

# Everyone Suffers from Imposter Syndrome — Here's How to Handle It

by Andy Molinsky

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One of the greatest barriers to moving outside your comfort zone is the fear that you're a poser, that you're not worthy, that you couldn't possibly be qualified to do whatever you're aiming to do. It's a fear that strikes many of us: impostor syndrome.

I know I've certainly had those thoughts while publishing pieces of writing, whether it's blogs or books. I've had them while teaching my first university classes and giving speeches to corporate audiences. I appear confident on the outside but feel deeply insecure on the inside, wondering who I am to be stepping up to this stage. What could I possibly have to say that anyone would want to hear?

And I'm not alone. Actress (and Harvard alum) Natalie Portman described the self-doubt she experienced as a Harvard student in a poignant commencement speech several years ago. "I felt like there had been some mistake," she said, "that I wasn't smart enough to be in this company, and that every time I opened my mouth I would have to prove that I wasn't just a dumb actress." Howard Schultz, the chair, president, and CEO of Starbucks revealed that

he, and CEOs he knows, feel the same way: “Very few people, whether you’ve been in that job before or not, get into the seat and believe today that they are now qualified to be the CEO. They’re not going to tell you that, but it’s true.”

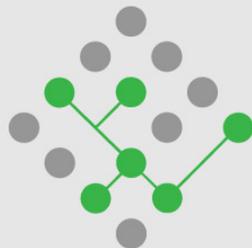
What can you do to overcome these feelings of inadequacy that so many of us experience?

A first tip is something that Portman highlights in her Harvard address, which I’ve found quite helpful: Recognize the benefits of being a novice. You might not realize it, but there are great benefits to being new in your field. When you are not steeped in the conventional wisdom of a given profession, you can ask questions that haven’t been asked before or approach problems in ways others haven’t thought of.

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It’s no surprise, for example, that some of the best research ideas I get as a professor come from undergraduate students with little previous experience, people who can think with a fresh outsider’s perspective. This is true in business as well. The pharmaceutical company Eli Lilly has created a crowdsourcing platform called InnoCentive, through which outside innovators are paid to solve vexing problems the company faces. And it works! In fact, according to a study by Karim Lakhani of Harvard Business School, many problems are solved by those from outside the field in question – physicists solving chemistry problems, for example. So the next time you feel inadequate in a particular domain, remember that as an

outsider to the role in question, you might have the most critical perspective of all.

A second tip for combatting impostor syndrome is to focus more on what you're learning than on how you're performing. According to psychologist Carol Dweck, the feelings that impostor syndrome leaves you with are ones we might actually be able to control. With a performance mindset, which people suffering from impostor syndrome often have, you tend to see your feelings of inadequacy or the mistakes you make as evidence of your underlying limitations. This mindset only fuels the concerns you have about being unfit for your job. But there's something you can work to cultivate instead: a learning mindset. From this perspective, your limitations are experienced quite differently. Your mistakes are seen as an inevitable part of the learning process rather than as more evidence of your underlying failings.

That brings us to the third tip: Understand the power of perspective. Those of us who experience impostor syndrome often feel like we're the only ones feeling this way, but reality is very different. Early in my career, when I walked into a networking event I was convinced that I was the only one worried about making small talk with strangers. But over time I've realized that practically everyone in the room shares that same concern. According to a recent survey by Vantage Hill Partners, being found incompetent is the number one fear of executives worldwide. So if you're feeling like an impostor, chances are that others in your situation feel the exact same way. Or, as Tina Fey once quipped, "I've realized that almost everyone is a fraud, so I try not to feel too bad about it."

It may not be easy, but overcoming impostor syndrome is possible – you don't need to feel helpless or alone. Next time you're in a situation that feels completely outside your comfort zone, don't focus on your failures. Consider it your opportunity to learn from your missteps and to bring forth a new perspective that others may not have.

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