

Dare
TO BE
YOU



First published in Great Britain in 2020 by Wren & Rook

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ISBN: 978 1 5263 6237 7
E-book ISBN: 978 1 5263 6238 4
Audio book ISBN: 978 1 5263 6239 1
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



Wren & Rook
An imprint of
Hachette Children's Group
Part of Hodder & Stoughton
Carmelite House
50 Victoria Embankment
London EC4Y 0DZ

An Hachette UK Company
www.hachette.co.uk
www.hachettechildrens.co.uk

Publishing Director: Debbie Foy
Managing Editor: Liza Miller
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Art Director: Laura Hambleton
Designed by Thy Bui

Printed in China

Additional images supplied by Shutterstock

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Matthew Syed

Dare TO BE YOU



ILLUSTRATED BY
Toby Triumph

wren
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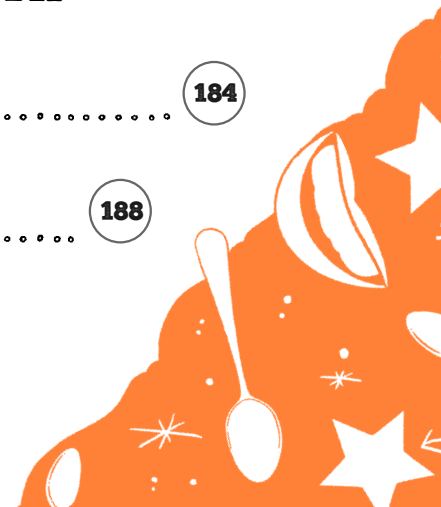
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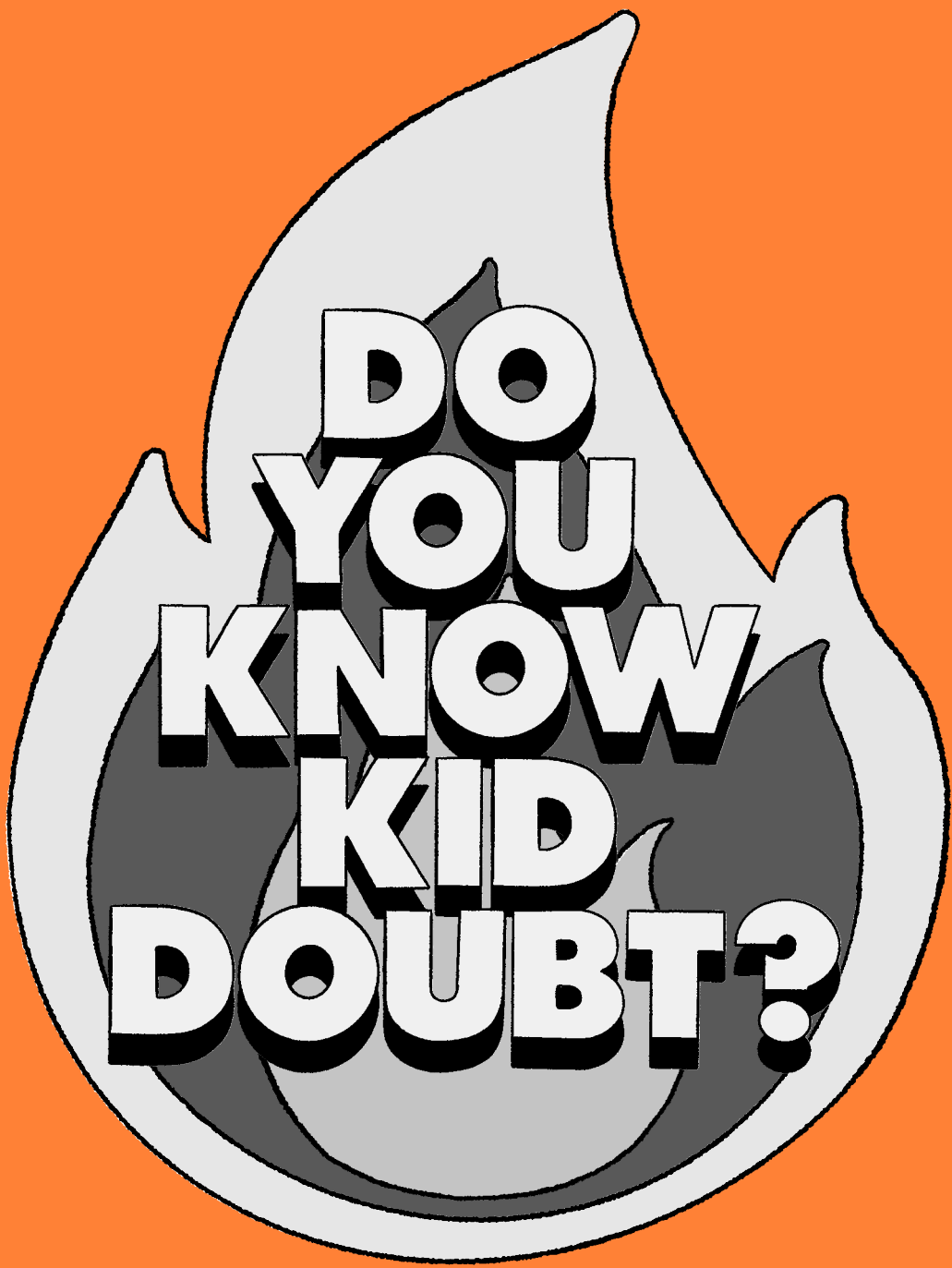
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I'm not sure if it was the smoke or the smell of burning that I noticed first. I am, however, totally sure of what I noticed second: the near collapse of Tim Preston. The colour draining from his face and his knees giving way under the weight of his growing panic. We both stared across the field, our eyes squinting against the flickering orange glow, our mouths wide open.

