

THE BIG IDEAS

Confidence, Defined

Intense certainty.

Confidence Bank Account

How to build it.

Mental Fortress

How to build it.

Your Top 10

Feast on your Hero Bars.

Affirmations

Personal, positive, present.

Perfectionism

The right amount of spice.

"Victorious warriors win first and then go to war, while defeated warriors go to war first and then seek to win."

~ Sun Tzu, The Art of War

The Confident Mind

A Battle-Tested Guide to Unshakable Performance

BY DR. NATE ZINSSER · CUSTOM HOUSE © 2022 · 352 PAGES

"Confidence makes one's peak performance *possible*, and that's why it's of such great importance to anyone who has to step into an arena and deliver their best. ...

I'm not just referring to those relatively few individuals who compete in college, professional, or Olympic sports: I'm describing anyone who is striving to achieve success in any field. No matter what 'game' you happen to play, you perform best in that state of certainty where you no longer think about how you will hit the ball, throw the ball, or make the move/speech/proposal or about what the implications of winning and losing might be. All those thoughts interfere with (1) your perception of the situation (like the flight of the ball or the movement of an opponent or the understanding of a customer), (2) your automatic recall from your stored experiences of the proper response, and (3) your unconscious instructions to your muscles and joints about how precisely to contract and relax in sequence to make the right move or the right comment at the right instant. Whether your game involves instantly reading a hostile defense and delivering a football to the right spot, returning an opponent's serve, or delivering a sales pitch to a roomful of skeptical prospects, you perform more consistently at the top of your ability when you are so certain about yourself, so confident in yourself, that your stream-of-consciousness thoughts slow down to the barest minimum. ...

The real question is about you. Are you as good at your job, your profession, your passion, as you could be? Would your life be different if you won your own First Victory and had Eli [Manning]'s level of confidence (not his arm, not his football IQ, just his confidence)? I'm pretty sure your answer is yes. In the pages ahead, you will find what you're looking for."

~ Dr. Nate Zinsser from *The Confident Mind*

I got this book while I was reading [Alden Mills](#)'s great book, [Unstoppable Mindset](#).

Alden referenced Dr. Zinsser and wisdom from this book a bunch of times so, midway through reading his book, I Amazoned this one. Thanks to the miracle that is our modern world, the book arrived the following evening. I started it the next morning and finished it that day.

It's FANTASTIC. In fact, I think it's now at least tied for first as THE best mental toughness book I've ever read. The first three chapters in particular are MIND-BOGGLINGLY (and life-changingly) good. (Get a copy of the book [here](#).)

As per the inside back flap of the book, Dr. Nate Zinsser is a "renowned performance psychology expert who has taught three generations of soldiers, athletes, and executives to master the art of confidence and mental toughness."

For over three decades, Dr. Zinsser was the director of the Performance Psychology Program at the United States Military Academy at West Point.

" Please understand this: success in any field—be it sports, the arts, business, science, and certainly the military—requires both confidence AND competence."

~ Dr. Nate Zinsser

He's also worked with world-class performers including two-time Super Bowl MVP Eli Manning, as well as many Olympic and NCAA champions.

As per the inside front flap: "Dr. Zinsser has come to understand that one single trait above all others makes peak performance possible: confidence, or the belief in oneself. ... You perform best when you are so certain of your abilities that your flow of fear, doubts, and confusion slows to the barest minimum. ... Confidence is a skill that can be taught, improved, and applied by anyone to enhance nearly every aspect of our lives and careers."

The book is PACKED with Big Ideas. I'm excited to share some favorites so let's jump straight in!

CONFIDENCE, DEFINED

"So my operating definition of confidence (one that will actually help you perform well), is this: a sense of certainty about your ability, which allows you to bypass conscious thought and execute unconsciously.

Break it down with me:

1. a sense of certainty—that feeling of having complete faith...
2. about your ability—that you can do something or that you know something...
3. which allows you to bypass conscious thought—so well you don't have to think about it...
4. and execute unconsciously—so you perform it automatically and instinctively.

Confidence is that feeling that you can do something (or that you know something) so well you don't have to think about how to do it when you're doing it. That skill or knowledge is in you, it's part of you, and it will come out when needed if you let it."

That's from the Introduction: "What Confidence Is and Isn't."

Want Dr. Zinsser's definition of confidence? There it is.

I repeat: Confidence is "a sense of certainty about your ability, which allows you to bypass conscious thought and execute unconsciously."

As we've discussed MANY times, etymologically, the word *confidence* comes from the ancient Latin word *confidere* which means "to have full or INTENSE trust."

In other words: to have CERTAINTY.

If you look up the word CONFIDENCE in a thesaurus, you'll find TRUST as the #1 synonym.

