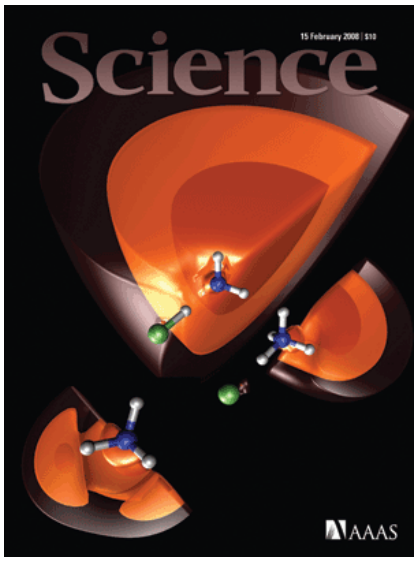
Science
AAAS

No, You're Not an Impostor

February 14, 2008

By Lucas Laursen



When a tenured professor admitted in a panel discussion that she had felt like a fraud as a graduate student, Abigail* knew exactly what she meant. The professor told the group that she had worried that she'd been let into her graduate program on a fluke and that someday she'd make an error that would blow her cover. She had always believed her peers in graduate school were much smarter despite knowing that she had the best grades of the bunch. "She said that she realised much later that this was completely ridiculous thinking and that obviously she was smart enough," says Abigail, a Ph.D. student in cell biology. "What she said really spoke to me."

Abigail has far more laboratory experience than most of her peers, thanks to 4 years of work as a lab technician before starting her doctorate. Yet, each failed lab procedure or delayed experiment makes her question her abilities, even after the equipment turns out to be at fault. She worries that someday her colleagues might wise up and out her as an impostor, a fraud in a lab coat.

"Impostor syndrome" is the name given to the feelings that Abigail and many other young scientists describe: Their accomplishments are just luck or deceit, and they're in over their heads. The key to getting past it, experts say, is making accurate, realistic assessments of your performance. Perhaps equally important: knowing you're not alone. Abigail thinks that sharing her feelings with other people is how she will eventually come to grips with her sense of feeling like an impostor. "It's fantastic to hear other people say, 'I've felt that way, too.' "

What's in a name?

Clinical psychologist Pauline Clance and colleague Suzanne Imes coined the term "impostor phenomenon" in a 1978 paper in Psychotherapy Theory, Research and Practice. They gave this name to high-performing but inwardly anxious women who were among the professionals attending Clance's group-therapy sessions. "These women do not experience an internal sense of success," wrote Clance. "They consider themselves to be 'impostors' " despite scoring well on standardised tests, earning advanced degrees, and receiving professional awards. Early on, this phenomenon was associated with women, a belief that persists today. But subsequent studies, including another by Clance, have shown that men are affected in equal numbers.

"That validates my experience," confirms Richard Felder, professor emeritus of chemical engineering at North Carolina State University in Raleigh. Felder was placed in remedial classes due to disciplinary problems in grade school. By the time he reached high school, he was performing better than most of his peers, but he had not overcome the feeling that his "earlier

self would re-emerge." Years later, as a professor, he came across an article describing the impostor phenomenon and says that "the feeling of liberation was powerful."

Richard Felder

In 1988, Felder wrote an article called "Impostors Everywhere," which has helped instructors guide students past such feelings. Felder says he often gives copies of the article to students he thinks might find it enlightening, and he's had women and men alike burst into tears of recognition. One student jokingly accused him of having read her diary.

Plenty of people get their motivation by comparing themselves to peers and trying to keep up or get ahead. So how do impostor feelings differ from a natural sense of competition, insecurity, or humility? "Humility and self-esteem are certainly related" to the impostor phenomenon, says Justin Kruger, a professor at New York University Stern School of Business who researches self-assessment and comparative judgements. But he goes on to point out that true humility relies on an accurate assessment of ability, whereas people who demonstrate the impostor phenomenon, "despite being fully competent, … feel that they don't really belong."

Unintended Consequences

Mary,* an assistant professor better known to her blog readers as Science Woman, says her impostor feelings were strongest when she was applying for jobs in three different subfields at the end of graduate school. She felt inadequately prepared for interviews in each of them because there was simply too much literature to stay current in all three. She is now partway through her first year as a tenure-track assistant professor and worries that she won't be able to compete with her peers for grants.

Valerie Young

Mary doesn't speak about these feelings with her new colleagues. Instead, she keeps a blog about her experiences--including her impostor feelings--and relies on advice from mentors in the blogosphere. When asked whether the strategy has worked, she laughs: "Well, obviously it's still somewhat of an issue for me," she says. "You know, I kind of just try to act like it doesn't exist and do the best job I can in both my teaching and my research." She shakes her head in disbelief at her online followers' admiration for her. "My god, I'm a first-year woman on the tenure track, and I'm barely holding it together!"

It is probably normal to experience impostor feelings to some degree in an unfamiliar environment, says career counsellor Valerie Young. "If there is some new transitional experience, new career, new promotion, it can trigger those feelings." Impostors have trouble putting those feelings in perspective and worry about their errors, not recognising that their colleagues make them, too. They also attribute their successes to luck or other factors beyond their control, while attributing the successes of their peers to skill.

Young says the root of the problem appears to be "very unrealistic notions of what it means to be competent" and says that people "set this internal bar exceedingly high." When they occasionally fail, these people may adopt negative behaviours such as procrastination and perfectionism. Mary says that her impostor feelings "maybe slightly held me back, particularly in terms of getting things written up and submitted. … I'm never sure whether it's good enough, so maybe I hang onto things longer than colleagues." But when asked, she concedes that she doesn't know how much time her colleagues spend on their work--an example of setting goals based on an incomplete understanding of her competition.

"Impostors" may also be less willing to present their work for evaluation, fearing that every time they do, they are at risk of being exposed. "Why apply for a position you secretly believe you are not qualified for?" asks Abigail.

Solutions: Impostors love company

Rugged individualists get past their impostor feelings by getting on with their job. But for others, breaking the issue down into manageable steps may be helpful.

Justin Kruger

For many "impostors," a disjunction exists between their self-assessment and their actual abilities. Young encourages her clients to recognise that feeling incompetent and being incompetent are two different things. "People aren't very accurate at identifying how well or how poorly they're doing," says social psychology professor David Dunning of Cornell University. But accuracy in self-assessment can mean the difference between gracefully carrying on after an unusually poor performance and skulking away from future challenges.

Another strategy, which Clance wrote about in her 1978 article, is to keep track of compliments you receive and focus on accepting rather than blowing off praise. Abigail developed a related approach for disowning her failures: She kept a list of all the times when she blamed herself for lab setbacks that turned out to be out of her control. "Eventually," she says, "the evidence piles up to the point where you have to look it in the eye and say, 'You know, it's not me!' "

A particularly effective tactic is talking to other people. "We can't peer into the minds of others and see that, 'Wait a minute, everyone else is also just as mystified!' " says Kruger, so people need to make the effort to discuss their performance with their peers. When you discover that the people you admire (or fear) sometimes worry about their own achievements, it can give you perspective on your own anxieties." As Kruger puts it, "nobody wants to entertain the possibility that they're the only one who doesn't get it."

Of course, it's easy to say that you should talk to peers and advisers but much harder to do. It can be awkward to admit to advisers that you worry that you're unqualified for the job. "Your worst fear would be for them to say, 'You know, I've been thinking that, too!' " says Abigail. Instead, both Abigail (known on her blog as Mrs. Whatsit) and Mary have reached out to other young scientists via their personal blogs, which afford them a level of anonymity but still help them air out their worries and seek support from their readers.

Impostor feelings have a way of festering silently for a long time, thanks to the difficulty of accurate self-assessment and the social stigma of asking for help. Connecting with peers

anonymously can be a first step toward realising that great scientists are made, not born, and that even some of the best of them faced on-the-job doubts along the way.

* Names have been changed.

Fake! Fraud! Impostor!

Get Over Insecurities and Give Yourself the Credit You Deserve

October 2005

By Ginger Rue

Allison,* 36, wasn't worried when she got a prestigious job in public relations. The Alabama resident had been one of the top students in her advertising program, and PR wasn't so different. But when she assigned her staff their first big project, someone asked a question using PR lingo she didn't know.

"I had no idea what the guy was talking about, so I bluffed my way through the meeting," Allison explains. Afterward, she grabbed an old PR textbook and berated herself about her shortcomings. "I told myself I had no business being there," she says. "I felt like a fraud. I figured it was just a matter of time until everyone else realized it."

Lots of people have had an experience like Allison's. The phenomenon even has a name. It's called Imposter Syndrome—a mindset in which smart, successful people believe that they have fooled others into thinking they're more intelligent and competent than they really are.

Public speaker and workshop leader Valerie Young, Ed.D., hosts seminars to help people like Allison break free from Imposter Syndrome. "You would think that the more successful a woman becomes, the less fraudulent she would feel, but for a lot of people, the more successful they become, the more those feelings become intensified," she explains.

Do you feel like a sham at work? Dr. Young says you probably have unrealistic expectations for yourself. Here's how to turn your thinking around.

Expectation

"If I were really smart, I'd know everything."

Helen, 23, of Washington, DC, recalls a mistake she made in her first job as a journalist. "I read on the Internet that a big celebrity was coming to town, so I wrote it up for my editor," she says. Turns out, the information wasn't true—and Helen hadn't verified her work. "I had to deal with angry calls for over a month," she says. "I felt stupid and totally unqualified to be a journalist." Of course, Helen wasn't stupid—just learning the ropes.

Tell yourself: I may not know everything, but I'm smart enough to learn. When you make a mistake at work, view the experience as an opportunity to grow and build up your skill set.

Expectation

"If I were really smart, I wouldn't need anyone else."

Another way to explain away success is to attribute it to others. People with Imposter Syndrome may believe that they owe their job to social connections or lucky timing. Amy, a 33-year-old from Ohio, is one of the most respected teachers in her school system, yet she questioned the glowing review her superintendent recently gave her. "The day he dropped in, I didn't feel that I was at my best," Amy says. "I wondered if he gave me a good review because I helped him with a project and he likes me."

Tell yourself: Connections wouldn't get me anywhere if I weren't qualified. Think about it: No one is going to risk career suicide by hiring or covering for an incompetent.

Expectation

"If I were really smart, I'd never question my abilities."

Intelligent people sometimes experience a paralyzing fear of failure. "It can cause perfectly capable people to drop out of school or never finish important projects," Dr. Young explains. Liz, 23, of Oregon, says, "I was a straight-A student through college and got tons of scholarships, yet sometimes I think maybe I would be happiest being a housewife one day, because I'd be able to avoid any chance of career failure or disappointment."

Tell yourself: I've accomplished a lot so far, and I can take on any challenge I choose. The only people who never make any mistakes are those who never try anything difficult.

Expectation

"If I were really smart, things would come easily to me."

Those with Imposter Syndrome often think that they can keep up with their peers only through constant hard work. When Emily, now 25, graduated from a top university, she began a career as an actuary in Los Angeles. "People often referred to me as being very bright," she says, "but there were many days that I felt clueless and it seemed I had to work and study so much harder than my coworkers."

Tell yourself: I'm just as capable as anyone else, or I wouldn't be here. Everybody's good at different things. It's normal for some things to be hard and other things to just flow.

Expectation

"If I were really smart, I'd push myself to do more."

The worst part about Imposter Syndrome may be the relentless pursuit of success. Like hamsters in a wheel, people with IS furiously chase the next challenge. Sonia, a 30-year-old artist in Texas, says, "I have a bachelor's degree and a master's, yet I feel I need to do more. This feeling won't go away, and probably never will."

Tell yourself: It's OK to feel satisfied. Take a look at your successes with an objective eye. Be proud of what you've accomplished.

A Chick Thing?

When Pauline Clance, Ph.D., and Suzanne Imes, Ph.D., first wrote about Imposter Syndrome in the '70s, they thought the mindset was unique to women. Later studies revealed that guys can also experience IS, but Dr. Young notes that in her many years of speaking about Imposter Syndrome, women have often been more likely to identify with her presentation.

The reason? Men may be less likely to consider feeling not-so-qualified a problem. "Guys learn how to boast and exaggerate as part of growing up," Dr. Young explains. If a man bluffs his way through something, he might even be proud of his ability to fake it. For women, feeling like they're the real deal tends to be more important.

Inc.com The Daily Resource for Entrepreneurs

The Impostor Syndrome

Why Do So Many Successful Entrepreneurs Feel Like Fakes?

