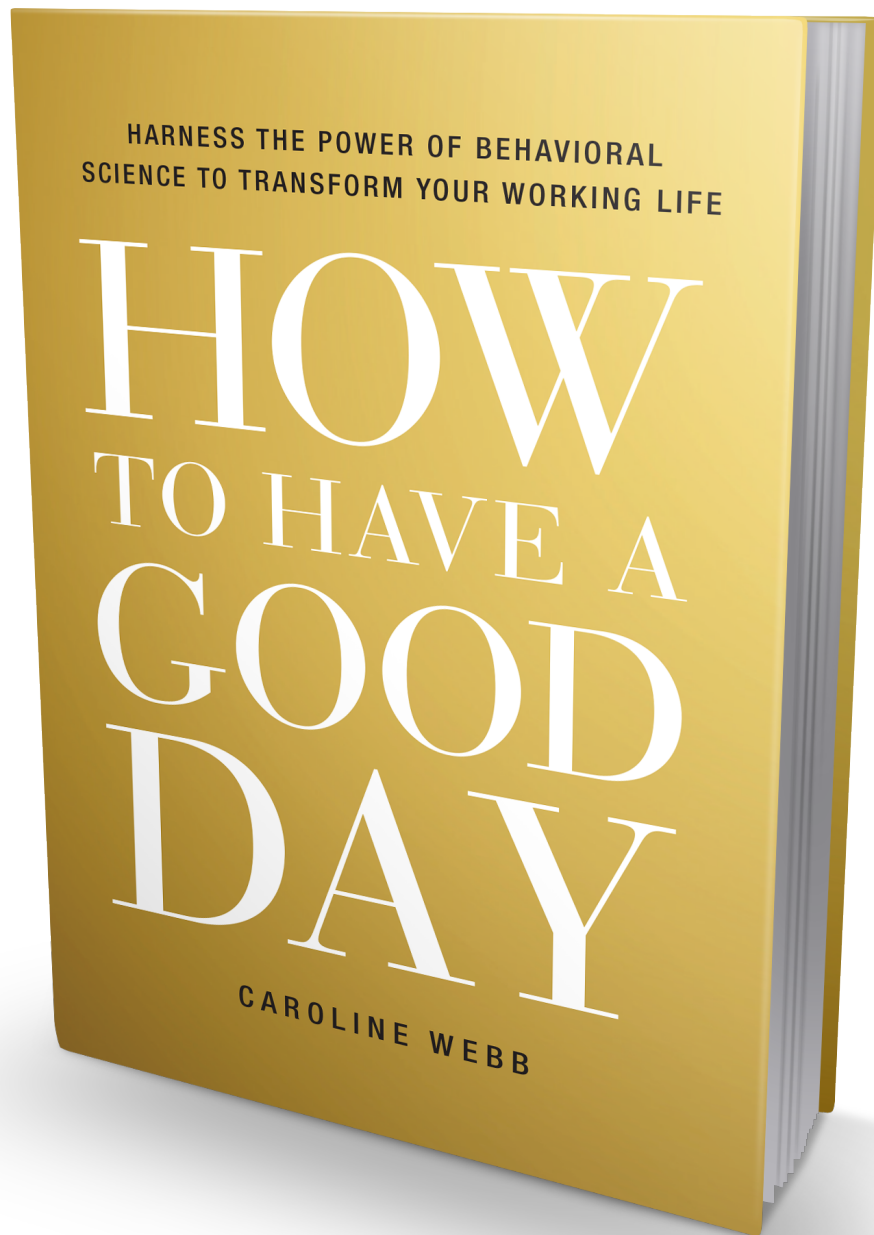


Excerpt from **How To Have A Good Day**



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But what *is* confidence? According to the research, one trait commonly associated with confidence is being proactive. When we see someone speak up and take initiative, we tend to assume we're dealing with a person of substance, someone with the power or expertise to have an impact. The same is true when we see someone who has the ability to convey certainty—or, at least, the clarity that passes for certainty in uncertain times.

