How to Overcome ‘Impostor Syndrome’

By JESSICA BENNETT June 11, 2020
Illustrations by Ariel Davis


It’s that nagging feeling that you don’t belong, and it affects women and minority groups disproportionately. Here’s how to combat it.

Introduction

My impostor syndrome has played out during public speeches, job negotiations and when I received my first book deal — prompting me to ask, “But why would anyone pay money to read what I have to say?” My editor, a woman, didn’t miss a beat: “I often wonder the same about my editing!” she said.

The term “impostor syndrome” wasn’t coined until 1978 (by two American psychologists, Pauline Clance and Suzanne Imes), but it’s safe to assume that women have always felt it. It’s that nagging feeling that you’re not good enough, that you don’t belong, that you don’t deserve the job, the promotion, the book deal, the seat at the table. According to Valerie Young, an educator and the author of “The Secret Thoughts of Successful Women,” it is common among high achievers, creative people and students. It persists through college and graduate school and into the working world, where women tend to judge their performance as worse than they objectively are while men judge their own as better. It tends to affect minority groups disproportionately, Ms. Young said — anyone who has the pressure of accomplishing “firsts.”

But there are ways to overcome feeling like an impostor — beginning by recognizing that it’s more than just a feeling.

Do You Feel Like an Impostor?

Feel a wave of self-doubt coming on? You might be suffering from impostor syndrome — and part of what makes it so complicated is that there’s no one way that it plays out. Among the ways it can manifest itself:

• **You feel like a fraud.** Even when you’ve arguably “made it” — you got the job, you earned the recognition, you won the award — you can’t seem to shake the feeling that it’s all smoke and mirrors, that you must have tricked everyone, and that at any moment you’ll be discovered.

• **You devalue your worth.** I recently tried to talk somebody out of giving me money for work. “Why don’t I just do it for free?” I offered. A male friend who was in the room while I was having this phone conversation practically shook me. “Jessica! Just take the money!” he said. (At which point I said yes.)
How to Overcome ‘Impostor Syndrome’

• **You undermine your experience or expertise.** I was talking about impostor syndrome with a friend, a teacher who was being recruited for a new job. “But I’m totally not qualified,” she said. (They had recruited her!) I interviewed a postdoctoral engineering student named Celeste, who told me that while she was working as a mechanical engineer, a supervisor noted in her review that she wouldn’t call herself an engineer. “I didn’t realize I told my co-workers I wasn’t an engineer when I was,” she said. “And I think, for me, it was an excuse just in case I made mistakes.”

**Remember: You are Not Alone**

When suffering from self-doubt, it's easy to think that you're the only one who’s ever felt that way — but it’s not true. Even the most successful, powerful and accomplished women (and men, too) have been unsure of themselves at one point or another. But don't take my word for it. Here are a few former impostors in their own words:

**Tina Fey:** “The beauty of the impostor syndrome is you vacillate between extreme egomania and a complete feeling of: ‘I’m a fraud! Oh God, they're onto me! I’m a fraud!’”

**Maya Angelou:** The prizewinning author once said, after publishing her 11th book, that every time she wrote another one she’d think to herself: “Uh-oh, they’re going to find out now. I’ve run a game on everybody.”

**Michelle Obama:** The former first lady has spoken and written about how, as a young woman, she used to lie awake at night asking herself: Am I too loud? Too much? Dreaming too big? “Eventually, I just got tired of always worrying what everyone else thought of me,” she said. “So I decided not to listen.”
How to Overcome ‘Impostor Syndrome’

Psyche Yourself Up

Research has found that what you say to yourself can actually change the way you see yourself — boosting confidence during a nerve-racking event. Here are four exercises to change the way you think about yourself.

- **Make a list.** Make a list of at least 10 things that show you are just as qualified as anyone else for the role you are seeking. Having trouble? First ask yourself what evidence exists that you are any less qualified than anybody else to do this work. Is there anything that makes you, I daresay, more qualified?

- **Say your name aloud.** Research has found that the simple act of taking a positive affirmation (such as “I’m awesome”) and adding your name to it (“Jessica is awesome”) can have a powerful effect on how you perceive yourself. And before you get bashful, LeBron James does it. “I wanted to do what was best for LeBron James,” he said when explaining his decision to leave the Cleveland Cavaliers for the Miami Heat in 2010. The Nobel laureate Malala Yousafzai has done it, too. “I said, ‘If he comes, what would you do, Malala?’” she told Jon Stewart, describing how she wrestled with her decision to speak out against the Taliban. “Then I would reply to myself, ‘Malala, just take a shoe and hit him.’” If it's good enough for a Nobel Peace Prize winner, I'm pretty sure it's good enough for the rest of us.

- **Own your accomplishments.** Women tend to explain their successes away by ascribing them to things like “luck,” “hard work” or “help from others” rather than the innate ability or intelligence that men often cite. Try to own the role you played in your success by forbidding yourself from falling back on excuses. Practice saying these words out loud: “I’m proud of what I’ve accomplished.”

- **Visualize success.** Visualize precisely how you’ll navigate the situation — successfully — before it happens. This is a tactic that is taught to military recruits, training them to visualize how they’re going to handle a situation before it happens. “I’ve used this a ton in my career,” said Maj. Nicole Miner, a former instructor at West Point. “Before confronting a naysayer I would conduct a mental rehearsal to make sure I was clear and firm. Self-talk then helps me stay under control and in the ‘right’ mindset for the situation. Your confidence doesn’t have to come from just experience, otherwise we would never try things for the first time.” Imagine yourself killing the job interview, nailing the presentation, or kicking the winning goal. Try it.
How to Overcome ‘Impostor Syndrome’

Fight the Impostor Feeling

So you’ve talked to yourself in the mirror and made lists of your accomplishments, and you still feel that impostor feeling creeping in. Try the following:

• **Talk to a colleague or friend.** Has she felt like an impostor, too? Knowing this is a thing that others feel will help make it just that: a thing, but not your thing. If that doubtful voice begins to creep into your head, repeat: “It’s not me, it’s the impostor syndrome talking.”

• **Unsubscribe from doubt.** In his book “Originals: How Non-Conformists Move the World,” Adam Grant, a professor of management and psychology at the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania, describes two kinds of doubt: self-doubt, which causes you to freeze up, and idea doubt, which can motivate people to refine, test or experiment with a good idea. Try to turn self-doubt into idea doubt by telling yourself: It’s not that I’m bad, it’s that the first few drafts of any idea are always bad — and I’m just not there yet.

• **Decide to be confident.** Literally make the choice to be confident. Raise your hand. Volunteer your expertise. When you start spiraling into self-doubt, force yourself to write down three things you’ve done well. (If three isn’t enough to ease your doubts, write three more.) And actually hand-write them. A 2014 study shows that people remember things better when they’ve written rather than typed them.

• **Remind yourself you’re good at what you do.** I have a folder in my inbox called “fun/nice.” It’s full of praise I’ve received over the years, to remind myself of my value when I need a quick confidence boost. Jessica Kirkpatrick, a data scientist based in Berkeley, Calif., told me she employs something called the “rubber band trick.” She wears a rubber band around her wrist and snaps it every time she has an impostor thought. It’s the same premise as Pavlov’s dogs: This action sends feedback to your brain, which eventually stops the thoughts that trigger the action. “Change your thoughts, and the brain will follow,” she said.

It’s important to remember: Failure doesn’t make you a fraud. Even the best athletes screw up, the best lawyers lose cases, the best actors star in busts. Failing, losing and being wrong on occasion are all part of the job. Don’t let it define you. Learn from your mistakes and move forward.

About the Author