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The Impostor Syndrome

Finding a Name for the Feelings

by Dr. Valerie Young

I'll never forget the day I first learned about the Impostor Syndrome. It was 1983. A chronic procrastinator, I was in my fourth year of a doctoral program. Like a lot of graduate students, my status was what was commonly referred to as "A-B-D," meaning I'd completed "all but the dissertation."

I was sitting in class one day when another student rose to present the findings of a study conducted by psychology professor Pauline Clance and psychologist Suzanne Imes called The Impostor Phenomenon Among High Achieving Women (1978).

In a nutshell, Clance and Imes found that many of their female clients seemed unable to internalize their accomplishments. External proof of intelligence and ability in the form of academic excellence, degrees, recognition, promotions and the like was routinely dismissed. Instead, success was attributed to contacts, luck, timing, perseverance, personality or otherwise having "fooled" others into thinking they were smarter and more capable than these women "knew" themselves to be.

Rather than offering assurance, each new achievement and subsequent challenge only served to intensify the ever-present fear of being...

Found Out

"Oh my God," I thought, "I've been unmasked!"

Clearly flustered, I quickly scanned the room checking to see if anyone had caught me nodding in dismayed recognition. No one had. At least not the female students. They were too busy bobbing their own heads in like-minded unison.

It's hard to describe what it was like to discover that these vague feelings of self-doubt, angst and intellectual fraudulence had a name. This, along with the realization that I was not alone, was utterly liberating. This experience proved to be a profound turning point in my life, both academically and personally.

Up until then, my preferred dissertation avoidance technique was to bounce from one potential research topic to another (a self-protection mechanism, I'd come to learn, that is typical of we "impostors"). Not any more. I decided that very day that I would

learn everything I could about the Impostor Syndrome and all the ways that women undermine themselves in achievement realms.

Fast forward to 1985. With my dissertation¹ finally complete, I set out to share what I'd found with fellow "impostors" all over the country.

Little did I know then just how many of us there are.

Take the Quiz

Yes or No

- Do you secretly worry that others will find out that you're not as bright and capable as they think you are?
- Do you sometimes shy away from challenges because of nagging self-doubt?
- Do you tend to chalk your accomplishments up to being a "fluke," "no big deal" or the fact that people just "like" you?
- Do you hate making a mistake, being less than fully prepared or not doing things perfectly?
- Do you tend to feel crushed by even constructive criticism, seeing it as evidence of your "ineptness?"
- When you do succeed, do you think, "Phew, I fooled 'em this time but I may not be so lucky next time."
- Do you believe that other people (students, colleagues, competitors) are smarter and more capable than you are?
- Do you live in fear of being found out, discovered, unmasked?

If you answered yes to any of these questions — join the club!

"[It was] heartening to see lots of people had similar doubts and I wasn't the only one."

"It put a word to how I feel. It was nice to see and hear others feeling the same way. I feel now I can recognize it and deal with it."

¹ * *A Model of Internal Barriers to Women's Occupational Achievement*, Valerie Young, Ed.D (1985). Unpublished dissertation, available through interlibrary loan; Hard copy available through [Dissertation Express](#) order #8509618.

10 Steps to Overcome the Impostor Syndrome

by Dr. Valerie Young

1. Break the silence. Shame keeps a lot of people from “fessing up” about their fraudulent feelings. Knowing there’s a name for these feelings and that you are not alone can be tremendously freeing.
2. Separate feelings from fact. There are times you’ll feel stupid. It happens to everyone from time to time. Realize that just because you may feel stupid, doesn’t mean you are.
3. Recognize when you should feel fraudulent. If you’re one of the first or the few women or minorities in your field or work place it’s only natural you’d sometimes feel like you don’t totally fit in. Instead of taking your self-doubt as a sign of your ineptness, recognize that it might be a normal response to being an outsider.
4. Accentuate the positive. Perfectionism can indicate a healthy drive to excel. The trick is to not obsess over everything being just so. Do a great job when it matters most. Don’t persevere over routine tasks. Forgive yourself when the inevitable mistake happens.
5. Develop a new response to failure and mistake making. Henry Ford once said, “Failure is only the opportunity to begin again more intelligently.” Instead of beating yourself up for being human for blowing the big project, do what professional athletes do and glean the learning value from the mistake and move on.
6. Right the rules. If you’ve been operating under misguided rules like, “I should always know the answer,” or “Never ask for help” start asserting your rights. Recognize that you have just as much right as the next person to be wrong, have an off-day, or ask for assistance.
7. Develop a new script. Your script is that automatic mental tapes that starts playing in situations that trigger your Impostor feelings. When you start a new job or project for example, instead of thinking for example, “Wait till they find out I have no idea what I’m doing,” try thinking, “Everyone who starts something new feels off-base in the beginning. I may not know all the answers but I’m smart enough to find them out.”
8. Visualize success. Do what professional athletes do. Spend time beforehand picturing yourself making a successful presentation or calmly posing your question in class. It sure beats picturing impending disaster and will help with performance-related stress.

9. Reward yourself. Break the cycle of continually seeking and then dismissing validation outside of yourself by learning to pat yourself on the back.

10. Fake it 'til you make it. Now and then we all have to fly by the seat of our pants. Instead of considering “winging it” as proof of your ineptness learn to do what many high achievers do and view it as a skill. Don't wait until you feel confident to start putting yourself out there. Courage comes from taking risks. Change your behavior first and allow your confidence to build.