

Ditch Your Inner Imposter

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How to break up with self-doubt and be confidently you

Anna Lou Walker

DITCH YOUR INNER IMPOSTER

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CONTENTS

Introduction 4

Chapter 1 – What is Imposter Syndrome? 6

Chapter 2 – How to Fight Imposter Syndrome 74

Final Word 159

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Introduction

"Why would anyone want to see me again in a movie? I don't know how to act anyway, so why am I doing this?"

Hazard a guess at which actor spoke those words, and you'd likely envision a struggling bit-part player, down on their luck after years of trying to break into the industry. You may be surprised, then, to discover that they actually have a staggering 21 Academy Award nominations and three wins to their name. Far from a struggling actor, this is a 2002 quote from Meryl Streep, widely considered one of – if not *the* – finest actors of her generation. You see, imposter syndrome – that sense that you haven't earned your accomplishments, that you aren't worthy, or that you're somehow "getting away with" things – can affect anybody. Young and old, men and women, bosses and students, it can impact anyone, at any time in their life.

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The term “imposter syndrome” was first coined by psychologists Pauline Rose Clance and Suzanne Imes in 1978. Their studies focused on successful women and defined the discovery as a phenomenon wherein “despite outstanding academic and professional accomplishments, women who experience the imposter phenomenon persist in believing that they are really not bright and have fooled anyone who thinks otherwise”.

An estimated 70 per cent of people experience imposter feelings at some point in their lives. Other famous “imposters” include Sheryl Sandberg: “Every time I didn’t embarrass myself – or even excelled – I believed that I had fooled everyone yet again. One day soon, the jig would be up.”

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If these feelings sound familiar, you’re in the right place. This practical guide to imposter syndrome will help you to recognize the impact it’s having on your life and make positive changes, so you can start to feel a sense of ownership and pride in your achievements and stop living in fear of “being found out”.

CHAPTER 1

What is Imposter Syndrome?

Also known as imposter phenomenon or imposter experience, studies on imposter syndrome have shown that up to 70 per cent of people will experience feelings of "imposterism" at some point in their life. Imposter syndrome isn't a disease or an abnormality, but a pervasive feeling of fraudulence – of achieving status or success of which we feel unworthy. These feelings can prevent people from sharing their ideas or pursuing their ambitions, and lead to feelings of low self-worth. But the good news is that there are solutions, and one of the most powerful is to learn about and discuss imposter syndrome. By sharing your experiences, and reading those of others, you'll realize that you're not alone. In this chapter, we'll outline more about the phenomenon, how to identify it and who it affects. We'll also look at why modern culture has contributed to its rise and explore the implications of imposter syndrome on both individuals and society as a whole.

WHAT CAUSES IMPOSTER SYNDROME?

People who are highly capable generally consider other people to be just as proficient as them. This mindset can lead them to believe that they don't deserve to be awarded opportunities over others, because – from their perspective – others are equally worthy of recognition. As Elizabeth Cox explains in her TED Talk "What is Imposter Syndrome and How Can You Combat It?", "There's often no threshold of accomplishment that puts these feelings to rest."

