table at that Monday meeting. The others speak in finished sentences. They say "clearly" and "obviously". Nobody looks as if their heart is going. You draw the natural conclusion, which is that they're sure of themselves and you're the odd one out.

The conclusion is natural because of what you can see. You have a full view of your own insides, including the rehearsed sentence, the dry mouth and the running commentary. Of everyone else you see only the outside. You're comparing the two, and the outside always looks calmer.

They're making the same comparison about you. From across the table you look composed as well. If anyone has ever been surprised to learn that you were nervous before a talk or an interview, you've already had proof of this, and you probably wrote it off.

There's research on how big the gap is. In one set of experiments, people giving short speeches rated how nervous they looked, and their audiences rated them too. The speakers thought their nerves showed much more than the audiences said they did. In a follow-up, some speakers were told about this finding beforehand, and observers rated their speeches as better. Just learning that nerves mostly don't show seems to have helped.

A related set of studies had students walk into a room wearing a T-shirt they found embarrassing. The wearers guessed that about half the people in the room would notice it. About a quarter did.

People's attention is mostly on themselves, and that includes the people you imagine are watching you.

Then there's the question of how common your private experience is. In 1978 two psychologists, Pauline Clance and Suzanne Imes, described a pattern they'd seen in more than 150 successful women, who believed despite degrees and promotions that they weren't really bright and had fooled everyone. They called it the impostor phenomenon. A 2020 review pulled together 62 studies covering more than 14,000 people. Depending on the questionnaire and the cut-off, between 9 and 82 per cent of those studied met the bar for impostor feelings. A range that wide tells you the measuring is rough, and I wouldn't lean on any single figure. What the review does show is that these feelings are common in both men and women, among students and among people well into their careers.

So in that Monday meeting, the chances are that at least one other person was holding a sentence they didn't say. Most people hide it, and so most people who have it think they're the only one.

There's a second fault in the comparison. Even when someone truly is sure, their sureness tells you little about whether they're right. In a series of studies with American students, some of them working in project teams for weeks, people who overrated their own ability were seen by their teammates as more competent and were given more influence. They weren't any better at the task. Groups, it seems, reward the look of confidence.

I should be fair about what that means, because it cuts both ways. It means the colleague who says "obviously" may know no more than you do. It also means that looking unsure has a real price, and that's a reason not to pile extra hedges on top of a good point. Chapter 12 comes back to that.

You may have heard of the Dunning-Kruger effect, usually told as "stupid people think they're clever". The original 1999 paper had a second finding that gets less attention. The best performers tended to place themselves lower than they deserved compared with others, apparently because they assumed everyone else found the tasks as easy as they had. The statistics in that paper have been argued over ever since, so I'd treat it as a suggestion and no more. The suggestion is still a useful one. If something comes easily to you, you may not count it as a skill at all. You assume everyone can do it, and you measure yourself by the things you find hard.

Of course, some people really are sure. Some are calm by temperament. Some have done this exact thing two hundred times. A few simply don't notice their own mistakes. I'm not claiming that everyone is secretly terrified. The second group is the interesting one, because their sureness came from repetition, and that route is open to you. Chapter 10 is about it.

Here's what I'd take from all this. You don't know that the colleague who spoke had no doubt. You can't know. She may have had the same thought you did, that someone must already have checked, and said it anyway. From the outside, a person who has no doubt and a person who has doubt and speaks look the same. The room can only see what people do.

That's encouraging, I think. You can't arrange to have someone else's insides. You can do what they did.

One small thing to try. Pick someone you think of as confident and ask them, in passing, whether they get nervous before presentations, or interviews, or whatever your own sore point is. Ask a second person if you can. You aren't looking for comfort. You're checking a belief you've held for years on the strength of how people look.

"Doubt keeps me sharp"

You have a presentation on Thursday. By Tuesday night you've been through the slides four times and you know them. On Wednesday night you go through them three more times, and you're in bed at one. On Thursday it goes well. Walking back to your desk, you think, "Good thing I put the work in."

The belief is that doubt is what makes your work good. It drives the care and the checking. Without it, you suspect, you'd get sloppy and be caught out, so the doubt is the price of quality and worth paying.

Part of this is right. Preparation matters, and confident, careless people turn in bad work every day. There's also research suggesting that for some anxious people, expecting the worst is a working strategy. In the 1980s Julie Norem and Nancy Cantor studied students they called defensive pessimists. These students set low expectations before a task, thought through what might go wrong, and then performed as well as the optimists. When the researchers interfered with the strategy, for example by reassuring them that they'd do fine, their performance got worse. So if thinking through what could go wrong is how you get ready, I'm not going to tell you to think positive. It would be bad advice.

But look at what the useful part of that strategy is. It's turning a vague dread into a list of particular things that could go wrong, and dealing with each. In the terms of chapter 3, it converts general doubt into specific doubts. That kind of preparation has a natural

end. You check the figure. You rehearse the opening. You work out answers to the three questions you're most likely to get. Then you're done.

The Wednesday night run-throughs were a different activity. They weren't answering anything. You knew the slides. You were going through them to make a feeling go away, and preparation of that sort has no natural end, because the feeling isn't about the slides. It stops when you run out of time or fall asleep. A useful sign is that you can't say what the next hour of work is meant to fix.

Then there's what happens to the credit. When Thursday goes well, the success is put down to the extra work. "I only got through it because I did three times what anyone else would need." Pauline Clance, from chapter 4, described this as a cycle. The person over-prepares, succeeds, credits the over-preparation, and so gains no confidence from the success. Some people run the opposite version, where they put the task off, rush it at the end, succeed anyway and call it luck. In both versions the success is explained by something other than ability, and the doubt is as strong for the next task as it was for this one.

Notice also that you've never run the comparison. You believe the extra hours are what stand between you and disaster. You don't know that, because you've never given a presentation on ordinary preparation and seen what happened. The belief has been protected from testing in the same way as the prediction in chapter 2.

The costs are easy to list. There are the hours. There's the state you arrive in, because a person who's over-rehearsed and short of sleep isn't at their best. And there's a ceiling on your working life. If every task costs you three times what it costs a colleague, you can take on a third as much, and you'll turn down good things on the honest ground that you don't have time.