But beyond that, there's no one right way to come off as confident. It can look different from one person to another, depending on their personality. We all know people who exude quiet confidence without being brash. They might not be the ones talking all the time, but when they talk, others listen. Greg, the crowdfunding entrepreneur, has decades of experience at the most senior levels of business and politics, and he says, "Real confidence is definitely not about swagger. And it's not always having a ready answer, either. To the contrary, it's sometimes showing that you're secure enough to pause, think about what other people are saying and say, 'That's really interesting.'" One study even suggested that speaking hesitantly was more likely to get you promoted in a collaborative culture, compared with a punchier take-no-prisoners style of delivery.<sup>3</sup>

So real confidence doesn't have to be about talking loudly. It's more about being the person we are when we're at our best, rather than trying to copy what we think self-assurance looks like in someone else. It's about staying in discovery mode when faced with stressful situations: being curious about what's happening rather than threatened by it, which in turn allows our brains to focus on being clever rather than defensive. In this chapter, I'll review some ways we can bring our bold-est self to life.

### REFRAME YOUR NERVES AS EXCITEMENT

Let's start with the moment when we often most need to summon our confidence: just before we enter the fray to make our pitch, presentation, or request.

When our brain recognizes that we're facing something exciting or challenging, it readies us for action by pouring a cocktail of neurotransmitters into our neural pathways, blending chemicals that boost our level of motivation and attention, making it possible for us to spring into action. That's a process known by scientists as "arousal." Yes, stop

snickering; it's also partly what's going on when we have the hots for someone. But arousal is also the word that describes the kind of mental readiness we need in our professional lives, for example when we're psyching ourselves up before giving a talk or asking for a raise. As we rise to meet the challenge, our brain is making sure we feel alert and alive. We might feel nervous, too, and two of those neurochemicals—adrenaline and noradrenaline—will probably have our heart racing a little. But as long as positive emotions are in the mix, we're still in discovery mode, and we're not panicking.

It's only if we interpret the situation negatively—perhaps as a threat to our competence or our ability to stay in control—that our level of arousal flips us into defensive mode. As we know, that's where our brain's survival circuits trigger a fight-flight-freeze response, boosting our levels of adrenaline and noradrenaline to battle-ready heights. In smaller amounts, those two neurochemicals do a nice job of motivating us and sharpening our focus, but at these much larger doses they make us skittish and give us tunnel vision. Interestingly, though, the really big guns of our threat response haven't yet fired. It's another twenty to thirty seconds before our adrenal glands respond, releasing yet *more* adrenaline and noradrenaline into our system, as well as the powerful but slower-acting hormone called cortisol.

And that's our window of opportunity. During that half minute between our initial alert and our adrenal reaction, it's still possible to dampen down our threat response fairly quickly and easily. In those few seconds after we notice that our heart has started pounding, we have a choice. We can interpret that as a sign that there's a threat looming, and allow our defensive response to unfold unchecked, or we can decide to interpret our case of nerves as a sign that our brain and body are ready to rise to a thrilling challenge. We can see it as “game over” or as “game on.” And research suggests that choosing the second option can make all the difference in the way we perform under pressure. Psychologists Wendy Berry Mendes and Jeremy Jamieson, at the University of California, San Francisco, and the University of Rochester, respectively, have conducted a number of studies showing that people perform better when they decide to interpret their fast heartbeat and breathing as “a resource that aids performance.” As they say: “Arousal is semantically and psychologically fuzzy. Our responses depend in large part on how a situation and our body's responses are construed.”<sup>24</sup>

So the next time you notice you're getting keyed up:

- ➔ Remind yourself that this is your body and brain ensuring you're ready for what comes next.
- ➔ Try saying some version of this to yourself: "That's my brain and body getting me ready for this challenge. Let's do this!"

It should help steer you back toward discovery mode before you even open your mouth to speak.

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## About Caroline Webb

Caroline Webb is an executive coach, author and speaker known for being one of the world's leading experts in using insights from behavioral science to improve professional life. Her bestselling book on that topic, *How To Have A Good Day*, has been published in 14 languages and more than 60 countries. She is also a Senior Advisor to McKinsey, where she was previously a Partner.

Tune in to Caroline's live video series:  
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