**THE BAKERY WAS ON FIRE.
ON FIRE. THERE WERE
ACTUAL FLAMES.**

And billowing black smoke vomiting into the sky behind us.

Oh and, just by the way, it was our fault.

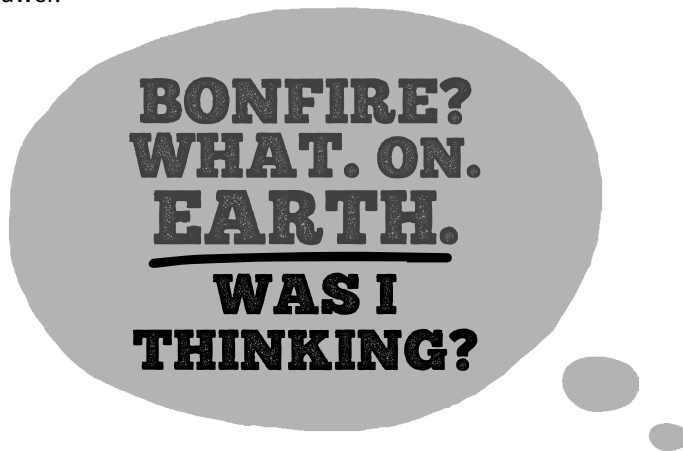




It all started at the beginning of the school holidays after a reasonably bad end to the school year. My exams hadn't gone as well as I'd hoped and there had been an incident in a chemistry lesson involving potassium permanganate and Mr Long's trousers that I was really trying to forget about. So when my brother's friends Tim Preston and Philip Beck came over to our house, I decided that was my chance to put everything behind me and firmly establish myself as part of my brother's effortlessly popular friendship group.

Unfortunately it didn't work out like I'd hoped. They mainly just ignored me when I tried to join in – if I was going to get in with them, it was clear I was going to have to do something big. Something that would prove I was as cool as they were.

You see, Tim Preston was one seriously cool kid and Philip Beck was even cooler than that. They were the boys that everyone wanted to be friends with. Tim Preston seemed to be brilliant at **EVERYTHING**, and Philip was just so funny. And I wanted to be a part of that. So when they suggested we go over to the field and light a bonfire, I thought *This is my chance* and went to get the matches out of the kitchen drawer.