I'd add one observation, which you can check against your own experience. Doubt during the task doesn't make you sharper either. When half your attention is on how you're coming across, only half is left for the work. Most people do their best work when they're absorbed in it, and being absorbed and watching yourself don't go together.

The objection is, "My standards are the reason my work is good." I believe you, and you should keep them. But a standard and a doubt are separate things. A standard is a statement about the work, such as "the figures must be right and the argument must be clear in the first minute". A doubt is a statement about you. You can hold the first at full strength without the second. An airline pilot runs the checklist before every flight. She does it because it's the checklist, and it takes the same few minutes whether she feels sure or unsure that day. When it's finished, she flies the plane.

The practical point follows from that. Decide the preparation in advance, by the job and not by the feeling. Before you start, write down what done looks like. For the presentation it might be two run-throughs, a check of the three key figures, and answers ready for the questions about cost. When you've done what's on the list, stop.

The feeling will say it isn't enough. Expect that. It would have said so after seven run-throughs too. Then give the presentation and see how it goes, because that result is the comparison you've never had.

"If I don't try, I can't fail"

Go back to the job advert from chapter 1, open in its tab for four days and closed on the Friday. Or take the quieter version of the same move. You do apply, but you leave it until the last evening and send something rushed. If it fails, it was the rush that failed.

The belief underneath is that not trying is safe. If you expect little and risk little, you can't be badly let down. A rejection would hurt, and a rejection after your best effort would hurt most, so you hold the effort back.

The part that's true is that rejection hurts. I'm not going to tell you it doesn't. Closing the tab did spare you a possible "no" in three weeks' time.

Psychologists have studied the half-hearted version of this under the name self-handicapping. In a well-known experiment from 1978, Steven Berglas and Edward Jones gave students a set of problems. Some students got problems that couldn't be solved, and were then told they'd done very well, so they had a success they couldn't explain. Before a second test, everyone was offered a choice of two drugs, one said to help performance and one said to harm it. Among the men, those with the unexplained success were much more likely to pick the drug that would harm them. If the second test went badly, the drug would be the reason, and their good opinion of their own ability would be safe. The women in the study didn't show the pattern.

I think that's what the closed tab protects. It doesn't protect you from failure, since you still don't have the job. It protects a possibility. "I could have got it if I'd gone for it." "I could write a good book if I ever had the time." It's like keeping a lottery ticket in a drawer and never checking the numbers, so that it can go on being a possible winner. An unchecked ticket pays out exactly what a losing ticket pays. You also have to keep not looking at it.

The comparison with failing is worth making plainly. If you apply and get turned down, you lose an evening and have a bad day or two. You also learn something, even if it's only that this sort of job attracts two hundred applicants. If you don't apply, you lose the same job and you learn nothing. The question of whether you could have got it stays open, and an open question like that tends to get heavier over the years.

This is where "I can't be disappointed" goes wrong. The disappointment does come. It comes slowly, when you hear who got the job, or when you notice how long the novel has been in the drawer. Thomas Gilovich and Victoria Medvec studied what people regret. Over the short term, people tended to regret things they'd done that turned out badly. Looking back over their lives, they more often regretted the things they hadn't done. Gilovich and other colleagues later found the same long-term pattern in China, Japan and Russia. A large repeat of the original studies in 2022 found it again in three tests out of four, with weaker effects, and its authors describe the wider evidence as mixed. All of it rests on what people recall or imagine, and nobody has followed people for decades to check. Still, it fits what older people tend to say when you ask them.

It's also doubtful that low expectations cushion the blow as well as they promise. In three studies by Sarit Golub, Daniel Gilbert and Timothy Wilson, people who expected a bad result felt worse while they waited than people who expected a good one. Once the result arrived, what they'd expected made no measurable difference to how they felt. Expecting the worst cost them something and bought them nothing. Test that against your own memory. Think of a disappointment you'd braced for, and ask whether the bracing helped much on the day.

You might say, "Some things I really wouldn't get." That's true, and you can't tell which ones from the feeling, for the reasons in chapter 3. The costs of trying are usually small and fixed. An application is an evening. A question at a talk is fifteen seconds. Showing a friend the drawings is one slightly awkward minute. Set against those, a "no" tells you less about yourself than it feels like it does. Most rejections come from things you never see, such as an internal candidate, a budget, or forty other good applicants.

So I'd suggest a different aim. Give up trying to be someone who never fails, which can only be managed by never trying. Aim to be someone who finds out. People who find out fail more often than you do at present, and they also get more of what they wanted, because they were in the running.

In practice, start by spotting your own half-tries. They're harder to see than a closed tab. Watch for the application sent at the last minute, and for the idea introduced with "this is only a rough thought". Watch for the piece of work you describe to everyone as

something you threw together. Each time you catch one, ask what the full attempt would have looked like. If the stakes are small, make it.

"At least I'm not arrogant"

You probably know someone who is never in doubt. He talks over people in meetings. He doesn't check things. He's wrong fairly often and doesn't seem to notice, and when it's pointed out he explains why it wasn't really his mistake. You'd rather be you than him, and your doubt feels like the thing that stands between the two.

So the belief is that self-doubt is a form of humility, and that if you lost it you'd start sliding towards him.

There's something right in this. Overconfidence is a real fault, and it does real damage in hospitals, on building sites and in boardrooms. Knowing where your knowledge runs out is a virtue, and you have it. I'd like you to keep it.

But humility and self-doubt aren't the same thing, and the difference matters. Humility, as I'd use the word, means being accurate about your limits and willing to be corrected. Accuracy works in both directions. A humble person can say "I don't know much about tax law". They can also say "I'm good at explaining technical things to customers", in the same flat tone, because both are true. Self-doubt is an error that always leans the same way. Bathroom scales that read five kilos light every morning aren't being modest. They're wrong, and you'd replace them.

There's a second part to humility, which is being open to correction, and here self-doubt does worse than you might expect. You'd think a person full of doubt would take criticism easily.

Usually it's the opposite. When you already suspect you're not up to the job, a criticism doesn't land as information about paragraph four. It lands as confirmation of the general doubt, and it hurts accordingly. So you dread feedback and put off asking for it, and when it comes you may be too busy absorbing the blow to make use of it. The person who thinks "I'm decent at this, and paragraph four needs work" is in a much better position to fix paragraph four.

