

A Sample Chapter from Women Who Spark: 12 Steps to Catapult Happiness, Cultivate Confidence and Discover the Purpose of Your Life, By Aleta Norris

Hello Friend, thank you for reading this chapter from my book.

Enjoy it! Hugs, Aleta

Step Five: Cultivate Confidence

We can't talk about happiness without talking about confidence. Deep, real, authentic happiness requires confidence. Without it, happiness rests on the surface. It is fleeting and fragile. If you lack confidence, your happiness may feel forced and fake. You know, the kind where you put your best foot forward. You smile, because you should.

When you choose to become authentically confident, everyone around you benefits. We miss the real you if you are not able to shine and to be on fire about your purpose in the world. Your confidence and happiness are gifts to everyone around you.

If you struggle in this area, you are not alone. Many women lack confidence—and it can make them feel like they're failing no matter how much they've accomplished in life.

Here are a few examples:

- Recently I had coffee with a woman I've known for years. She is a successful business woman, well known in the community, highly talented, and a strong contributor. She confided in me. "I feel like one day I will be discovered. People will realize I don't know what I'm doing." I've learned enough about women's journeys over the years to not be surprised. I felt sad for her, however, because she is amazing. She is an executive, and that is because she knows what she's doing. And yet, she does not see it.
- A few months ago, another woman whose confidence I have always admired asked for my advice on how to provide feedback to one of her clients. After I shared some ideas, she said, "I feel so insecure about doing that."

- Another time, I talked to a senior level executive who has struggled with confidence her entire life because of something her father said to her when she was a little girl. I won't repeat the comment, because it is almost not appropriate. The essence of the comment, however, was "You are worthless." Sixty years later, she is still paralyzed by those words.

You cannot be happy if you are not confident.

You can smile. You can put on a good front. You can hang in there with the best of them. But you can't have pure, deep, joyful happiness.

Confidence is your belief in yourself. It is your belief that you can figure things out, that you can overcome the things that are put in your path, and that you are as capable and deserving as the person next to you.

You are in charge of your confidence. You, and you alone, get to decide how you will see yourself. Those words sound so simple and yet we all know it's not easy. In this chapter, your mission is to discover how to be confident, consistently, over time, and in any circumstances.

We'll get started by looking at what gets in the way.

Five Common Confidence Busters

- 1. You are overwhelmed.** It's easy to take too much on. In our society there is a tendency to measure a woman's value by her productivity, as well as the productivity of her children and family as a whole. We get drawn into robust calendars and lots of activity. Unfortunately, that often leads to feeling overwhelmed. When that happens, everything feels like a mess. When things feel like a mess, it is easy to feel incapable—and that leads to a loss of confidence.
- 2. You are grappling with guilt or shame.** Is there something from your past you've been holding onto? Do your mistakes continue to haunt you? Are you being too hard on yourself? Guilt related to the actions and decisions of your younger self can get in the way of your confidence today. If you are struggling to forgive yourself, you may carry this weight around with you for a long time. Others' words may also have had a negative impact on your confidence. Words and actions hurt women, and the effects can last a long time. Who has led you to feel shame, a feeling that you are not worthy? Who are you allowing to have power over you?

