



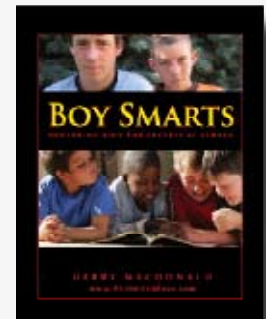
ACT AS IF TO DEVELOP INNER CONFIDENCE

Dear Barry:

I wish my 12 year old son could see himself in the positive light that I do. Lately, he has been struggling with his confidence and has been spending more time alone. I guess he is like so many awkward boys his age who try so hard to appear independent and in control on the outside, but feel vulnerable and inadequate on the inside. A couple of weeks ago he really took me off guard, saying, "I am crap. I am such a loser. I hate myself." We sat down together and discussed how the challenges of puberty can affect mood and thinking. We then read your recent article about positive thinking and launched into a good discussion about overcoming mind-traps.

At the *Boy Smarts* workshop you said that children need to learn ways to manage runaway negative thinking and you described a strategy for older boys called "Acting As If." I'd appreciate if you would explain the idea in more detail, as my son is eager to learn ways to manage negativity and grow his confidence.

Rebecca - Surrey, BC



Dear Rebecca,

The trials of puberty can stir feelings of inadequacy and trigger negative self-talk in many boys. Popular media teaches boys a code of tough masculinity that expects boys to spring into action at the drop of a dime: ready to fight, have sex, or hurl oneself into adventure. How boys interpret these cultural messages about manhood during puberty depends on their life circumstances, personal resiliency, and their network of support.

An obvious starting point is for boys to find someone they can trust enough to discuss disturbing thoughts and feelings, but this process of locating a confidante can be nerve-racking for pubescent boys. A British Columbian provincial report on early adolescent health and wellness reports that 60% of girls believe that most of the time they have a friend who helps them when they are having a hard time, whereas only 27% of Grade Seven boys believe this. When boys ruminate alone about confusing and negative gender messages, they may get trapped in a loop of negative self-talk, their confidence spiraling downward—unless, until, they learn to redirect their thoughts.

Brain research into neuroplasticity demonstrates that we develop and change in response to what we think. It's possible for all of us to learn strategies of mindful self-awareness to influence our brains so that we feel more relaxed, confident, and successful. Choosing to focus on constructive thoughts helps us feel better, and this improvement in mood happens even if we think initially that we are kidding ourselves—that these more positive thoughts are fictional, not the grey stuff of real life.

Yet there is nothing particularly real or indisputably true about negative thoughts, even ones that have become a habit, that we have used to brace ourselves against disappointment or hurt. Negative thoughts themselves can even become a self-fulfilling prophecy, as we unconsciously scan the environment, looking for the negative expectations to be fulfilled, perhaps even feeling a glum satisfaction when they are. Negative thoughts can set up an automatic hum in the background of our minds. Why not learn to change the channel?



Consider for a moment our different feelings when we assume someone really likes us, or when we assume that a person is merely tolerating our company. Why not choose thoughts that make us feel better rather than those that drag us down? Choosing a positive thought over a more discouraging thought may sound simple, but first we must learn to check inside, to tease out the feel-good thoughts from the ones that don't feel good. And here's the rub. Rather than discarding the feel-good thoughts as far-fetched and implausible, if not downright delusional—we can make a conscious choice to dwell on these positive thoughts, and practice thinking them as if they were true.

While you may have heard about the power of repeating positive affirmations over and over, this choice to practice what I am calling feel-good thoughts is different. It requires a moment of mindful self-awareness, a check-in with your mind and body, a noticing: is this thought I am having here serving me? What happens when I change this thought, recast it, maybe even say the opposite?

Since thoughts that circle in our minds have power, but no tangible reality, why not use them in the service of our own health?

It has even been discovered that not only can our minds change our mood, but that our body language has the power to change our minds and mood as well. In the popular *Ted Talk*, “*Your Body Language Shapes Who You Are*”, Amy Cuddy discusses how when we hold



our bodies in an upright confident posture, our moods change, along with our hormones, helping us to be more assertive, confident, and optimistic. People who practice the mountain pose in yoga may recall how they feel when they stand tall, with their shoulders back and down, their chests forward, not collapsed, and their feet firmly, evenly rooted.

Amy Cuddy explains that high-power alpha males in primate hierarchies have high testosterone and lower cortisol (the stress hormone), and that powerful and effective men and women also have high testosterone and low cortisol as well. The confidence that we invite into our minds and bodies has a real physiological effect.