It helps to see these as two separate questions. The first is how you rate your ability. The second is how open you are to finding out you're wrong. The man in the first paragraph rates himself highly, which is a small problem. His large problem is the second question, where he's shut. To become him, you'd have to stop listening, stop checking and stop admitting mistakes. Rating yourself accurately requires none of that. You can move on the first question and stay exactly where you are on the second.

I'd add something that may be uncomfortable, and I mean it kindly. Self-doubt feels modest, but it keeps your attention on yourself. In the Monday meeting the subject was supposed to be the fall in sign-ups. For you, in that minute, the subject became how you would look. The modest thing to do, in the sense of putting yourself second, would have been to say "the form's broken on mobile, in case that's useful", because the problem mattered more than your standing.

That points to a cost other people bear. The team needed what you knew. It got it eventually from someone else, but plenty of times there's no someone else, and the thing you noticed goes unsaid. More broadly, when the careful people in a room stay quiet, the

decisions get made by whoever is left. If you think overconfident people have too much say where you work, part of the reason is that people like you have been leaving them the floor.

The fair objection is that people do dislike a show-off, and that the penalty isn't handed out evenly. In experiments by the psychologist Laurie Rudman, women who talked up their own strengths were rated as more competent than women who were modest, and also as less likeable and less likely to be hired. Men who were modest lost on competence, and the results for how much they were liked were inconsistent. I don't doubt that many readers have felt this. It's a fact about those workplaces, and I'm not going to tell you it's all in your head.

But consider how much room there is between silence and showing off. Mentioning something you noticed isn't boasting. Nor is applying for a job, or answering a question you know the answer to, or saying "thank you" when someone praises your work. Nearly everything this book asks of you sits in that middle ground. You may have been treating the whole of it as dangerous because one edge of it is.

One more thought, which I find reassuring. The worry about becoming arrogant is itself a decent sign. Arrogant people don't, on the whole, lie awake concerned that they might be arrogant. If you keep checking your work, keep listening, and keep saying "I was wrong" when you were, you can afford a much better opinion of your abilities than you have now.

Here's a short exercise. Write down three things you're good at, in plain sentences, the way you'd write them about a colleague in a reference. "She's reliable with deadlines." "She explains things clearly." Now write them with "I". Notice the pull to add "but", or "I suppose", or "compared with some people". Leave those off, and read the three sentences back. They're meant as description, and if they make you wince, remember that you'd have written them about a colleague without a second thought.

"They were only being kind"

Your manager stops at your desk and says the report was excellent, exactly what the board needed. Before she has finished the sentence, your mind is at work on it. She's being nice. She probably skimmed it. The bar for these reports is low. Anyone would have done the same with the data you were given.

A month later the same manager says that one section of a different report was a bit unclear. That goes straight in. You don't ask whether she skimmed it, or whether she was in a hurry, or whether one unclear section out of twelve is a good result. You think about it on the way home, and again on Sunday evening.

From the inside this feels like rigour. Praise is cheap and people hand it out to be pleasant, whereas criticism costs something to give, so it must be sincere. Taking compliments with a pinch of salt feels like a way of keeping your feet on the ground.

Some of that is right. A fair amount of praise is politeness. And you're not unusual in feeling criticism more sharply. A large review of research, published in 2001 under the title "Bad is stronger than good", found the same lean across many areas of life. Bad events, bad feedback and bad impressions tend to have more effect on people than good ones of the same size. So everyone's books are tilted a little.

But look at the procedure you're using, because it goes beyond a tilt. You have two sets of rules. Praise is cross-examined. What was her motive, is she qualified to judge, what was it being compared

with? Criticism is admitted without a single question. A fair process would ask the same questions of both. If you applied them to the criticism, you might conclude that she's right about the section, that it's fixable, and that it says very little about you. You'd be keeping the information and dropping the verdict.

The same double standard shows up in how you explain results. When something goes well, there's a long list of causes to choose from. You were lucky. You had help. The task was easy. You worked absurdly hard. They like you. The timing was good. When something goes badly there's one cause, and it's you. A shop that wrote down every refund and never rang up a sale would show a loss every year, however much it sold. Your record of your own ability has been kept by that method.

Why would anyone do this? One line of research, begun by the psychologist William Swann, suggests that people tend to seek out and trust feedback that agrees with what they already think of themselves, even when what they think is unflattering. Praise still feels nicer than criticism, to nearly everyone. It just isn't believed. Praise that doesn't fit feels false, and criticism that fits has the ring of truth. But the ring of truth here is only familiarity. The criticism sounds right because it matches what you already say to yourself.

It's worth taking the favourite explanations one at a time.

Luck is real, and every career has some in it. But luck doesn't arrive on schedule. If you've been "lucky" for eleven years, under different managers and on different projects, then luck is a strained explanation and there's a simpler one available.

Hard work is a strange thing to count against yourself. Being willing and able to work hard is an ability. Nobody paying you cares whether the result came easily.

"They like me" is no more damning than that. Being someone people want to work with is part of doing most jobs well.

"Anyone could have done it" is the one to be most suspicious of, for the reason given in chapter 4. Things feel easy when you're good at them. If anyone could have done it, it's fair to wonder why they asked you.

A quick test for any of these is to imagine a friend saying it about herself. She tells you her promotion was luck, her good review was kindness and her qualification was a fluke. You wouldn't accept that from her. You'd say she was being ridiculous, and you'd be right.

Some praise really is empty, of course, and you don't want to become a person who laps it all up. Fine. Weigh it the way you'd weigh any evidence. Praise counts for more when it's specific, when it comes from someone who knows the work, and when they had no need to say anything. What people do counts for most of all. Did the client renew? Did your manager give you the next difficult project? Do colleagues bring you their questions? People are polite with words and much less polite with their time and money.

Two practical things follow.

The first is to keep a record, since the one in your head can't be trusted. Use a notebook or a file, one line per entry, facts only.

"Client renewed for a second year." "J asked me to look over her

draft." "Report went to the board unchanged." Put the criticisms in too, in the same plain style. "Section 3 unclear, rewrote it." After a few months you'll have something you've never had, which is an account of your work that includes the good results. I expect the criticisms will turn out to be fewer and smaller than you'd have said.

The second is to change what you say when someone praises your work. Say "thank you", and stop there. Don't add "oh, it was nothing" or "I just got lucky with the data". When you argue with praise out loud, you teach the other person to stop offering it, and you hear yourself running the work down once more. "Thank you" is enough. It also happens to be polite, since they've just given you their opinion and you aren't telling them it's wrong.