September 2006

By Leigh Buchanan

By most definitions, Bud Stockwell has hit the personal-fulfillment trifecta. At 53, he owns a profitable $2 million health food store called Cornucopia. His business is a beloved institution in Northampton, Massachusetts. Cornucopia also satisfies its founder's activist urges by providing a platform from which to promote natural, healthy living.

In fact, Cornucopia is such a fine business that last year it was named best small natural foods store in America by a natural products publication. When a reporter called to interview the owner for an article about his award, Stockwell readily answered her questions. But then he told no one. Not his wife. Not his daughter. Not one of his 23 employees. "The magazine came out two months later and it was almost like I was embarrassed by it," says Stockwell. "I didn't feel like I deserved it. I think we have a great business, but how much of that was because of me and how much is because of our location or the staff? There's still part of me that always questions that."

Stockwell's self-doubt is an example of the impostor syndrome, a term coined in the '70s to describe the fear that one is not as smart or capable as others think. People who feel like fakes chalk up their accomplishments to external factors such as luck and timing, or worry they are coasting on charm and personality rather than on talent. Psychological research done in the early 1980s estimated that two out of five successful people consider themselves frauds; other studies have found that 70 percent of all people feel like fakes at one time or another. "Some people, the more successful they become, the more they feel like frauds," says Valerie Young, who leads workshops and professional development programs on the subject. "They feel as though they're fooling people. There's a dissonance between self-image and external reality."

Such sentiments seem at odds with entrepreneurship. Starting companies, after all, requires plus-size confidence, and few positions are more exposed than the summit of one's own business. In addition, factors that often contribute to the impostor syndrome--such as poor

academic records and uninspiring early careers--are badges of pride for many entrepreneurs, who often speak derisively of M.B.A.'s and have made "fake it till you make it" a mantra.

"I know my company, but I don't have skills that I could apply somewhere else," says one entrepreneur. "I feel like a lot of what I've done has been a fluke."

In other ways, though, entrepreneurship is a perfect breeding ground for the syndrome. "People who have had bad experiences in organizations may see entrepreneurship as the only way out because it allows them to control their lives," says Manfred Kets de Vries, a psychoanalyst and professor of leadership development at Insead, in France. With no boss, company founders can avoid critical scrutiny. Buffered by their relative control of the environment, entrepreneurs may feel ill-equipped to survive in the outside world. "I've always felt if I stopped doing Cornucopia, who would hire me?" says Stockwell. "If I think about it rationally, I know there's good reason I'm successful. But it wouldn't take a lot to shake my confidence." Adds Steven Myhill-Jones, CEO of Latitude Geographics Group, a $2.5 million geographic-analysis software company in Victoria, British Columbia: "I know my company, but I don't have skills that I could go apply somewhere else. I feel like a lot of what I've done has been a fluke or good timing."

Ironically, it was Latitude's inability to exploit good timing that upped its odds of survival. Although Latitude Geographics was born amid dot-com bounty, Myhill-Jones was starved by the banks, which questioned his lack of experience (he started his business at 23, with a resumé consisting of a bachelor's degree in geography and an internship at a land-use agency). He grew dejected watching other wing-and-a-prayer companies attract large investments. When a direct competitor landed $12 million in venture funding, he considered folding. "I felt like I had no business being in business," Myhill-Jones says. Myhill-Jones may have felt like a fake, but he acted like a real entrepreneur and expanded the business organically. That strategy made it healthy--far healthier than the venture-backed competitor, which soon collapsed.

Another Achilles' heel has to do with expectations. The public assumes CEOs will be knowledgeable about every aspect of their businesses, and business is getting more complex. In this respect, those with scant education are especially vulnerable. "It's like the skills I have are just commonsense skills, like being able to relate to people," says Stockwell. "They don't feel as valid as knowledge-based skills." Myhill-Jones, for his part, is the founder of a software company who knows very little about technology. "To this day I can't do the work we do," he says. "I can make a comment on the user interface or something. But I don't understand the underlying technology."

Both Myhill-Jones and Stockwell have coped chiefly by hiring around their perceived deficiencies. Other responses are less salutary. In the corporate world, where the impostor syndrome is well documented, self-doubters may turn down promotions or switch jobs to avoid exposure. Entrepreneurs sometimes decline interviews and speaking engagements, or even designate someone else to be the public face of their companies. Many wear away their noses through ceaseless application to grindstones. "They think, 'Sure, I'm successful but it's only because I'm working 80 hours a week,'" says Young. "'If I let up for a second, it's all going to fall apart.'"

In extreme cases, desperate efforts to shore up foundations perceived as weak can bring down the whole structure, says Kets de Vries. He recalls treating one entrepreneur who felt himself wholly inadequate to run a company, as though nothing he did was ever good enough. "So he kept pushing and pushing," says Kets de Vries. "His company was falling apart, his wife had left him, his children didn't like him anymore. He had physical symptoms." Kets de Vries suggests

that those who feel like a phony bring on a partner. Valerie Young suggests a simpler approach: Treat faking it as a strength. “If you’re an entrepreneur you’re going to have to wing it,” she says.

The impostor syndrome may be especially problematic among women. In the business realm, female CEOs are still rare enough that many believe their performance is being watched more closely and that their success or failure reflects directly on their female peers. Fundamental issues of nature and nurture also apply. “There’s a lot of evidence that boys growing up tend to blame things outside of themselves when things go wrong: The other team cheated; the referee wasn’t fair; the teacher didn’t give us enough time to study,” says Young. “Girls tend to blame themselves. So when they don’t make the sale, the customer isn’t saying he doesn’t like the product--he’s saying, ‘You’re inadequate.’”

Academic research holds that men and women experience the impostor syndrome in comparable numbers, but “I’ve been doing this 25 years, and anecdotally that’s not what I’ve found,” says Young. “I’ll meet some guy on a plane and I’ll tell him what I do and he doesn’t get it. He’ll say, ‘That’s stupid. Why would anybody feel that way?’”

GLAMOUR

Are You Suffering from Impostor Syndrome?

Convinced you're not up to the job? Here's how to beat your internal fraud squad

September 2005

You're smart and successful, so why do you feel like a failure? It may be you have Impostor Syndrome, a term coined by clinical psychologist Dr. Pauline Clance, to describe doubt in your own abilities and fear of not maintaining your success. Glamour reveals some expert tips to ensure you put your trust in your talent.

You Land a Promotion

You think: "There can't have been many people to choose from."

Dr. Valerie Young, who runs Impostor Syndrome workshops, explains: "Although you should see the promotion as a vote of confidence, you convince yourself it is anything but that."

Solution: "Put yourself in the shoes of the people promoting you," says Dr. Young. "They're not going to do it unless they think you're up to it. After all, *their* reputation depends on it, too. Replace 'Oh no! What am I doing?' with 'Wow! I'm really going to learn a lot.'"

You're Awarded a Pay Rise

You think: "I don't deserve it. There must be some mistake."

Solution: "You must take control of your negative mindset immediately," says life coach Fiona Harrold, author of *Indestructible Self-Belief* (Piatkus Books, £4.99). "If you allow your self-doubt to run riot, you'll undermine yourself and your employer will start to wonder why they did give you that rise. Sit down and think of compelling reasons why you're worth every extra penny. Justify it to yourself and recognize how valuable you are to the organization."

You're Asked to Lead a Crucial Project

You think: "I know I'm going to mess this up."

Solution: “Make choices based on what gives you a sense of fulfillment, not fear,” says Dr. Clance. You don’t want to take on an impossible task as that will just reinforce your feelings of inadequacy. And Cary Cooper, professor of organizational psychology and health at Lancaster University, reminds us: “There’s nothing wrong with asking for help.”

Your Boss Leaves and You’re in Line for Her Job

You think: “Will I be able to cope? And won’t my colleagues be jealous?”

Solution: “Every time you step into a new role, it takes a few months to find your feet,” says Dr. Young. “Whether the move will generate jealousy or not depends on your current reputation and rapport with other staff members. Although you may become your colleagues’ superior, make sure you are inclusive and maintain good relationships with them all.”

Chicago Tribune FINAL

Who Do You Think You Are?

Big success can make you feel so small

Wednesday, March 30, 2005

By Leslie Goldman

All eyes were on Liz Ryan as she took the stage in New York to receive her "Stevie" award — the business equivalent of an Oscar.

But as she accepted, Ryan, founder and chief executive officer of WorldWIT, a women's online discussion community, was filled with doubt.

"Bill Rancic (of "The Apprentice") was handing me the award and I'm thinking, 'Who the hell am I? I'm just a mom with an overflowing laundry room and a 2-year-old with applesauce in his hair,'" remembers Ryan.

This wasn't the first time doubts had circulated through her mind.

Such thoughts go deeper than deprecation or fleeting lapses in self-confidence. It's an issue some mental-health professionals call the Impostor Syndrome, and it affects many highly successful women.

The syndrome was identified in 1978 by psychology professor Pauline Clance and psychologist Suzanne Imes as a persistent belief in one's lack of intelligence, skill or competence.

It's a sense of intellectual fraudulence; the belief that one doesn't deserve her academic or career achievement and simply has been able to fool others into believing in her abilities.

Arla Lisa McMillan, a psychotherapist, says she sees a steady flow of Impostor Syndrome clients.

It's an exhausting way to live.

"Say you're a successful banker, sitting with a client, and they're asking you questions and you're answering but you're thinking, 'There must be a better answer.'

“You’re second-guessing yourself, thinking any second you’re going to be discovered. You’re constantly on guard.”

Businesswomen, who are achieving more and more in spheres in which they previously didn’t exist, are prime candidates.

“That is a set up for feelings of inadequacy,” says McMillan.

Impostor Syndrome can be considered a clinical phenomenon but not a psychiatric diagnosis.

What determines whether treatment is needed is the degree, the intensity and whether it interferes with one’s ability to complete daily tasks, says psychiatrist Leslie Hartley Gise, clinical professor in the department of psychiatry at the University of Hawaii.

“Who among us hasn’t doubted ourselves at some point?” Gise says.

“All of these things in a mild form are part of normal human experience. But if somebody is staying three extra hours at work to prove they can make it, it would more likely be a disorder and something they would want to address.”

Arguably, Impostor Syndrome could be a new label for old-fashioned insecurity or a lack of self-confidence.

But some experts say the issue goes deeper.

Valerie Young, a teacher who holds a doctorate in education, says “impostors” come from all walks of life and all career levels: physicians, nurses, lawyers, educators, computer programmers and students.

The syndrome can be especially rampant in historically male-dominated fields, such as science and engineering, she says, or for first-generation professionals “who feel the weight of being the standard-bearer for their family or race in some cases.”

Young herself had felt like an impostor until she put a name to the face in 1983 during a graduate class.

“Somebody brought a paper into class and started describing this syndrome — bright, capable women who felt like they’d fooled others, managed to slip through the system undetected.

“I looked around the room and saw all the other women graduate students nodding their heads.”

She now teaches a workshop designed to help women feel as capable as their success would suggest they are.

For writer Jory Des Jardins, 32, the syndrome first manifested itself several years ago, when her articles were printed in major publications, including The New York Times.
“When people got excited about my work, I’d think, ‘Oh, my God, I can’t believe you read that article. I can’t believe you thought it was good.’”

The syndrome later surfaced when Des Jardins was promoted at a media startup. "They were treating the job like it was brain surgery, and I felt I had not done anything significant to earn it," she recalls.

Eventually, after a string of jobs left her feeling perpetually dissatisfied, she sought assistance from a career coach who asked if she had ever heard of Impostor Syndrome.

"I Googled it and realized there are a lot of people with it. No one who is senior vice president of banking would want to admit she doesn't feel up to snuff."

According to Young, three elements are at the core of the syndrome: a warped definition of competence; a complex view of success; and the way some women respond to failure.

As for the competence aspect, Young says, "Our internal bar is set way too high."

The result: Anything short of a flawless performance leaves perfectionists feeling unsuccessful.

Consider Ryan, who started a software company in 1999, which Motorola recently bought for $25 million.

Even though she hasn't been involved with the company for three years, she has been getting congratulatory calls about the purchase.

"My first thought is, 'Yes, it's great, but it took five years, it's just a $25 million sale.'

"A friend said, 'What do you mean just a $25 million sale? Why do you trivialize that?'"

Ryan theorizes that she may be prone to discounting her accomplishments because she was raised to believe tooting one's own horn is unseemly.