- 3. You compare yourself to others.** A significant portion of your low confidence is probably rooted in comparison. The women around you are smiling, their families are laughing and having fun, their houses are bigger, their jobs are more fulfilling, and they have busy social calendars. It is easy to feel like your life is less impressive than someone else's. If you struggle with this, you are not alone. In a world where social media posts and magazine covers stare at us every day, it is no wonder we get lost in our heads, wondering how these other women have figured out how to be (or at least appear to be) so confident and happy.
- 4. You are stuck in a whirlwind of disappointment.** Disappointment paralyzes many women. We get caught up in our heads, obsessing over all of the things that have not gone the way we envisioned. It might be our careers, marriages, or relationships with our kids. It might also be the absence of children, a lack of friendship, weight, energy, or purpose. The negative effect of this is compounded when we're also caught in the habit of comparison. When you allow this type of thinking to creep into your head, you risk talking yourself into a false belief that your life is a disaster while everyone else has it all figured out. Disappointment is a real and necessary part of life. It in no way indicates failure. It is predictable. Life is too complicated to go well all the time. It's obsessing over your disappointments that will get you in trouble.
- 5. You feel like you're not good enough.** This is the culmination of the first four things on this list. You are overwhelmed, grappling with guilt and shame, comparing yourself to others and ruminating on disappointments. Of course, you feel like you're not good enough. That is predictable. Some of this is couched in who you are innately. About 50% of women have a genetic disposition toward a stronger sense of self. These are the women who comfortably rely on intuition, they make quicker decisions than others, and they're comfortable taking risks. It is part of their constitution. They have a natural air of confidence. The other half were born with a more tentative nature. As such, these women will have a greater reliance on certainty, proof, affirmation and comfort that they are okay. If you fall into this second group there are some specific steps you can take to develop a life-changing level of confidence.

Ten Ways to Cultivate Confidence

- 1. View confidence as a journey.** Rather than focusing on your lack of confidence now, focus on what you can do to grow in confidence. With every step you take to master almost anything, your confidence will become stronger. Think about something you do routinely. Now, think back to the first time you did it. You might have been nervous because you didn't know what to expect. The second time was better, and the third time was almost easy. It's common to feel overwhelmed and incapable when you take on a new role. I often tell people, "Just wait. One year from now, you will feel so different about this."
- 2. Post affirmations.** Affirmations help you manage your thought patterns. It's easy to get caught up in your head with phrases related to not being good enough, not being able to do what the person next to you is doing, and not being smart enough. You can replace those thoughts with affirming phrases. Look at some options below for ideas—and come up with some of your own. Write a few of your favorites on notecards or sticky notes. Post them where you can see them to remind yourself.
 - I am smart.
 - I am worthy.
 - I am successful.
 - I am likable.
 - I am unique and equally valuable.
 - I deserve to be happy.
 - I can achieve my dreams.
 - I can do this.
- 3. Take small steps.** Completing big projects, chasing dreams, and cultivating new talents can feel overwhelming. It is easy to fall into a trap of thinking, "I could never do that." Instead of letting yourself be intimidated by the big picture, find one small step you can take today. For example, if you dream of leaving your job and starting a business, the first step could be to buy a journal to use while you brainstorm your potential business ideas and to document what you're learning along the way. The second step could be to create a list of all of the business ideas you have. The third step could be researching information on the internet about how to start a business. Progress cultivates confidence.

4. Keep your social media feeds in perspective. One of our biggest comparison traps is social media. Please keep in mind that real life is what happens when the photos are not being taken. I have seen many struggling women stop and smile for a photo. As soon as the photo is taken, the smile fades. Not everyone is as happy and put together as their photos suggest. And regardless of how happy, beautiful, and exciting all of the photos look, almost every woman I have ever met has something that is a struggle.

Remember, it's likely those women in your social media circle have also been hit with broken dreams, along with the unforeseen twists and turns in life.

Instead of allowing yourself to be consumed by a competitive spirit, ask yourself, "I wonder what her struggle is? I wonder what I can't see?" Be realistic—and compassionate to her and yourself.

5. Manage your self-talk. This is a big one. Imagine you walk into an event attended by people you don't know. You notice that almost everyone is deep in conversation. No one notices you or welcomes you.

Your self-talk may kick in:

"I shouldn't be here."

"I don't belong."

"Everyone else here knows someone."

"The sooner I get out of here the better."

"What was I thinking?"

I promise you none of these things are true. Try a little trick: If you are alone, get a beverage, then stand at a high-top table or an off-to-the-side spot in the room. Look around and calmly observe the room. Within about one minute, someone will come and talk with you. This will be a person who arrived alone, like you did. Or it will be a kind person who notices you are alone. Soon, you will be knee deep in a conversation, intimidating the next solo person who arrives. We are all the same. We all want the comfort of being in a conversation. Often, self-talk is based on mistaken beliefs.