"Can I just check this with you?"

The email from chapter 1 didn't go straight to the client. You wrote it, polished it, and then forwarded it to a colleague with "does this sound OK?" She wrote back, "Looks fine to me." You felt your shoulders drop, and you sent it. The next day there was another email, and you forwarded that one too.

There are versions of this at home. You're choosing between two coats and you send photos to your sister. You've more or less decided about a course, and you put the question to five friends and go with the majority. Your partner asks where you'd like to eat and you say, "I don't mind, you choose."

It all looks like plain good sense. Two heads are better than one, other people often know more, and checking costs nothing.

A good deal of that is true. A second pair of eyes catches things. In plenty of jobs, review is a required step, and rightly. Asking people who know more than you is one of the best habits a person can have. None of what follows is an argument against it.

The distinction I'd draw is between asking for information and asking for reassurance. When you ask for information, there's something you don't know and the other person might. Their answer could change what you do. Once you have it, you don't need to ask again.

When you ask for reassurance, you already have your answer. The email is fine and you know it's fine. What you want is for the uneasy feeling to be settled, and only one reply will do that. If she

said "hmm, I'm not sure about the second line", you wouldn't be grateful for the information. You'd be thrown. And when she says "looks fine", the comfort lasts until the next email.

There's a simple test you can use before you ask. What do you think the answer is? If you know what they'll say, and you'd send the thing as it stands if nobody were around to ask, then it's reassurance you're after.

The reason it doesn't work is the one from chapter 2. The relief is quick, so the habit gets stronger. And the credit goes to the check. The email was all right "because she looked it over". You never find out that it would have been all right anyway. Your own judgement, which was the thing in doubt, never gets tested alone, so it never gains any standing with you.

Clinicians have described this most carefully in people with obsessive and anxious problems, where seeking reassurance is a recognised part of what keeps the problem going. In one study, people with these problems reported a brief drop in anxiety after being reassured, followed later by the return of both the discomfort and the urge to ask again. People without such problems didn't report that return. The researchers are careful to say that this rests on what patients remember and hasn't been shown by experiment. They also warn against simply refusing reassurance to someone in distress. Ordinary self-doubt is a much milder thing, and carrying the lesson across is my step. But the shape looks the same to me. Reassurance seems to wear off quickly, and the more often you ask, the more you need to.

The costs fall in a few places. Your judgement stays untested, as I've said. Your colleagues form a view. Someone whose work always arrives with "can you just check?" comes to be seen as someone whose work needs checking, and that affects what they're trusted with. There's also a small, steady tax on the people you ask, who are usually too kind to mention it.

The cost at home is quieter and I think larger. Each "you choose" is tiny. Over years, a good part of your life ends up chosen by other people. Preferences that are never voiced get fainter, and after a while "I don't mind" is no longer a politeness. You don't know what you'd like any more.

You may be thinking, "But she does catch things sometimes." Then keep the part that works, and make it a proper review. Ask a specific question. "Is the second paragraph clear about the price?" will get you a useful answer. "Does this sound OK?" will get you "looks fine". It also helps to decide in advance, by the type of work and not by the feeling, what gets a second look. Anything going to the board or anything with a contract attached might qualify. A routine email to a client you've dealt with for two years doesn't.

Here's an experiment for the next fortnight. Each time you're about to ask someone to check something, first write down what you expect them to say. Then ask, if you still want to, and compare. If your prediction matches their answer nine times out of ten, you've learned something solid, which is that your own judgement was already telling you what they would. After that, start sending the low-stakes things unchecked, and see what happens to them.

For decisions, the first step is smaller still. When you're asked what you'd like, give a preference before you hand the choice over, even a slight one. "I'd rather the Italian, but I'm easy." You can still be easy. The point is to keep in practice at knowing what you think.

"I'll do it when I feel ready"

You're going to apply for the senior role next year, when you feel more ready. You'll offer to speak at the conference once you're more confident on your feet. You'll show someone the drawings when they're better.

The belief is that confidence comes first and action follows. On this view confidence is a kind of entry ticket. Other people seem to have theirs already, and you're waiting for yours to arrive.

It sounds responsible, and in some cases it is. Nobody should rewire a house or fit a gas boiler before they're ready. But in those cases readiness is measured in hours of training and a test passed. Nobody asks the apprentice whether she feels ready. They look at her certificate.

Think about where the confidence you already have came from. Take driving, if you drive. In your first lesson you weren't confident. You were gripping the wheel while a stranger sat with his foot over a second brake. The ease you have now arrived somewhere in the first few hundred hours on the road. At no point did you feel like a driver first and then start driving. The same is true of your first week in any job, and of the first time you cooked for six people. In each case the feeling followed the doing, often by a long way.

The psychologist Albert Bandura spent much of his career on this. His term was self-efficacy, which means your belief that you can carry out a particular task. He identified four things that feed it.

The first is having done the thing successfully yourself. The second is watching people like you do it. The third is being told you can. The fourth is how your body feels at the time. He argued that the first is much the strongest, and that being told you can is weak and fades quickly when it isn't backed by experience.

That explains a lot about why confidence advice fails. "Believe in yourself" is the third source, which is the weak one. A pep talk or a kind friend can lift you for an afternoon. By Monday it has worn off, because nothing has happened that your mind counts as evidence.

There's a large body of research linking self-efficacy with how well people perform at work. One review combined over a hundred studies and found a solid association. Some researchers have argued that much of that link runs from performance to belief, not the other way round. In other words, people come to believe they can do things largely because they've done them. For my purposes that's the point. Confidence is mostly a result.

So waiting until you feel ready means waiting for the result of something you aren't doing. The feeling is unlikely to arrive, because the strongest thing that produces it is the experience you're putting off. Next year you'll probably feel much as you do now, and the sensible-sounding delay will renew itself for another year.

The way out is to stop measuring readiness by feeling and measure it by something you can check. Take the senior role. What does it require? List the main things. Mark the ones you've already done, even in a smaller form. For each of the rest, ask whether you could

learn it in the first few months, with help. That list will tell you whether you're ready enough to apply. How you feel about it won't. Bear in mind that nobody arrives in a job already able to do all of it. Part of every job is learned after you start, and the people who appoint you know that.

