Katty Kay and Claire Shipman’s experiences and interactions with some of the world’s most powerful women sparked their exploration into the concept of confidence. Both women are based in Washington, D.C., and specialize in politics and international affairs; Kay as anchor at BBC World News America, and Shipman as a correspondent for ABC News and Good Morning America.

They started the book project by considering a long list of questions about confidence, such as: Are men truly more confident than women? How do you define confidence? Do you have to be born with it, or can you develop it? And do we need it to be successful?

In their research, they interviewed scientists, neurologists, psychologists, performance and sports coaches, as well as women with all levels of confidence, from high to low. They talked to men in all walks of life, too. “Much of what we found is
relevant for both sexes,” they say. ”But there is a particular crisis for women.”

The authors believe that the root of this crisis is a lack of self-belief. This can be costly for women, because Shipman and Kay also found that confidence equates with success. “… there is evidence that confidence is more important than ability when it comes to getting ahead,” they say.

But there are plenty of ways to become more confident. “The newest research shows that we can literally change our brains in ways that affect our thoughts and behavior at any age,” state the authors. “With diligent effort, we can all choose to become more confident.”

In *The Confidence Code*, Shipman and Kay explore confidence from a wide range of perspectives: (1) why it’s not enough to be “good;” (2) why it’s important to do more, and think less; (3) what it means to be wired for confidence; (4)
why women tend to have less confidence; (5) new ways to nurture children to develop confidence; (6) ways to boost your confidence; (7) how to instill confidence in children, girls especially, by letting them struggle a little; and (8) how men and women demonstrate confidence differently.

We’ll look at each of these perspectives in turn.

**It’s Not Enough To Be Good**

Studies show that women are less confident than men. Women report higher levels of self-doubt, they ask for less in salary negotiations, and they initiate salary discussions far less often than men. Marilyn Davidson, professor at the Manchester Business School in England, surveys her students on what they expect to be earning five years after graduation. The men expect to earn 20% more than the women - meaning that “… women effectively believe they are 20 percent less
valuable than men believe they are,” say Shipman and Kay.

Women also tend to talk less in certain situations. A Princeton study showed that women spoke as much as 75% less when they were outnumbered by men. “The kicker is that a man in a room with mostly women talks just as much as he always does,” say the authors. Maybe that’s because men think differently about failure. “Most of the men we interviewed … say they simply spend less time thinking about the possible consequences of failure.”

While men often lean toward overconfidence, women tend to examine their failures in minute detail. Some male senior executives say they’ve seen female execs hesitate when key decisions need to be made - maybe due to a fear of failure, or desire that everything be perfect. But that second of hesitation can mean that your ideas
don’t get heard, or make you miss out on a promotion.

Do you need to have all the answers before you have the confidence to speak up? Cameron Anderson, a psychologist at the business school at the University of California, Berkeley, devised tests to compare the value of confidence vs. competence. Students were given a list of names of historical figures, some real, and others fake, and were asked to indicate the ones they knew. The students who indicated they knew the most fake names turned out to be the ones who had also achieved the highest social status in the class. So even though they were less competent, they were the most respected among their classmates, and were able to exert more influence.

Do More, Think Less
What exactly is confidence, anyway? When the authors started out, they believed it meant feeling good about yourself, and acting confident - speaking loudly and often, dominating conversations, and knowing that you’re always right.

They met with neuroscientist Adam Kepecs, who researches confidence in rats at Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory on Long Island. He explores “statistical confidence,” which is the degree of certainty about a choice that’s been made. Just like humans, rats possess varying degrees of confidence. Kepecs measures their responses in tests that assess how long they’ll wait for a drop of water, once they’ve evaluated the criteria that indicate where that drop is most likely to appear. For the rats, this statistical confidence isn’t about feeling good about themselves - it’s about survival.