This unreachable internal bar, Young explains, also could be a result of being raised in a society in which women often get the message that they are worth less than men.

The syndrome often stays with women even as they grow more successful, Young says.

One might assume that as a woman achieves career goals her feelings of being a fraud decrease. But for women with Impostor Syndrome, it's just the opposite.

"Now you have a reputation to defend; the stakes are higher," Young says.

Even actress Jennifer Aniston told Vogue, "Without fail, the night before a photo shoot, I go, 'Why do I think I'm allowed to be in a magazine?' I just get so terrified."

The third component in Impostor Syndrome is how women experience and respond to failure.

As Gise put it: "Women are at high risk to overreacting to negative feedback or criticism.

"If somebody asked her to do something again, she might feel like a failure; a man might think, 'That boss is a bastard, he has unreasonable expectations.'"

To break out of the syndrome, McMillan advises, women must identify the symptoms. These include self-denigrating thoughts that always add up to not feeling good enough: believing that others are smarter; being easily discouraged; feelings of inadequacy; negative self-talk; and inability to show vulnerability.

McMillan encourages women to counter negative thoughts by writing down positive statements, such as: “I did an excellent job on that report because I did a great deal of research and knew the subject well.”

Another strategy is to ask oneself: If my friend came to me with this, what would I say to her?

If the problem persists, it might be useful to seek outside assistance, such as psychotherapy, from a mental-health professional.

Getting help can be especially crucial, McMillan says, as Impostor Syndrome can leave women vulnerable to eating disorders, substance abuse or other addictions.

For Des Jardins, addressing the syndrome has freed her to enjoy life more.

That meant quitting her corporate job to become a full-time writer and penning a semi-autobiographical book.

For Ryan, it’s been a matter of putting one foot in front of the other.

“I still doubt myself a million times a day, but my success has been an incontrovertible thing. That doesn’t fill whatever hole you have inside you, but it tells you what the world sees.”

Even Young acknowledges that she doesn’t think Impostor Syndrome ever really goes away.

“It’s a matter of replacing the old pattern of thoughts and emotions,” she says.

“If Katie Couric asked me to be on the ‘Today’ show, these feelings would still come up for me. But I could calm myself down much faster and be excited for myself.”

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THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

You're Not Fooling Anyone

November 9, 2007

By John Gravois, New York

Holden Caulfield used to hunt phonies a few blocks from here, but times have changed. Now the phonies — or people who think they are, anyway — hunt themselves.

Case in point: On a recent evening, Columbia University held a well-attended workshop for young academics who feel like frauds.

These were duly vetted, highly successful scholars who nonetheless live in creeping fear of being found out. Exposed. Sent packing.

If that sounds familiar, you may have the impostor syndrome. In psychological terms, that's a cognitive distortion that prevents a person from internalizing any sense of accomplishment.

"It's like we have this trick scale," says Valerie Young, a traveling expert on the syndrome who gave the workshop at Columbia. Here's how that scale works: Self-doubt and negative feedback weigh heavily on the mind, but praise barely registers. You attribute your failures to a stable, inner core of ineptness. Meanwhile, you discount your successes as accidental or, worse, as just so many confidence jobs. Every positive is a false positive.

By many accounts, academics — graduate students, junior professors, and even some full professors — relate to this only a little less than they relate to eye strain.

The condition was first identified in 1978 by the psychologists Pauline Rose Clance and Suzanne Imes, who initially thought it was an anxiety unique to women. They avoided the word "syndrome," calling it instead the "impostor phenomenon."

"I didn't want it to be seen as one more thing people could see as wrong with women," says Ms. Clance.

She need not have worried.

The idea quickly struck a chord with scholars from the working class, along with other beneficiaries of the social mobility that infused higher education in the 1960s and 1970s. Those new academics bristled at the old guard's sense of entitlement. But they found themselves crippled by a stubborn inability to feel the same.

Meanwhile, scholars who came from academic legacies — the children of the old guard — had feelings of unearned privilege to contend with.

In the mid-1980s, Ms. Clance teamed up with Gail Matthews, now a professor of psychology at Dominican University of California, to conduct a survey on the phenomenon. They found that about 70 percent of people from all walks of life — men and women — have felt like impostors for at least some part of their careers. “We had no idea it was this widespread,” says Ms. Matthews.

In other words, we have come so far in the American postindustrial meritocracy that everyone has equal access to guilt-ridden feelings of fraudulence.

According to Ms. Matthews, a person with impostor syndrome typically experiences a cycle of distress when faced with a new task: self-doubt, followed by perfectionism, then — sometimes but not always — procrastination.

“The next step is often overwork,” Ms. Matthews says. “It has a driven quality — a lot of anxiety, a lot of suffering.

“Then comes success,” she says. “So you do well!”

(Pause for a brief sigh of relief.)

“Then you discount your success,” she says. “Success reinforces the whole cycle.”

Ms. Young, the proprietor of **http://www.impostorsyndrome.com**, is a trim, businesslike woman who calls herself a “recovering impostor.” After learning about the syndrome in graduate school — and identifying strongly with it — she left academe with a Ph.D. in education and hit the lecture circuit.

She has delivered her talk, “How to Feel as Bright and Capable as Everyone Seems to Think You Are,” at dozens of campuses. The University of Texas at Austin alone has had her out four times. Other universities, like Stanford and the University of Michigan, conduct their own in-house workshops on the syndrome.

Ms. Young’s recent lecture at Columbia, delivered to a group of mostly graduate students, had a waiting list of 60 for a 190-person auditorium.

Ms. Young recommends various strategies to help her audiences attribute success to their intelligence and not to flukes or fakery. She suggests getting comfortable with a skill that rhymes with “woolfitting” and means something like “winging it.” It is a skill, she says, that many old-fashioned males treat as such, but that people with the impostor syndrome regard as a character flaw.

The students at Columbia seemed reluctant to let go of their feelings of fraudulence, however. At one point, some of them interrupted the lecture with a flurry of cross talk.

“What if somebody’s parents did go here — did get them in?” asked a concerned undergraduate in the first row. “It’s a good question!” said a young man in the middle of the auditorium, craning his neck to scan the room, as if waiting for someone to fess up.

A young woman blurted: “I went to New York City public schools.”

Finally, a graduate student in the back row — a husky-voiced woman with a few piercings — brought an end to the squirm-inducing exchange.

“Yes,” she said, “It is possible that there is someone in this room who really is an impostor. But look at how many of us there are.”

Then she surveyed the audience of overachievers and said, “We couldn’t have all gotten here for crap reasons.”

Reprinted in:

Sun-Sentinel

The Urge to Self-Destruct Puts You in Lofty Company

April 28, 2005

By James Warren, Chicago Tribune

If you secretly fret that others will discover you're not as brilliant as they assume, you may suffer from a purported malady whose name suggests the analytical flexibility of the psychology profession. Yes, you could be a victim of the dreaded Impostor Syndrome.

According to the May-June issue of *Best Life* (a magazine about "what matters to men"), this syndrome may well explain former Tyco boss Dennis Kozlowski's disputed financial dealings, *West Wing* producer Aaron Sorkin's drug bust, short-time University of Alabama football coach Mike Price's topless-bar escapade and *New York Times* scam artist Jayson Blair's phony reporting. They all goofed big time as they reached certain lofty heights of their chosen fields.

One social psychologist, who is identified here as "an expert on the subject," informs us that the syndrome stems from low self-esteem and the fact that success can bring gloom and pressure because since "with every gain, there is also a loss."

So, if you're planning to run a Fortune 500 company, or coach a famous sports team, "Get a good psychological screening for depression, manic-depressive disorders, or substance abuse if you suspect there's a problem," counsels Daniel Yohanna, director of psychiatry at Northwestern University's Feinberg School of Medicine.

Of course, how many folks who ascend the top of any institutional mountain will concede failings of any consequence? But you can take a brief quiz on the topic, with questions passed along by Valerie Young, "a well-known authority on impostor syndrome." By the time you're done, maybe you'll be a well-known authority, too, if not necessarily willing to admit fatal imperfections.

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The Boston Globe

Imposter Phenomenon

When Even The Most Successful People Have a Gnawing Feeling They're Fakes

March 22, 1986

By Carol Stocker, Globe Staff:

A certified public accountant who receives the highest test score in the CPA Boards in the state of Massachusetts attributes her success to the fact that "it's a small state."

After applying for a job in Boston, a woman is told she is the best candidate the search committee has seen. She attributes the good impression to the fact that the interview was held on July 5 and the panel "is probably hung over from July 4 parties."

A conference participant at Simmons College says she feels that the standards for her doctorate were too low. "I figure if I can get a PhD from Harvard, anybody can."

All these women suffer from a very common syndrome that's been dubbed the "Imposter Phenomenon" -- the secret and subjective experience of feeling like a phony, despite a documented record of achievement, and the accompanying fear of being unmasked.

Ironically, these "imposters" are usually very competent. And the phenomenon especially strikes those who have received public recognition for success.

Victims of the Imposter Phenomenon measure accomplishments on a trick scale, "where only the negative evidence counts," said Valerie Young, an associate at New Perspectives, Inc., an Amherst-based training program and consulting organization.

"And they have very long memories for failures . . . As I got closer to getting my doctorate," Young recalled, "I started having a recurring dream where someone would go back in my records and find I had failed to complete some requirement in the first grade."

Philadelphia clinical psychologist Joan Harvey, who has studied the syndrome, said, "Lawyers have it a lot because they're on display all the time. I got a letter from a lawyer who got a perfect score in the law school admissions test and did well in school, yet he had never tried a case in a courtroom because he was afraid. He wrote me, 'I would be exposed by a merciless judge as the fraud I know myself to be.' So instead he went into corporate law -- and was the first among the graduates of his college to be promoted to a partner."

Although it is not a new problem, the Imposter Phenomenon didn't have a name until 1978, when the term was invented by Pauline Clance and Suzanne Imes, two psychologists at Georgia State University.

Since then, interest has snowballed. At least two popular books have been published on the subject in the last year: Harvey's "If I'm So Successful, Why Do I Feel Like a Fake," which just went into paperback, and "The Imposter Phenomenon" by Pauline Clance. And Peggy McIntosh, a program director at the Wellesley College Center for Research on Women, has written "Feeling Like a Fraud," which is available from The Stone Center at Wellesley College for $4.

Originally diagnosed as a problem unique to women, it is now being debated whether the imposter phenomenon is just as common -- though less often admitted -- among men.

Harvey found the same rate for both men and women, blacks and whites in research she conducted in affiliation with Temple University.

"One thing that did make a difference was whether they were the first generation of their families in a profession, the first generation to go to college," Harvey said. "Also, women in traditionally masculine careers were more apt to feel like imposters. And so did men in traditionally feminine careers."

McIntosh feels that the syndrome has class, race and gender components. "The larger culture has taught women and lower caste men that they do not belong in positions of power, creating policy and opinion."

Apparently all of the research and most of the workshops surrounding the issue have been conducted by women, who often see it as a feminist issue.

Harvey's explanation is that "men take it for granted and just live it, while women want to do something about it."

While men typically try to hide their insecurities, "Women turn themselves in," Young asserted. "They say -- 'You liked that report? I lost my train of thought in the middle.' They say 'You like this dress? I got it at a tag sale.' Men understand better that a mistake doesn't count unless it's found out."

Young has been offering workshops on the Imposter Phenomenon for women for four years. One reason why, Young said, is that few men would attend such a seminar to discuss their insecurities. "Men are more comfortable bluffing their way through difficulties, while women are much more comfortable discussing their problems."

But Young also agrees with McIntosh that society does more to encourage these feelings of inadequacy in women than in men. "What's seen as talent for a man is often viewed as luck for a woman. When Juanita Kreps was Secretary of Commerce in the Carter cabinet, a reporter asked how she explained the incredible luck in her career. 'Luck had nothing to do with it,' Kreps answered. But many women feel that they got into graduate school because Venus intersected with Saturn the day their applications were evaluated."

Karen Brown, a 24-year-old graduate student, admitted she had believed that her acceptance to Princeton as an undergraduate was because of a mix-up. “I spent most of four years thinking they confused me with another applicant because I have a common name.”

She was one of two dozen young women who told of such anxieties, often accompanied by the laughter of shared recognition, at a recent morning seminar Young held at the Boston University Medical Center. Most of the women were doctoral candidates in biochemistry, a predominantly male field.

