

# Developing Confidence

By Clyde M. Narramore, Ed.D. and Bruce Narramore, Ph.D.

Jim, a young man in his twenties, came into my counseling office. He was well dressed and clearly very intelligent. But after talking with him for a few minutes, I (Clyde) realized that Jim had little confidence and self-assurance. He wasn't sure he was in the right vocation. He wasn't sure he had chosen the right major in college. And he wasn't sure if he should pursue his current dating relationship.

When I asked Jim about working with me in counseling to get to the root of his lack of confidence, Jim replied, "Yes, but I'm not sure what I ought to do. Some people say I should just be more confident. Another friend told me I shouldn't need a counselor because I should just trust God." Jim didn't even have confidence to get help for his lack of confidence!

Confidence is one of three cornerstones on which your attitude toward yourself, that is, your self-concept or self-esteem, is based. The second cornerstone is feeling loveable – the feeling belief that you are the kind of person that others care about. Being and feeling loved is the most basic of all emotional needs. It is the perception that you belong as opposed to a feeling belief that you are unlovable. The third cornerstone of your attitude toward yourself is feeling worth, that is, that you are a valuable individual. Feeling worth is based upon the deep-seated feeling belief that you are a significant person. It encompasses feeling and believing that your opinions and emotions matter and that people value you.

Confidence is different than feeling lovable or feeling worth. It has more to do with performance. It reflects your belief and feeling that you have some God-given talents and abilities that you can use as you go through life. Feeling lovable and feeling worth are abiding feeling beliefs about your entire self; in contrast, you can feel confident in some areas but not in others. Confidence is essentially a sense of competence.

When people lack confidence, they feel tense, anxious, and unsure of their ability to perform a task. They may either give in to their self-doubts and become more passive and dependent, or they may become driven, pushy, or power-hungry in vain attempts to mask their true feelings.

Most people are not as hesitant and self-doubting as Jim. Their lack of confidence is limited to one or two areas and is less severe and debilitating.

All of us have some lack of confidence, but for some, deep down feelings prevent them from being the people God would have them be. The Bible says, "Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters" (Col. 3:23, New International Version). God wants us, his children, to be dynamic, confident people, free to use the abilities and gifts he has given us.

## Multiple Causes

Why do so many people lack confidence? If you could visit the offices of professionally trained psychologists and counselors and ask them this question, they would give you very similar answers. They would tell you that they have counseled scores of people who have been lacking in self-confidence and that in nearly every instance, the negative feelings developed during the early years of life and continued through adolescence.

Let's take a closer look at some of the major causes for a lack of confidence. What experiences cause children to feel they are not competent to function independently and well in life?

## **Parent Influence**

The first "voice of confidence" comes to us from our parents. Mothers and fathers have a profound influence upon the way their children come to feel about themselves. Beginning with the first day of life, children need to be cared for and loved deeply for who they are. As a child grows up, loving parents will take pleasure in their baby's first steps, first words, and each new task mastered. They will let him know that they want him to succeed and that they believe he will. They will encourage her to try new things and to develop her God-given gifts and abilities. They will show a healthy sense of pride in endeavors and accomplishments. Parents will give the same love and confidence-building affirmations to the youngest child as they give to an older sibling.

Regardless of world conditions and a family's social and economic status, children who receive such love and affirmation almost certainly grow up having healthy, contented feelings about themselves. They will usually feel loved and significant, as well as confident. Consequently, they will have good feelings toward other people. Notice the beautiful cycle here: first, children feel loved, encouraged, and affirmed; then they feel good about themselves. In turn, they become adults who are sufficiently confident about reaching out to love and affirm others.

But not all children have such a positive emotional background. A father who had a strongly assertive and critical disposition raised Tom. He laid down the law from the time Tom could talk until he left home at age twenty. Tom's father never asked him for suggestions; he didn't want them. He was certain how everything should be done, and it was his job to rear Tom to have his same "good sense." He argued with Tom's opinions and never encouraged him to think for himself. Tom was criticized for nearly everything he did; his dad could always find a better way.

Tom's mother was a rather quiet woman who fit snugly into her husband's strong personality style. In fact, one reason she married him was that she felt insecure and was withdrawn herself. She had looked for a husband who would take charge and run matters with a strong hand. Needless to say, she was unable to help Tom develop a healthy sense of confidence and competence as he was growing up because she lacked these traits herself. Consequently, Tom reached adulthood feeling that he didn't have much to offer. He didn't trust himself or his thoughts, decisions, or abilities. He had terribly low self-esteem and lacked self-confidence.

