
Don't Let Impostor Syndrome Sabotage Your Career

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Have you ever experienced a moment of panic before you got ready to pitch a proposal, deliver a talk or convene a meeting? I'm not referring to butterflies in your stomach or simple stage fright. I'm talking about being stopped in your tracks with a feeling of such tremendous self-doubt that your confidence was shot. Welcome to the non-exclusive club of millions of professional women (and men) who experience the impostor syndrome.

Dr. Valerie Young is an internationally known speaker, author and expert on women and impostor syndrome. Her book -- *The Secret Thoughts of Successful Women: Why Capable People Suffer From the Impostor Syndrome and How to Thrive In Spite of It* (Crown Business, Random House) is a fascinating look into how so many accomplished and capable people suffer from self doubt.

A self-described "recovering impostor," Young remembers her own experience in graduate school, a time when she succumbed to feelings of self-doubt and failed to recognize and celebrate her accomplishments. Impostor syndrome is a major psychological phenomenon that is extremely prevalent in the career world.

There are high achieving celebrity impostor syndrome sufferers including Tina Fey, Maya Angelou and Sheryl Sandberg, who have all openly admitted to feeling like an impostor at some point during their careers. Young says, "When you feel yourself sliding into competence extremism, recognize it for what it is. Then make a conscious decision to stop and really savor those exhilarating mental high points and forgive yourself for the inevitable lulls."

That's what Tina Fey does. As she says in Young's book, "The beauty of the impostor syndrome is you vacillate between extreme egomania and a complete feeling of: 'I'm a fraud! Oh God, they're on to me! I'm a fraud!' So you just try to ride the egomania when it comes and enjoy it, and then slide through the idea of fraud."

Another type of impostor never achieves success, according to Young, because the impostor syndrome holds them back from moving forward with their goals:

The thing about "impostors" is they have unsustainably high standards for everything they do. The thinking here is, *If I don't know everything, then I know nothing. If it's not absolutely perfect, it's woefully deficient. If I'm not operating at the top of my game 24/7, then I'm incompetent.*

Fakes & Frauds

Impostor feelings need to be normalized so we can understand that the circumstances are situational. Impostor syndrome is not a mental illness but a phenomenon that afflicts many whose work is constantly being reviewed by a subjective audience.

Consider the creative careerists and those who use skills in writing, design, performance or marketing as an example. These professionals often only feel good when they garner rave reviews because their work is appreciated by a subjective audience.

First-generation professionals and college students often feel like they are frauds who don't deserve to be charting a new path. Women in STEM careers (science, technology, math and engineering) are still a minority in the workforce and they often succumb to the pressure of feeling they need to represent all women in STEM fields. They often believe they are not worthy or good enough even when very accomplished. This is a classic example of impostor syndrome at work.

Take a Risk

When opportunity knocks with a new job, promotion or a chance to take a risk, women often feel the impostor syndrome take hold. Young suggests impostor syndrome gives us an opportunity to drill down and ask if the new opportunity is fear based. Sometimes it's a question about whether the new promotion, for example, will really provide you with an authentic path that honors your values. It begs the question -- how do you define success? The feelings of self-doubt are normal and in the best case scenario, prompt one to pursue a self reflection about what really matters. According to Young:

While the impostor syndrome is not unique to women, they are more likely to agonize over tiny mistakes and blame themselves for failure, see even constructive criticism as evidence of their shortcomings; and chalk up their accomplishments to luck rather than skill. When they do succeed, they think 'Phew, I fooled 'em again.' Perpetually waiting to be "unmasked" doesn't just drain a woman's energy and confidence. It can make her more risk-averse and less self-promoting than her male peers, which can hurt her future success."

Did You See Her Hair?

It's very well documented that girls and women are more likely to internalize failure and mistakes while boys and men are more likely to externalize these. Young cites a classic cartoon example where a woman tries on a pair of pants that no longer fit and she says, "I must be getting fat" while a man tries on his ill-fitting pants and states, "There must be something wrong with these pants."

Women tend to assume it's their issue and blame themselves. There is a social and cultural bias and women can be the worst offenders. Have you ever watched an Academy Award show and a famous actress (any will do) approached the stage to receive her coveted award and you murmured "I can't believe she is wearing that dress!" Women tend to be very critical of each other, so fostering a culture of self-confidence needs to start with women supporting other women.

Own Your Confidence

Don't wait till you feel confident to act confident. It's important to have humility to admit when you don't know something. A way to build confidence is to be authentic and accept that you don't need to know everything.

Young talks about an unrealistic *Competency Rulebook*. Women set very unrealistic expectations for themselves and the impostor syndrome then has a ripe environment in which to thrive. Women must stop being their own worst enemies. It's impossible to know everything and women need to give themselves a break. Perfection is unattainable so women have to stop waiting to achieve perfection and celebrate the strengths they already own.

According to Young, it's time for women to be bold:

Being bold is not about being right, being perfect, or knowing it all. Rather it is about marshaling resources, information and people. It involves seeing problems as opportunities, occasionally flying by the seat of your pants, and ultimately being willing to fall flat on your face and know you will survive.

You've heard the adage -- "fake it till you make it," but Young takes this a step farther. She encourages us all to find the *chutzpah artists* in our world who take life by the horns and have the moxie and the courage to make things happen. We can learn so much from these courageous souls by tapping into their willingness to take a risk. Start observing the confident people around you and model their behavior.

Girl-Talk

The Impostor Syndrome can start at tender age, so Young encourages parents to be communicative with their kids and address adversity, resilience and self-confidence early on:

Research shows that even as girls, women are more likely to blame ourselves when things go wrong. We're also more apt to give up following a set-back. Since failure and mistakes are inevitable, bar none the best thing parents can do is to help their daughters understand the learning value of failure and to gain confidence from overcoming adversity rather than running from it. It's okay to falter. The key is to get back in the game and try, try again.

What's a Woman to Do?

Self-confidence is attainable. Expand your comfort zone incrementally toward a stretch goal. Baby steps will allow you to truly own what you do well and learn to turn off the negative mental self talk that often surfaces. The impostor syndrome can emerge during performance evaluations or review time when you feel most vulnerable at work. By focusing on what you love to do, you can reprogram your brain to also believe that you do these things really well. Take time to enjoy your strengths and don't set unrealistic goals of perfection. Celebrate what you've already done well.

What is your negative internal script saying? What do you want the positive voices to say instead? Revel in your excitement, anticipation and successes and become OK with the fact that you can and will make mistakes. When professional athletes don't win the big game, they watch the playback tape, learn what they can do better next time, and get back into the game.

Pull up a chair -- invite yourself to the table, and give yourself permission to own your strengths and your self-confidence. The impostor syndrome is very real but you also have the power to silence this negative self talk so you can enjoy your life and your career.

Be sure to check out Dr. Valerie Young's book *The Secret Thoughts of Successful Women* for great strategies on how to thrive in spite of the impostor syndrome.

Caroline Dowd-Higgins authored the book *This Is Not the Career I Ordered* and maintains the career reinvention blog of the same name (www.carolinedowdhiggins.com) She is also the Director of Career & Professional Development and Adjunct Faculty at Indiana University Maurer School of Law. She hosts the national CBS Radio Show *Career Coach Caroline* on Tuesdays at 5pm ET

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