

Confidence can be a bad thing—here's why

June 26 2017, by Stuart Beattie And Tim Woodman



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Have you ever felt 100% confident in your ability to complete a task, and then failed miserably? After [losing in the first](#) round at Queen's Club for the first time since 2012, world number one tennis player, Andy Murray, hinted that "overconfidence" might have been his downfall. Reflecting on his early exit, [Murray said](#): "Winning a tournament is great and you feel good afterwards, but you can also sometimes think that your game is in a good place and maybe become a little bit more relaxed in

that week beforehand."

There is no doubt that success breeds [confidence](#), and in turn, the confidence gained from success positively influences performance – normally. However, recently, this latter part of the relationship between confidence and performance has been called into doubt. High confidence can have its drawbacks. One may only need to look at the results of the recent general election to note that Theresa May called for an early election partly based on her confidence to win an overall majority.

[Our research](#) at the Institute for the Psychology of Elite Performance at Bangor University has extensively examined the relationship between confidence and performance. So, what are the advantages and disadvantages of having high (or indeed low) levels of confidence for an upcoming task?

Confidence and performance

First, let's look at the possible outcomes of having low confidence (some form of [self-doubt](#)). Low confidence is the state of thinking that we are not quite ready to face an upcoming task. In this case, one of two things happens: either [we disengage](#) from the task, or we invest extra effort into preparing for it. In one of our studies participants were required to [skip with a rope](#) continuously for one minute. Participants were then told that they had to repeat the task but using a more difficult rope to skip with (in fact it was the same type of rope). Results revealed that confidence decreased but performance improved. In this case, self-doubt can be quite beneficial.

Now let's consider the role of overconfidence. A high level of confidence is usually helpful for performing tasks because it can lead you to strive for difficult goals. But high confidence can also be

detrimental when it causes you to lower the amount of effort you give towards these goals. Overconfidence often makes people no longer feel the need to invest all of their effort – think of the confident student who studies less for an upcoming exam.

Interestingly, some of our [research findings](#) show that when people are faced with immediate feedback after a golf putting task (knowing exactly how well you have just performed), confidence expectations (number of putts they thought they could make next) far exceeded actual obtained performance levels by as much as 46%. When confidence is miscalibrated (believing you are better than you really are), it will have a negative effect on subsequent task performance.

This overconfidence in our ability to perform a task seems to be a subconscious process, and it looks like it is here to stay. Fortunately, in the long term the pros of being overconfident (reaching for the stars) seem to far outweigh the cons ([task](#) failure) because if at first you do not succeed you can always try again. But miscalibrated confidence will be more likely to occur if vital [performance information](#) regarding your previous levels of [performance](#) accomplishments is either ignored or not available. When this happens people tend to overestimate rather than underestimate their abilities.

So, Andy Murray, this Queen's setback is a great wake-up call – just in time for Wimbledon.

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