How was that **EVER** going to end well?

It wasn't. And it didn't.

The truth is, I wasn't thinking. I was mindlessly trying to impress Tim Preston, trying to make him and Philip Beck like me.

I had never lit a bonfire before in my life and I'm pretty sure they hadn't either. I'd only ever been to one bonfire before and that was a highly organised affair at the local community centre.

Just how bad an idea this was became clear when they suggested that I have the first go at lighting the fire. But I went along with it. We messed about with the matches for about twenty-three seconds – it wasn't all that interesting, especially not once I burned my thumb trying to prove that I was very experienced in the bonfire department. I repeat, in case you are in any doubt as to whether this was a bad idea – **IT WAS A TERRIBLE IDEA.**

We ditched the matches and ran further into the field. Tim and Philip started a wrestling game with me, which basically involved them throwing me to the floor repeatedly, and me pretending I thought it was hilarious when actually they were bruising my ribs.

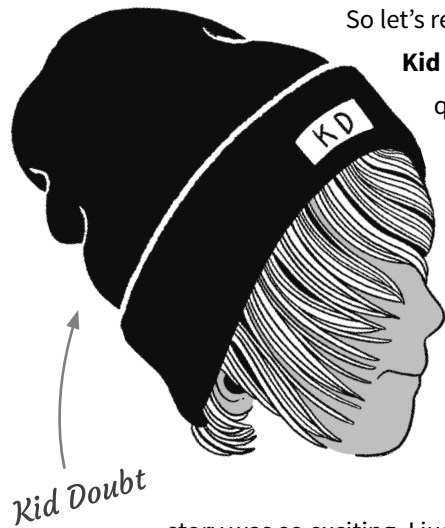
We stupidly forgot all about the matches we had left by the back of the bakery.

That is, until we turned around and saw the flames.



KID DOUBT AND THE CONSEQUENCES (NO, THAT ISN'T THE LATEST RAP COLLABORATION...)

We'll come back to that (major) incident shortly. Because it was in that moment – somewhere between being tackled to the ground by Tim Preston and Philip Beck and noticing that we'd set the bakery on fire – that I realised something. Something life-changing. Something that has stayed with me ever since.



So let's rewind a couple of years and introduce you to **Kid Doubt**. I first met him at school and he was quite distant at first. I didn't see him much, which was fine by me – he wasn't exactly a laugh a minute. But whenever he was around, I would start to feel uneasy. A bit anxious. A bit unsure of myself. Like I didn't fit in. And I didn't like it.

Around the time I first met **Kid Doubt**, I was reading *The Hobbit* by J.R.R. Tolkien. I can't tell you how much I was loving it. The story was so exciting, I just couldn't put it down. And so I took it with me to school. I usually played football at lunchtime, but that day I just wanted to read the next chapter, to find out about the next epic battle in this amazing fantasy world I was now a part of. I couldn't wait. So instead of heading straight out to the pitch, I went back into the classroom, got the book out of my bag and sat down to read.

Just at that moment, I felt an uneasy feeling and knew that **Kid Doubt** was around. Some of the other kids were staring at me through the window. They had the football in their hands and were pointing at my book and falling about laughing. I could see the shadow of **Kid Doubt** there too. He looked a bit like me but meaner, so I recognised him straight away.

All of a sudden I could feel my legs start to go wobbly and my hands getting sweaty. My mind started racing with thoughts like

WHAT IF THEY DON'T LET ME PLAY FOOTBALL WITH THEM AGAIN, WHAT IF THEY CARRY ON LAUGHING AT ME? AND WHAT IF THEY DON'T LIKE ME ANY MORE?

So I did something I regret to this day. (Not as much as the fire, but still quite a lot.) I pretended that I had been reading as a joke, to make them laugh. I tossed the book in the bin and ran out to join them on the pitch.