The idea of acting a part until you become it is not new: Fake it till you make it, we hear in many circles. In 1884 William James, the American philosopher, claimed that if you act as though you are a particular type of person, that you will become that person. Believing that tiny changes in behaviour significantly affect thoughts and feelings, James said, "Act as if what you do makes a difference. It does." In other words, confidence is a habit that can be developed by acting as if you already had the confidence you desire to have.


Decades of subsequent research confirm James' insight. Smiling makes us feel happier in an instant. Crossing our arms in concentration may double the time that we persevere with a difficult task. Squeezing our hands into a fist boosts our willpower by 40%. Ask procrastinators to spend just three minutes doing what ever they are trying to avoid and act as if they are interested in the task, and they will more likely complete the task. When seniors think and behave as if they are younger than their biological age, their memories improve and their reaction times become faster.

The *Acting As If* strategy I often comment on in *Boy Smarts Action Talk* workshops is a powerful way to focus and harness personal thinking, overcome mind-traps, and move toward achieving personal success. Even when we can't see ourselves ever escaping a tunnel of negativity, we can shift and nudge ourselves toward success by acting as if our positive thoughts and feelings are true. Many professionals use the Acting As If strategy when they have to cope with taxing or frightening situations. Medical professionals, police officers, and other front line workers learn to appear very calm in dangerous or unpredictable situations; no doubt their appearance of confidence helps to steady them. Similarly, teachers faced with a difficult class or parents who are trying to manage a teenager's meltdown may act in a calm, measured way that helps to quiet their own inward fluttering.

Here's how to try *Acting As If*:

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Step 1: Identify the Mind-trap

Identify the mind-trap thought that is blocking your success. We all have a silent, internal conversation with ourselves, about 50,000 automatic thoughts a day! When self-talk is mainly negative, it becomes a mind-trap. Think about a time you were struggling and not feeling good about yourself. What negative thoughts did you have about yourself in that moment?

Here are some common mind-trap thoughts:

- + "I am not good enough"
- + "I am ugly"
- + "I am a stupid"
- + "I am a failure"
- + "I am weak"
- + "I'm not worth it"

Step 2: Dispute the Mind-trap

Learning to dispute negative mind-traps might take time and practice, but is worth the effort. Whenever you become aware you're feeling angry, anxious or upset, use these feelings as your signal to stop and reflect on your thoughts. Consider the accuracy of negative thoughts with some challenging questions:

- + Am I making decisions based on my negative feelings? ("I feel like an idiot, so I must be one.")
- + Am I jumping to negative conclusions?
- + Am I assuming the worst, or that people are reacting negatively to me?
- + Am I over generalizing and viewing a negative event as a never-ending pattern of defeat?

Step 3: Identify a Positive Thought

Identify the positive thought that is exactly opposite of the mind-trap. Recognizing that your current way of thinking might be self-defeating—it doesn't make you feel good or help you to get what you want—but can also motivate you to look at things from a different perspective. Changing the way you think about things may not be easy at first, but with time and practice, you will get better. Ask yourself: Are there any other ways that I could look at this situation? If I were being positive, what might I say about this situation? Consider these possibilities:

- + "I can totally make it through this exam"
- + "I look awesome in these clothes"
- + "I'm having fun and enjoying my time with others"
- + "I like who I am and I feel good about myself"
- + "I can trust myself to make good decisions"
- + "I can figure this out"

A longer list of positive thinking statements is included at the end of this article.

Step 4: Consider Your Positive Vision

Consider what life would be like if the positive thought were true. Quiet your mind by closing your eyes and taking three long and slow deep breaths, each in breath followed by a low, slow exhalation.

- a) If you are anticipating a challenging scenario or prospect, visualize what you would like to see happening.
- b) Listen to some appreciative things that others would say about you and what you would say about yourself.
- c) Experience what your body would feel.

List what would happen in very specific ways when you become this new thought: from making easy, friendly eye contact, to smiling, initiating conversations, being animated, and feeling relaxed.

Step 5: Create a Movie of Your Positive Vision

In your mind's eye create a movie showing the behaviours that go with this positive scene or image. Close your eyes and watch a 1 minute movie where you are acting, thinking, and feeling as if the new behaviours, feelings, and thoughts are true. Pay attention to your sensory experiences. Have fun with this movie by exaggerating your positive feelings as if you are tremendously confident and fantastically capable.





