

Toolbox Talk for students

Confidence, Comparison and
Feeling Good Enough



Time: 15 minutes

Objective: To help learners understand how comparison and self-doubt can affect confidence, recognise when these thoughts are holding them back and use practical ways to build confidence through experience, support and steady progress.

Have you ever walked into a classroom, workshop or new workplace and felt as though everyone else knew exactly what they were doing? One person understands the task immediately, while somebody else already has practical experience or confidently answers every question.

Meanwhile, you are wondering whether you belong there at all. We usually compare what is happening inside our own head with what somebody else is showing on the outside. We can see their confidence, finished work or latest achievement but we cannot see their nerves, mistakes, worries or the time it took them to get there.

Why It Matters

Starting college, university, training or an apprenticeship means entering situations where you will not know everything. That is the reason you are there: to learn. Even so, it can be uncomfortable to feel inexperienced, particularly when other people appear to be progressing more quickly. Comparison can sometimes help by showing us what is possible or giving us something to work towards. It becomes unhelpful when somebody else's progress starts feeling like proof that we are failing. Social media adds to this because people share qualifications, new jobs and successes more often than rejection, failure or struggle. When confidence drops, learners may stop asking questions, avoid opportunities or decide they are not capable before giving themselves a fair chance. This can affect learning and relationships. In practical environments, pretending to understand something because you are embarrassed to ask can also create a safety risk.

What It Can Look Like

Somebody may stay quiet even when they have a good idea, avoid volunteering for a task or let other people make every decision.



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They might apologise constantly, dismiss their own achievements or believe that any success was simply luck. Self-doubt can also lead to perfectionism. You may spend far too long on one piece of work, avoid submitting it because it does not feel good enough or give up when you cannot do something immediately. Some people respond differently and act overly confident, make jokes or criticise others to hide how unsure they feel themselves. You might catch yourself thinking, “Everyone is ahead of me” “I’m going to look stupid if I ask” or “I should be better at this by now.” Everyone begins with different experience, support and circumstances. Feeling unsure in a new situation does not mean you are incapable. Low confidence alone does not mean there is a mental health problem.

What Can Help

Confidence usually develops after we do something, not before. Waiting until you feel completely ready can keep you stuck, so focus on one manageable action. That could mean asking one question, attempting one part of a practical task or contributing one idea during a group discussion. When a doubtful thought appears, look for the evidence. If you think, “I’m terrible at this,” ask yourself whether you are truly unable to do it or still learning. Replace a final judgement with a more accurate description, such as “I don’t understand this yet, so I need more explanation or practice.” This is not pretending everything is positive. It is giving yourself a fair assessment of where you are.

Try measuring progress against where you started rather than against the strongest person in the room. Keep a short record of tasks you have completed, feedback you have received and things that have become easier.



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Be aware of who and what you compare yourself with. If certain social media accounts repeatedly leave you feeling behind, reduce how often you see them. Spend time with people who can encourage you while still being honest. If self-doubt is regularly stopping you from attending, completing work or taking opportunities, speak to somebody you trust. A friend, family member, tutor, lecturer or apprenticeship adviser may be able to help you see options that are difficult to notice when you are judging yourself harshly.

Preparing for Life in Construction

Construction is built on skills that develop through teaching, repetition and experience. An experienced tradesperson may complete a task quickly because they have done it hundreds of times, not because you should already be able to match them. A good apprenticeship or placement gives you the chance to learn safely, make mistakes, receive feedback and improve. You will not be expected to know everything on your first day. Asking questions, checking instructions and admitting when you are unsure show that you care about doing the job properly. Confidence in construction is not about pretending you never struggle. It is about knowing what you can do, recognising what you still need to learn and being willing to keep developing.

Discussion Questions

- Why might somebody appear more confident than they actually feel?
- When can comparison be useful and when might it begin holding someone back?
- What could a learner do if they do not understand a task but feel embarrassed to ask?



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Takeaway Message

Feeling behind does not always mean you are behind. You may simply be comparing your beginning with somebody else's later stage. Confidence is rarely something people either have or do not have; it grows as we practise, ask questions, make mistakes and discover that we can handle more than we thought. You do not need to be the best person in the room to belong there. You need to give yourself permission to keep learning.

Action

After this talk, privately write down one thing you can do now that you found difficult when you started. Then choose one skill you want to improve and identify the next small action that would help you practise it.



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