Look up TRUST in a thesaurus and you'll see CONFIDENCE as the #1 synonym (followed by, for the record: belief, faith, freedom from suspicion/doubt, sureness, certainty, certitude, assurance, conviction, credence, reliance).

Dr. Zinsser's primary point throughout the book is the fact that you will ONLY have a shot at performing at your ABSOLUTE BEST *if* (important qualifier!) you are able to turn off the voice of doubt. You do this by learning how to cultivate the INTENSE TRUST/CERTAINTY that you have what it takes to dominate. Of course, the book is all about helping us do precisely that.

P.S. Right before that definition, Dr. Z references [Sian Beilock](#), who wrote the book *Choke*—which is, as the title suggests, all about the things that get in the way of you performing at your best.

As Dr. Zinsser says: "Real confidence, then, the kind you'll need to be at your best when the heat's on and the consequences matter, is the absence of all that mental chatter and discursive analytical thought."

How do we turn off that mental chatter? We TRUST ourselves—certain that we have what it takes to dominate as we let it rip. Now it's time to look at HOW we build that level of confidence.

" Confidence is a quality that you can develop the same way you develop any other skill, ability, or competency—through practice."

~ Dr. Nate Zinsser

" No one, not the mentally toughest, most confident individual on the planet, is immune to the occasional trip around the sewer cycle. What matters, then, is (1) how often and how frequently you're on which cycle [the sewer cycle vs. the success cycle] and (2) which cycle you're on when it's time to perform."

~ Dr. Nate Zinsser

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL BANK ACCOUNT OF CONFIDENCE

"Put bluntly, it doesn't matter how much 'failure' you've experienced if you decide to respond to it constructively. And sometimes maybe 'responding to it constructively' means you ignore it altogether."

~ Dr. Nate Zinsser

"It's no stretch then, to think of your confidence, that sense of certainty you have about yourself and your abilities, as the sum total of all your thoughts about yourself and your abilities. In the world of human performance, your confidence regarding your sport, or game, or profession is the sum total of all your thoughts about that sport, or game, or profession. ...

But this total isn't a static, once-and-for-all tally. Instead, it changes constantly, as each and every new thought and new memory is added to it, making it a 'running total,' a momentary sum of everything that you've thought about yourself and your abilities, a sum that is always changing depending on (1) how you are thinking at any time, (2) which aspects of your experience you are choosing to focus and linger on at any moment, and (3) how much emotion you invest in which particular thoughts and which particular memories. In that way, human confidence is very much a psychological 'bank account,' a repository of your thoughts about yourself and what is happening in your life.

Just as the balance of any bank account at the end of the day depends upon how much is either deposited into it or withdrawn from it, the psychological bank account of confidence also rises and falls depending on how you are thinking in any given moment. 'Deposit' into that bank account memories of past successes, memories of progress or improvement, and thoughts about future improvements and accomplishments, and the 'balance' grows. 'Withdraw' from that account by replaying past setbacks and difficulties, or by fixating on possible future setbacks and difficulties, and the 'balance' shrinks. Gaining confidence, protecting confidence, and performing with confidence—winning that First Victory—is all about managing your psychological bank account."

That's also from the Introduction on "What Confidence Is and Isn't."

Your PSYCHOLOGICAL BANK ACCOUNT OF CONFIDENCE.

Building THAT is, essentially, what this book is ALL about and HOW we create "a sense of certainty about your ability, which allows you to bypass conscious thought and execute unconsciously."

Dr. Z tells us that there are THREE ways to build our psychological bank account of confidence.

- #1: *Filtering Your Past for Valuable Deposits.*
- #2: *Constructive Thinking in the Present.*
- #3: *Envisioning Your Ideal Future Self.*

Each of those gets its own chapter.

The exercises in them are life-changing.

We'll explore a few of my favorite practices in a moment.

"Confidence has relatively little to do with what actually happens to you, and pretty much everything to do with how you think about what happens to you."

~ Dr. Nate Zinsser

For now, know this: "Once you understand that every thought and every memory you have about your sport or your profession is affecting your ongoing sense of certainty, you can decide to either take command of how you think or give this command over to the ups and downs, the highs and lows of life. Taking this command over the input into your personal mental bank account will create for yourself an advantage over all those who don't. The ability to do this—to selectively interpret your personal experience so that you mentally retain and benefit from experiences of success, progress, and effort, while simultaneously mentally releasing or restructuring experiences of setbacks and difficulties is in all of us. It is the primary mental skill upon which the First Victory is won."

P.S. One more thing I want to mention before we move on. Dr. Z uses the phrase "First Victory" OVER and OVER and OVER again throughout the book. It's from Sun Tzu.

