Signs of Insecurity: Behavior That Reveals a Lack of Confidence
By Dr. Gerald Stein

Insecure people often reveal their self-doubt without being aware of it. Indeed, a wise observer can frequently “read” another individual very quickly. For example, members of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra have told me that they can tell whether a new conductor is competent and talented within 10 minutes of the beginning of their first rehearsal with him.

What follows is a short list of behaviours that suggest insecurity:

1. Are you able to give a compliment? Even more important, can you graciously accept one? The latter behaviour tends to be difficult for someone who is unsure of himself. He might blush or become flustered. Alternatively, he is prone to dismissing the validity of the praise, instead telling you why it isn’t true. What should one do if complimented? Simply smile and say “thank you.” Nothing more.

2. An inability to maintain eye contact is hard for many individuals who lack confidence. They will look away or look down, but rarely maintain the gaze of the other by looking into his or her eyes.

3. The self-doubting person tends to apologize a good deal when no apology is necessary. It is as if she expects to be reproached or is afraid to give offense; so, she prophylactically tries to excuse any possible mistake on her part in order to avoid just such a response.

4. Answering a question with an upward inflection of the voice has been heard or done by everyone. The person being questioned doesn’t have certainty about his answer, so he replies with a tone of voice that betrays his insecurity.

5. Men and women who are uncomfortable with sharing personal information for fear of being judged will oft-times turn the conversation to a different topic, away from anything that might make them vulnerable or reveal too much. This is also called “changing the subject.”

6. One way of inoculating yourself against criticism is to make jokes at your own expense. Do this too often and others may conclude that you put yourself down because you believe yourself to be seriously flawed.

7. Do you have trouble making a decision? The comedy team “Cheech and Chong” (I’m not sure which one) said: “Taking responsibility is a lot of responsibility.” If you automatically let others choose the restaurant, movie, or other activity, you are either very easy-going and good-natured or you don’t want to be held accountable for making the wrong choice.

8. Do you state strong opinions in the course of a conversation? Those who avoid doing so might want to keep the peace — often a very good thing — but some of them fear drawing fire and unwanted attention to themselves, putting themselves in the uncomfortable position of having to defend their statements.
Before I give you eight more signs of insecurity, I’ll say a few things about what causes that condition. Many things can contribute. Critical or neglectful parents, poor academic skills, frequent moves that make you “the new kid” (especially if you are introverted by nature), learning disabilities and ADHD, being “different” in some fashion (size, shape, colour, religion), thinking that you are the “poor” kid in a community of the affluent, sensing that you are the average child in a school filled with very bright youngsters, feeling ashamed of your parents or your residence, frequent rejections, getting fired or laid off (whether deserved or not), clumsiness, a history of abuse or bullying; physical unattractiveness, deformity, or injury; and so forth. Now back to the list of signs of insecurity:

9. Are you prone to nervous laughter in social situations? It is another behavior that betrays insecurity.
10. People will appraise you harshly if they see you bite your nails or simply observe that they look bitten.
11. Do you routinely efface yourself and place yourself at a disadvantage — letting others go first, speak first — reluctant to raise your hand? Do you hesitate to take your turn? Are you extremely self-sacrificing? Insecurity can make you wait and wait until the opportunity before you is lost. Excessive deference displays little regard for yourself, even if some amount of deference is often a sign of good breeding and consideration for others.
12. Are you nervous when eating or drinking in front of others? Are you fearful that you will drop something, display poor table manners, look funny, or make a mess of yourself? You probably won’t; at least not more than the rest of us.
13. Can you make phone calls without trepidation? Especially those in which you need to introduce yourself, correct a problem, or speak to an authority? Too much discomfort in anticipation of these sorts of actions can reveal your sense of personal uncertainty.
14. Might you make too many excuses? Those who are unsure often give explanations for their decisions where none are required. For example, imagine that you order an entrée at a nice restaurant and the waiter asks whether you want an appetizer or salad to start. Instead of just saying “no,” you feel compelled to give a reason why you don’t. Some folks offer multiple excuses for what they do and why they do it, especially if someone else will be disappointed by their action. A word to the wise: if you must give a reason, limit yourself to one. The more excuses you give, the more uncertain (or dishonest) you sound. For example, “I can’t come to the party because I have a stomach ache and my car broke down and I need to study.” One reason will be much more convincing than three, but you probably needn’t explain yourself nearly as often as you think you do.
15. Insecurity can be suggested by hesitation to ask for a favour or an inability to say “no” to someone who asks you for something. Anticipation of rejection or disapproval is the motivator for both of these problems with self-assertion. By contrast, a self-assured person will not automatically believe that the relationship (or his own value) is dependent upon going along with someone else’s wishes or doing things for others.
16. Do you make more than occasional requests for reassurance? A few examples: “Does that make sense?” or “What do you think?” or “What would you do?” or “Do you think that is a good idea?” or “Do I look OK?” Do you need to have sex frequently to prove to yourself that your partner remains interested in you? If you are self-assured, you won’t regularly implore your partner to calm your doubts and remind you, over and over, in words and deeds, of your desirability or intelligence.
You can use the list in one of two ways: to consider whether you are personally insecure or to evaluate the confidence of some of those around you. Of course, you are the only one whose self-confidence you can change.

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