



The Hidden Power of Presence: How to Speak, Listen, and Lead with Confidence

Dr. Shirls

The Hidden Power of Presence

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Part 1: The Invisible First Impression

Before you ever open your mouth, your presence starts speaking for you. In those first two seconds, yes, just two, your brain and the brains of those around you are busy making sense of subtle clues you don't even realize you're sending. This part is about uncovering those invisible signals and understanding how you can shape that all-important first impression, every single day.

Chapter 1: Your Brain Decides Before You Speak

Imagine walking into a classroom, meeting someone new, or joining a team for the first time. Before you say a single word, your brain and theirs are already working overtime. Scientists call it the "2-second rule": people form first impressions in the blink of an eye, and what they notice is often not what you're saying, but how you're showing up.

Posture, eye contact, and energy are the instant cues your body sends. Are your shoulders slouched or upright? Are your eyes scanning the floor or meeting someone else's gaze? Is your energy open and curious, or tense and closed off? These are your hidden messengers. The mind is wired to notice them, and they shape how others feel about you, even before you get a chance to speak.

- Posture: Are you standing tall or slouching?
- Eye contact: Do you acknowledge people, or look away?
- Energy: Are you alert and open, or anxious and withdrawn?

The catch? You're always sending signals, even when you aren't aware of it. Your presence is broadcasting messages about your confidence, your curiosity, even your mood. Think back: what signals do you think people pick up from you before you say a single word? Take a moment to reflect. Your silent story starts before you ever speak.



Chapter 2: What Presence Really Is (And Isn't)

There's a huge myth out there when it comes to presence: that you have to be the loudest or most dramatic person in the room. Not true! Many teens believe presence means taking up space, being outgoing, or never feeling nervous. In reality, quiet confidence and the ability to pay attention, not perform, make you stand out the most.

- Myth: You have to be loud to be confident.
- Myth: You can't be nervous if you're truly present.
- Truth: Calm is stronger than loudness. People trust ease and poise.
- Truth: Paying attention is more impactful than putting on a show.
- Truth: Authentic is always better than perfect.

Think about the difference between a calm, steady classmate who listens and responds with thoughtfulness, versus someone who jokes loudly to hide their nerves. Which person do you want to follow or connect with? It's almost always the steady, authentic presence. Whether you're in class, on the field, or hanging out with friends, showing up as yourself (shyness and all) is the real game changer.

Don't force yourself to be something you're not. Instead, practice showing up with calm and genuine curiosity. That's what people remember.

Instant Impression Cues for Teens



Posture Speaks

A confident stance (shoulders back, chin up) sends an instant message that you're attentive and ready. Even if nerves kick in, your body posture sets the stage for how others read you.



Energy Vibes

Your mood, enthusiasm, and openness show up in your overall energy. Looking interested or curious (instead of bored or distracted) makes people instantly comfortable around you.



Eyes Engage

Making genuine eye contact, even just for a second or two, signals trustworthiness and attention. It's a simple but powerful way to connect before you even speak.

—“—

People will forget what you
said, people will forget what
you did, but people will never
forget how you made them
feel.

Maya Angelou

Part 2: The Science Behind Confidence

Confidence can seem like magic, but it has real roots in your mind and body. Let's look under the hood and discover what makes it tick, and how presence is actually powered by your brain's amazing systems. When you understand that even the most self-assured people sometimes feel nervous, it changes everything. You'll learn how being present can calm your mind and why your body's signals can change your brain's chemistry for the better.

Chapter 3: Your Brain on Presence

Three brain systems are always in play when you're around people: The amygdala (your ancient 'danger detector'), the prefrontal cortex (your smart, thinking center), and mirror neurons (your connection network).

Your amygdala is on alert for signs of danger, like a new group or high-stress moment. That's why you might suddenly feel sweaty and nervous in a crowd or before a presentation.

But here's something awesome: your prefrontal cortex has the power to keep things in balance. When you breathe slowly, stand confidently, and focus on the present moment, your thinking brain can quiet your "danger detector."

Meanwhile, mirror neurons (special brain cells) help you connect with others. They're why you yawn when someone else yawns or feel calm around calm people. So, your presence isn't just about you. It helps everyone around you tune in, too.