Millions of children are raised in homes where similar dynamics take place on an hour-by-hour basis. One negative experience after another is fed into their mental and emotional computers until they are solidly programmed with uncertainty, indecisiveness, and lack of confidence.

The experiences that destroy a child's self-confidence are legion. Listen to parents correct their children in your local shopping center or listen to adults talk about their own childhood experiences. You will quickly realize how many boys and girls are raised in such a way that their God-given needs for feeling loved and competent are not adequately met.

Here are several of the most common confidence killers:

- Criticism
- Lack of encouragement
- Angry punishment and correction
- Overprotection

- Excessive parental anxiety
- Unfavorable comparison to siblings and friends
- Unrealistic or age-inappropriate expectations
- Lack of praise
- Excessive competition

Each of these leaves children doubting their own ability to become competent, successful people in school, work, and relationships.

## **Peer Influence**

Ordinarily, parents have much more influence, either negatively or positively, on their children than anyone else. This is because parents live with their children from the day they are born and because they provide their children's most important emotional attachments. But other voices also tell children they are, or are not, what they should be.

Peers can be a cause of low self-confidence. Middle school girls, for example, can be incredibly jealous, critical, and rejecting. Trying to find their own niche, they criticize, exclude, and mock classmates who are not wanted in their "inner circle."

Competition, whether it is about looks, friends, athletics, or grades, is universal. Every child has experiences of falling behind at times. But some children repeatedly seem to not quite make it. An average student may feel inferior when compared to the best students. So may a child who isn't as talented musically or athletically.

Belittling and comparisons such as *You aren't good enough* or *Others do better* (no matter how hard you try) may leave imprints on the pictures we hold of ourselves. Excessive criticism and condemnation can leave serious scars that cause us to feel incompetent and unable to measure up. These feelings can remain for a lifetime, tragically inhibiting or holding us back unless something happens to change them.

## **Teacher Influence**

Teachers may also deeply affect children. Many teachers are wonderful, helpful, respectful people who know both how to help children learn and how to help them feel good about themselves. But others, probably because of their own lack of positive feeling beliefs about themselves, tend to undermine their students' confidence.

Let's consider Steve. He was a shy, withdrawn child when he entered kindergarten at the age of five. His parents quarreled most of the time, and life was quite unbearable at home. Steve daydreamed at school, escaping to his "other world" because the real world in which he lived was so unpleasant and unfulfilling.

Unfortunately, Steve had a succession of teachers in the first few years of elementary school who frequently showed their displeasure with him, ridiculed him in front of other children, and embarrassed him to tears. Rebuking him with a critical tone they would say, "You can do better, Steve!" With condemnation rather than encouragement, judgment rather than a genuine interest in building him up, they questioned, "Why don't you work harder?" This continued day after day, year after year. By the time Steve was ten, he felt so weak, whipped, and useless that he completely gave up.

Occasional negative experiences with a teacher are not necessarily harmful, but repeated negative occurrences, coupled with a weak home situation, can be devastating to a sensitive, growing child.

## **Social Influence**

Our attitudes toward ourselves in childhood, including our sense of confidence, are not only influenced by our parents, peers, and teachers, but also by our circumstances. Circumstances such as a family's financial condition, the type of vocation or the cultural status of parents, and even the geographic location of the home can make lasting impressions on a child's outlook and impact feelings about self and fellow human beings.

Jill, for example, now twenty-five years old, has still not gotten over the rejection she experienced because she lived in a poor part of town and rarely had new clothes for school. She never felt that she fit in and never developed confidence in her social skills. Even though she is now a college-educated woman with poise and outstanding technical skills, inwardly she approaches each new social situation expecting not to measure up to others. While most observers wouldn't know it, inwardly Jill still feels like that awkward adolescent. Deep down she doesn't believe she will ever fit in and be accepted. She struggles with a serious lack of confidence socially.

After counseling with people over many years, we have seen that circumstances like Jill's do not automatically influence a child's feelings of confidence negatively. It is usually only when such social circumstances are combined with other family dynamics that they have a major, lasting influence. Millions of adults are raised in homes with meager financial resources, in an economically poor area of town, or belonging to minority groups that experience severe discrimination and mistreatment. Yet, their parents are loving, kind, and supportive. These parents enable their children to grow up feeling that they are loved, appreciated, talented, and even privileged in spite of the external circumstances. As a result, the basic emotional needs of the children are well met and they will reach adulthood feeling loved, valued, and competent.

## **Spiritual Influence**

Another factor that deeply affects children's developing understanding of themselves and their capabilities is the spiritual influence. The Bible teaches that people are made in the likeness of God. Each of us has a capacity for knowing God personally. We can view life through spiritual eyes. A child, like an adult, is a spiritual being.

