

BANISHING THAT VOICE IN YOUR HEAD

Feeling less than confident about your ability to perform certain work tasks or other responsibilities in your life? You may be experiencing impostor syndrome.

WORDS BY REBECCA DOUGLAS

If you're anything like me, you've experienced the dread of a manager calling you into their office, and immediately assumed you'll be fired or hauled over hot coals for poor performance. Maybe you missed an important point in your last presentation, a client has made a complaint, or you unknowingly mucked up a task on a recent project?

I'd continually leap to the worst conclusions and sweat it out until finally speaking with my boss and then, funnily enough, the news was often neutral or even positive – perhaps a small pat on the back, or a promotion. Even if I'd made a mistake, the managers I worked with were lovely. They'd offer support, training or guidance on how to achieve a better outcome next time. Not a hint of bellowing, insults, or recriminations.

So why did I let the suspense send me into a spiral of self-doubt?

Whether at work or another area of our lives, most of us will encounter that gnawing feeling that we don't belong and don't really deserve our current position or accomplishments. You didn't cheat your way into them, but that nagging doubt persists.

Surely, someone will soon expose you for the fraud you are, and others will stand around pointing and laughing at you for daring to believe you belonged up on that pedestal.

This terrible and all-too-common feeling is known as impostor syndrome. The term was introduced in 1978 by psychologists Pauline Rose Clance and Suzanne Imes. At first, they suggested only women suffered from the syndrome, but later acknowledged that men could experience it as well. It's not currently a recognised disorder under the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), but this pervasive, negative self-talk about our

competency is real and prevalent, and many mental health experts believe it deserves official status.

In a nutshell, says clinical psychologist Kirsten Keown, impostor syndrome is a feeling of inadequacy divorced from the reality of how successful you are at what you do. You could be at the top of your field and yet be convinced you're the world's biggest failure.

"It's a system of self-doubting beliefs that interfere with your sense of security and ownership in a role," says Keown. "There's a sense of phoniness because you think you're not intelligent or capable or creative enough to live up to the role, despite evidence to the contrary."

GROWING UNCERTAINTY

So, what causes impostor syndrome? According to clinical psychologist Dr Lillian Nejad, when it comes to taking an overly harsh view of ourselves there are various factors that can come into play. These include being previously taught that, if you're not good at something from the start, you'll never be good at it, as well as an unhealthy emphasis on academic and other achievements as being the be-all and end-all of success.

"Perfectionistic tendencies and societal pressures are closely linked to these feelings of inadequacy," Nejad says. "Internalised beliefs originating from one's upbringing, including family perspectives on success, the promotion of a fixed mindset rather than a growth mindset with regard to intellect, skills and abilities, and a reinforcing of the idea that self-worth is contingent on achievement are also thought to contribute to the development of impostor syndrome."

Common triggers of impostor syndrome include adapting to a new vocational challenge and having

extremely capable people around you, causing you to compare yourself unfavourably to them.

"A job change, a new role or a new working environment where you may feel different or 'other' can contribute to impostor syndrome," says Nejad. "Being surrounded by other high-achieving people may also trigger a sense of insecurity about the extent of one's own intellect, skills, and abilities by comparison."

Sociologist Dr Lauren Rosewarne says cultural factors can also come into play.

"While degrees of impostor syndrome are common – some estimates suggest that 70 per cent of people have experienced it at one time or another – there are certain individuals who feel it more acutely," she says. "Those who have been marginalised in the workplace – women, people of colour etc – are often culturally made to feel that they don't deserve their position, and therefore this idea gets internalised."

The result can be a further entrenchment of existing beliefs about these groups.

"The central impact is underrepresentation of marginalised people in fields where they are qualified, but disbelieving about their abilities. This perpetuates stereotypes about certain people being better suited to some industries than others."

Sadly, it's all too easy to take to heart the insults and slights that others aim in our direction. This leads to a pervading feeling that it must have been luck, rather than skill, that

"IF IT WAS SOMEONE ELSE'S PROBLEM, SUCH AS A FRIEND'S, WHAT WOULD YOU ADVISE?"

KIRSTEN KEOWN



got us to where we are in life. Says Keown: "We're like Velcro for bad comments and Teflon for good. We'll grasp onto the stuff that gives us a negative perception of ourselves, whereas all the compliments and the accolades can just sort of slide off of the Teflon brain very quickly."

Giving yourself such a hard time can get in the way of your productivity, while you waste time and energy agonising over the details.

"The symptoms of impostor syndrome can include feeling like a fraud, working too hard to prove yourself, and valuing perfection over productivity, so you're fighting to prove yourself and get everything right, rather than looking at the big picture and being as productive as you can be," says Keown. "The extreme version would see you hiding knowledge gaps, playing it safe, not taking any risks, and procrastinating."

SELF-FULFILLING PROPHECY

Consequently, this can impact negatively on the quality of your work, paralysing you with fear such that you avoid tasks that trigger self-doubt, and making you more likely to stick with what you know when you could be better off trying something new and leaping into the unknown. Conversely, you might take on too much in your eagerness to show you belong.