Chapter 4:

The Body–Brain Loop

Here's a wild fact: the way you hold your body literally changes the way you feel, and even what you believe about yourself. Try this: spend a minute standing (or sitting) tall, shoulders open, chin raised, and take a few deep breaths. Notice how confidence bubbles up, even if you were nervous to start. That's the body–brain loop in action. Your brain takes cues from your body: slouched positions can increase self-doubt, while open, upright posture boosts feelings of poise and readiness.

In the real world, showing up with the outer signs of confidence starts an internal chain reaction. Act confident, and soon you'll start to feel it for real. The next time you're feeling unsure, try the experiment: adjust your posture first, and notice your feelings follow. Trust the loop, it works!



—“—

Confidence is like a muscle:
the more you use it, the
stronger it gets.

Dr. Shirls

Part 3: The P.R.E.S.E.N.C.E. Framework

Want a simple roadmap to feeling and acting more confident? Meet the P.R.E.S.E.N.C.E. framework, a supercharged checklist that turns presence into a skill you can actually practice. Each letter stands for an easy-to-spot piece of true presence, and every teen can learn to use it, no matter how shy or outgoing you are.



Chapter 5: The Presence Blueprint

P – Posture: Are you sitting or standing with energy and balance? Good posture opens your chest, frees your breath, and signals you're ready for anything.

R – Regulation: Can you steady your nerves when stress hits? Regulation means using breath, focus, or movement to keep your emotions in check and your mind calm.

E – Eye Contact: Meeting someone's eyes (even briefly) builds trust and says you're tuned in.

S – Speech Clarity: Clear speech, at a comfortable pace, helps you come across as thoughtful and confident.

E – Energy: Are you alert, present, and engaged? Energy isn't about bouncing off the walls. It's about bringing attention and curiosity.

N – Noticing Others: Presence means tuning in to people around you, not just focusing on yourself.

C – Curiosity: Ask questions, explore ideas. People love sharing time with someone genuinely interested.

E – Engagement: Show up fully; nod, smile, participate. Presence is active, not passive!

Practice these one at a time or all together. They work in class, on teams, or with friends. Big change comes from small, repeatable steps!

The P.R.E.S.E.N.C.E. Skills in Action



Posture Power

Walk into the room with shoulders back and you instantly raise your confidence and the room's energy.



Regulation Moves

Quick breath routines or stretching in your seat helps your nerves settle before speaking up.



Eye Contact Magic

Glance up, smile softly. People instantly feel engaged and respected.



Stay Curious

Ask a follow-up question or nod when someone talks. Your interest makes the entire group come alive!

Chapter 6: The Signals You Send

Ever felt misunderstood, or like your real intentions weren't coming through? That's the power of signals. Posture, facial expressions, eye contact, and energy often say more than words. You might intend to look relaxed but come off as bored; or want to seem open, but your arms are crossed.

Try the "signal translator" activity: ask a friend how you seem in the first 10 seconds you walk into a room, then compare it with what you meant to send. This quick habit reveals how to bridge the gap, and helps you become a presence that's as strong as your intentions.

Part 4: How to Show Up Powerfully

Showing up powerfully isn't about dominating or shouting. It's about learning to use your voice and attention so others feel included, valued, and energized. In this section, you'll learn the art of voice, how to actually listen, and what it takes to shift the energy in a room, sometimes without even trying.

Chapter 7: Your Voice Is a Tool

If words are tools, your voice is the toolbox. The magic? Tone, energy, and pace change everything, even if the words stay the same! Try saying 'thanks for being here' with a smile and with a frown; with excitement and with boredom. The impact is totally different. For teens, practicing how you say things (not just what you say) builds confidence for every situation: the classroom, the court, or hanging with friends. Want to sound clearer? Slow down. Want to sound more interested? Add a little energy to your tone and use your voice to connect, not just to fill space. Try out a few “practice scripts,” both silly and serious, and notice how your energy changes the response you get from others.



