

The My So-Called Career Guide To Impostor Syndrome

Welcome to the first in our series of *My So-Called Career Guides To...*; a set of free resources for you to download at any time, giving you access to career support whenever you need it the most.

For the first in this series, we are going to focus on impostor syndrome, one of the best known ways we hold ourselves back or get in our own way when we start to take ownership of our so-called careers. When you know what to look for, you can see this insidious 'stinking thinking' impacting so many areas of your life and work.

Despite years of social conditioning that could lead us to believe otherwise, self doubt is not evidence of you failing where everyone else is succeeding. We all experience it -- and when I say 'all' here, I really mean it -- powerful women in the public eye from Michelle Obama to Meryl Streep have spoken openly about their internal challenges, and there is evidence to suggest that the higher we rise in our careers, the worse it can get if we allow it to go unchecked.

"It doesn't go away, that feeling that you shouldn't take me that seriously."

- Michelle Obama

An enormous 70% of the population -- two thirds of women report feelings of impostor syndrome at some point in their careers, compared to just over half of men. Even more people suffer in silence, or don't know that there is a name for what they're feeling -- so we are talking epidemic proportions.

So what exactly is impostor syndrome, and why is it so prevalent?

Impostor syndrome was originally defined in 1978 by psychologists Pauline Rose Clance and Suzanne Imes and termed 'impostor phenomenon'. They noticed that "successful women sometimes expressed fears that their achievements were down to luck" and went on to assert that, despite having external evidence of accomplishments, people with impostor syndrome remain convinced that they don't deserve the success they have.

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At its most basic, impostor syndrome is the fear of being found out. The idea that, no matter our experience, talent or expertise, we are only moments away from being exposed as a massive fraud who has no idea what they are doing. This fear of being found out is often paired with an inability to internalise our own successes, or the very real role we played in our personal story.

"It's almost like the better I do, the more my feeling of inadequacy actually increases because I'm just going, at any moment someone's going to find out that I'm a total fraud, and that I don't deserve any of what I've achieved I can't possibly live up to what everyone thinks I am and what everyone's expectations of me are."

- Emma Watson

Impostor syndrome often shows itself when we attribute our achievements to luck – you only got the job because they couldn't find any really good candidates, or because you know so and so, or you blagged it through a qualification rather than gaining the amazing grades you deserve because you worked incredibly hard, or they took a chance on you rather than recognising the value you bring – you get the idea, right?

Impostor syndrome is an inner critic that speaks up when you are on the cusp of stepping up, and talks you back down to a level where she/he/it feels more comfortable.

Even though it might not be justified, the feelings of anxiety and self-doubt are very real, and can be crippling, leading to people turning down opportunities, not applying for roles, holding yourself back from being vulnerable, challenging, authentic, questioning, ambitious – all things which are vital for growth.

It's not just a case of telling yourself to get it together... Impostor Syndrome requires a unique blend of compassion and practicality to tackle. This kind of change doesn't happen overnight. It takes practice to put yourself out of your comfort zone, to raise your hand, to step up and own your success.

On the following pages, you'll find our 5 Top Tips for Tackling Impostor Syndrome, and a list of additional resources if you want to go a bit deeper.

Enjoy!

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The My So-Called Career Top Tips To Tackle Impostor Syndrome:

1) **Accept that you're only human – you won't always know the answer right away.**

Remind yourself that you don't need to be the master of everything you try right away – or ever, in some cases. You're not going to know the answer immediately to every question, or the right decision in every situation, and recognising this is a good starting point.

Impostor syndrome often comes from the fear of being caught not having the answer – and a lot of the time, you're not going to have the answer, and that is absolutely fine because no one else does either.

ACTION: Get comfortable with using YET. Statements like... *"I don't know that yet, but I'm going to go and find out"*, or *"I haven't tried that yet, but look forward to learning"*, *"I don't feel confident running those meetings yet, but I can see that over time that can change"*.

2) **Recognise and reframe unhelpful thoughts**

My favourite example of recognising and reframing is from Bruce Springsteen. Rather than letting his fear about going out on stage and performing in front of hundreds of thousands of people compromise his performance and enjoyment, he has reframed the fear as excitement.

Recognising the voice of the gremlin on your shoulder, and taking time to reflect on the situations where it pipes up, can help you understand where your self doubt is really coming from, and how you can turn it around.

ACTION: When unhelpful thoughts come into your mind, write them down, with a note about what was going on at the time. Then, when you are feeling more neutral or positive, return to them and practice turning them on their head.

If the thought of standing up and giving a presentation triggers the thought that *'I'll stand up and they'll realise I have no idea what I'm talking about'* – you could turn this around to *'I feel uncertain about this, but public speaking is a really common fear, and I've done plenty of research so it will probably be ok'*.

Try to visualise yourself nailing it. Visualisation can be such a powerful tool in these situations, but all too often we spend our time focusing on what could go wrong. Then ask yourself what scaffolding you might need to help you feel more comfortable –

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perhaps you could ask someone you trust to give you feedback on your presentation, or dry run a Q&A session with you?

3) Start a feedback file and save positive feedback, comments and compliments.

When impostor syndrome strikes, fight back with evidence to the contrary.

If you don't trust your own assessment of the situation because of this "[*incorrect assessment of your worthiness and successes*](#)", it's much harder to disregard the words of others, especially those who have no reason to pander to your ego.

ACTION: Get into a habit of saving praise, achievements, feedback and comments on your work in a file so you can come back to it when you need a confidence boost. You can also use them externally to help your work speak for itself.

Highlight the things you are proud of – reflecting either weekly or monthly on what felt really good and why. If your work is worthy of other people's praise, chances are it's worthy of yours too.

4) Don't suffer in silence.

Shame over how we're feeling can keep us silent, when naming what's going on can be a really helpful first step. That said, sharing alone won't solve the problem, so don't fall into the trap of getting stuck here. Talking helps normalise the way you feel, but you can't talk yourself out of impostor syndrome – for that, you need to take action.

ACTION: Focus on building strong networks, both inside and outside the workplace, within which you can be honest about how you're feeling. But rather than co-ruminating or commiserating, challenge each other to take action, and provide accountability and support.

5) Fake it til you make it.

Don't wait until you feel confident to start stepping up. No matter how talented or experienced you are, there will always be times when you will need to wing it. Instead of seeing this as proof positive that you don't deserve the opportunity, think of it as a skill you can acquire. Growth and courage come from taking risks, so change your behaviour first and you'll be rewarded by feeling your confidence build each time you step outside your comfort zone.

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ACTION: Make a list of things that feel challenging or uncomfortable to you. Rank them from 'Mild Peril' to 'Absolutely Terrifying'. Start to look for opportunities to do the things you've classified as 'Mild Peril'. As you get used to putting yourself out there, you'll see your comfort zone grow, and things that once seemed 'Absolutely Terrifying' quickly drop down to 'Mild Peril' status.

We hope you found this helpful and would love to hear from you about your experiences tackling impostor syndrome.

If you have tips you'd like to share with the My So-Called Career Community, a story you'd like to tell, or if there is a topic you'd like us to create a My So-Called Career Guide To, you can reach us at hello@mysocalledcareer.com or @socalledcareer on Instagram.

Additional Resources on Impostor Syndrome

[Playing Big](#), by Tara Mohr

[Brave New Girl](#), by Chloe Brotheridge

[The Secret Thoughts of Successful Women](#), by Dr Valerie Young

[The Squiggly Careers podcast, ep #31](#), by Helen Tupper and Sarah Ellis

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