Kepecs believes that confidence has two sides:
objective, and subjective. The objective side is a process of calculation, a “confidence tool” like the one that the rats use in improving their chances of success. The subjective side is all about feelings, the emotional confidence that we sometimes find hard to grasp. “Maybe confidence shouldn’t be so mysterious and glamorous and perversely aspirational,” say Kay and Shipman. “How refreshing to view it, at least in part, as a simple, concrete tool …”

The psychologists who specialize in the area of confidence use terms like “mastery,” “an attitude in how you approach the world,” or “a belief that you can accomplish the task you want to accomplish.” Mastery is important. It encompasses process and progress. “It’s about work, and learning to develop an appetite for challenge.” All of the hard work we put into mastering things results in confidence. And that gives us the confidence to try to master
new things.

According to Richard Petty, psychology professor at Ohio State: “Confidence is the stuff that puts thought into action.” The authors agree. They say we need to be able to go beyond the comfortable, and do things that are difficult. Optimism helps us visualize good outcomes, and resilience helps us keep going when things get tough. But confidence is what is needed to jumpstart the process.

Another experiment, by Zach Estes at the University of Milan, showed that when women were forced to answer all the questions on a test, even those they thought they did not know the answers to, they did just as well as the men - who were more likely to at least try to answer all of the questions.

“When women don’t act, when we hesitate because we aren’t sure … we hold ourselves back,” say Shipman and Kay. Under-confidence
leads to inaction, which leads to failure. Confidence is a tool, one that pushes us to take action.

Wired For Confidence

Is there a gene for confidence? Yes, say Shipman and Kay. It’s the serotonin transporter gene, called SLC6A4, and it regulates our serotonin levels. Serotonin impacts mood; drugs like Prozac boost serotonin levels, which helps people feel calmer and happier. Some of us have more efficient versions of the SLC6A4 gene than others - those with the less efficient version are more prone to anxiety and depression, and those with the most efficient version possess greater resilience - which is crucial for confidence.

Many scientists believe that the key personality traits - openness, conscientiousness, extraversion and agreeableness - are about 50 percent genetic.
They believe that confidence and optimism - elements of the key traits above - are 25 percent inherited. That’s a lot of pre-determination when it comes to confidence.

But there’s more at work beyond SLC6A4. “… confidence is influenced by a large number of genes, dozens or more, which create a messy stew of hormones and neural activity,” state the authors. But they stress one pivotal point: “… it’s not simply about whether we can do a task, but whether we assess ourselves to be capable of doing that task.”

Other neurotransmitters that play a role include dopamine and oxytocin. And the effectiveness of the genes that control amounts of these neurotransmitters in the brain also varies, from person to person.

Nurture plays a vital role in the development of confidence too. Experiments on rhesus monkeys
show that when anxious baby monkeys are raised by supportive mothers, they become confident. “A decent [monkey] mother produces a somewhat anxious adult, but a great mother can turn a baby genetically programmed to be at risk for anxiety into a healthy adult,” explain Shipman and Kay.

And other studies have found that when sensitive children are raised in a safe, supportive environment, they can excel beyond their sturdier peers.

Brain plasticity is another area with exciting implications for confidence. “… when we change our thinking and develop new mental habits, that effort creates physical changes in our brains,” say the authors. Confidence is a choice we can all make.

Meditation and cognitive behavior therapy are some of the ways that we can lay new neural pathways. “If we can permanently alter brain
makeup, then even those people born with less genetic confidence can develop permanent, solid confidence with the right training.”

Why Women Have Less Confidence

From their earliest days in school, girls are rewarded for being quiet and calm. “The result is that making mistakes, and taking risks, behavior critical for confidence building, is also behavior girls try to avoid,” say Kay and Shipman. Those rambunctious boys, on the other hand, are busy teasing and roughhousing - developing the resilience that they’ll need to be successful adults. “Professional success demands political savvy, a certain amount of scheming and jockeying, a flair for self-promotion and not letting a no stop you…. Whatever the reason, we haven’t been very good at mastering these skills, and that holds us back,” they say.
But sometimes women who behave in the ways that confident men do - freely sharing ideas, both good and bad ones; speaking up often; and offering advice to more senior staff - are disliked, or called “a bitch.” And “… the very fear of this kind of abuse is enough to make women pull too far back and become overly deferential.”