The problem isn’t confined to students. Women in television production, real estate, human services, muscular therapy, job counseling, law and computers attended another seminar Young conducted at Radcliffe Career Services, a Radcliffe office that helps alumnae and the general population with career issues.

The feeling of “faking it” is most common among first year college or graduate students or among people starting a new job, and it tends to vanish or recede as people learn the ropes. It is also commonly associated with writing and with public speaking -- which Young calls “the No. 1 fear in America. Dying is No. 2.”

But for a few, the Imposter Phenomenon is chronic and debilitating.

“In therapy, I’m seeing people who were successful but dropped out because they couldn’t stand the anxiety. One of my patients was a gifted child and got a full scholarship to college,” said Harvey. “But he started drinking and never finished. And he’s drifted from one thing to another. When he ran track in high school, he said, ‘I would find myself out in front and drop back to the rest of the pack.’ “

Harvey thinks the phenomenon combines both a fear of failure and a fear of success. “I have a patient right now applying for a job who has to write an essay and is totally paralyzed. Consciously she’s afraid she can’t get a job. Unconsciously, she’s afraid she will.”

Perhaps the most important function Young’s workshops serve is to allow people to share their secret and learn that others have the same feelings.

Young, who describes herself as a “recovering imposter,” was working on her doctorate in education at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst when she first heard about the syndrome at a school seminar. “I felt unmasked. Then I saw that others I knew to be competent were nodding their heads, too.”

She and her classmates formed a six-week “imposter support group.” Whenever possible Young urges those who attend her seminars to start similar groups.

There are also techniques which Harvey and Young suggest reduce or help eliminate the syndrome:

- Make a list of the situations in which “imposter” feelings are likely to strike. When you can warn yourself to expect these feelings, they’re easier to recognize and deal with.
- Separate feelings from reality. Remind yourself that feeling like an imposter is different from being an imposter.

- “Imposters” often have conflicting images of themselves as either geniuses or total idiots. Give yourself permission to be somewhere more in the middle, where most of us are most of the time.
- Be selective about what you go “all out” for and give yourself permission to have occasional “off” days.
- Set a modest goal for confronting this fear and think up a couple of steps you can take in the next month toward reaching it. For instance, if criticism triggers these feelings, ask a friend to gently critique some of your work on a regular basis. If you fear speaking in public, make it a habit to raise your hand once in every meeting.
- Try to break frightening tasks into several parts. If possible, start with the easiest part.
- Keep a written record of your accomplishments. Feel a sense of ownership for them.
- Talk about your secret fraudulent feelings with trusted friends. Find and give support.
- Don’t turn yourself in. “Fake it till you make it.”

To McIntosh, the phenomenon has further dimensions that are not addressed by confidence raising.

In fact, she sees a lot of authenticity in feelings of fraudulence. “When women apologize or falter in public, or refuse to take individual credit for what they’ve done, I think we should listen twice.

“Those who really think they are the best and the brightest are the real frauds,” McIntosh contends. “I think our feelings of fraudulence are very promising. They may, if we trust them, help us to alter the arrogant behaviors of power holders and question the myth that those who have power individually deserve it. We need new ways of using power to share power, of using privilege to share privilege. When women feel fraudulent, often they are trying to share power, privilege and credit in ways that have not yet been recognized.”

There are others who have good things to say about feeling like a fake.

Such as the male corporate executive who told Harvey he credited it with spurring him to work harder for success. “It’s a fear I can deal with. It’s very positive and I don’t want it to stop,” he told Harvey.

He admitted that the constant anxiety took a toll on his health, but he had his own solution: “I work out as much as I can.

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VENTURA COUNTY STAR
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Who They Foolin'?

From celebrities to CEOs, many successful people suffer from syndrome called 'impostor phenomenon'

November 17, 2002

By Kim Lamb Gregory

When she asked to be president of the National Association of Women Business Owners of Ventura County, Jerri Hemsworth smiled and accepted but inside she was thinking, "Do they really know I don't know what the hell I'm doing?" she recalled with a chuckle.

The Woodland Hills businesswoman was just as self-effacing about the graphics design service she launched six years ago that has since blossomed into Newman Grace, Inc., a full-service ad agency.

"I sit back and I think, 'I can't believe presidents of companies and marketing directors are taking me seriously,'" she said. "In reality, I *do* know what I'm talking about, but I don't feel that way."

Contrary to the stereotype of the cocky CEO barking orders aboard a company jet, many successful people are more like Hemsworth: humbled and amazed by their success.

They wonder if it will all disappear the minute somebody discovers what they think is their terrible secret – that they're really impostors.

Any moment, Hemsworth joked, she expects the Impostor Police to "knock on my door and say, 'Hey! You didn't go to art school!'" she said.

The fact of the matter is, folks like Hemsworth are not faking it. They are competent and conscientious but have a terrible time seeing what everybody else sees.

"I just created an ad for a new client and I'm still waiting for him to call up and say, 'You've got to be kidding! You want me to pay money for this?'" she said. "I'm stunned when people call up and say, 'You know, that ad worked so well.'"

Hemsworth could be among legions of successful people yoked to the "impostor phenomenon." In spite of overwhelming evidence to the contrary in the form of academic degrees, recognition, promotions and awards, people suffering from this syndrome don't believe they are as bright or capable as everybody else seems to believe they are.

The syndrome was discovered by two psychologists in the late 1970s. One of them, Pauline Rose Clance, Ph.D., says she still gets regular requests to this day for her 1986 book, "The Impostor Phenomenon: When Success Makes You Feel Like a Fake," even though it is out of print.

"I get calls from college students, executives, editors – different people from a wide range of professions who are looking for the book," she said.

The continuing demand for her book and testimony from people like Hemsworth suggest the impostor phenomenon is alive and well in the 21st century.

"I had thought perhaps, at some point, there might be a change as far as people experiencing the impostor phenomenon," Clance said, "but it's still very relevant."

A phenomenon persists

Those laboring under the impostor belief system attribute their success to luck, timing, a fluke or' some other capricious external circumstances.

"We feel like we've fooled people or charmed them and slipped through the system," said Valerie Young, Ph.D., a Massachusetts-based writer/lecturer who travels the U.S. giving seminars on the impostor phenomenon.

Young is among those who have designed workshops, written books or conducted further research on the syndrome, after Clance and her contemporary, Suzanne Imes, Ph.D.; identified it in 1978.

Clance and Imes, now both psychology professors at the University of Georgia, discovered the phenomenon while working at Overland College in Ohio, where the admissions standards are steep.

Clance was working with students who excelled academically, while Imes was helping students who were failing or dropping out.

Clance and Imes were surprised to learn that studel1ts who excelled academically felt as if they were faking their achievements, whereas the poor students were downright arrogant.

"Those students were overestimating their abilities," Clance remembered. "They'd say, 'This is an 'A' paper,' or 'I've aced this one,' and it would be a 'C' or a 'D' paper."

The good students felt as if they were in over their heads.

"Here I was with these brilliant Overland students, and they were saying, 'I don't know how I got in here. Maybe the admissions committee made a mistake.' "

Noticing the problem was especially grave among coeds, Clance and Imes researched and then wrote a 1978 report called "The Impostor Phenomenon Among High-Achieving Women."

They hit a nerve.

Soon, Clance and Imes were getting calls for interviews and TV appearances, and Clance herself began to feel the stirrings of the syndrome she had helped discover.

“When I was getting book contracts and I was on the Donahue show and ‘The Today Show’ and Time magazine, I did begin to feel that way,” Clance said. “Fortunately, because) had worked with it, I could say, ‘OK, I’m getting “impostor” feelings.’ “

Gender-neutral syndrome?

Young, who has a Ph.D. in education, first became interested in the phenomenon after seeing it in herself.

Now 48, she was sitting in a graduate studies class at the University of Massachusetts one day in the early ‘80s when another student rose to read excerpts from “The Impostor Phenomenon Among High-Achieving Women.”

As she listened to a report espousing the theory that some people -- especially women fear they are not deserving of their success and, are in fact fooling everybody, Young found herself nodding vigorously in understanding.

“When I snapped out of it, I looked around and all of the other women graduates were nodding their heads, too,” she said.

A few weeks later, she started a support group, then began doing her doctoral research on understanding and eliminating the psychological barriers preventing women from embracing their full potential.

Both Clance and Young’s empirical research suggests women are just as likely as men to suffer from the impostor syndrome but women are far more likely to admit it.

“Men were more likely to acknowledge impostor feelings in an anonymous survey,” Clance said.

Clance believes that’s because men are largely socialized to deny fear, or at least defy fear.

“In some ways, they have been given a little bit more socialization to go ahead in spite of the fear,” Clance said.

The Star asked four men to be a part of this article, but all either declined, or decided they felt too much mastery to fit the mold.

Young is not surprised.

“Anecdotally, there are men whom I tell (about the impostor syndrome) and they say, ‘Oh yeah,’” Young said, “but so many more of them look at me like I have two heads.”

Young believes one of the reasons men may be less prone to feelings of fraud may lie in the different way men and women define “expertise.”

“In general, women are more likely to look at success as needing to be an expert,” Young said. “There’s always one more book to read, one more skill to learn.”

Men grow up learning how to wing it, she said.

“(Men learn) how to exaggerate and boast and bluff,” Young explained. “Girls feel like that’s lying. We do ‘true confessions,’ like, ‘Oh, you liked that presentation? Actually I forgot what I was saying halfway through. And there was a typo on page 3.’”

Who feels like a fake?

Women in fields dominated by men are among those groups prone to “I don’t belong here ~ I’m faking it” feelings.

Vicki Arndt, 45, owner of a Westlake Village ‘financial planning business, knows the feeling well. She opened Eagleson Arndt Financial Advisors seven years, ago.

Besides competing in the male-dominated, field of finance, she found her ability really put to the test when the economy tanked.

“This has been the most dramatic decline of the market since the Great Depression,” she said.

“And my business has grown. I tend to discount that, unfortunately.”

Other subsets of people who may be prone to the impostor syndrome are first-generation professionals and newly promoted supervisors.

Even those who don’t usually suffer from the impostor syndrome might suddenly feel unauthentic when they find themselves promoted.

“They feel like, ‘Maybe I have gone in there and so1d’myself to do this project or convinced my boss I could do this and I really can’t,’” Clance said.

If you sprang from blue-collar roots and are the first in your family to finish college or work as a professional, you could feel like a fraud, Clance said.

The director of a leadership group for Hispanic teens sees this all the time.

Gil Cuevas, founder and executive director of Fillmore-based Future Leaders of America, works with students whose families have just arrived in the US from Mexico. When these first-generation Mexican-Americans surpass the family’s educational ceiling, the fake feelings can start.

Cuevas recalls one local student who was accepted into Harvard University.

“He was brilliant. There was nothing to stop him academically, but the environment was so alien to him; he was from a traditional family,” Cuevas explained. “He had to take a leave of absence after one semester, came home and got his bearings, then went back.”

There’s another peril to becoming the first in a working-class family to move into the professional world. The feeling of fraud can be exacerbated by family members who may feel abandoned by the high-achieving family member. They may subtly sabotage him or her with messages that he or she doesn’t belong in “that” world.

“There’s a price to be paid from a class perspective,” Young said. “If you’re successful, people in your family and your community look at you like, ‘Who do you think you are?’”

Family values

Reasons people develop the impostor syndrome are often rooted in their families of origin.

“It could be, ‘How did your parents define or perceive success?’” Young explained.

Success in Arndt’s family, for example, had a lofty definition.

“Our parents were extraordinary,” said Arndt, whose one sibling is an attorney. “My father was on the state Supreme Court. ... My mother was president of everything - Woman of the Year.... We had a lot of modeling.”

Westlake Village businesswoman Julie Ferman, 42, also had the success bar set high. She also is acquainted with the impostor syndrome.

“I’ve been suffering from this all of my life,” she said.

She too, expects the Impostor Paratroopers to parachute into her front lawn and swoop her away, even though her Internet dating service, Cupid’s Coach, has garnered national attention.

Intrigued by her emphasis on finding dates for singles over 50, producers from “Good Morning America,” “The Today Show” and “Oprah” and reporters from The Wall Street Journal are among the national media who have recently contacted Ferman for interviews. Yet, Ferman still wonders if she’s fooling people.

“Every organization I was ever in, I always rose to the top,” she said, “but in the back of my mind, I remember my dad’s critical eye.”