One objection is that this sounds like "fake it till you make it", and you don't want to be a fake. You don't have to be. Nothing here asks you to pretend you're sure. You can say "the form seems to be broken on mobile" with your heart thumping, and it's a perfectly honest sentence. You're acting with the doubt present. You aren't claiming it's absent. If anything, that's more honest than staying quiet and letting people think you had nothing to say.

The other objection is more practical. "If I try before I'm ready and it goes badly, I'll be worse off than before." There's something in that. Bandura's point was about successes, and an early disaster can set a person back. So choose the size of the step. Ask a question in a meeting of six before you give a talk to two hundred. Show the drawings to one friend before you enter the exhibition. Working up through steps you're likely to manage is simply how the skill gets built.

The step does have to be real, though. Something has to be at stake, even if it's small, or your mind won't count it. Practising your point in the car on the way home doesn't count, I'm afraid.

I'd also warn you about the first few times. They'll feel bad even when they go well. Your heart will pound the second time you speak up almost as much as the first. The feeling runs well behind

the evidence. My guess, and it is a guess, is that a situation starts to feel different after something like ten goes, not two. If you judge by how you feel after the second, you'll decide it isn't working.

For now, pick one thing you've been putting off until you feel ready. Write down what ready would mean in terms you could check. Then work out the smallest real version of it that you could do this month. If a chance to do it comes up before you finish the book, take it. Otherwise chapter 12 will ask you to.

Where you learned it

In chapter 1 I said your doubt is selective, and that something so selective was probably learned. It's worth drawing the map. Where is your doubt strong? It might be at work but not at home, or with figures but not with people, or around older men, or around anyone with a certain kind of education. Where is it missing? Most people find the map has a logic to it, and the logic usually points back to somewhere.

What follows are common sources. They're my summary of what people report, offered as examples, and only you know which apply.

Some people grew up in a home where mistakes drew comment and successes didn't. Nobody was cruel. The ninety per cent on the test got "what happened to the other ten?", and it was meant as encouragement. A child in that home learns to find the faults first, before anyone else can.

Some were compared, usually with a brother or sister who was "the clever one" or "the sporty one". The comparison hands the child a settled opinion about what they're not.

Some had the opposite, and it surprises people that this can lead to the same place. They were the clever one, praised early and often for being bright. There's research by Melissa Kamins and Carol Dweck in which young children who were praised for what they were coped worse with a later setback than children praised for how they'd gone about the task. My reading of that, and it goes

beyond the study, is this. If you're loved for being clever, every hard task is a threat, because struggling might show that you aren't. Holding back protects the label.

For some it was a single event. A teacher read your work aloud and the class laughed. A first boss picked your work apart in front of people, week after week. One humiliation at the wrong age can set a rule that lasts thirty years.

And for some it came with moving between worlds. You were the first in your family at university, or you changed country, or class, or you work in a field where few people share your background. The unwritten rules were unfamiliar. Everyone else seemed to know them, and you concluded that the lack was in you, when it was only in what you'd been shown.

I've listed these because of what they have in common. In each case, stepping back was a sensible response at the time. A child with a critical parent does better by checking everything twice. A teenager who's been laughed at is wise not to volunteer. The habit was a fair solution to a real problem, and no fault in you.

The trouble is that it was never reviewed. You carried it into rooms where the critical parent isn't present and nobody is going to laugh. And because of the mechanism in chapter 2, it never gets checked against the new rooms. Each step back prevents exactly the experience that would show it was out of date.

Now for the case where the room really is the source. Some researchers have argued that the phrase "impostor syndrome" puts the problem in the wrong place, as though the person had a

disorder, when the feelings often depend on how that person is being treated. The 2020 review from chapter 4 included eleven studies of people from ethnic minorities, mostly American university students. Impostor feelings were common among them, and in one study they went along with the stress students reported from being in a minority. If you're interrupted more than others, if your ideas tend to be credited to the person who repeats them, if you're asked to prove what colleagues are assumed to know, then some of your doubt is simply an accurate perception. You are being doubted.

If that's your position, I'd suggest keeping two sentences apart. "They doubt me" is one. "I'm not good enough" is another. The first is a fact about them, and it can be completely true while the second is completely false. The trouble starts when the first gets quietly translated into the second, which is easy to do after enough years of it.

The record from chapter 8 is especially useful here, because it gives you evidence that doesn't depend on the room's opinion of you. The remedies for the first sentence are different too. They include allies, finding others in the same position, raising it where that's safe, and sometimes moving to a better place. Those are changes to the situation, and they shouldn't be mistaken for a self-improvement project. I won't pretend the method in this book fixes an unfair workplace.

I will say one thing, carefully, because it's unfair and still true. In a room that already underrates you, stepping back costs you more than it costs other people. Your silence gets read as confirmation.

That isn't your fault, and it's a reason to put your points on the table even though it takes more effort for you than for them.

A word about one harsher case. If someone close to you, a partner especially, regularly tells you that your memory is wrong, your judgement can't be trusted and you'd be lost without them, the doubt you feel is being produced on purpose. That's a form of abuse. A domestic abuse helpline is the right first call, and a therapist can help with what it leaves behind.

Knowing where the habit came from won't make it go away. It does help in one way. When the general doubt next speaks, you may recognise the sentence. It's often word for word what someone once said, or what you concluded at twelve. You can then see it as something old, learned in a particular place for good reasons, and you needn't treat it as a report on today. And something you learned can be replaced by learning something else, which is the business of the next chapter.

The decision

Here's where the argument has got to. The doubt and the step back are separate, and the second is a habit. The habit pays in quick relief and costs you evidence, practice, hours and other people's picture of you. The feeling of doubt tracks exposure and caring more than ability. Other people's calm is mostly surface. Extra preparation and extra checking soothe the feeling without settling anything. Not trying protects a possibility and nothing else. Self-doubt isn't humility. Your record has been kept unfairly. And confidence comes after doing, so waiting for it doesn't work.

If most of that seems right to you, then there's a decision to make, and I'd put it like this.

A doubt that names something I can check gets checked, once. A doubt that only names me doesn't get to decide what I do.

Notice what the rule leaves alone. It doesn't ask you to stop feeling doubt, which you couldn't do anyway. It doesn't ask you to feel confident, or to think well of yourself on demand. The doubt can come along. It can sit in the meeting with you and say its usual sentence. What changes is that it loses its vote on what you do next.