When I initially started attending business networking events, my self-talk sounded like this, "Oh boy, what am I doing here? This is really uncomfortable. I think I'll talk to one person, then I'll leave." That was my ticket out the door. The next time I did the same

thing. The third time I attended an event, I realized that I knew a small group of people and I challenged myself to meet one more person before I could leave. All of these years later, I know numerous people almost everywhere I go in my business community. My confidence has also grown.

Your self-talk will find plenty of opportunities to take you into a rabbit hole of insecurity. Replace it with a strategy.

- 6. Focus on others.** This may feel counterintuitive. After all, I've already pointed out that comparison is not a good thing. This is different from comparison. This is about getting outside of your own head and, instead, looking at the positive attributes, activities and accomplishments of the women around you. Who inspires you? Who do you want to compliment? Who do you want to emulate? What do you want to replicate?

Focusing on others also includes asking, "What can I do for her?"

Consider the networking example I shared. Rather than focus on your insecurity, look around the room for another person who is alone. Find ways to put her at ease by starting a conversation. And when you are in a conversation, watch for others who arrive alone. Help minimize their awkward moments.

As you begin to think more about others, the less you will be focused on your own insecurities and disappointments.

- 7. Accept that some fear, insecurity and self-doubt is normal.** In the 1980s, a professor by the name of Steven C Hayes, introduced us to the idea that some suffering in our life is inevitable and an essential part of being human. Rather than try to replace all negative thinking with positive affirmations, he suggested we could just connect with our thoughts, remind ourselves they are not true, and move on.

Equipped with this information, perhaps you can find some peace when you're tempted to become overwhelmed by fear. One strategy to deal with your insecurities in a healthy way is to pull out your journal and jot down some of your thoughts. If you can get them out of your head and onto a piece of paper, perhaps you can look at them objectively and move on to something else.

8. Keep in mind everyone is afraid. Afraid they are not good enough, beautiful enough, successful enough, or capable enough. At times we are all afraid we can't achieve our dreams or do what someone else is doing. Even wildly successful people are afraid.

The next time you are at an event, let's say a theater or stadium of some kind, look to your right, then look to your left. These people on either side of you may not look afraid, but there is something. Of what, you ask? The list of possible reasons is endless. They might be afraid of getting old, not having enough money for retirement, not being likable, being lonely when their kids leave home, being unable to pay the rent, not being able to ever have a child, not being able to find a job they will actually love, giving a speech at their daughter's wedding, or that life will never be better than it is right now. Everyone is afraid at times, but you can learn to manage your fears, put them in perspective, and become more confident.

9. Do something to get yourself unstuck. If you're stuck dwelling on your fears and your long list of disappointments, do something. Don't try to tackle everything all at once. Do one thing. Whatever is swirling in your head, move it from thoughts to paper. Then pick the one thing you'll use as a starting point. After that step is accomplished, choose one more thing. Each step will move you closer to realizing your dreams. Or choose one disappointment to tackle. Figure your way out of it. Fix it. Make it better. Change your life one step at a time.

If you are afraid you're not likable, call one friend you feel comfortable with and invite her to have a cup of coffee or a glass of wine with you.

If you are disappointed your job is not more fulfilling, jump on a job site and see what is out there.

If you are disappointed your son doesn't call you more often, pick up the phone and call him.

Do something. Own what you want and go after it.

10. Create your own definition of who you are and what your life is. It's easy to get distracted by what everyone else is doing. Instead, design your life. You need to get excited about who you are and what you want your life to be.

Step Five: Cultivate Confidence

Dedicate this to writing. Who are you? What will you not compromise? What do you feel sure of? What habits and rituals should be a part of your day? What are your dreams? What do you want to accomplish today, this week, this month, this quarter?

When we get to Step Eleven, “Get After It!”, we will go deeper into how to make these things happen. When you make the things that are most important to you a priority, you will discover a whole new level of confidence.

ⁱ Professor Steven Hayes (some insecurity and self doubt is good)

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