Kid Doubt didn't leave me alone for the rest of the day. He ran behind me on the pitch as we played and then sat behind me in class that afternoon. Watching me. Almost breathing on me. And when I walked home, feeling really disappointed that I had been so stupid as to throw my favourite-ever book in the bin, I'm sure I saw him smile. Like he was happy that I was uneasy.



(((SPOILER ALERT)))

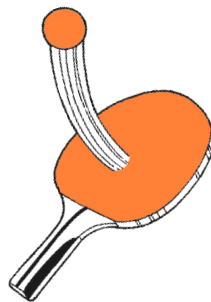
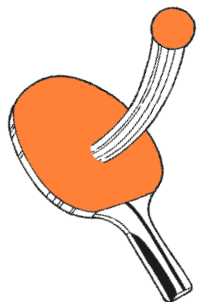
You have probably guessed this already, but **Kid Doubt** isn't actually a real person. In truth, he is just a feeling or a voice inside my head. You can't actually see him or touch him. But you can feel him and hear him, that's for sure. Sometimes the feeling can be a bit overwhelming. And I have found that thinking about him as a person has helped me to find ways to deal with him. So we'll carry on with that analogy if it's okay with you.

After that, **Kid Doubt** seemed to stick around. He wasn't always there but I learned that he could turn up anywhere and at any time. He was always miserable, always hunched over, his grey face arranged in a permanent frown.

And I started to worry. About all kinds of stuff that had never really worried me before. I started to think that my friends didn't like me, that maybe I wasn't cool enough, that my clothes weren't good enough, that even just being me wasn't good enough.

I started to behave differently when **Kid Doubt** was around too. I'd see him smirking if I got anxious, so I'd get all loud and start acting the fool in class so that everyone would laugh. I thought that if I could

make everyone laugh, then maybe they'd like me more. And I started skipping table-tennis practice.



.....

*Oh, did I mention that I am quite good at table tennis? Really? I haven't managed to get that in yet?! That I am absolutely mega at ping pong? **WEIRD**. My brother says I can't stop going on about it, but I knew he was wrong. We're a whole 1,250 words into this book and I haven't even mentioned anything about it. (Not even the two Olympics I went to. Yep. **TWO**.)*

.....

Under the influence of **Kid Doubt**, I had started to skip practice. I didn't want to, I loved it. But every time I saw **Kid Doubt** near the training hall, I'd start thinking about that incident with *The Hobbit* and the football. I'd get so anxious about everyone laughing at me that I decided I'd rather not go.

Kid Doubt being around was really starting to hold me back. And it wasn't something I had planned for. I didn't know how to handle it. But he was making me anxious. He was making me do stupid things. And worst of all, he was making me want to be someone else – anyone else – but me.

HA

HA

HA

And that is how, in probably the worst incident of my life to date, I ended up almost burning the bakery down.

Kid Doubt was definitely in the mix that day, laughing at me when my brother and his friends weren't interested in my attempts to be part of the crew. Making me anxious that I wasn't cool enough to fit in. Encouraging me to do things that I knew were a really bad idea.

HA



After Tim Preston and Philip Beck recovered from their panic at seeing the flames, they were off. Tim's parting words were something like:

**THIS IS
NOTHING TO
DO WITH ME,
YOU IDIOT.**

And so there I was – well, there **WE** were. Me and **Kid Doubt**. And about eight firefighters. People from the local streets started to arrive to look at the damage.

And then I saw my mum driving towards the scene. There was no doubt it was her. I could spot her a mile off because the words **SYED BROTHERS** were emblazoned in enormous, bright orange letters on the side of the car. (Yes, you read that right! There's more to come on this later...)



MY HEART SANK.

Never mind the potassium permanganate and the trousers. Things were about to go from bad to whatever is much, much worse than staining your chemistry teacher's best outfit pink.

THE CONSEQUENCES...

Thankfully no one was hurt in the bakery fire. In fact, not even a croissant was actually burned in the end. It was Sunday and the bakery had been shut. But we were extremely lucky that it wasn't more serious. And I really did pay, I was grounded for a **VERY LONG TIME**. That summer, I was only allowed out of the house to scrub the soot off the bakery's brickwork, which took six whole days, or to wash the car (the one with **SYED BROTHERS** on the side).