The rest of this chapter is method. None of it is complicated.

Learn your own step backs. They're quick, and the first job is to catch them. You'll have your usual ones. It may be silence in meetings, or the fifth reread, or the "quick check" with a colleague, or "you choose", or the advert you look at and don't answer. Write

down your two or three most common. For the first week, you're only trying to notice them as they happen, or soon afterwards. Catching one an hour later still counts.

Ask "what exactly?" When you catch the doubt, put the question from chapter 3 to it. If it names something you can check, check it. If it says something about you, note that it's the general doubt, and carry on with what you were about to do.

Check once, with a limit. A specific doubt gets one proper check. Look up the March figure, find out whether it includes refunds, and move on. If the same doubt comes back after it's been answered, it has changed into the other kind, and more checking won't help. For bigger pieces of work, set the preparation in advance as in chapter 5, by the job. Two run-throughs, three figures checked, questions prepared, stop.

Go early. This matters more than it looks. In a meeting, the doubt grows with every minute you wait, and the longer you've been silent the bigger a deal it feels to break the silence. So say something in the first ten minutes, even if it's only a question. After that you're a person who's speaking in this meeting, and the second contribution is far easier. The same goes for sending things. Decide beforehand which draft you'll send, the second, say, and send it when you reach it. Put the application in on the day you decide to apply, or the next morning. Don't leave it for the week before the deadline.

Drop the apology in front. I mean the little run-up. "This is probably a stupid question, but." "I'm sure you've already thought of this." "I'm no expert." It feels like politeness, and like insurance

in case you're wrong. What it does is tell people how to take what follows, and they'll mostly take you at your word. Chapter 4 mentioned that groups give weight to people who sound sure. You don't need to sound surer than you are. Just stop sounding less sure than you are. "Could it be the form on mobile?" is a complete sentence. If you truly are uncertain, say what you're uncertain about. "I've only tested it on my own phone" is useful information, and "this is probably nothing" isn't.

Write down the prediction, then the result. This is the most important of the seven, because it's how the evidence finally gets in. Before you do the thing, write one line saying what you expect. Make it specific enough to be wrong. "They'll say it's already been checked and I'll look foolish." Afterwards, write one line saying what happened. "Dev checked, it was broken, fixed by lunch." Keep these lines in the same notebook or file as the record from chapter 8. Therapists use the same technique under the name behavioural experiments. One review of fourteen clinical studies found some evidence that it works better than simply facing the feared situation, though the authors said the studies were too limited for firm conclusions. For our purposes it does one specific job. In chapter 2, the prediction survived because it was never tested and never even stated. This puts it on paper next to what happened. Some predictions will come true, and the next chapter deals with that. My expectation is that most won't, and that the ones that do will turn out milder than forecast.

Bank the good results. Add them to the record from chapter 8, in plain words. When someone says something good about your work, say "thank you" and write it down later. After a few months,

read the record through before anything that frightens you. You'll be reading facts about what you've already done.

Start small, and I mean that as method, not as kindness. Chapter 10 explained why early successes matter. Choose situations where a bad result would cost little. It might be a question in a small meeting, or an email sent on the second draft, or a preference stated at home. The smallest real version you worked out at the end of chapter 10 belongs on the list too. Do those for a few weeks before you take on the big presentation. But do start this week, because the first prediction you write down and test is worth more than another chapter of reading.

It helps to decide in advance exactly what you'll do at the moment you know is coming. Plans of the form "when this happens, I'll do that" have been tested in a lot of studies, and across them people with such a plan were noticeably more likely to follow through than people with only a good intention. The reason seems to be that the decision is already made, so you don't have to make it while the doubt is talking. Write two or three, fitted to your own step backs. For example:

- When the team meeting starts, I'll ask or say one thing in the first ten minutes.
- When I've finished the second draft of an email, I'll send it.
- When someone asks where I'd like to eat, I'll name a place.

What should you expect? Not calm, at first. The first dozen times, your body will behave exactly as it always has. If the argument of this book is right, the feeling follows later, as the record fills and the predictions keep failing. I can't promise you how quickly, and

for some situations it may never go completely. Many people who speak in public for a living are nervous every time. They've stopped treating it as a reason not to speak.

When it goes wrong

It will, in two ways. Sometimes you'll act against the doubt and it will go badly. And sometimes you'll step back again, after you'd decided not to. They need different responses, so I'll take them in turn.

When you acted, and the doubt was right

You made the point, and it had been dealt with last week while you were on leave. You applied, and didn't get an interview. You sent the report on the second draft and there was a mistake in it, and the client noticed.

The general doubt will be on to this at once. "There, you see. This is what happens." It will treat one result as the verdict on the whole approach, and on you. The belief on offer is that the doubt was protecting you all along, and that you were a fool to stop listening.

Start by putting the event next to the prediction you wrote down. Predictions made by doubt tend to be dramatic. "I'll look foolish and they'll remember it." What happened in the meeting was that someone said "yes, we picked that up last week, thanks", and the conversation moved on in four seconds. The point was redundant. The predicted humiliation didn't happen. The doubt got the small thing right and the big thing wrong, and the big thing was the part that had been stopping you.

Then treat what happened as an event, with a cause you can look for. A failure nearly always has a specific doubt inside it, and that's the useful part. Why was the mistake in the report? Because the

refund figures come from a different system and you didn't reconcile them. Good. That's now a line on your checklist for next time, in the way chapter 5 described. It's a fact about refund figures. It isn't a fact about whether you're fit to write reports.

With rejections, there's often nothing to find, which is frustrating in its own way. You can ask for feedback, and sometimes you'll get something usable. Often the honest answer is that there were many good applicants and someone else fitted slightly better. Count the attempt as the success. You were trying to become someone who finds out, and you found out.

Sometimes the failure does show a real gap. You gave the talk and it was muddled, because you aren't yet good at structuring a talk. That's useful to know. A skill gap is a specific doubt on a larger scale. It can be closed by a course, by practice, or by someone showing you how they do it. The general doubt would have you read it as "I'm not a person who can give talks", which sounds similar and is a completely different claim. One of them comes with a to-do list and the other doesn't.