Chapter 8: Listening Is Presence

Did you know listening can make you as memorable as speaking? Being heard is one of the best feelings in the world. When you really tune in, nodding, making eye contact, putting away your phone, you trigger positive brain chemistry in others. Dopamine and oxytocin (feel-good chemicals) flood your brain when you sense you're respected and included. Being a great listener means asking questions, summarizing what you've heard, and showing respect, even when you disagree. Try comparing a 'bad listener' scenario (phone out, half-glancing, interrupting) to a 'great listener' moment (focused, encouraging, reflecting back).

Want a quick win? Use the "listening upgrade" checklist: phone down, eyes on, ask a follow-up, and don't plan your next sentence while the other person is talking. You'll be amazed by the difference.



Chapter 9: Mirror Neurons & Social Energy

Energy in a group is contagious. Ever notice how when one person is confident, others relax? Or how anxiety can fill a room? That's the work of 'mirror neurons': brain cells that reflect and copy the emotional tone of those around them. If you work on steadying your presence, you're not just helping yourself, you can help an entire group.

Try this: sit with a friend and spend two silent minutes just matching their posture and expression. Now, slowly shift to a more open, confident pose. Watch as they begin to do the same! These small studies prove you can set the emotional tone for your class, your team, or your group of friends. Never underestimate the impact of your steadiness: it's leadership in action, whether you're quiet, loud, shy, or outgoing.

—“—

You don't lead by hitting
people over the head, that's
assault, not leadership.

Dwight D. Eisenhower

Part 5: Staying Calm Under Pressure

Pressure moments: tests, presentations, new people, are part of teen life. They can trigger nervousness or make your mind go blank. The good news: staying calm is a skill, not a gift. With a few routines and a new understanding of what your brain is doing, you'll learn to handle anxiety like a pro, on the fly, in real-life, with no drama necessary.

Chapter 10: The Amygdala Moment

Have you ever stood in front of the class and suddenly forgotten what you were about to say? That's your amygdala at work, a part of the brain designed to keep you safe. It triggers fight, flight, or freeze whenever it senses a threat, even if the 'threat' is only speaking in public! This isn't a sign that something's wrong. It's just your brain being protective.

Understanding that every teen (and adult, too!) experiences these blank moments helps you normalize it. The trick is to recognize what's happening, and remind yourself that you're not in danger, you're just stretching your presence skills.

Remember, your brain is not trying to embarrass you, it is trying to protect you.

Chapter 11: The 30-Second Reset

When nerves strike, grounding helps you reset fast.

Here's a quick emergency confidence routine: Plant both feet on the ground, roll your shoulders back, take a slow deep breath, and let your eyes scan the room. Anchoring your body this way sends a cue to your brain that you're safe and ready.

Use it before tests, presentations, or any time you need a confidence boost in 30 seconds flat!

Chapter 12: Box Breathing & Calm Control

Box breathing is a powerful tool used by athletes, performers, and even Navy SEALs! Here's how it works: Inhale for four counts, hold for four, exhale for four, hold for four. Repeat the cycle 3-4 times. This routine calms your body, quiets nerves, and brings your focus back to the present.

Use it before big tests, speaking up, or when anxiety hits in a social setting. The science? Slow, patterned breathing tells your brain: no danger here, reset and try again.

Chapter 13: Movement as Medicine

Staying still can actually make nerves worse. Movement, big or small, calms your brain and unlocks steady presence. Even tiny motions help: Take a sip of water, tap your fingers, roll your shoulders, or wiggle your toes. These micro-movements signal safety to your nervous system, help reset your focus, and make it easier to speak or listen with confidence. Use movement anytime nerves hit, it's your body's natural medicine!



Part 6: Real-World Presence Skills

Presence isn't just for the stage. Teens use these skills in small, everyday moments, introducing themselves, joining a new club, greeting teachers, or making new friends. In this section, you'll learn practical strategies for first impressions, the art of the handshake, and how to check your own signals before you speak.

Chapter 14: The Power of a Handshake

In many cultures, handshakes are the first step to connection. It matters more than you might think!

Cultural awareness (cultural differences) is important: not everyone shakes hands, and that's okay. But where it's expected, the right handshake (firm, not crushing; eye contact, quick smile) sets a tone of respect and confidence.