But, in the end, I owe a lot to that incident. And I don't just mean the obsessive fear of matches that I still have. No, on my sixth day of scrubbing those bakery walls, I had an epiphany.

I realised that the fire had happened because for too long I had let something else, someone else – Kid Doubt – guide the things I felt and did. I had almost burned the bakery to a cinder in the pursuit of making Tim Preston like me. I'd even given up reading *The Hobbit*.

And suddenly I knew that I didn't need Kid Doubt. In fact, things would be a whole lot better if I believed in myself and did the things I actually wanted to do. After all, **Kid Doubt** is no friend. What kind of



a friend wants you to feel rubbish? Wants to make you act differently just to fit in? Wants to make you anxious and nervous? That is no friend **AT ALL**. That person is just going to hold you back..

And so I made a pact with myself: I decided I wasn't going to let **Kid Doubt** make me anxious any longer. I was going to follow my **OWN** path, not someone else's. I'd finally figured out that **THAT** is what being cool *really* looks like. From then on, I promised myself that I was going to:

- 1 **MAKE FRIENDS WITH PEOPLE WHO LIKED ME FOR ME.**
- 2 **MAKE CHOICES THAT I FELT WERE RIGHT FOR ME.**

**'THE THING
PEOPLE DON'T
UNDERSTAND
ABOUT BEING ROCK
'N' ROLL IS THAT
BEING ROCK 'N' ROLL IS
DOING WHAT YOU
BELIEVE IN AND
WHAT YOU WANT.'**

CHRIS MARTIN, LEAD SINGER OF COLDPLAY

One thing I learned quite quickly after making my pact is that **Kid Doubt** is quite the 'hanger-on'. I had vowed to ignore that grey and miserable face if I ever saw him again. But of course, I did see him again. Often. You name it, if there is a party, an exam, a competition, a play rehearsal or a school trip, he'll be there, trying to get an invite.

So it wasn't long before I started to wonder why **Kid Doubt** had such an effect on me. Why did I want everyone to like me so much? And how was I going to overcome the anxiety that **Kid Doubt** made me feel when I could see him smirking at me? I needed to develop strategies to help build my confidence. To figure out how to refill my tank of resilience when **Kid Doubt** left it empty.



As I got a bit older, I turned these strategies into a kind of plan. A manifesto for daring to be **ME**. And if I was feeling unsure, I would run down the items in **The Plan** to give myself the confidence to follow my own path. The confidence to question the world around me. And the confidence to make changes if things weren't working as well as they should.

THE PLAN

(A MANIFESTO FOR DARING TO BE YOU)

1 Make friends with people who like you for YOU.

If you haven't already found them, keep looking.

They are out there, I promise.

2 Make choices based on what you feel is right.

For YOU. Don't listen to whatever **Kid Doubt** is suggesting.

3 Don't blindly copy other people. Be YOU.

We'll get to this later. There's a bit of science to this.

4 Ask questions. Keep asking questions. Make things work for YOU.

Don't take the current situation at face value. Get curious about why things are the way they are – and see if you can make them work better for you.

5 Don't be afraid to do things at YOUR own pace.

Be brave enough to ask for help and slow down if you need to.

6 YOU should be prepared to be flexible.

You might not find your own path straight away. You might need to change it up a few times before you find what really works for you.

7 Be kind. And don't listen to anyone who isn't kind towards YOU.

Don't throw up over this one. It sounds a bit sickly, but I am going to show you that being kind works in your favour. And besides, who wants to start acting like someone else's **Kid Doubt**?

8 Make it happen. Don't wait. Get out there. It is down to YOU.

Dare to be different. DARE TO BE YOU!

p.s. Don't worry if some of these points seem daunting now, because those ideas are what this book is all about.