Keep the proportions in view as well. If you now speak up ten times where you used to speak once, you'll be wrong in public more often than before, in absolute numbers. That's arithmetic. You'll also be right in public far more often, and the people around you are judging you on the whole run. Everyone whose judgement you respect has been wrong in front of you at some point. You didn't cross them off.

When you stepped back again

You decided on the rule, you wrote your plans, and on Tuesday you sat through an hour's meeting and said nothing. Or you caught yourself on the sixth reread at eleven at night.

The general doubt has a line ready for this too. "You can't even follow a self-help book." I'd ask you to notice that this is the same voice making the same move, and not to give it more weight here than anywhere else. A lapse in a habit you've had for twenty or thirty years isn't evidence of anything much. It's what changing a habit looks like for nearly everyone who does it. It doesn't mean you misunderstood the argument, and it doesn't mean you didn't want this enough.

There's also some evidence that going hard on yourself is the less effective response. In a set of experiments by Juliana Breines and Serena Chen, people who were prompted to treat a personal failure with understanding were afterwards more motivated to improve, and spent longer studying for a second test after doing badly on the first, than people who weren't. Being harsh with yourself feels like taking the matter seriously. It seems mainly to make people avoid the subject.

So look at the lapse with some curiosity. Here are the questions I'd ask.

Is there still time? Very often there is. The meeting is over, but you can send a two-line message. "One thought I didn't get to raise. The form seems broken on mobile." You can reopen the advert if the deadline hasn't passed. A late step forward isn't as good as a prompt one, but it's far better than none, and it still goes in the record.

What was different about this time? Look for the circumstance. Perhaps the most senior person in the building was in the room. Perhaps you were tired, or it was the week after a mistake. Perhaps you waited, and by minute forty the silence had set hard. Most people find they have two or three conditions under which the habit wins. Once you know yours, you can plan for them specifically. "When the director is in the meeting, I'll speak in the first five minutes."

Was the step too big? If you keep failing to do a thing, it may be a rung too high for now. Drop down to something you can manage, do that for a fortnight, and come back.

Then let it go. One thing I'd avoid is counting unbroken streaks. A streak turns a single lapse into a collapse, and then the lapse becomes a reason to give up. What matters is the proportion over months. If you stepped back nine times out of ten last year and it's six out of ten by the summer, the habit is changing, and you'll see it in how quickly the record fills.

When to get more help than a book

Self-doubt is ordinary, and a book is a reasonable place to start. Nobody has tested this book's approach in a trial, so I can't tell you how often it's enough. Some situations call for more. See a doctor as a first step, or a qualified therapist, if any of these apply.

- The doubt comes with low mood, loss of interest or a sense of worthlessness that has lasted more than two weeks.
- You have panic attacks, or you're so anxious about being judged that you avoid ordinary things such as phone calls, eating with

others or going to work.

- The checking has become something you can't stop even when you want to, and it takes up hours of your day.
- The doubt goes back to abuse, bullying or another experience that still intrudes on your life.
- You've worked at this for some months and nothing has moved.

For severe anxiety about being judged, which doctors call social anxiety disorder, the health guidance body for England recommends individual cognitive behavioural therapy as the first choice. It uses more thorough versions of several things in this book. If you take prescribed medication for anxiety or depression, don't stop or change it because of anything you've read here. Talk to the person who prescribed it. And if you ever have thoughts of harming yourself, contact a doctor or a crisis line that day, or the emergency services if you're in immediate danger.

The next time

Somewhere in the next few days there'll be a moment like the ones in chapter 1. You'll notice something in a meeting, or see something you could apply for, or finish a piece of work that's ready to go. The doubt will arrive on time, saying what it always says.

You don't need to argue with it. You've read the arguments, and the moment itself is a poor time to rehearse them. Ask it "what exactly?" If it names something, go and check that one thing. If all it has is its opinion of you, then you know where that opinion came from, and you know it hasn't been right very often. Say the sentence. Send the email. Put your name down.

It won't feel good the first time. Your heart will be going, and afterwards you'll probably replay it and find fault with how you put it. That's fine. Write down what you predicted and what happened, and leave it there.

Before you put the book down, do three small things.

Write one plan in the "when, then" form for the step back you make most often, and put it where you'll see it before the situation comes up.

Start the record. Put in three entries from the last year, plain facts, no adjectives. You'll be able to think of three if you don't let yourself explain them away.

Tell one person what you're doing, in a sentence. "I'm trying to speak earlier in meetings." Choose someone who'll be glad, and who might tell you in a month whether they've noticed.

I can't tell you that the doubt will go. For most people it gets quieter in the places where they've tested it and stays loud in the places where they haven't, which is an argument for testing it in more places. What I'm fairly sure of is that you've been working from a poor estimate of yourself. It's been kept low by a habit that stopped the evidence coming in. If you let the evidence in, the estimate will correct itself, slowly.

You knew the answer in that meeting. My guess is that you've known a good many answers over the years, and said very few of them. The next one that comes to you, say.

Notes

This book gives general information. It isn't medical or psychological advice, and it's no substitute for a doctor or therapist who knows your situation.

I've kept sources out of the chapters so they read easily. Here they are by chapter, with the limits I'm aware of. Where a chapter isn't listed, it rests on my own reasoning.

Chapter 2. The idea that safety behaviours maintain anxiety comes from Paul Salkovskis, "The importance of behaviour in the maintenance of anxiety and panic", *Behavioural Psychotherapy* 19, 1991, pages 6 to 19. That paper is theory and contains no data. Wells and colleagues, *Behavior Therapy* 26, 1995, pages 153 to 161, found in eight patients with social phobia that one session of exposure with safety behaviours dropped did better than exposure alone. The pooled analysis is Meulders and colleagues, *Clinical Psychology Review* 45, 2016, pages 144 to 156. It covered 20 studies and found a lean towards dropping safety behaviours that fell short of statistical significance. Treat the idea as a clinical model with some support.

Chapter 3. Arntz, Rauner and van den Hout, "If I feel anxious, there must be danger", *Behaviour Research and Therapy* 33, 1995, pages 917 to 925. The participants were 162 patients with various anxiety problems and 24 people without. They rated written stories, so this is a study of judgements on paper, and it can't show what causes what. The distinction between specific and general doubt is mine.