Want to avoid common mistakes? Don't over-squeeze, don't stare, and don't go limp.

Practice with someone at home. Your handshake says more than you think!

Presence in Action: First Impressions



Interview Ready

Smile, firm handshake, and simple eye contact help you nail first impressions in interviews and class presentations.



New Friend Energy

Approach new people with curiosity, listen actively, and offer a genuine introduction every time.



Confidence Checklist

Check your signals: feet planted, shoulders open, eye contact, breath steady, get ready before you speak!

Chapter 15: First Impressions That Stick

The way you introduce yourself, whether to a class, in an interview, or when meeting someone new, creates a "sticky" first impression.

Remember: start with a smile, use your name, and offer a simple greeting. Speak clearly, and keep your energy approachable but not overwhelming. Want to stand out? Ask a question or make a small suggestion, it shows curiosity and initiative.

Before any big hello, use your quick 'before you speak' checklist: posture, eye contact, calm breath, and a pause to collect your thoughts. Those few extra seconds make all the difference and help your presence shine.

Part 7: Becoming a Leader

Leadership isn't about titles or power. It's about showing up, inviting others in, and creating a safe space for everyone to speak and thrive. As a teen, there are leadership moments waiting for you: introducing friends, cheering a teammate, volunteering to speak up, and more. This section gives you practical, simple steps to practice leadership even now.

Chapter 16: Practice Leadership (Even Now)

Leadership starts small. Practice introducing people to each other, stepping up to lead a group project, or simply offering to help a new classmate find their way. Every interaction is a chance to build your presence and your leadership skills. These “reps” matter. By doing them over and over, leadership becomes a part of you. Look for small opportunities daily, coming up with a team plan, helping settle differences, or making sure everyone’s voice is heard.

Don’t wait for permission or a title, start leading now, and watch your confidence grow.

Chapter 17: Future You

What does 'future you' look like in your imagination? Take a few minutes to picture yourself nailing an interview, leading a team project, or presenting to a crowd. Visualization is powerful: your brain rehearses these moments in detail, so that when real life happens, you're ready. See yourself calm, steady, and present. This mental practice primes you to perform and brings you one step closer to your best self. Big moments aren't just for adults, start imagining them now, and you'll own them when they come.



Chapter 18: The Mindset Shift

Here's the heart of presence, and a signature Dr. Shirley's move: shift your internal question from "Do I belong?" to "How can I contribute?"

Instead of worrying about whether you fit in, look for ways to add value; support a friend, ask a good question, share your unique view. This shift turns anxiety into action, and fear into fuel for making a real difference. You've got a presence the world needs, and it starts with believing you have something worth sharing. Keep moving from self-doubt toward curiosity and contribution, and watch everything change!

—“—

The world needs that special
gift that only you have.

Marie Forleo

Final Chapter: The Power of Your Presence

If you remember just one thing, make it this: the world doesn't just need more voices or more ideas, it needs your unique presence.

Speak when you have something to say, listen when someone else is sharing, and offer quiet leadership every chance you get.

Your confidence grows every time you practice, and your presence becomes a gift to everyone around you. You don't need to become someone else. You just need to show up, authentically, bravely, and with intent. The hidden power of presence is yours to claim; start today and keep growing stronger with every step.

Ready for your next adventure? Let's go, one mindful moment at a time!

Bonus Section:

Presence Practice Toolkit

Ready to put your skills to the test? Here's your toolkit for mastering presence, one day at a time.

Daily 2-minute practice: Stand tall, take three slow breaths, scan the room, and smile. Use your P.R.E.S.E.N.C.E. checklist: Posture, Regulation, Eye Contact, Speech Clarity, Energy, Noticing, Curiosity, Engagement.

Pre-Big Moment Checklist: Check feet, roll shoulders, take five deep breaths, repeat positive affirmation, picture success.

In the following two bonus sections check out:

Reflection prompts: When do I feel most confident? What signals do I send? What kind of presence do I want to have?

Quick Scripts: 'Hi, my name is...' (introduction). 'I have a thought to add...' (speaking up). 'Give me a sec, and I'll start again.' (recovering from a freeze).