"This might look like not asking for help, trying to be superhuman, and people-pleasing," says Keown. "Some people will agree to too many things, while others will say no to too many things, trying to avoid situations that might show them up."

These feelings can spill over into other areas of your life and have long-term consequences.

"Impostor syndrome is associated with fear of failure, overall life dissatisfaction and problems with anxiety," says Nejad. "People who chronically experience impostor syndrome may be more vulnerable to burnout and symptoms associated with depression."

It can also have a detrimental effect on your career, meaning you're not always able to capitalise on the opportunities that cross your path.

"And many people avoid their feelings of self-doubt and inadequacy, which can make it worse over time. The anxiety related to feeling unworthy or fraudulent can lead to avoidance behaviours such as

REWIRING YOUR BRAIN

Clinical psychologist Dr Lillian Nejad shares her tips for managing impostor syndrome.

Observe your self-talk This is key because your thoughts directly influence how you feel. Self-defeating thoughts can include beliefs about yourself such as, "I don't know anything" or, "I'm a fake", and beliefs about others such as, "They're so much better than me" or, "They will realise I'm not up to this."

Talk about it It's more common than you think. Being open about your insecurities can lift a weight off your shoulders and enable you to hear about others' fears, which is a normalising and validating experience.

Have a balanced perspective Acknowledge your strengths as well as the areas you would like to improve.

Accept that you have both natural abilities, and areas you can develop through practice and effort.

Celebrate your successes Reward yourself for a job well done and give yourself credit for your achievements. If you're unsure about the value of your contribution, seek feedback from trusted colleagues, peers, and/or mentors.

Seek support A psychologist can help you to break the cycle of thoughts, feelings, and behaviours that contribute to impostor syndrome. A mentor can also help you effectively navigate these experiences that are common among high achievers, and assist you in reaching your career goals.

procrastination, which may serve as a self-fulfilling prophecy," Nejad says. "A lack of self-confidence can have a huge impact on a person's career trajectory. For instance, they may never ask for a raise or a promotion because they don't think they deserve it."

BUILDING CONFIDENCE

While a healthy amount of scepticism with regards to our abilities is necessary to help keep our egos in check and our heads fitting through the doorframe, it's equally fair to allow yourself to bask in a bit of glory when you get things right.

So how do you do this when your brain keeps telling you that your success is undeserved?

When it comes to drowning out the doubts, Rosewarne recommends keeping away from influences that make you feel bad about yourself or inspire you to adopt a false persona to compete with everyone else.

"Think carefully about whether social media is a fuel for this. Are you, for example, constantly comparing yourself to others? Does social media encourage you to exhibit a disingenuous identity?" she says.

Rosewarne suggests seeking trusted feedback and evidence of your real achievements. "Keep a record of not only your achievements, but the work you put in to get there so that you don't trick yourself into believing your accomplishments are someone else's," she says.

As for dealing with overwhelm and self-doubt in the face of a seemingly impossible to-do list or a particular task, breaking down your list or a piece of work into smaller, more manageable chunks can be incredibly effective.

Positive affirmations have also been touted as a helpful tool for overcoming negative, self-sabotaging thoughts, but thoughts related to impostor syndrome can override supportive phrases such as 'I am happy' and 'I am a successful person', derailing their potential to talk you into a good headspace.

"Research has shown that focusing on what you have done well or focusing on the 'I cans' is far more effective than those empty affirmations," says Keown. "If you've got impostor syndrome and you stand in front of the mirror and say, 'You're fabulous,' the impostor syndrome part of your brain is going to be screaming, 'But you're not, because I know you

didn't do this and that and the other thing,' or 'I know there's somebody who's better.'"


Instead, amass a collection of evidence of your achievements in whatever format suits you best. Keown does this for herself by writing down three things each day on a Post-It note and putting it in a jar.

"The three things might be really small, like sending an email I didn't want to send or having a phone call I didn't want to have, or they might be bigger achievements, or they might be little things people have thanked me for," she says.

Another way to challenge those negative thoughts is to look at the situation from the outside in – if it was someone else's problem, such as a friend's, rather than yours, how would you advise them? "Thinking about what you would tell a friend in the same position can be a good way of fleshing out some of those alternative, more helpful ways of viewing the situation," says Keown.

Remind yourself that it's okay to get things wrong – an imperfect job can be improved upon, whether it's a rough draft that you'll edit later, or a misstep that you'll learn from and will be sure not to repeat the next time you attempt a similar task.

There's comfort in knowing you're not alone in experiencing these moments of self-doubt. When they're more than just fleeting thoughts, however, and impacting your life, it might be time to speak to someone.

"If you are feeling frequent distress and it is consistently getting in the way of work performance or if it's interrupting functions such as sleeping and eating, and leading to coping mechanisms such as increased alcohol consumption, those are signals that you probably need to talk to a mental health professional about it," says Keown. 



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So insidious is impostor syndrome and the attitudes that enable it to thrive, it's often the most accomplished of us who feel the unworthiest, as these five women attest. mindfood.com/women-of-worth