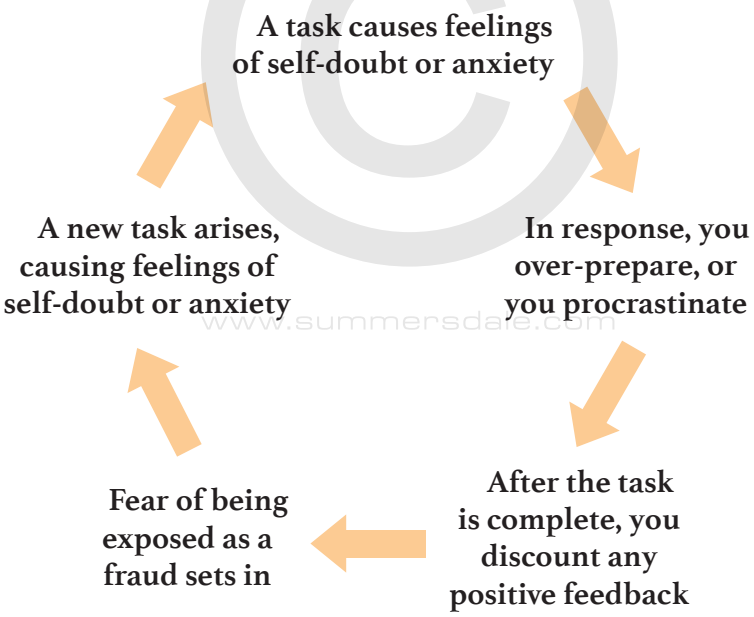
That's why even people widely considered geniuses, such as Albert Einstein or Maya Angelou, can (and did) experience imposter syndrome. Cox explains that "pluralistic ignorance" – whereby individuals each privately doubt themselves yet believe they're alone in thinking in that way because they don't hear others voice the same concerns – means it's difficult to dismiss these feelings.

The best solution? Talk about it! By opening up about our experiences with imposter syndrome, we come to realize that we're not alone – not only with our feelings of fraudulence, but with the slings and arrows that naturally come with adult life. We may think other people breeze through with comparatively few struggles, but really, everyone is on their own journey, and will encounter their own obstacles on the path to success.

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THE IMPOSTER SYNDROME CYCLE

The biggest challenge for anybody seeking to overcome imposter syndrome is interrupting the cycle. But before you can do that, you need to recognize how the cycle works, as this handy diagram demonstrates...



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I was once afraid of people saying, "Who does she think she is?"

Now I have the courage to say, "This is who I am."

OPRAH WINFREY

www.sumbodesigns.com

HOW COMMON IS IMPOSTER SYNDROME?

Where do you feel most affected by imposter syndrome? At work? At university? Within your family or your group of friends? Look around you. Of every ten people in that environment, probably seven will share your feelings of inadequacy. Although any kind of person can be impacted by imposter syndrome, some people are more likely to experience it than others. In academia, for example, women, perfectionists and first-generation students are most likely to struggle with feelings of imposterism. In the workplace, it's more likely to affect women and people of colour. Realizing how common feelings of imposter syndrome are, and especially how your own unique identity or circumstances may be contributing to your experience with it, is a great first step in overcoming the impact it's having on your life.

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HOW CAN YOU TELL IF YOU'RE EXPERIENCING IMPOSTER SYNDROME?

Ironically, people who experience imposter syndrome often have feelings of imposter syndrome about identifying their imposter syndrome. Confused? Don't be. This simple checklist will help you to understand whether your feelings of inadequacy are down to imposter syndrome, or something else. Check off the signs that resonate with you. If you check more than three, you may be experiencing imposter syndrome.

- ☐ I agonize over the smallest details
- ☐ I've been successful, but only thanks to luck
- ☐ I regularly feel self-doubt
- ☐ I'm sensitive to criticism
- ☐ I'm a perfectionist
- ☐ It's only a matter of time before I'm "found out"
- ☐ People who compliment me are "just being nice"
- ☐ If people knew the "real me", they'd think differently of me
- ☐ I have to work harder than my peers to have the same success
- ☐ I'm terrified of failure

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HOW IS IMPOSTER SYNDROME HOLDING YOU BACK?

As you undertake your journey through this book, it's important to identify the ways that imposter syndrome is holding you back. This will give you a clear set of goals to work towards as you acknowledge and begin to disrupt the negative cycle of imposter syndrome.

Try this!

Take some time with a pen and paper to list all the ways your sense of imposter syndrome is holding you back – whether that's from your ambitions, happiness or desires – and be as honest with yourself as possible. Now, rephrase each of your bullet points as a goal. For example, "I'm not good enough to apply for my dream job" would become, "I will apply for my dream job in three months' time". "I'm not interesting enough to go on dates" becomes, "I will ask somebody on a date this month".

Keeping your focus practical will give you a practical roadmap out of imposter syndrome and towards confidence.

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