

# Your Self-Doubts Are Never Going Away — And That’s Okay

Confronting the tyrannical inner “no” head-on



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Decades ago, I enrolled in a course on instructional leadership that was offered at work to anyone interested in joining the agency’s roster of in-house instructors.

I wanted this, badly. My regular professional duties were stifling and I hoped this opportunity to share my expertise would break up my routine and raise my profile.

But powerful forces interfered.

When it was my turn to deliver a practice lecture — videotaped by the instructor in front of a roomful of others taking the training — my senses went into overdrive.

My heart raced and I struggled to catch my breath. As the camera rolled, my voice quavered and rasped. I could barely keep my thoughts in order.

I was on the verge of losing control over my body and my intellect, fighting my way through every second until, finally, the ordeal ended.

As you might guess, I experienced a low-level panic attack compounded by a crisis of confidence.

More episodes like this followed over the years. I struggled to understand my split personality: confident in my raw ability to do “gold star” work on the one hand, and totally incapable of projecting that confidence on the other.

I wasn’t aware at the time of the many ways to [prevent or treat a panic attack](#), ranging from breathing exercises to ongoing therapy.

But years later, I perceive the source of the dichotomy (I'm strong! I'm weak!) as something deeper than an insufficient or inconsistent supply of courage, which often gave rise to panic.

The culprit is *doubt*.

### **Two minds, undecided**

You may think *doubt* is just shorthand for a lack of self-confidence. But I believe that *doubt* is a deeper, more subtle, and more pernicious condition — like the low hum of a fluorescent light — that shapes and pervades so much of who we are and what we choose to do, or *not* to do.

The word *doubt* is derived from the Latin *dubitāre*, linguistically rooted in duo (two), with a sense of “two minds, undecided between two things.”

And indeed there is a dual nature associated with doubting. It places us in an uncomfortable liminal space, poised between wanting to take positive actions that benefit us (applying for a job, auditioning for a part), and holding back from carrying out our intentions. (I'm ready! I'm not ready!)

Looking back on that leadership training, I embodied doubt's duality to perfection. I had chosen a path that would result in my needing to stand out — literally, to stand in front of people and teach, putting me in a position of high-profile authority. Yet in pursuing that goal, I struggled to perform that very task.

I was caught between *doing* and *denying*.

And that is an apt working definition of what it means to *doubt* — more specifically, to engage in *self-doubt*.

And *self-doubt* — though by no means the only form of doubt — has really got a grip on us, these days.

And guess what? It actually *is* all in our heads.

### **Doubt's true nature**

It turns out there is a biological underpinning for this particular state. It's not the nervous system's fight-or-flight response mechanisms we associate with related states such as anxiety and fear.

According to [an oft-cited study](#), an anatomical region of the brain — the ventromedial portion of the prefrontal cortex — is at least partly responsible for processing belief and doubt. When this portion of the brain is damaged, patients lack “normative doubt.” That is, they demonstrate a tendency toward overconfidence, boastfulness, grandiosity, obstinacy, and egocentric behavior. They are also vulnerable to deceptive or misleading information.

These traits are the antithesis of doubtfulness, which helps us see even more clearly that self-doubt involves questioning our capacity to act fruitfully and translate hopes and dreams into reality.

We *want* certain things, but we struggle to believe in our ability to obtain them, as if the proverbial brass ring is always just a few inches beyond the grasp of our outstretched arms.

Isn't all this just a fancy way of talking about *imposter syndrome*?

Not quite. Imposter syndrome is, to my mind, more situational than self-doubt. It reflects a mindset of people “[undeserving of their achievements and the high esteem in which they are, in fact, generally held.](#)”

Imposter syndrome generally sets in after you’ve climbed the mountain, so to speak, or at least reached the top of one of the peaks in the range. You’ve already accomplished much — and now you marvel at how you managed it...and can you keep it all going? To you, that mountain looks like a house of cards ready to topple in the breeze.

When doubt takes hold, in contrast, we may not even try to reach a goal. Or even when do try, doubt handicaps our chances of succeeding — of doing something well. Witness my near-nervous breakdown while taping a practice lesson.

### **Please make it go away**

And so the big question: Can we reign in doubt? Can we take classes or read books or talk to therapists that will get this thing under control — or better still, make it go away?

No — and we shouldn’t want to.

I say that because trying to banish doubt — as the French philosopher René Descartes sought to do in his quest for “[rock and clay](#),” the certainty of knowledge — is all well and good for philosophers, but not so productive for ordinary mortals like us.

Doubt is a major feature of the human condition. We can waste a lot of psychic energy trying to ignore it.

### **Befriending the doubt monster**

I suggest that the better path lies in making doubt a companion and collaborator, rather than an enemy barring the gates of accomplishment. It is possible to accommodate doubt — to make peace with the feelings it arouses, however uncomfortable, and turn them to your advantage.

#### **Step 1**

The process begins with some basic self-owning:

*I have deep doubts about my ability to do X. I might do it badly. I might fail entirely. I might be ill-equipped even to try. Doubt: I see you and feel you.*

#### **Step 2**

Put doubt in perspective:

*I readily acknowledge my doubts about this effort, but self-doubt is one feeling among many and not a reliable predictor of the truth. Doubting, by itself, does not pre-determine outcome.*

#### **Step 3**

Make doubt an ally:

*Doubt is a form of protection that focuses my attention. My doubts are not telling me “no,” they’re telling me where to sharpen and apply my skill, talent, intellect, etc., toward achieving my goal.*

#### **Step 4**

Practice productive coexistence — the powerful “yes and...” formula:

*I have doubts and I'm going to proceed anyway without compromising my ambitious aims, high standards, and grand vision.*

Take these steps seriously and you may well find yourself unlocking doors you were convinced you could not pass through. You will find joy in taking creative risks you were certain would turn you into a quivering blob of jelly.

I've worked hard over many years to put these ideas into practice. Thanks to this mindset, I've taken huge risks as a playwright, poet, and author — putting edgy and sometimes offbeat stuff out into the world for others to watch, read, and judge. I've put together complex public events, daring people to show up and prove me right. I also run public workshops now without a trace of the nerves that once plagued me.

Of *course*, I have doubts — still, always — and that's the point.

We do our best living, learning, and growing with our doubts in tow, keeping us company. Not just in tow, but also in check. They should never hold us back, but serve to remind us of the complex admixture of pain and pleasure that makes us human.