And what about appearance? Are attractive people more confident? There is evidence that women are judged on their appearance much more harshly than men. The professional impact of obesity, for example, is different for men and women. Obese women are, “… deemed less organized, less competent, and lacking in self-control,” say Shipman and Kay. Obese men, though, “… can be seen as powerful, savvy, competitive, and intelligent.” (This is known as the Tony Soprano effect.)

For many women, being liked is more important
than being respected. While studies show that likeability is important in the workplace, many women don’t like to be criticized, so they don’t put forward ideas - and when they are criticized, they spend a lot of time brooding about the criticism.

Psychologist Susan Nolen-Hoeksema believes that because women place more importance on emotional connections, they “ruminate,” or overthink, which can put them at higher risk of depression or anxiety. Women also tend to be perfectionists - not submitting work until it’s perfect, or not putting forth an idea until it’s fully researched.

The authors see this as encouraging, because many of the reasons women have less confidence are factors they can control, and therefore diminish.

What about testosterone and estrogen?

Testosterone is linked to competitive instinct and
risk taking, and men have about 10 times more testosterone circulating through their systems than women. It’s also linked with having a reduced ability to cooperate and connect. Estrogen, on the other hand, is linked to social skills, bonding and connection. So there may be underlying reasons why women behave and think in the ways they do. And these natural instincts can work in women’s favor. While the structure of the female brain might encourage the avoidance of conflict and risk, it also enables women to process large amounts of data quickly, make good judgments, minimize bad impulses, be empathetic toward others, achieve consensus and get things done right.

The New Nurture: Raising Confident Children

What’s the best way to foster confidence in our children? “Much of what parents have been told
to emphasize for the past twenty years, based on the self-esteem movement, is misguided, and it’s generated a glut of flimsy self-esteem and flimsy confidence,” declare the authors. Parents today often dole out an excess of praise, and give kids a minimum of responsibility.

Children need to experience trial and error to gain confidence. Nansook Park, a psychologist at the University of Michigan, calls it “graduated exposure. Don’t just drop them in the middle of the lake and hope they swim to shore. They need to be introduced to risk taking carefully, because failure is a key ingredient in building resilience.

And we need to be leery of becoming dependent on praise. “It turns out that flattery and praise are as lethal as sugar,” say the authors. Confidence that’s founded on praise from others is fragile, and we’re also less likely to take risks if we think it will meet with disapproval.
They stress that confidence is an active choice: “When we say confidence is a choice, we mean it’s a choice we can make to act, or to do, or to decide.” Women have to get over their fear of failing, and just act - and then they’ll succeed more often than they think. In most cases, it’s not a lack of competence that holds women back, but a skewed perspective on their abilities. “When we give in to negative beliefs about what we can and can’t do, we don’t seize the challenges we could easily handle and learn from,” they say. But it is possible to change our own perceptions, and recalibrate our confidence levels.

**How To Boost Your Confidence**

*Try out lots of low-risk ideas.* There are plenty of ways to start boosting your confidence. One idea is based on the Silicon Valley mantra of “fail fast, fail often.” What this means, in confidence-
boosting terms, is to try a number of smaller, low-risk ideas out, and see which, if any, succeed. When you have less invested in something, it’s not as devastating if it fails. “If we get busy failing in little ways, we will stop ruminating on our possible shortcomings and imagining worst-case scenarios,” declare Shipman and Kay.

**Take action.** We also need to be prepared to leave our comfort zone. Any action is better than none. Start small, and take progressive steps to achieve your goal. If you’re not ready to ask your boss for a raise, practice with a friend. If you have difficulty networking in a crowd, offer to pass food, or get drinks at an event, so you have something to do and a natural way of starting conversations. Increase your exposure gradually, and you’ll work your way up to being comfortable in these types of situations.