Know this: The VERY FIRST quote in the book AND THE VERY LAST QUOTE in the book is:
“Victorious warriors win first and then go to war, while defeated warriors go to war first and then seek to win.”

*“You never know how much
you truly have in your ‘tank’
until you go out and empty
it.”*

~ Dr. Nate Zinsser

YOUR MENTAL FORTRESS

“You can armor yourself against any unexpected turn of events and also against all the known and expected difficulties of life by building for yourself a personal mental fortress, a guaranteed foolproof bank that holds your personal confidence account.

How do you build that bank? You start with some strong foundations, and naturally, because this is a mental bank account, your foundations are mental too. There are four mental pillars that we begin with, four factors that affect all human performance. Once you accept them, you’ll see the pursuit of excellence a lot more clearly, and you’ll have the peace of mind that will help you build a lasting structure.

Maybe you’ve seen the well-known ‘Serenity Prayer.’

*God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,
Courage to change the things I can,
And wisdom to know the difference.*

I like that word serenity. It suggests a certain level of inner peace, a certain level of mental calmness, a stable foundation from which growth and development can happen. For the purpose of confidence, for winning the First Victory, that serenity is the foundation of the fortress that houses your mental bank account. And you establish that foundation of serenity by accepting four realities of human performance that you cannot change. These four pillars are (1) the mind-body connection, (2) human imperfection, (3) the action of the autonomic nervous system, and (4) the delayed returns of continued practice. We can choose to ignore and resist these concrete realities of our human existence, or we can choose to acknowledge them and work with them. The former path leads to stagnation and mediocrity, and the latter path to growth and success. The choice is yours.”

That’s from Chapter #1: “Accepting What You Cannot Change.”

A couple things to note here...

First, as I read the line about “building for yourself a personal mental fortress,” I IMMEDIATELY thought about Marcus Aurelius and wrote down “Inner Citadel.”

The great Stoic scholar, [Pierre Hadot](#) wrote a book called [The Inner Citadel](#). That’s the name he gave to that mindset of absolute security that [Marcus Aurelius](#) wrote about in his [Meditations](#).

As Hadot says, when we connect with our inner daimon and follow its lead, we “experience a feeling of absolute security. From now on, it feels, nothing can invade or disturb it. It is like a cliff against which the crashing surf breaks constantly, while it remains standing unmovably as the waves come, bubbling, to die at its feet.”

Then, as I read the Serenity Prayer, I reminded myself that THAT prayer is inspired by Stoicism. In fact, it’s the most poetic summation of Stoic philosophy I can imagine.

If you haven’t memorized that prayer yet, I HIGHLY recommend you do. Here it is again...

*“God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,
Courage to change the things I can,
And wisdom to know the difference.”*

Note: Whenever I want to memorize a quote like that, I write it down then memorize one line at a time—repeating it silently until I get it right. Then I do more reps until I can’t get it wrong.

*“Cultivating this inner sense
of certainty and bringing it out
when the game is on the line
works. It’s not a 100 percent
guarantee of success at every
turn, but it always gives you
your best chance.”*

~ Dr. Nate Zinsser

"Vividly picturing yourself acting in a desired fashion and accomplishing desired achievements, the science tells us, alters your self-image, that dominant opinion you have of yourself."

~ Dr. Nate Zinsser

YOUR TOP TEN

"For all of you who grew up believing that you should remember your mistakes and imperfections as a way to achieve success, these exercises represent a big change in your thinking habits. How well are those current thinking habits working for you? Are you gaining confidence every day no matter what happens to you by thinking that way? Or to paraphrase Bob Rotella from his book *Your 15th Club*, 'Is your present way of thinking consistent with the level of success you'd like to have? Does it help you find out how good you could be? And do you dare to change it?' Let's take that dare! Start managing your memories and depositing as much 'money' as possible into your mental bank account."

That's from the chapter on "Building Your Bank Account #1" in which Dr. Z walks us through how to make our PAST a goldmine of positive memories.

My favorite exercise from this chapter is called "Your Top Ten."

As Dr. Z says, this exercise is "about bringing the ten most-encouraging, most-energizing memories out of the dark recesses of your mind and polishing those jewels of thought so they radiate their brilliance back at you."

Here's the quick take... Bust out a piece of paper. Put your name at the top. Write down your Top Ten list of things you're MOST PROUD OF.

After you've polished those jewels (!), put your NEXT BIG GOAL on the bottom of the page and *see* how your prior successes are fuel for and point to your future successes.

Then put that collection of Hero Bars somewhere you can see it all day every day.

I had fun doing this. Then I had even more fun doing it with Emerson.

If you feel so inspired... DO THAT EXERCISE NOW!!!