Self-Reflection Prompts for Building Self-Confidence

Self-reflection is a powerful tool for developing genuine self-confidence. Taking the time to pause and thoughtfully consider your feelings, behaviors, and aspirations gives you deeper insight into who you are. This awareness lays the foundation for building authentic confidence grounded in your personal experiences and values. On the following pages, you'll find prompts designed to guide your thinking and help you discover more about yourself. As you read each question, take a moment to consider your honest answers. Use the lines provided to write your thoughts, stories, and reflections. There are no right or wrong answers, just meaningful moments of self-discovery.

Reflection Prompts

1. When do I feel most confident?

Think about specific moments or situations when your confidence shines. Was it during a presentation, a creative project, helping a friend, or perhaps trying something new? Identifying these moments helps you understand the environment, people, or activities that bring out your best self. Knowing when you feel most confident can guide you in seeking out more of those empowering experiences.

2. What signals do I send?

Our confidence is often communicated through the signals we send, verbal and non-verbal messages like posture, facial expressions, tone of voice, and body language. Consider how you present yourself in different situations. Are you making eye contact, standing tall, speaking clearly, and smiling? Or do you sometimes close off or hold back? Reflecting on your signals helps you become aware of the impression you make on others and allows you to be intentional about your presence.

3. What kind of presence do I want to have?

Your presence is the feeling or impression you create when you walk into a room or engage with others. Are there specific qualities, such as warmth, energy, calmness, or assertiveness, that you want people to associate with you? Reflecting on the presence you wish to cultivate can help you set personal goals and practice new habits that align with your intentions for how you show up in the world.



Quick Scripts for Everyday Moments: Speak Up, Stand Out, and Grow Your Confidence

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Introduction: Finding Your Voice Every Day

It's normal to feel a little awkward or unsure in everyday conversations, whether you're meeting someone new, joining a discussion, or figuring out how to handle tough moments. Having some quick, friendly scripts can help you show your presence, speak up, and boost your confidence, even when words don't come easily.

This book is packed with ready-to-use phrases and practical tips designed for teens in real-life situations. From introductions to recovery after a freeze, you'll find scripts to make everyday moments less daunting. Remember, how you say things is just as important as what you say. So, let's help you find the words that match your personality and style!

Why Quick Scripts Matter for Teens



Show Up Confidently

A well-chosen phrase makes your words stand out and helps you step forward, even in difficult moments.



Make First Impressions Count

A friendly introduction sets a positive tone and helps you connect with others right away.



Speak Up & Get Heard

Scripts give you the courage to voice your thoughts and questions, making sure your perspective isn't missed.

Introductions: “Hi, my name is...”

Starting a conversation or meeting someone new can feel intimidating, especially if you’re stepping into a group for the first time. With a simple introduction, you set the tone for the interaction, and often, you ease everyone else’s nerves too! Whether you’re at school, an event, or in an online group, here are some scripts to help you introduce yourself smoothly:

- Hi, my name is (your name). Nice to meet you!
- Hey, I’m (your name).
- I haven’t met you yet, I’m (your name).
- Hi! I’m (your name). What’s your name?

Try these swaps to personalize your intro:

- Add an interest: “Hi, I’m Jordan. I love playing soccer. How about you?”
- Find common ground: “Hey, I think we have math together. I’m Alex.”
- Mention the event: “Hi, I’m Priya. This club meeting looks fun!”

Remember: A smile and relaxed body language make your words even more inviting. Practice these lines in front of a mirror so you can deliver them naturally.

Speaking Up: “I have a thought to add...”

Whether in class, at a club, or among friends, there are moments where you have something valuable to say. Sharing your ideas confidently encourages others to listen, and often, to join in! Here are scripts for jumping into a conversation or adding your viewpoint:

- I have a thought to add, can I share?
- That made me think of something. May I add it?
- I agree, and I’d also like to say...
- That’s interesting! Here’s my take...
- If I may jump in, I wanted to add...

It can be tough to speak up, especially if you’re unsure of how your idea will land.

Remember: most groups appreciate fresh perspectives. Try speaking up during quieter moments, and use these scripts to introduce your idea before sharing details.