And if you fail, you can learn from your mistakes.
No matter what happens, you’ll survive, and you’ll get a confidence boost just from having taken that risk.

**Don’t overthink it.** Women tend to ruminate, and brood over their perceived failures or missteps. Break these negative feedback loops by focusing on things that went well, rather than things that went badly. At the end of each day, mentally list three of that day’s successes. This type of exercise rewires the brain and breaks the negative feedback loop.

*Reframe your negative thoughts.* Don’t let negative thoughts overwhelm you. Instead, reframe each as a positive. Change “Why can’t I ever get everything done?” to “I actually manage to accomplish a lot.” This reframing will eventually become a habit.

**Don’t focus so much on yourself.** “… it’s all too easy to think that whatever you have done -
whether it’s a triumph or a failure - is the focus of everyone else’s attention. It isn’t,” say the authors. And work problems aren’t about you, they’re about work - so keep your focus on getting the job done, and realize that critiques about the process or the outputs aren’t personal.

**Don’t be self-deprecating.** Women tend to downplay their abilities, or contributions. But too much self-deprecation sounds like even you don’t have faith in your abilities. Just say a simple thank you when you receive accolades, and move on.

**Learn how to speak up.** Speaking in public with assurance is an acquired skill. Learn it! And avoid “upspeak” at all costs. (Some women express statements as questions - “I think we should go with the online marketing strategy?”) This way of speaking is really a bid for reassurance and an attempt to deflect criticism - the opposite of sounding confident. Luckily, this one’s an easy fix,
it just requires a bit of self-monitoring.

How To Instill Confidence In Your Children - Especially Daughters

“Teaching a child to accept and even embrace struggle, rather than shy away from it, is a crucial step along the path toward instilling confidence,” state Shipman and Kay. When we fix our children’s problems too quickly, they never learn how to cope with challenge and adversity. Parents should focus on encouragement, rather than praise. Acknowledge the effort, more than the result. “You worked really hard on that project,” instead of “Good job!”

*It isn’t about you.* Many of us live vicariously through our children. We feel their successes, and their failures, very deeply. But you don’t want to be the parent screaming at your kid’s referee. Instead, set an example for your children. Show
them how you address life’s challenges, with hard work and confidence.

**Encourage daughters to be “less good.”** By rewarding “good” behavior (being well-behaved and quiet), we teach girls to not speak up, to not be demanding. It’s a very hard habit for girls to break. So don’t be too quick to reprimand a girl for throwing a tantrum. And don’t tell her that she’s disappointing you by not behaving like a “good girl.” Don’t overpraise her when she’s good, either. “Because if you constantly reward your daughter for helping out, keeping quiet, or being tidy, you’re instilling a psychological addiction to goodness and the praise that follows it,” say the authors.

**Put your kids in sports.** This is a great way for kids to learn about working as a team, winning and losing, and the importance of mastering skills.
How Confidence Looks In Women Compared To Men

The way that men and women express confidence, in their style and behavior, can be quite different. “Male workplace bravado … is still the gold standard,” according to Shipman and Kay. But you don’t have to be a jerk to be confident. A wider view of confidence is beginning to emerge.

A study completed recently at Stanford Business School, which followed business school grads for eight years, found that the women who possessed both male and female qualities outperformed everyone else, including the men. The male qualities were defined as confidence, assertiveness and aggression. The female qualities were humility, persuasion, process orientation, and collaboration. Those lucky females with a mix of the male and female characteristics were promoted 1.5 times as often as most of the
men, and 1.5 times as often as women with just “feminine” qualities.

The Confidence Code

Shipman and Kay offer a simplified code for achieving confidence: “Think Less. Take Action. Be Authentic.” “The experience of it can be addictive,” they say. “And its greatest rewards go well beyond workplace achievements or outward success.”