Step 6: Act As If

Practice acting as if the positive thinking and positive behaviours are absolutely true. Take a few seconds every hour or so for several days checking in with yourself. Are you remembering to act as if you have confidence? As if you know that good things will come to you? As if people like you? If you notice that you have fallen into old self-defeating patterns, don't berate yourself—just come back to the thought: Hey, I can decide whether I want to keep carrying this thought—or choose a lighter one.

As you move through your day at home, at school, and in the community, one way to check in with yourself is to notice your body posture. It will reflect your positive thinking, and your positive thinking reflects your body posture. Smile inwardly, knowing that only you can design the perfect script for you, and only you are the best personal trainer for your mind.

When a negative thought sneaks in to sabotage your experience, simply notice it—after all, it was a trusted companion for a long time. You might even smile at it, and continue acting as if your positive thought is true. Keep focussed on how your step-by-step actions and thinking strengthen your positive thinking, your positive feeling, and your positive behaviour.

Cultivating Positivity is Actually a Generous Thing to Do

Notice that when you *act as if* your positive thinking is true that those around you also seem more relaxed and confident too. Understand that by acting and thinking in positive ways that you are contributing to the well-being of others by being happy and confident yourself.

Becoming More Resilient

As you become a more resilient person, you will get better at facing hard problems with strength and resolve. Sometimes you will be disappointed or hurt by the actions of others. Rather than feeling defeated you will find a way to carry on and overcome adversity. As you practice and become proficient at *Acting As If* you will learn to smile at the advice offered by Christopher Robin in *Winnie the Pooh*: “Always remember you are braver than you believe, stronger than you seem, and smarter than you think.” • • •

Barry MacDonald
MentoringBoys.com



The challenges associated with being male vary from community to community. I welcome the opportunity to meet you at an upcoming workshop or conference to discuss the needs of your boys.

All material provided by Barry MacDonald is for educational purposes only. Direct consultation of a qualified mental health provider should be sought for specific questions or problems.

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Join me at an upcoming workshop in Surrey/Langley, and Victoria

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More Examples of Positive Thinking

Here are more examples of positive thinking that you can read daily to yourself to encourage you to practice as you grow your own:

- + Despite my ups and downs, I like who I am and I feel good about myself.
- + My life is as unique as my fingerprints. I have my own gifts that I will discover. In some ways I may look and act and even sound like some others, but there never was another person like me before, and there will never be another me again.
- + I would rather be me than anyone else in the world. I like how I feel and I like how I think and I like how I do things.
- + I have many amazing qualities. I have talents that I don't fully understand yet. I am discovering new capacities in myself all the time.
- + I am positive. I am confident. I am full of life. I radiate good things. I'm glad to be alive.
- + I am intelligent. My mind is quick and alert and clever and fun. I think good thoughts, and my mind makes things work right for me.
- + I have a lot of energy and enthusiasm and vitality. I am exciting and I really enjoy being me.
- + I like to be around other people and other people like to be around me. People like to hear what I have to say and know what I have to think.
- + I smile a lot. I am happy on the inside and I am happy on the outside. I am interested in many things. I love to learn and be around people.

Extension Activity: Upbeat Quotations to Choose for Reflection

As you strengthen your confidence, consider taking time to learn from powerful men and women you have looked up to in your own life, and also from those who have gone before you, and whom you can call on as models. Read the following famous quotes of people who have struggled with mind-traps and have overcome them in a great variety of ways. Discuss these quotations with another person to inspire you even more to become the awesome person that you are.

"Optimism is the faith that leads to achievement. Nothing can be done without hope and confidence."

—*Helen Keller*

"To be yourself in a world that is constantly trying to make you something else is the greatest accomplishment."

—*Ralph Waldo Emerson*

"It takes courage to grow up and become who you really are."

—*e. e. cummings*

"Look up at the stars and not down at your feet. Try to make sense of what you see, and wonder about what makes the universe exist. Be curious."

—*Stephen Hawking*

"The biggest risk is not taking any risk... In a world that's changing really quickly, the only strategy that is guaranteed to fail is not taking risks."

—*Mark Zuckerberg*

"You must expect great things of yourself before you can do them."

—*Michael Jordan*

"When you're different, sometimes you don't see the millions of people who accept you for what you are. All you notice is the person who doesn't."

—*Jodi Picoult*

"Your time is limited, so don't waste it living someone else's life."

—*Steve Jobs*

"Don't let the fear of striking out hold you back."

—*Babe Ruth*

"Identify your problems but give your power and energy to solutions."

—*Tony Robbins*