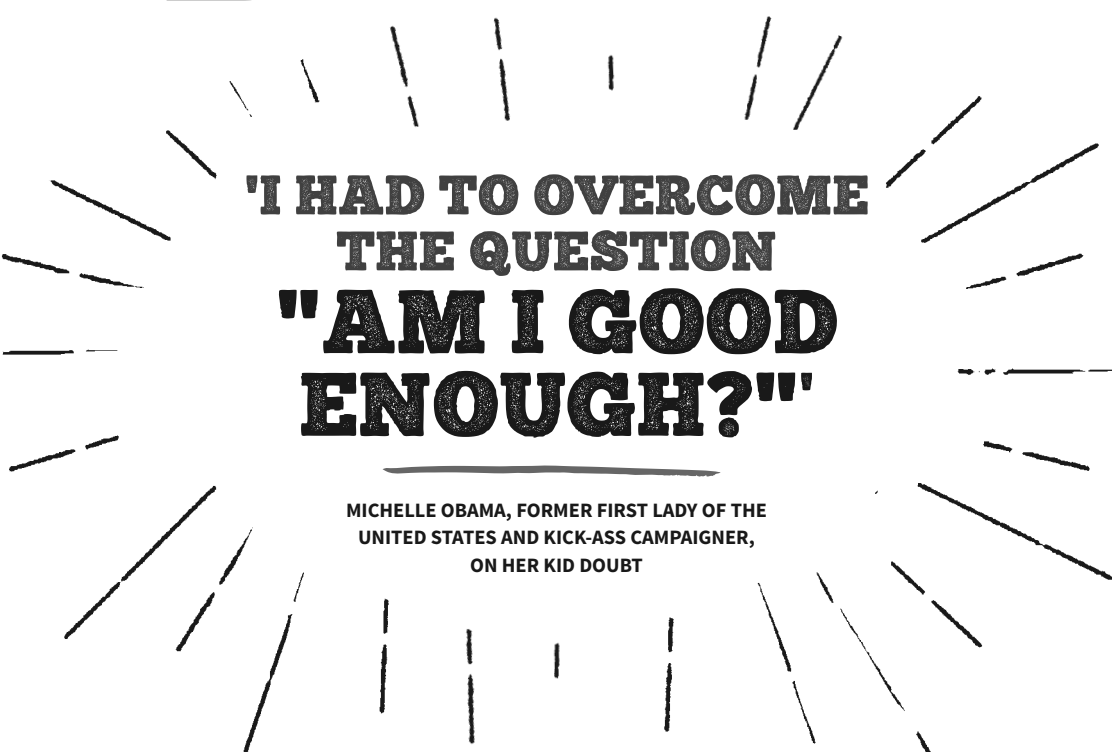
I want to share my strategies from **The Plan** with you, to help you face your own **Kid Doubt**.

TRACK DOWN YOUR KID DOUBT

Everyone has a **Kid Doubt**. And I mean **EVERYONE**. Even if they tell you otherwise. Even if they appear to be brilliant at everything. Even if they appear to have so many friends they could fill Wembley Stadium. Even if they appear not to have a care in the world. Because


((SPOILER ALERT))

Kid Doubt has about 7,700,000,000 brothers and sisters. (Imagine the family reunion!) Every single person on the planet has their very own **Kid Doubt**. Even really famous and successful people.



**'I HAD TO OVERCOME
THE QUESTION
"AM I GOOD
ENOUGH?"'**

MICHELLE OBAMA, FORMER FIRST LADY OF THE
UNITED STATES AND KICK-ASS CAMPAIGNER,
ON HER KID DOUBT



**'ANY MOMENT,
SOMEONE'S GOING
TO FIND OUT I'M A
TOTAL FRAUD,
AND THAT I DON'T
DESERVE ANY OF
WHAT I'VE
ACHIEVED.
I CAN'T POSSIBLY
LIVE UP TO WHAT
EVERYONE THINKS
I AM AND WHAT
EVERYONE'S
EXPECTATIONS
OF ME ARE.'**

EMMA WATSON, AWESOME ACTRESS, CAMPAIGNER,
FORMER GRYFFINDOR AND OCCASIONAL SELF-DOUBTER

Your **Kid Doubt** might look different to mine. They might be bigger, smaller or even less funny (although that would be hard to imagine). They may not be a 'he'. But all the **Kid Doubts** have one thing in common – they are all trying to hold us back. To make us feel that we are not perfect, that we should try and be like other people, that we shouldn't enjoy the things we do – and should enjoy things we don't. Making us feel anxious about the goals we hope for, and nervous about our choices.