Chapter 4. Savitsky and Gilovich, "The illusion of transparency and the alleviation of speech anxiety", *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 39, 2003, pages 618 to 625. I've given no figures because I could only confirm the summary. The T-shirt studies are in Gilovich, Medvec and Savitsky, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 78, 2000, pages 211 to 222. Wearers predicted that 46 per cent of observers would notice the shirt, and 23 per cent did. Only 15 students wore the shirt, so take the direction of the result and not the exact numbers. Clance and Imes, "The imposter phenomenon in high achieving women", *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research and Practice* 15, 1978, pages 241 to 247, is a clinical description of mostly white, middle-class American women, with no comparison group. The authors thought the pattern was rarer in men, and later work hasn't supported that. The review is Bravata and colleagues, *Journal of General Internal Medicine* 35, 2020, pages 1252 to 1275. It covered 62 studies and 14,161 participants. Of the 33 studies that compared the sexes, 16 found higher rates in women and 17 found no difference. It found no published trials of any treatment, which is one reason this book promises little. Eleven of its studies looked at ethnic minority groups, nearly all of them students. Its summary calls the rates particularly high, but the body of the review reports only that the feelings were common in those groups and gives no pooled comparison with anyone else, so "common" is as far as I've gone. It adds that the questionnaires were developed on samples with few non-white people in them. All but one of the authors worked for or advised the company that paid for the review. The status studies are Anderson, Brion, Moore and Kennedy, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 103, 2012, pages 718 to 735. A later paper by Tenney and colleagues in the same journal, volume 116, 2019, found that overconfidence stated

in words was penalised once it was exposed. Kruger and Dunning, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 77, 1999, pages 1121 to 1134. In one of their studies the top quarter scored at the 86th percentile and placed themselves at the 68th. Critics argue that much of the famous pattern is what you'd get from noisy self-estimates and a general tendency to rate oneself above average. Gignac and Zajenkowski, *Intelligence* 80, 2020, is one such critique, and others have disputed it in turn.

Chapter 5. Norem and Cantor, "Defensive pessimism: harnessing anxiety as motivation", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 51, 1986, pages 1208 to 1217. The participants were students doing laboratory puzzles. The detail that the interference took the form of encouragement comes from later descriptions of the study. Later work links defensive pessimism with more anxiety even where performance holds up. The cycle of over-preparation is described in Pauline Clance's 1985 book "The Impostor Phenomenon", from her clinical work.

Chapter 6. Berglas and Jones, "Drug choice as a self-handicapping strategy in response to noncontingent success", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 36, 1978, pages 405 to 417. Gilovich and Medvec, "The experience of regret", *Psychological Review* 102, 1995, pages 379 to 395. That paper reviews their own studies, first reported in *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 67, 1994, pages 357 to 365. The cross-cultural studies are Gilovich, Wang, Regan and Nishina, *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* 34, 2003, pages 61 to 71. Yeung and Feldman, *Collabra: Psychology* 8, 2022, repeated four of the 1994 studies with 988 Americans online. Three held up with weaker effects and one

didn't. Golub, Gilbert and Wilson, "Anticipating one's troubles", *Emotion* 9, 2009, pages 277 to 281. I've confirmed the summary of that paper and not its details.

Chapter 7. Rudman, "Self-promotion as a risk factor for women", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 74, 1998, pages 629 to 645. Three experiments, confirmed from the summary. The penalty for self-promoting women disappeared when the person judging was a man who depended on her performance. The account of humility is mine.

Chapter 8. Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer and Vohs, "Bad is stronger than good", *Review of General Psychology* 5, 2001, pages 323 to 370. It's a narrative review, which means the authors chose which studies to discuss, and at least one philosopher has argued the general claim is too loosely defined to test. Swann, Wenzlaff, Krull and Pelham, *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* 101, 1992, pages 293 to 306, with small groups. Kwang and Swann, *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 14, 2010, pages 263 to 280, pooled the research and concluded that praise governs how people feel while agreement with their self-view governs what they believe and seek out.

Chapter 9. Salkovskis and Kobori, *Journal of Behavior Therapy and Experimental Psychiatry* 49, 2015, pages 203 to 208. The participants were 153 people with obsessive compulsive disorder, 50 with panic disorder and 52 without either. It relies on people's recollections. The authors say prospective and experimental studies are still needed.

Chapter 10. Bandura, "Self-efficacy: toward a unifying theory of behavioral change", *Psychological Review* 84, 1977, pages 191 to 215, and his 1997 book "Self-efficacy: the exercise of control". The review of work performance is Stajkovic and Luthans, *Psychological Bulletin* 124, 1998, pages 240 to 261, with 114 studies, 21,616 participants and an average correlation of .38. It was weaker for complex tasks. The argument that the link runs mostly from past performance to belief is Sitzmann and Yeo, *Personnel Psychology* 66, 2013, pages 531 to 568. Bandura had already disputed earlier studies in this line, in *Journal of Management* 38, 2012, pages 9 to 44. The figure of about ten attempts is my guess.

Chapter 11. Kamins and Dweck, *Developmental Psychology* 35, 1999, pages 835 to 847, with children of five and six, who acted out the tasks and the setback in role-play. The step from that study to adults who were "the clever one" is mine. The argument about context is Feenstra and colleagues, "Contextualizing the impostor 'syndrome'", *Frontiers in Psychology* 11, 2020, article 575024. It's an opinion piece with no new data. Cokley and colleagues, *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development* 41, 2013, pages 82 to 95, studied 240 ethnic minority students at one American university. The list of origins is my summary and not a research finding.

Chapter 12. Behavioural experiments: McMillan and Lee, *Clinical Psychology Review* 30, 2010, pages 467 to 478, covering 14 studies and 644 participants. Plans in "when, then" form: Gollwitzer and Sheeran, *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* 38, 2006, pages 69 to 119, covering 94 tests with a medium to large effect. The advice to speak early and to drop the opening apology is my own.

Chapter 13. Breines and Chen, "Self-compassion increases self-improvement motivation", *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 38, 2012, pages 1133 to 1143. Four experiments, mostly with students. The guidance on therapy is the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, clinical guideline 159, "Social anxiety disorder: recognition, assessment and treatment", 2013.

One thing I left out on purpose. You may have read that men apply for jobs when they meet 60 per cent of the requirements and women only when they meet all of them. The figure traces back to a 2008 business journal article that mentioned an unpublished company report, and nobody has been able to produce the research behind it. I haven't used it.