Families who set the bar too high for their children may be setting them up to feel like frauds, Clance said.

Ferman believes that was the case in her family. No matter what she achieved, her father, though well-meaning, would come up with more things she could have done.

“I looked to my dad for approval for so long,” Ferman said. “Dad died, so I couldn’t get it.”

As Clance explained, the child of a hypercritical parent feels that, no matter what he or she accomplishes, it will never be good enough. When as adults they receive outside praise, they can interpret that as: “I was never a success at home, so I couldn’t possibly be a success now. If these people don’t see that, the only explanation is that I must be fooling them.”

Syndrome symptoms

The impostor phenomenon can manifest itself many ways, including perfectionism and procrastination.

To cover up the fear that they’re faking it, many “impostors” work twice as hard, bludgeoning themselves with unrealistic perfectionism.

“There is just no room for anything less,” Young said. “(Anything less) just becomes proof that, ‘If I were really competent and qualified and intelligent, I would know everything.’”

At first, that was how Arndt felt. Failing at her business was not an option, and she felt she had to have all the answers to the stock market decline.

“Getting OK with not having the answer has been a process,” Arndt said. “The truth was that nobody had all the answers.”

Procrastination can be another coping mechanism.

“They figure, ‘If I wait (until the last minute) and then I don’t do so well, then I can say I just didn’t have the time,’ rather than, ‘I really don’t have the ability to do this,’” Clance explained.

Getting real

Conquering the impostor phenomenon starts with the knowledge that you’re in good company.

“There are a lot of people who have similar feelings and these are normal feelings,” Clance said.

Next, take a realistic look at the feedback you’re getting from yourself and others.

“People have learned to discount compliments,” Clance said. “Inside they may be saying, ‘I did that well because I had a lot of help,’ or, ‘It really wasn’t as hard as people think it was.’”

If you have had positive feedback from three or four objective sources, chances are you’re not faking it - you’re performing well.

When facing a challenge that summons those “false” feelings, Young also recommends “re-framing” your thoughts.

“Instead of saying, ‘Oh my God, I don’t know what I’m doing,’ tell yourself, ‘It’s OK not to know everything right away.’”

Also, confide your fears to a mentor or friends you can trust. Just acknowledging the fear and having friends help her put those fears in perspective is what helped Ferman.

“That’s the beautiful part of it,” she said.

“Little by little; I finally started getting over it. My friends and girlfriends have really helped.”

Finally, both Clance and Young recommend that people fake it till they make it. Go ahead in spite of the fear. Change can happen “from the outside in,” Young said.

“People kind of wait until they don’t feel like impostors anymore before they take a risk,” Young said. “If you wait until you’re completely confident, it’s never gonna happen.”

Are you feeling like you don't deserve it all?

Are you an impostor? Rather, do you think you are? Here are some questions to clue you in on whether you might suffer from impostor syndrome, which makes people think they shouldn't have as much as they have:

1. Do you secretly worry that others will find out that you're not as birght and capable as they think you are?

2. Do you sometimes shy away from challenges because of nagging self-doubt?

3. Do you tend to chalk you accomplishments up to being "a fluke" or "no big deal" or to the fact that people just "like" you?

4. Do you hat making a mistake, being less than fully prepared or not doing things perfectly?

5. Do you tend to feel crushed by even constructive criticism, seeing it as evidence of your "ineptness"?

6. When you do succeed, do you think, "Phew, I fooled 'em this time, but I may not be so lucky next time."

7. Do you believe that other people (students, colleagues, competitors) are smarter and more capable than you are?

8. Do you live in fear of being found out, discovered, unmasked?

"If you answered 'yes' to any one of these questions, join the club," wrote Valerie Young, Ed.D. and self-described "recovering impostor."

Source: Valerie Young, Ed.D, who runs workshops and speaks across the United States about "The Impostor Syndrome."

THE GLOBE AND MAIL
CANADA'S NATIONAL NEWSPAPER

Feeling Like a Fraud

Wednesday, June 2, 2004

By Susan Pinker, Special to The Globe and Mail

When Prof. Monique Frize was offered a prestigious academic research chair on women in engineering, her first reaction was a sense of foreboding, not pride.

Despite past successes as a biomedical engineer in Montreal and as head of biomedical services for New Brunswick's hospital system, the professor of engineering at both the University of Ottawa and Carleton University in Ottawa felt unprepared for what others described as "a superwoman job" -- and feared she'd be uncovered as a fake.

"I told my husband that I'd be an impostor to accept this job. But then I succeeded so incredibly that the traditional men around me began asking me, 'When is enough going to be enough?' "

Apparently never. Since that appointment, Prof. Frize has been awarded four honorary degrees and an Order of Canada and is now writing a book on women in engineering.

Yet she still experiences self-doubt when facing a big new project. "I've always had [fears of being unmasked] before a new responsibility. After six months, I would start to feel better. I knew how good it could be. But the feelings came back every time there was a new challenge," she says.

Prof. Frize suffers from "impostor syndrome," according to Valerie Young, a Massachusetts-based educator and speaker on the subject. First identified in 1978 by Georgia State University psychology professor Pauline Rose Clance and psychologist Suzanne Imes, impostors are high achievers who don't believe in their accomplishments, are convinced they're scamming everyone about their skills and will eventually be uncovered -- evidence to the contrary be damned.

The two first noticed the phenomenon at Ohio's Oberlin College in the early 1970s, where they worked with a group of top students who worried about flunking out despite excellent grades.

Even though it's been 30 years, Dr. Clance, now a professor emeritus, says she has recently been seeing increasing demand for her clinical and consulting work and receiving more interview and workshop requests on the issue. "I wish it weren't still relevant."

But it is. While many actors suffer from impostor syndrome -- an occupational hazard of earning your living by pretending -- they don't have a monopoly on it.

"The impostor syndrome is surprisingly common," Dr. Young says. "Early studies suggest that up to 70 per cent of all people have experienced these feelings at one time or another, especially when starting a new job or pioneering in a field."

And “about 30 per cent have it to the degree that it interferes with their work and their life,” Dr. Clance says.

Impostors play down their accomplishments, attributing them to luck or external factors instead of their own abilities. The result: increased anxiety about work and decreased appetite for risk, she says.

This can have a chilling effect on their careers, prompting those with strong impostor feelings to avoid promotions and new opportunities. Not only do such sufferers face career stagnation but their employers don’t fully benefit from their abilities and expertise. Impostor syndrome is also linked to depression, Dr. Clance says. “Lots of times, impostor syndrome limits how high people can go.”

One of the features of the syndrome is that impostors never outgrow their fear of discovery, and never feel truly comfortable in their occupational roles, says Julie Norem, a professor of psychology at Wellesley College in Boston.

“They’re not enjoying themselves, they’re not getting much satisfaction, even though they’re performing well. And their fear that they’ll be discovered really interferes with their friendships.”

Yet, here’s an irony: While impostors may not be getting much satisfaction or enjoyment from their achievements, strategies some use to compensate for their feelings of inadequacy -- over preparing and out-credentialing their peers -- may actually be responsible for their successes in the workplace, she says.

Of course, many people feel that they’re not smart enough or expert enough now and then.

What differentiates the syndrome from garden-variety self-doubt is that the feelings may wane over time but never entirely disappear, despite growing accolades or achievements, Prof. Norem says. They have to keep trying to satisfy a skeptical judge with impossible standards: themselves.

“Everything I achieved was a fluke,” is how Terry-Nan Tannenbaum, a public health physician and assistant director of Montreal’s infectious disease unit, used to think. “I’m so much aware of all the things I don’t know.”

Even famous impostors admit to dreading the day others realize the awful truth they knew all along. “I still think people will find out that I’m really not very talented. I’m really not very good. It’s all been a big sham,” said actress Michelle Pfeiffer in a 2002 interview with imdb.com, a film-industry website. In Interview magazine, actress Kate Winslet is quoted as saying, “Sometimes I wake up in the morning before going off to a shoot, and I think, I can’t do this. I’m a fraud. They’re going to fire me.”

Dr. Tannenbaum, recalling how impostor feelings were strongest early in her career, describes how she attempted to avoid risks where she might have felt exposed, yet might also have excelled. “At first, each step was safe. I didn’t put myself in situations where [feeling like a fake] could be proved true, and wouldn’t do something or apply for something unless I knew I was going to get it. It was only when I knew I could deal with failure that I started to take risks.”

For Perle Feldman, a Montreal family physician, assistant professor of family medicine at McGill University and self-described impostor, the fears of being discovered drive her to seek extra training, publish more and seek out more and more credentials. “I’m still waiting for them, the big ‘they,’ to figure it out. You’re ready for someone to say, you’re not who you think you are, for someone in the audience to stand up and yell, ‘fraud’. “

The phenomenon was first thought to be a gender issue because Dr. Clance and Dr. Imes identified it in 150 highly successful professional women and graduate students. But they and other experts have discovered that both women and men are susceptible, though men are less likely to talk about it. Where the gender card is relevant is that impostors of both sexes seem to feel strongly bound by sex-role stereotypes, says Prof. Norem, who has incorporated the notion of impostor syndrome into her research on negative thinking.

“When these women think about their ‘ought selves,’ they think of someone stereotypically feminine. But their ideal selves are in terms of achievement. What they ought to feel makes them feel depressed, but if they move toward their ideal selves, they feel guilty. So they’re trapped.”

She adds that men might feel very nurturing but are unable to demonstrate that quality in the workplace and so feel stuck playing a role they feel is not genuine. “So they’re convinced that what others see is not real.”

So how do impostors overcome the problems that go with their fear of being a fake? The strategy that actually helps breed success in the workplace is what Prof. Norem calls defensive pessimism -- having unrealistically low expectations, and then devoting considerable energy to anticipating everything that could go wrong.

Mentally playing through every negative outcome helps impostors reduce anxiety because they move to concrete steps they can take. “This helps impostors feel that there’s something they can do. The impostors who use this strategy are more satisfied with their lives and show more improvement with their self-esteem,” she says.

And it does help to identify what you’re experiencing, the experts say. “Knowing there’s a name for these feelings and that you’re not alone can be tremendously freeing,” Dr. Young says, adding that separating feelings from the facts of your achievements comes next.

To do this, Dr. Clance suggests seeking out trusted friends or mentors, and listening to their feedback. “If you can’t find a trusted coach or mentor in the workplace, go to a professional who knows about this, like a therapist or an executive coach, and make sure it’s a confidential relationship,” she says.

“In coaching them through these feelings, they are not only able to take on new opportunities, they internalize that they are doing well enough, that they are doing fine.”

Indeed, when impostors acknowledge their feelings, they can be role models for others, Prof. Frize says. “When a female president of a university talked about feeling like an impostor in a public speech to 200 women scientists, we were all nodding, thinking of ourselves, thinking, ‘Oh my God, even her,’ “ she says.

Dr. Tannenbaum says learning about the phenomenon was therapeutic. “Part of it was finding out what it was, that it was a syndrome. That helped,” she says, recalling her moment of

epiphany when another professional handed her a pile of academic papers on the subject. Though her feelings of being a fake have faded as she's gotten older, they have not disappeared.

"I'm always carrying around a pile of articles I have to read. I'm only slowly getting used to giving talks. I absolutely overprepare and look up every reference," she says.

The feeling of never really knowing enough may be why Dr. Feldman was spending a recent Sunday morning checking on patients in hospital, then writing a university admissions essay.

Twenty years of experience, a full clinical practice and a series of publications and awards are not enough. She is applying for a master's degree in medical education to follow up a fellowship she just completed at Harvard University.

"I do want to do it, but I'm scared. These new people don't know me and they're going to figure it out and say 'Fraud, get out! You don't deserve to be here.' "

Do you have impostor syndrome?

Ponder these statements to see if you're a sufferer:

> You're not as smart and capable as everyone thinks you are. You're just pretending.
>
> Read one more book, get one more degree or work at one more job before considering yourself qualified.
>
> Never put yourself in positions where you may not succeed.
>
> Don't take on challenges where you might be exposed.
>
> Always remind yourself and others of how much you really don't know.
>
> Always compare yourselves with other people.
>
> All work should be done perfectly so they won't know you're just faking it.
>
> Your job or promotion or school admission was only a matter of being in the right place at the right time.
>
> Always anticipate problems before they occur.
>
> Never make mistakes.
>
> Don't believe compliments, especially from friends and family. Explain why you're not deserving.
>
> Play down accomplishments. You fooled them this time, but maybe you won't be so lucky next time.
>
> Your successes are due to chance. Your mistakes prove you were faking it all along.