These truths have the potential to deeply affect our feelings about the universe and world conditions, and, most of all, about ourselves. If, at an early age, children realize they are created, gifted, and loved by God, their entire life is impacted.

Without this God-centered outlook, children are at a disadvantage. They cannot explain the presence of evil in the world. They will not understand how the human race came to be on this planet. They will not realize that their Creator endows them. They will not have a solid reason for respecting all human life as being made by God.

In short, people are spiritual beings, living in a world God designed. But when they don't know this, they struggle to make sense of life and their place in it. This can bring confusion and leave many unanswered questions. It can work against an adequate self-image and a sense of how one fits into this realm called life.

By contrast, children who grow up knowing they are created, loved, and endowed by God with talents and abilities have a fabulous resource that can strengthen their personalities and their feelings about themselves. Their relationship with God and their knowledge of the Bible's teaching about them as persons provide a basis for an accurate estimate of their capacity to live as they were created to live. For example, the Bible says, "For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well" (Ps. 139:13-14).

However, some children, even though they grow up in Christian homes, will develop very distorted understandings of themselves and their relationships with God. Since our thoughts, feelings, and experiences involving God are impacted by our relationships with God's earthly representatives, particularly our parents, but

religious leaders as well, intellectual knowledge about God is not enough. Children may realize their parents do not practice what they preach. It is one thing to be *told* that God created you, loves you, and wants to use you in his kingdom; it's quite another to *experience* that love from God's earthly representatives. Children who are constantly criticized and beaten down at home by Christian parents will more likely believe their nonverbal messages than their verbal messages; the pastor's teachings about God-given talents may fall on deaf ears.

For example, Emma's Christian parents told her about God and took her to a church where she learned much about the Bible. But her parents were extremely demanding. Emma felt she could never quite live up to their expectations. At seventeen, she saw a psychologist for depression and use of illegal drugs. She talked about her relationship with God: "I believe in him, but I don't think I could ever please him," she said. Then she described her relationship with her dad in greater detail. "My dad makes plenty of money, but we aren't close. He is married to his work and too busy to spend time with me. And when he does, he is always telling me I should be doing better."

Emma had a cold relationship with her father—few expressions of love, no compliments, and no encouragement. Emma's heart cried out to be affirmed. She yearned for recognition of her abilities and achievements, but only felt a cavernous void. She felt she could never live up to her father's expectations, or to God's. Even though she knew in her head that God accepted her through Christ, she was unable to emotionally experience that acceptance or God's pleasure in her.

The world has far too many "Emmas". Personal experiences may not be exactly alike, but the results are much the same. Even though children may be raised in religious homes, their childhood relationships with parents can undercut the biblical message that every child is special and has God-given talents. This produces adults who are unsure of their identities, lack self-assurance and confidence, and often feel resentful of their parents and of God.

## **The Healing Process**

You may be saying, Yes, I do lack self-confidence. I don't have the self-assurance I would like. But what now? How can I overcome these feelings and turn them around?

Your first step: *Recognize the problem*. Because it is so painful to not like yourself, it is not a feeling easy to acknowledge. Most of us try to hide true feelings like this. We push our lack of confidence temporarily out of sight by becoming driven workaholics or over-conscientious students or domineering personalities. We use our successes or abilities to take charge in an attempt to quiet our inner doubts and fears. Some blame others; some just stop trying. The first step is to acknowledge your defensive avoidance and face the deep, rock bottom feelings about yourself.

The second step: *Look for the causes*. Since problems are always caused, you need to ask some questions. Where did my lack of confidence come from? What happened in my childhood to cause my lack of confidence? What dynamics were going on in my life, especially at home, to cause me to react the way I do today?

This step is important because it takes the problem out of the "mystery" or "theory" category into insight and understanding. Mysteries are hard to work on, and theory doesn't change our lives. But often, when we understand the causes for our struggles, we not only feel some relief, we also know what we need to work on and do. It may help to review the list of confidence killers listed above and check the ones you experienced growing up.

Step three: *Talk it over with a friend or counselor*. You may have a family member or a friend with whom you can share past experiences that have produced your lack of confident feelings. Sometimes adult siblings get together and reminisce about their growing up years. If you engage in this type of process, you may discover causes that you have never realized. This may stir up painful childhood feelings. You may be surprised by how you have absorbed the hurts of childhood—hurts that little by little, you excluded from your remembrance. As an

adult, you may think those hurts are in the past. Yet, they may be driving your personal dissatisfaction, perfectionism, domineering style, or other struggles at work and home.