We need to look **Kid Doubt** in the eye and start getting happy with being exactly who we want to be. Why? Because we are Awesome. Why else? Because sometimes we don't *feel* Awesome. Honestly, it is exhausting worrying, trying to fit in, trying to be somebody else. Not to mention time-consuming. One piece of research by 72 Point suggests that people spend nearly two hours worrying **EVERY SINGLE DAY**. That's nearly twenty-eight days a year! The whole of February, twenty-four hours a day.

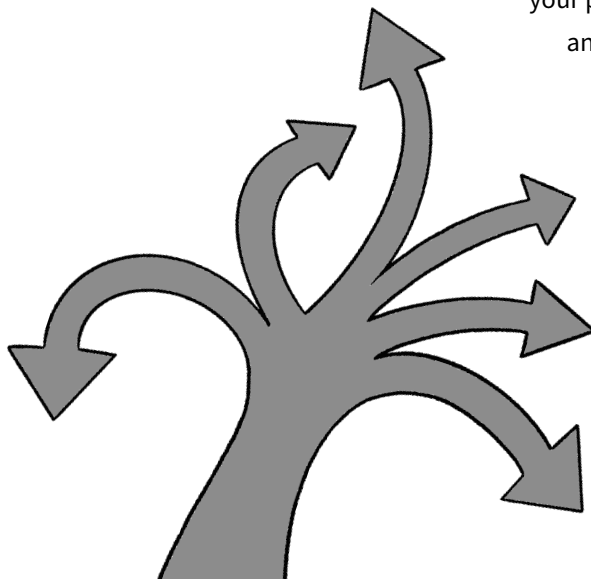
**NON.
STOP.
WORRYING.
UGH.**

So, if we could find a way to boost our confidence and be happy being who we want to be, there would probably be a whole lot less to worry about. And then we'd have a whole lot more time to do the things we really enjoy (like, for me, table tennis. Did I mention...? Oh okay, yes, I did).



And that is what **THIS BOOK** is for. I am going to prove (a big claim, you can vote me off the show if I don't) why you should dare to be yourself. That's right, this is a book about you (well, actually, it is quite a lot about me). But seriously, this book really is about YOU. About the person you are now, the person you were ten minutes ago as well as two years ago. About the person you will be tomorrow and the day after that, the year after that and into the future. **YOUR** future. Like it or not, you are you. So let's decide, right here, right now, to make sure you **LIKE** yourself.

I'm going to bust the idea that anyone is 'normal' – which means there is no point in aspiring to fit right in and be, well, 'normal'. I am going to show you that copying other people can be a real waste of energy sometimes. I'm going to show you that there isn't just one path to success. There are loads of different paths and what works for you might be totally different to what works for your best friend or your older sister. I'm going to show you that the best ideas come from people who think differently to the crowd, so stick with your own thoughts and be confident enough to find your voice. I'm going to show you that you should **DARE TO BE YOU**. Because **THAT** is your pathway to confidence and happiness.



Now, let's get on with it while **Kid Doubt** isn't looking. And we'd better be quick. Because he's sure to be back. And we need to be ready ...

OVER TO YOU

MEET YOUR KID DOUBT

Do you have a **Kid Doubt** that holds you back sometimes? What are some of the things that you worry about?

- Take a blank sheet of paper. If you'd like to, you can draw your **Kid Doubt** on one side of the sheet and yourself on the other side.
- Underneath **Kid Doubt**, draw some thought bubbles. In each one, write down something that you feel unsure, nervous or worried about at the moment.
- Now imagine how you would like to be feeling instead, if **Kid Doubt** was nowhere to be seen. What are the things you might need to think or say to **Kid Doubt** to make that happen?