Adapted from educator Valerie Young's workshop on impostor syndrome.

Overcome impostor syndrome

What helps? Here are some tips culled from the experts:

- Time. Most "impostors" say their feelings of being a fraud diminish as they gain experience.
- Learn more. Educating yourself about the syndrome reduces feelings of isolation. Some helpful websites include: http://www.gsu.edu~wwwaow/resources/imposter_phenomenon.html and **http://www.impostorsyndrome.com**
- Talk about it. Being more open to people you trust helps you gain perspective.
- Separate feelings from fact. Look at your accomplishments more objectively.
- Recast perfectionism as a positive trait. Feeling like an impostor may make you try harder but it also demonstrates a healthy drive to excel.
- Be selective about the drive to prove yourself. Do a great job when it matters most. Don't persevere over routine tasks.
- Change the rules. "I should always know the answer, I should never make a mistake, and never ask for help," are misguided. You have as much right to make a mistake or have an off-day as anyone.
- Don't dismiss external validation. Learn to pat yourself on the back.
- Visualize success as well as anticipating and preparing for failure.

Find a trusted friend, mentor or proven coach to use as a sounding board. When they give you positive feedback, take it to heart.

THE GLOBE AND MAIL
CANADA'S NATIONAL NEWSPAPER

Feel like a fraud? Workplace might be to blame

Even accomplished workers can fall prey to 'impostor phenomenon'

Saturday, December 24, 2005

By Virginia Galt

It's not uncommon for high achievers to sometimes harbour fears of inadequacy. Indeed, some organizational psychologists suggest that a little uncertainty is good if it spurs us on to greater efforts.

However, some workplaces are so "aggressively competitive" that they make even the most accomplished employees feel unworthy of their success, says Diane Zorn, a faculty development director at York University who has conducted research on the debilitating effects of "impostor phenomenon" -- the constant fear of being exposed as a fraud despite a solid record of achievement.

The higher a person rises in an organization, the more he or she feels expected to "know it all," says Ms. Zorn, who has conducted heavily attended workshops on the impostor phenomenon at Canadian universities for the past eight years and is currently working on a book.

Academics are particularly vulnerable -- universities are far less collegial than they might appear from the outside, she says. But any demanding workplace culture, where high achievers are left on their own to sink or swim, can leave even the best employees feeling insecure -- to the detriment of their happiness and their ultimate potential, says Ms. Zorn, whose title is course director in philosophy at the Atkinson faculty of liberal and professional studies at York.

The impostor phenomenon is "not just psychological" -- it is rooted in workplace culture, she emphasizes.

An intensely competitive culture will reinforce any self-doubts a person might have if there is a lack of mentoring and a lack of collaboration, Ms. Zorn says. "The idea that no one there is going to help you . . . leads to feelings of isolation. That is often the case when you get into higher up positions."

In the university setting, few interdisciplinary research projects are truly interdisciplinary, she says.

“They usually involve a lot of separate investigators -- a lead one and a bunch of co-investigators -- who go off and do their own thing and come back and meet and publish in their own area.”

In the business environment, as well, “I question how much genuine collaboration there is.”

Ms. Zorn says that when she instructs business students, “there are a lot of problems with group work. It is not as collaborative as it seems. There are often a few people trying to run the show.”

So given the realities of many work environments -- the competition, the politics, the occasional The Globe and Mail: Feel like a fraud? Workplace might be to blame putdowns -- how does one move ahead with confidence? There are steps an individual can take to bolster self-confidence and take credit for his or her achievements, rather than writing off success to good luck, being in the right place at the right time or undeserved promotion by a sympathetic supervisor, she says.

The first step, says Ms. Zorn, is to recognize whether you are suffering from a touch of impostor phenomenon.

Do you always deflect compliments about your work? Do you feel your success is undeserved and you will some day be found out? Are you afraid to ask questions for fear of looking stupid? Are you constantly comparing yourself to the superstars in your field instead of acknowledging your own accomplishments? If your self-confidence is a little shaky, or even if it isn’t, find a mentor, Ms. Zorn suggests.

If you cannot find someone to trust inside your organization, go outside and find someone whose judgment you respect to try out ideas.

In academia, some PhD candidates are now seeking out “dissertation coaches” to make sure they are on solid ground and that their work will stand up to rigorous academic challenge.

In business, more employees are turning to professional associations, outside coaches or informal support networks for honest feedback on whether they are on the right track, Ms. Zorn says.

Organizational psychologist Guy Beaudin of Toronto-based RHR International Ltd., says that, in a well-run organization, people are promoted on merit.

But there are situations where those who get promoted really are “faking it,” Dr. Beaudin adds.

“You will run across individuals who have been able to get by on interpersonal skills or their ability to play the political games within organizations and find themselves in roles of a great deal of prominence without really having the hard skills to deliver,” he says.

These people will often mask their incompetence by adopting an overbearing management style.

“Their whole leadership style is predicated on the fact that they don’t have either the skills or knowledge or expertise to truly do their job well, so their style is to be very demanding of their staff,” Dr. Beaudin says.

In most cases, however, candidates chosen for promotion will grow into their new roles, given the proper support, he says.

It takes time to gain confidence in a new role or a new project -- nobody should expect to have it mastered on day one, nor feel like an impostor because they do not know all the answers, Dr. Beaudin says.

“For someone in a new role, the first couple of months are critical. It’s the time to be really intentional and disciplined about getting all the information you need. In the beginning, people will give you a lot of latitude to ask a lot of dumb questions,” Dr. Beaudin says.

“It gets more difficult after four or five months when people feel like you really should know what’s going on here.”

It is normal to have doubts, especially when taking on a new role, he adds.

“And some of that is actually quite beneficial. It can spur people to be more creative, to come up with better solutions. When you have people who feel they have to prove themselves, they will actually work harder and want to deliver a better performance,” he says.

“But when it goes too far, it leads to the impostor syndrome.”

Impostor syndrome

Are you suffering from impostor syndrome? These are some of the signs, according to York University instructor Diane Zorn:

- Feelings of incompetence.
- A belief that you don’t deserve success.
- Feeling like a fraud.
- Fear of being “found out.”
- Don’t take credit for your own accomplishments.

So what can you do about it? A website developed for those who suffer from such feelings, http://www.impostersyndrome.com, offers the following advice: Speak up, share your feelings. You will find you are not alone.

Separate feelings from fact. Everyone feels stupid from time to time. “Just because you feel stupid, doesn’t mean you are.”

Don’t be such a perfectionist. Forgive yourself when the inevitable mistake happens.

Learn to ask for help. “Recognize you have just as much right as the next person to be wrong, have an off day or ask for assistance.”

Recognize that everyone who starts something new feels off-base in the beginning. Tell yourself: “I may not know all the answers, but I am smart enough to find them out.”

Take some risks. “Instead of considering ‘winging it’ as proof of your ineptness, learn to do what many high achievers do -- view it as a skill.”

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TORONTO STAR

Behind the Mask

Inside many high-achievers is a little voice saying, `You are an impostor'

July 14, 2007

By David Graham, Living Reporter

Canadian actor Mike Myers jokes that no matter how successful he becomes, he can't quiet the fear that the "talent police" are going to arrest him for impersonating a gifted comedian.

Despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary, he can't shake the demons that whisper in his ear, "You're a fraud."

He's not alone.

Some of the world's most admired celebrities refuse to take credit for their abilities. Even at the height of his career, Broadway choreographer Bob Fosse worried that each production would be his last, that audiences would eventually realize he was a no-talent phony.

Actors Michelle Pfeiffer and Kate Winslet have gone on record with their fears that they are fakes – that they can't, in fact, act.

And in both her roles, as a Yale student and as an academy award-winning actor, Jodi Foster says she has never been able to shake the feeling that she's an impostor.

People in all fields can be dogged by the irrational fear that they can't live up to their billing.

Many successful academics, doctors, business people and even entrepreneurs refuse to acknowledge it is their intelligence, creativity and skill that fuel their education and careers.

Rather, their minds spin with other possibilities. They cite luck as a prime factor. They were simply in the right place at the right time. Perhaps they smooth-talked their way through an interview.

Some credit their winning personality and attractive appearance for their success. These people simply cannot fathom the possibility that their intelligence and skill figured at all.

They are sufferers of Impostor Syndrome, says Valerie Young, who believes the source of these inner voices is psychological – that the root of these unique insecurities is in the sufferer's mind rather than imposed by the outside culture. She estimates 70 per cent of all people have felt like a fake at one time or another.

Young, who earned a EdD in education from the University of Massachusetts two decades ago, uses the example of a first generation professional from a working-class family, who feels like a foreigner in their new, swanky environment.

“They never quite feel like they belong no matter how successful they are,” she says. “I know a woman who has a PhD in business who is working as a bookkeeper because she is so afraid of being exposed as a fraud.”

People who worry that they are fakes can take opposite routes in response to their fears.

Some hold themselves back while others push themselves relentlessly forward. They become workaholics and perfectionists.

Academics, for example, either drop out or gather endless degrees. Professionals will settle for jobs beneath their qualifications or labour intensely to please their bosses and suppress the thoughts that they don’t belong.

“Students have dropped out of school and committed suicide,” Young says. “People change careers constantly to avoid detection. Others don’t go after promotions at all.”

Women are most at risk, Young says, but wonders if men are just as susceptible – but won’t come forward – because it reveals them as vulnerable. Women, she suggests, “internalize failure” while men “blame the outside world.”

Young says the condition can lessen in time, but that it can be triggered by any new challenge, such as a promotion. “I don’t think it ever goes away,” she says. “It’s like a tape that plays in your head.”

Diane Zorn, a course director at York University, rejects the prevalent notion that it’s a psychological syndrome and prefers to call it by its original designation – Impostor Phenomenon.

Zorn says the research she’s been conducting since 1999 supports the claim that the issue is cultural, that it’s the way life is structured in universities, for example, or the fiercely competitive nature of some workplaces that makes high performing people feel isolated and as if they don’t belong. The higher people climb up the ladder, the more intense the feelings become, she says.

Zorn recognized the condition in herself when she discovered the work of Pauline Clance and Suzanne Imes, who first identified the Impostor Phenomenon in the 1970s. Clance and Imes had surveyed a group of high-achieving women who said that no matter how successful they were, they still felt like phonies. In her book *Impostor Phenomenon: When Success Makes You Feel Like a Fake*, Clance says the worry associated with this fear of exposure can result in fatigue, depression, substance abuse, problems with sleep and headaches.

Zorn recalls feeling the sting of Impostor Phenomenon in the teaching environment, where she would keep her contact with students to a minimum.

“I’ve completely overcome those feelings but I recall not having long office hours and not wanting too much interaction with the students.”

As a student, she remembers feeling that other students always seemed more prepared.

And as a professional, she was reluctant to apply for grants and was fearful of publishing.

That's changed, she says.

For Zorn's growth, it was important to identify the condition.

She kept a journal to document how often she deflected compliments and how she reacted to stressful situation.

Finally, she concludes, coaching and mentoring are key tools in both academic and work environments for overcoming feelings that you're an impostor.

Unfortunately, Young says, as far as she knows, most employers are not taking the condition seriously.

Zorn invites people who may recognize themselves as frauds to take the Impostor Phenomenon test as compiled by Clance.

The Sydney Morning Herald

False Negatives

March 5, 2003

By Annemarie Fleming

The point

We all have moments of doubt but feeling you're not up to the job can cripple your career.

Do you ever feel you are a phoney? That, despite the framed diploma on the wall, you are a fake? That success in your job is due to luck, timing or just being liked, rather than how skilled you are?

If you answered "yes", you may be pleased to hear you're not alone. Studies estimate up to 70 per cent of us feel this way at some time in our working lives.

For most of us, these feelings of insecurity do go away in time but for others the condition worsens to the point that they consider themselves impostors. They are the sufferers of impostor syndrome, a condition in which personal success is attributed to external factors, such as being in the right place at the right time, rather than internal factors, such as the person's skill and capability.

One man in the grip of this condition explained his acceptance into Harvard as being due to computer error. A woman said she only got her PhD because no one bothered to read her thesis. Instead, she felt they'd just put it on the scales, found it weighed about the right amount and so conferred the award.

Andi Garing, 42, a former opera singer and singing teacher turned psychologist, knows only too well the effect that impostor syndrome can have on careers. For years she was plagued by the thought that one day somebody would realise she didn't have any skills.