Asking Questions:

“Can you explain that again?”

Curiosity is a sign of strength, not weakness. If something isn't clear, don't hesitate to raise your hand, send a chat, or gently interject with a question. Here are friendly, confident ways to ask for clarification:

- I'm not sure I followed; can you explain that another way?
- Could you please repeat that?
- Can I ask a quick question about what you just said?
- Would you mind going over that part one more time?
- Sorry, I missed that, can you say it again?

If you're nervous about interrupting, waiting for a pause and making eye contact first can help. Use these scripts to show you care about understanding and participating.

Quick Scripts for Everyday Wins



Join Group Chats

Try: “Mind if I join your conversation?” or “Hey, what are you all talking about?” It breaks the ice and shows interest.



Start Participation

Use: “I’d like to share my idea, if that’s okay?” This polite opener helps you ease into a discussion confidently.



Ask for Help

Say: “Could someone explain this part to me?” Letting others clarify helps you—and possibly others, too.

Agreeing and Disagreeing: “I see your point, but I think...”

Disagreements don't need to end in arguments. Respectful communication builds trust, helps relationships grow, and welcomes diverse opinions. Here are ways to agree, disagree, or partially agree while keeping the tone positive:

- I see your point, but I think...
- I totally get where you're coming from. My view is a little different...
- I agree with some of that, but I have another idea to share...
- I understand what you mean. Here's how I see it...
- Thanks for sharing your perspective. I'd like to add...

It's okay to have a different opinion. What matters is how you share it. Speak calmly, avoid making things personal, and always listen before responding.

Handling Awkward Moments: Recovery Scripts

Everyone faces awkward moments. Maybe you slip up, get interrupted, or freeze mid-sentence. The best remedy is to stay calm, acknowledge the moment, and use scripts to keep things moving smoothly. Here are some recovery phrases:

- Give me a sec, and I'll start again.
- Oops, I lost my train of thought. One moment, please.
- Sorry, I got a little nervous. Let me try that again.
- I need a moment to think about what I wanted to say.

It's normal to make mistakes or get caught off-guard. Owning the moment with humor or honesty builds trust with those around you and helps everyone relax.

Freezing or Losing Your Words: “Give me a sec, and I’ll start again.”

Even the most confident speakers blank out sometimes. It can happen from nerves, stress, or just a distracting day. Using a quick, calm recovery line lets you gather your thoughts and re-engage. Here are reliable scripts:

- Give me a sec, and I’ll start again.
- Hang on, I need to regroup my thoughts.
- I lost my place, let me take a second.
- Sorry, my mind went blank. Let me start over.

Take a breath, make friendly eye contact, and restart at your own pace. You’ll find most people understand, because they’ve been there too.

“
Mistakes are
proof that you
are trying.

Dr. Shirls

Mistakes: “Sorry, what I meant to say was...”

Slipping up or saying something that comes out wrong is part of learning. The key is to correct yourself with grace and move on. Use these scripts when you want to clarify or fix your message:

- Sorry, what I meant to say was...
- Let me rephrase that...
- Actually, I meant...
- I didn't explain that well. Here's what I was trying to say:

Notice the theme: acknowledge, correct, and continue. This builds respect and invites others to focus on your point, not your mistakes.

A Final Thought

If you've made it to this page, I want you to know something.

You don't have to be the loudest person in the room to make a difference. You don't have to be perfect before you speak. You don't have to wait until you're older, smarter, or more experienced before your voice matters.

The world is changed by ordinary people who choose to show up with courage.

Every time you stand a little taller, listen a little better, ask a thoughtful question, encourage a friend, or speak up when it matters, you are becoming the person you were created to be. Those moments may seem small, but they shape your future one choice at a time.

There will be days when confidence comes easily, and there will be days when it doesn't. That's okay. Confidence isn't something you either have or don't have. It's something you build, one brave moment after another.

Never forget this:

Your presence is a gift.

Your voice matters.

Your kindness matters.

Your ideas matter.

And the world will never have another you.

So, keep learning. Keep growing. Keep showing up.

And whenever you begin to doubt yourself, remember three simple words:

You've got this.

Love,

Dr. Shirls