As we talk our experiences through with a friend or counselor, we can release ourselves from their grip. Discussing how it felt to grow up, for example, with an incredibly talented sibling, an anxious or smothering mother, or a competitive and critical father often gives relief as well as insight into a lack of confidence. Slowly, but surely, feelings about our abilities and ourselves may begin to change and we can start trying out new skills. In time, we may feel more confident, spontaneous, and free.

The fourth step: *Build growth-enhancing friendships*. Clint had a serious lack of confidence when he graduated from college. Fortunately, however, he took a job with Bill, an employer who saw his latent abilities. Bill encouraged Clint, complimented him on his work, and kept giving him more responsibilities. As the months went by, Clint developed more and more confidence until today he is managing an entire division of a large corporation.

If you want to develop more confidence, surround yourself with at least a few friends who care about you and will be able to affirm your abilities and successes. The Bible says we are to “encourage one another and build each other up” (1 Thess. 5:11). Seek those who will be encouragers for you!

After recognizing your problem, getting it out where it can be dealt with, talking with someone about the sources of your difficulty, and developing encouraging friendships, it is time for the next step.

Step five: *Apply spiritual resources*. Begin by understanding and accepting your value in the sight of God. Your parents may have unintentionally or unknowingly put thousands of negative emotional bits and pieces into your mental and emotional bank account. But what they put in may have been based upon their own feelings and circumstances. For example, one client said, “My parents always said I would never amount to a hill of beans. It seems like they told me that ten times a day.” In a sense, this man’s parents programmed him to believe he would be a failure.

Now your job is to get “reprogrammed.” You need to get new, more accurate information into the marrow of your bones. You need to look for correct information from someone who has integrity in his or her own life, and will lovingly speak truth about you into your life. Friends and spouses help immensely, but there is only one perfect dispenser of information about you: God! And what does he say about you?

First, God says, “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness” (Gen. 1:26). You are created in God’s image – that’s as good as it gets! As one little boy said, “I’m me and I’m good ‘cause God don’t make junk!” When you think of yourself, realize that you were *fashioned by God himself*. Don’t minimize or look down upon God’s masterpiece. You are his creation, his finest creation. From now on, whenever you think about yourself, remember that God said you are very well fashioned and his crowning achievement.

But God not only created us. He also placed us on this planet to take care of it under his guidance. He put us in charge of everything on and around the earth, giving us monumental responsibilities. In a sweeping, authoritative statement, God declared, “Let us make mankind . . . so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground” (Gen. 1:26). He said that we, his creatures, are to also subdue the earth (v. 28). The satisfying conclusion: “God saw all that he had made, and it was very good” (v.31).

The reality is that God made us and endows us with talents and abilities. He wants and expects each of us to use our talents throughout our lives. Consequently, we should try never to minimize our competence or our abilities.

Accepting God's endowment can revolutionize your life. But to get it deep into your mind, you need to think about it, meditate on it, and talk to your friends about it. When you pray, thank God for creating and gifting you. As time goes on, you may come to believe it unreservedly and incorporate this truth into your feelings as well as into your knowledge.

A final step: *Put your new self-understanding into action.* Once you understand the source of your struggles and how wonderfully God has created and equipped you, step out of your comfort zone. Start trying some new things. Stretch yourself by speaking up where you have been hesitant before. Enroll in school again. Tackle a new project or task. It may be a bit scary in the beginning, but it's the way to really change. Start using more of the gifts God has given you. Be sure to build on your successes, not on your failures.

### **If You Need More Help**

A final word: Some problems are of such a nature, of such severity, or so long-standing that they need professional attention. Even though we intellectually know that God has created and gifted us, our deeply ingrained emotional doubts may rise up to tell us, "No!"

If confidence is a problem for you and self-doubts are deep, find the professional help you need. God has equipped many fine Christian therapists to help you work through your deep, innermost problems. Don't hesitate to seek their help. If you need assistance finding a psychologist or professional counselor in your area, you may contact the Narramore Christian Foundation for a referral.

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**Dr. Clyde M. Narramore** (1916 – 2015) was the founder of the Narramore Christian Foundation. He was a well-known radio and conference speaker, and the author of more than 20 books including *The Psychology of Counseling* and *The Way to Happiness*.

**Dr. Bruce Narramore** was the founding dean of the Rosemead School of Psychology, and served as President of the Narramore Christian Foundation for 13 years. He has authored and co-authored ten books including the best seller, *Help! I'm a Parent* and *The Integration of Psychology and Theology*.