"The thing about this syndrome is that nothing is logical," says Garing. "I had two bachelor degrees, I had won a prestigious scholarship from Dame Kiri Te Kanawa, my singing students were successful, and yet I still thought that I was no good at what I did."

But aren't those feelings just all about being modest and not wanting to blow your own trumpet? "No," says Garing, who is now doing a PhD on impostor syndrome, "it's different because you'll find that impostor syndrome mostly affects high achievers, people who are already successful. And you find it starts to affect people at a particular point in their lives, when they become more noticed in the workplace or if they need to move on in their lives. But no one wants to talk about it because they don't want to let on that they're a fraud."

Dr. Valerie Young, a United States specialist in impostor syndrome from Massachusetts, is not surprised to hear an Australian voice at the end of the line when I phone her. Australians and New Zealanders make up the largest group of people to contact her outside the US, she says.

So does this mean Australians regard themselves as a nation of phoneys? “Definitely not,” says Young. “It means that Australians are honest about owning up to the condition and that they have an interest in self-discovery and want to create more satisfying and balanced work lives.”

Young’s personal experience shows impostor syndrome affects all professions. “It really does run the gamut, from doctors right through to administration assistants. The incidence seems less in blue-collar workers and I think this is because in those jobs you can see the tangible fruit of your labour. That pipe is broken so you fix it.

“For most sufferers, just breaking the silence is a big step on the road to recovery. I get so many emails from people who say, ‘Thank God there are others out there who feel the same as I do.”‘

And recovery is not something that happens overnight for most workers. “You have to work on it,” says Garing. “It’s all about replacing the tape in your head that keeps saying ‘I’m a fraud’ with one that says ‘I’m not a fraud; I’m highly successful and people see me as such.”‘

“People who fear that they’re impostors need to realise that most of life is like flying by the seat of your pants,” says Young. “The trouble is we have an internal rule book that keeps reminding us that maybe we don’t know what we’re doing.”

So is the solution to impostor syndrome that we should learn to ignore these voices and adopt the “fake it till you make it” approach? “There’s nothing wrong with faking it,” she says with a laugh. There are many who would agree.

Irish Independent

Are You Suffering From Impostor Syndrome?

You're smart and successful, so why do you sometimes feel like a failure?

Tuesday August 16th 2005

By Lucy Bowen

Did you just get a promotion, a pay rise or even a completely new job but you're beset by fears that you're not quite up to it? It may be that you have 'impostor syndrome', a term coined by clinical psychologist Dr Pauline Clance to describe doubt in your own abilities and a fear of not maintaining your success. Here are some ways to beat those insecurities:

* If you get a promotion, do you think, "there can't have been many people to choose from". Dr Valerie Young, who runs 'impostor syndrome' workshops, explains: "Although you should see the the promotion as a vote of confidence, you convince yourself it is anything but that."

As a solution, she suggests putting yourself in the shoes of the people promoting you. They're not going to do it unless they think you're up to it. After all, their reputation depends on it too.

* When you're awarded a pay rise, do you think, 'I don't deserve it there must be a mistake'. If so, "you must take control of your negative mindset immediately," says life coach Fiona Harrold, author of Indestructible Self-Belief (Piatkus Books). "If you allow your self-doubt to run riot, you'll undermine yourself and your employer will start to wonder why they did give you that rise. Sit down and think of compelling reasons why you're worth every extra penny. Justify it to yourself and recognise how valuable you are to the organisation."

* You're asked to lead a crucial project but you think to yourself that you're going to mess it up. Dr Clance says you should make choices based on what gives you a sense of fulfillment, not fear. You don't want to take on an impossible task as that will just reinforce your feelings of inadequacy. Also, there's no harm in asking for help.

* Your boss leaves and you're in line for her job. Your first fear might be will I be able to cope? Your second one will be wondering about your former colleagues, who might be jealous, or worse, not respect you.

Every time you step into a new role it will take a few months to find your feet, says Dr Young. Whether the move will generate jealousy or not depends on your current reputation and rapport

with other staff members. Although you may become your colleagues' superior, make sure you are inclusive and maintain good relationships with them all.

Answer the following questions to discover whether you have the impostor syndrome:

* Do you secretly worry that others will find out 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 up your accomplishments 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'?

* Do you believe that other people are smarter and more capable than you are?

* Do you live in fear of being found out, discovered, unmasked?

If you said yes to any of the above - join the club. We've all been there.

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DAILY HAMPSHIRE
GAZETTE

Is This Woman an Impostor? Are You?

January 18, 1991

By Jean Hanff Korelitz

“I’m Valerie Young, and I’m a recovering impostor.”

So speaks the serene, secure and very-much-in-control-of-the-situation woman at the front of the room. It’s 9 o’clock on a Saturday morning, and those of us seated in this back room at the First Congregational Church in Northampton steal suspicious glances at each other. From brief introductions, we know that our group includes an Ada Comstock Scholar convinced that her scholarship was given to her by mistake, two graduate students already sure that their upcoming foray into the job market will be a disaster, a college student who feels that, in her case, the University of Massachusetts’ admissions department made a big error, and a striking, vibrant woman who - amazingly - seems to take no pride whatsoever in the fact that she once swam the English Channel. And me, of course. The one who’s here to write about it all.

As they look at me, and as I look at them, I’m reminded of something Valerie Young warned me of over the phone last week: “Women always look at each other and think, ‘Gee, how could she suffer from self-doubt? She looks so competent to me!’” And indeed they do. Only, here and there around the room, does the odd tapping foot or hair-twisting finger display unease. That and the fact that the owner of that foot or finger is here to begin with.

“Here” is, technically, an all-day career-related workshop for women, focusing on the “Impostor Syndrome.” According to the workshop literature, this refers to “the surprisingly vast number of bright and capable women who, despite external evidence to the contrary, continue to doubt their competence. By downplaying or dismissing their abilities and accomplishments such women are stymied in their careers and operate by the disabling belief that they are, in effect, ‘impostors,’ or ‘fakes,’ or ‘frauds.’ Moreover, this debilitating fear of being ‘unmasked’ can and does interfere with the productivity, effectiveness and advancement potential of its adherents.”

Women who suffer from the impostor syndrome, Young explains, employ an elaborate array of rationalizations to justify their seeming successes, including sheer luck, timing, the ease of a task and the suspicion that they have “charmed” people into believing they arc competent. The stories Young tells would be funny if they weren’t so sad: a woman who received the highest score on a C.P.A. exam in the entire state of Massachusetts justified it by reminding herself that Massachusetts is a small state; a woman receiving her doctoral degree was convinced that her examiners merely weighed her hefty thesis but never actually read it; a woman enthusiastically offered a teaching job at M.I.T. rationalized that, since it was the day after July 4, her interviewer had probably been suffering from a hangover. “We must,” Young says dryly, “at least give ourselves credit for immense creativity.”

Young first became interested in the Impostor Syndrome as a graduate student at the University of Massachusetts, and wrote a doctoral thesis entitled "A Model of Internal Barriers to Women's Occupational Achievement."

At that time, the phenomenon of self-sabotage among professional women was just coming to light. Three years earlier, the journalist Betty Rollins had published a "Hers" column in the New York Times entitled "Chronic Self-Doubt: Why Does It Afflict so Many Women?" In it, Rollins recounts the sheer terror that accompanies each and every journalistic assignment she receives, and the attendant conviction that this time she will be found out for what she is: an incompetent. At one point, she talks to a male colleague about these fears. Does he ever worry that a story won't work out? Nah, be answers. What if he makes a mistake? Aren't I entitled to make a mistake once in a while?

To Rollins, this response is nothing short of stunning. "Sure," she writes. "And so am I. But I don't feel entitled. And I know why. It's because they let us in and we feel we have to be perfect. Never mind how many women are out there working. The work place is still, for the most part, owned and run by men, and we're there because they've allowed us to be there - sometimes because they had to - and we know it and they know it and they know we know it. So we better be good."

Young began giving seminars on the subject about eight years ago, and estimates that she has offered the session about 50 times. In addition, she has consulted for a Fortune 500 company, and is currently the assistant director of marketing communications for a company in Connecticut. Given this background, I'm not surprised to see that Young is looking very businesslike indeed in a crisp, professional suit and heels. But this is Northampton, after all, and jeans seem to be the uniform of choice among workshop participants. This being the case, Young takes the opportunity to dash home during the lunch break and reemerges in the afternoon looking decidedly less formal.

A slender woman with vivid blue eyes, she radiates a confidence that is, she informs us, hard won. Over the course of the day, she leads us through the seminar's three objectives: to understand the dynamics of the impostor syndrome, to identify its sources, and to attempt to unlearn the self-limiting responses that it engenders. We break into small groups to discuss patterns in our childhoods, recall the messages received from our parents about achievement and success, and analyze our responses to childhood failures and triumphs.

One woman, a graduate student in anthropology, says that success in her mother's eyes meant marriage and children only; another woman reports that her parents instructed her to save the world and, along the way, make enough money that she will never have to depend on a man. Around the room, heads nod in recognition, and sporadic "Me too's" ring out.

As the afternoon session begins, Young unveils the "Trumpet Process," a worksheet based on a guide developed by University of Massachusetts professor Gerald Weinstein. It asks us to recall a situation in which we felt like an impostor, then analyze it in detail. Ultimately, this analysis will bring us to something called the "crusher" - that is the deep dark secret that is at the root of our fear of exposure - "I'm stupid," say, or "worthless," "incompetent," "pitiful." Whatever it is, Young insists, whatever our particular fear, "a crusher is always a lie." While we are somewhat reassured by this, we're not entirely convinced. All of us feel raw and exposed, a little depressed, a little sheepish. "This is the low point of the seminar." Young says merrily. "After this it's all uphill."

And she's right. When at last we turn our attention to strategies designed to break the pattern of chronic self-castigation, there is a palpable sense of relief in the air. Perhaps, we think, that capable achiever we've pretended to be all these years wasn't just an act; after all. We did write that prize-winning essay once, or score that goal back in high school, or get accepted into that professional theater company. In fact, now that we think about it, no "impostor," no matter how strong, could actually have propelled someone across the English Channel.

I'm sitting on the couch with Judy, a woman from Natick who is here visiting her daughter Liza for the weekend and ended up accompanying her to the seminar. We're talking about the future. "I'd like to take an art class." Judy confides, then shyly she begins to tell us about her painting. Sometimes, she paints on clothing, and many of her friends have tried to commission work from her, though of course she bas never done it. But secretly, she says, her dream is to start a small company to sell her work. "What a wonderful idea!" I say, but Judy shakes her bead sadly. "I'm really a bad painter," she assures us.

This, coming after hours of talk, confession and sometimes brutal soul searching, sets us off into fits of hysterical laughter. After a moment, Judy joins in too. "This is so interesting," someone says. "You're never going to see us again in your life. Why is it so important that you have to tell us you're a bad painter?" Judy's daughter Liza wanders over to see what the commotion is, and when we tell her she shrugs. "Of course she says her work is terrible," Liza tells us. "Why do you think she's here?"

Old habits, Young reminds us, are hard to break, and while she is clear in promising us "no magic pill," she does offer an array of strategies that we can use to break our patterns of self-sabotage and self-doubt.

"Positive daydreaming," for example, creates an alternative to anticipating the worst in a job interview or work assignment. Instead of imagining ourselves floundering, we should try to visualize ourselves as relaxed, confident and knowledgeable. We should recognize, too, the subtle distinction between feeling like an impostor and actually being one (there are, Young reminds us, real impostors out there).

Finally, we are asked to recognize the arrogance implicit in feeling like a fraud - "After all, all those people you fooled must be pretty stupid." Imagine phoning up old Professor Brown and letting him know bow you fooled him way back when with that paper be gave you an A for. That was a terrible paper! He must have been a real jerk not to see how bad it was!

Young's parting advice is deceptively simple. "Just fake it," she says. "The meaning will follow." But wait a minute. Isn't this what we're already doing? How is "faking it" different from masquerading as a competent person?

Young explains. Often, she tells us, she is challenged by the women in her workshops on this very point. Is she telling them to act like men? Or to falsify credentials? Not at all. "Faking it" is about not holding oneself back because of a perceived inadequacy. Act as if you can do it, and don't wait to apply for that job or ask for that raise until you no longer feel like an impostor.