If you *don't* feel so inspired... DEFINITELY DO THAT EXERCISE NOW!!!

P.S. [Bob Rotella](#) was Dr. Z's mentor when he was getting his PhD at the University of Virginia. Check out our Notes on Rotella's [How Champions Think](#) and [Golf Is Not a Game of Perfect](#).

AFFIRMATIONS

"Finish out your day by writing each of the three affirmations you have composed in a notebook or journal at least three times each. Anyone who is serious about winning their First Victory can devote five minutes before retiring to this practice. As you write each of your affirmations, let them create a strong internal feeling. If you are affirming a skill or action ('My quick feet match my opponent'), feel yourself doing it. If you are affirming an outcome ('I am the 2020 Sales Professional of the Year'), feel the sense of accomplishment that outcome would bring. Making the last thoughts of your day personal, positive, and powerful gives the subconscious parts of your mind useful material to process while you are sleeping, without interference from your conscious mind. You might even find that ending your day with these good feelings promotes a more peaceful sleep."

"In the journey of one thousand miles, nine hundred and ninety-nine miles is only halfway."

~ Tsutomu Ohshima

That's from the chapter on building our confidence via "Constructive Thinking in the Present."

It's FANTASTIC.

I've always been more than a little ambivalent about affirmations. I've been turned off by the somewhat unscientific, woo-woo nature of how most authors discuss the subject.

Dr. Z changed my mind by presenting the SCIENCE behind affirmations and connecting the practice of affirmations to stuff like self-fulfilling prophecies and then giving us some REALLY practical ways to practice "affirming" who we are as part of our day-to-day lives.

"Victorious warriors win first and then go to war, while defeated warriors go to war first and then seek to win."

~ Sun Tzu, The Art of War

I'm so moved by the power of affirmations that I changed nearly ALL of my Targets in the Heroic app to be affirmations—from "I'm in Bed for 9-10 Hours Like a World-Class Athlete" to "I Am Ruthlessly Focused on WIN!" and "I Create Micro-Moments of Awesome with A + E1 + E2!"

I'm also writing my top affirmations down every night and saying them like mantras ALL DAY EVERY DAY. It's awesome. I can already feel the power of CONSTANTLY focusing my mind and making deposits ALL DAY EVERY DAY.

The book is worth it for this chapter and the prior couple chapters alone. Get it/check it out. For now, know this: You want your affirmations to be PERSONAL (Use "I..." or "We..."), POSITIVE, and PRESENT. If you feel so inspired, create a few right now for the QUALITIES you want to embody, the ACTIONS you want to take and the OUTCOMES you want to see.

THE SPICE OF LIFE

"Nothing will drain your confidence account faster or prevent your First Victory more surely than your refusal to accept and work with inevitable human imperfection. If you punish yourself for each and every mistake, error, and imperfection, it's impossible to be confident. Destructive perfectionism is different from *striving for perfection*, the discipline and dedication necessary for sustaining your efforts toward improvement. A small amount of perfectionism is absolutely required if you're going to develop your knowledge, skills, and fitness, just as a small amount of spice is required in most cooking recipes to give the meal some excitement. But too much perfectionism will derail your progress and ruin your life, just as too much spice ruins any meal."

That's another Idea from the first chapter on "Accepting What You Cannot Change."

It's my new all-time favorite way to think about high standards and bringing JUST the right amount of perfectionism into our lives. Think SPICE! We want *just* the right amount. Too little or too much ruins the meal the same way too little or too much perfectionism ruins our lives.

(It also reminds me of [Tal Ben-Shahar's](#) distinctions on the Optimalist vs. the Perfectionist we talk about in our Notes on [The Pursuit of Perfect](#) and [Conquering Perfectionism 101](#).)

As Dr. Z says: "**Strive for perfection, but don't demand it.**"

Here's to making the deposits in your Antifragile Confidence bank accounts through your thoughts and actions all day every day, especially... TODAY.

It's Day 1. We're ALL IN. Let's go, Hero!

B

Brian Johnson,
Heroic Philosopher CEO

About the Author of This Note

BRIAN JOHNSON



Brian Johnson is the Founder + CEO of Heroic Public Benefit Corporation and the author of [Areté: Activate Your Heroic Potential](#). He's 50% Philosopher and 50% CEO and 101% committed to helping create a world in which 51% of humanity is flourishing by the year 2051. As a Founder/CEO he's made crowdfunding history and built and sold two social platforms. As a Philosopher/teacher, he's helped millions of people from around the world, trained 10,000+ [Heroic Coaches](#) from 100+ countries and created a protocol that science says changes lives. He lives in the country outside Austin, Texas, with his wife, Alexandra, and their two kids, Emerson and Eleanor. Learn more at [heroic.us](#).

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