"There are times," Young says, "when everyone flies by the seat of their pants, and sometimes women don't give themselves permission to be in that learning mode." When the situation is right, she tells us, we should allow ourselves to wing it.

It's evident that there IS a change in the women who emerge from the First Congregational Church that evening, a sense of calm and, perhaps even more important, a sense of humor. With that in mind, I recall a snatch of conversation from hours earlier, in the quiet moment before the workshop attendees began to drift in. Valerie and I had set up the room, arranged the chairs and set up the coffee machine. As she prepared to give a presentation she bad given many times before and obviously knew cold. I asked her if she ever thought. "I can't do this. Everyone will find out that I know nothing about this subject, that I have no wisdom to bestow, that I shouldn't be giving this workshop."

To my surprise, she nodded. "I think about it for two minutes or so," she says, a little ruefully. "It's automatic."

The Impostor Phenomenon: Are Achievers Draining Their Companies?

From The Executive Female *(magazine published by the National Association of Female Executives)* March/April 1986

By Valerie Young, Ed.D

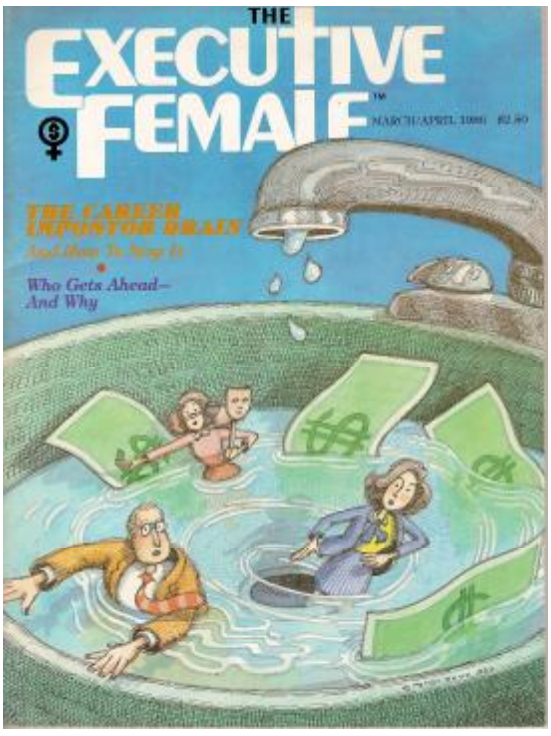
> *Companies as well as individuals pay a high price when achievers secretly feel they have fooled others about their talents. When qualified workers fear risks, get caught in the "expert trap," and are prone to perfectionism and procrastination, there's a leak in the corporations human resources pool.*

Waste in the Workplace

The Impostor Syndrome, although experienced on an individual level, can and does interfere with the job effectiveness, productivity and advancement potential of those encumbered by it. This should be of great concern to managers because it affects a company's greatest resource – its employees. The syndrome can become an expensive problem when it results in:

- **An untapped labor pool:** The men and women who experience "impostor-ism" are less likely to feel qualified for promotions; hence, they are less inclined to compete for advanced positions. They are more apt to fall into the "expert trap," remaining in jobs in which they are comfortable and knowledgeable, but have clearly outgrown.

- **Employees reluctant to take risks:** Impostors are more reluctant to pursue new ideas and to take business risks which could benefit their companies, and more reticent about offering potentially valuable insights, ideas, opinions and solutions to problems because they fear being wrong or exposing their "ignorance."



- **Procrastination:** They are also more prone to production-delaying procrastination; "putting off' is a coping mechanism which allows them to postpone the moment of awful "truth," finding out that they can't complete a project satisfactorily.

- **Employee stress:** The anxiety of expecting to be "unmasked" can cause stress-related problems. Billions of dollars are wasted on its symptoms: low productivity, absenteeism, haphazard communication, below-par performance and sickness (studies show that people under stress are more vulnerable to disease).

In addition, employees caught in the Impostor Syndrome are also more likely to see constructive criticism as proof of their ineptitude, rather than use it to improve their skills or increase their knowledge. And, in turn, they are not as motivated by praise and positive feedback because they dismiss compliments, crediting their accomplishments to luck, charm ("they're just saying that because they like me") and/or the effort of others (if someone else helped, the achievement doesn't count).

From Loss to Profit

You, as a manager, should try to assess the extent to which the impostor phenomenon exists in your company, and also try to determine how your organization's corporate culture may contribute to the problem. This is an issue, which must be handled sensitively; it would be threatening and counterproductive to call a meeting and ask people who feel they're faking their way through their jobs to raise their hands.

One corporate vice president used an informal, non-accusatory approach that prompted people to respond honestly. After passing around an article on the Impostor Syndrome, he followed up with one-to-one chats, saying, "Hey, I thought that article was on target. What do you think?" Among other things, he discovered that his assistant often put more effort into a task than it warranted. For instance, when asked to jot down a few thoughts on an upcoming agenda topic, she prepared a letter-perfect full report. Her perfectionism wasted time and talent that could have been used more productively.

Other managers have distributed the assessment tools Clance and Imes included in *The Impostor Phenomenon,* which were designed to measure the degree to which individuals experience "faking" feelings. To ensure candor and cooperation, such tools should be completed anonymously, voluntarily, and participants should be told why they are being given the tool and how you will use the data.

Managers, with staff help, can also develop an organizational profile, which reflects how employees experience their company's "achievement climate." This should be an honest examination of the ways management may be contributing to the problem. (In many cases, it is less threatening and more productive for an experienced consultant to gather this information and follow up with actions that fit the organization's specific needs.)

Questions to explore include:

1) How does your organization view mistakes, unsuccessful risks, failure and being wrong? Are mistakes and failures considered human and inevitable? Are employees encouraged to learn from mistakes and failures, or are they penalized for them? Do employees have the right to be wrong on occasion, to have an "off' day or to work at honing less-developed skills? Are they encouraged to collaborate on enterprises so that consequences of risks are shared?

2) Is asking for help – or even information – considered a sign of weakness or a legitimate request? Is admitting a gap in knowledge seen as normal and necessary for learning, or a sign of incompetence? Is perfectionism the unspoken rule?

To take your inquiry one step further, consider whether your organization recognizes and addresses the uniqueness of women's experience in the workplace. Research has shown that some women lower their expectations for future successes following a setback; do supervisors encourage and support them at these times? And, because people are prone to self-doubts in new situations, particularly when pioneering in an area, are women who are the first in a department or job given appropriate training and support? In addition, is your organization aware of the "outsider" status many women in non-traditional jobs experience, and the pressures on women to be model representatives of their sex?

Because of sexism and the credibility gap created by societal assumptions about women's capabilities and appropriate roles, women must outperform or collect more credentials than their male counterparts in order to succeed. Is your company sympathetic to the ways sex-role stereotyping reinforces women's insecurities about their abilities and forces them to continually prove their competence in a male-dominated business world? Does management understand and acknowledge the various ways people discount, ignore or trivialize women's accomplishments? Is there an attitude among some supervisors that women must "earn" the right to hold their jobs?

Because old attitudes about female roles and talents die hard, women are often treated too harshly. In your organization, are women's mistakes or weak spots scrutinized more closely or judged more severely? Are male and female supervisors unnecessarily hard on women staffers to prove that they're not catering to women? Are women given *more* challenging assignments than men to "test" their capabilities?

For the same reason, women may be handled gingerly – with "kid gloves." In your company, are they unconsciously discouraged from taking risks, given less challenging assignments or prematurely "rescued" from tough assignments? Is criticism soft-pedaled or withheld for fear of upsetting female employees?

And does your company have an unspoken but obvious double standard? Is making a mistake or getting egg on one's face more acceptable for male than female employees? Is tooting one's own horn perceived differently when done by men and women? Is asking for assistance or information taken as a sign of a woman's incompetence? Is the poor performance of one woman, especially if she is the first in her position, considered evidence that a woman can't handle the job?

A Plan for Action

If an honest appraisal of your organization uncovered some areas needing improvement, and your goal is to create a work environment for all your employees, which is both supportive and conducive to productivity, consider making some of the following changes. You and other managers who want to reduce the negative impact of the Impostor Syndrome on your organization can:

- First and foremost, provide a safe forum for employees to discuss concerns and insecurities.
- Acknowledge the ways that the corporate culture and management's attitudes and standards may be contributing to the problem.
- Explore, with female staffers, the ways they feel supported or undermined.
- Disclose, when appropriate, your own fears and doubts about work, and indicate that you, too, occasionally have off days. People are often surprised to learn that those they look up to sometimes feel nervous or make mistakes. When leaders share their own human uncertainties, it teaches others that competence – even at high levels – doesn't demand perfection, only the ability and willingness to learn.
- Invite women with whom you have good rapport to share how they dealt with stereotypes they have encountered on the job, and relate how their abilities, competence and roles as females are perceived (for example, women are supposed to make the coffee and listen to everyone's personal problems; they are *not* supposed to show up male co-workers or be the CEO). Being frustrated or stymied by stereotyping means women have less energy to focus on getting the job done. If you are a male supervisor, be careful not to minimize or discount women's experiences or become defensive; you asked them to talk and it is up to you to listen.
- Whether you are a male or female manager, honestly examine the stereotypes you hold about women. By monitoring your own language and behavior, you can be an anti-sexist role model. Then, gently but firmly confront others when you observe sexist behavior.
- Help staff members learn to delegate, to let go of routine tasks they insist on completing due to perfectionistic tendencies. In many aspects of our jobs, an adequate performance is all that is required; there is no need to waste time on petty details.
- Stay alert to self-defeating patterns you observe in others, such as when women preface their sentences with such classic disclaimers as, "this probably isn't right, but…" or "this is probably a dumb question, but…" or brush off praise with "anybody could have done it" or "it wasn't much." When you hear these kinds of self put-downs, call the person on her negative thinking.
- Encourage employees to take risks; promote the notion that there is no shame in failing as long as everyone gives it their best shot. Make sure adequate resources and support are available so no one is set up to fail.
- Emphasize the learning value of mistakes. Failing or making mistakes is a signal to practice more, to develop skills, to improve performance, to do whatever is required to correct past errors. This kind of positive thinking motivates workers to persevere despite blunders or setbacks.

- When criticizing an individual's performance, make it clear that you want to guide him to correct poor habits, not ridicule or blame.
- When you must criticize, emphasize strong points before discussing weak areas. For example, say, "That report you turned in really reflected a lot of insight and effort, yet it requires some major revisions which I'm confident you can deliver." When mixed feedback is given, ask the receiver to repeat what he or she has heard. This is especially important because the impostor is apt to hear, "so you're saying I can't write," and will weed out the positive and focus on the negative.
- Build self-confidence by praising employees for a job well done; this is especially important because impostors are typically unable to pat their own backs. This kind of reinforcement can help them take credit for their accomplishments and skills, and encourage them to continue improving their performance.
- Emphasize, in evaluation and promotion decisions, that job proficiency is more a matter of acquiring or expanding skills and knowledge than a function of innate ability. Let employees know you define competence as having what it takes to learn.
- Become, and remain, aware of how other people's behavior can undercut a woman's self-confidence and effectiveness. Complaints often voiced by women include: men interrupting or ignoring them when they speak (studies show that men do this to women 90 percent more often than the reverse), digs about a woman being an affirmative-action hiree, exclusionary kinds of male camaraderie, etc. Most put-downs are subtle but nonetheless demoralizing. Discourage such behavior among colleagues and subordinates, monitor your own sexist actions and be sympathetic to female staffers who encounter this behavior.
- Try to minimize organizational pressures on women. Don't set a woman up as the boss of an all-male team; instead, put more women on the team. Recognize and factor in the societal pressures that squeeze women between work, and family responsibilities. Instead of penalizing someone who has to leave work to care for a sick child, devise organizational strategies that ease the strain on employees with children.

Finally, for any effort to be lasting and profitable, more substantive and systemic changes need to occur. My suggestions: set up a task force to study and make recommendations about how to address Impostor Syndrome problems; start programs to teach managers how to recognize and counteract the negative impact of the syndrome; provide training in how to fully develop and use female employees' capabilities; promote professional women's networks; make an organizational commitment to day care; conduct in-house training programs for promising employees who need to build their confidence; and establish a formal or informal mentor system.

It is up to managers and companies – and in their best interests – to develop and support those intelligent, talented employees who, despite proof to the contrary, continue to doubt their competence. Conquer the Impostor Syndrome, and you will create a brighter, more profitable work environment.