



Feeling Like a Fraud – Imposter Syndrome has it's Roots in Childhood

By Melody Wilding

Do you ever feel like you somehow got away with landing your job without truly deserving it? Do you feel *super uncomfortable* when your boss praises your work, because you're sure you haven't earned it? Do you have a fear of being "found out," exposed for not being experienced, talented, successful or knowledgeable enough for your job?

You might be experiencing something called Impostor Syndrome. And you wouldn't be alone: over 70% of people report experiencing Impostor Syndrome at some point in their career.

What Is Impostor Syndrome?

People who suffer from Impostor Syndrome feel inadequacy and chronic self-doubt that persists even in the face of information that invalidates that feeling. Impostor Syndrome makes people feel like an intellectual fraud: unable to recognize — let alone celebrate — their successes and achievements.

Impostor Syndrome is particularly common among successful professionals who have reached the upper echelons of success as defined by their industry, age group or gender. They may stop to look around from their perch as they rise in their career and suddenly panic that they're phonies. They believe they've managed to convince everyone around them of their worthiness.

What's more, given that professionals at the top of their fields really do experience greater pressure and higher stakes (if an intern screws up, it's not that big of a deal, but if a VP flubs, it could cost the company money and people their jobs), conditions are ripe for feeling inadequate.

But what are the origins of Impostor Syndrome? Why do some people fall victim to it, and others don't?

Where Does Impostor Syndrome Come From?

Psychologists believe that, like many other habitual thought patterns, Impostor Syndrome could be rooted in family background and the parenting style with which one was raised.

Let's drill down to some specific facets of upbringing that could influence the likelihood of developing Impostor Syndrome.

Undeserved Praise

If your parents or other significant adults in your life (a grandparent, a family friend, a much older sibling) gave you acknowledgement for things you didn't think you deserved praise for, you might have become instilled with the sense that you were a phony.

Were you told you were a "good girl" or "good boy" frequently? Were you applauded for your skills as an athlete, your artistic aptitude, or your math smarts when you knew based on comparison to your peers that you weren't particularly distinguished in that arena? In some cases, you may have started to think of your output and ability as a sham.

No Praise at All

On the flip side, if you never received praise at all — even for something impressive (such as a batting a home run, earning straight A's, nabbing the lead role in the school play) — you probably learned to think of yourself as inadequate and rarely up to snuff.

Everyone, from the youngest child to the most mature adult, relishes and requires praise in order to nurture their self-esteem and sense of self-worth. Receiving intermittent, conditional praise or receiving none at all can breed deep insecurity. For children, that need for positive attention is greatest. If you didn't have that need met, it could continue to skew your self-regard even as an adult.

Lack of Entitlement

If you were disciplined as a child using language like "Your brother deserves to sit up front because he ate his spinach and you didn't," or "You don't deserve to have dessert because you didn't clean your room," you might have drawn the natural conclusion that you just generally weren't a deserving person. If the idea of deserving was directly tied to punishment, it might have curdled your understanding of what it means to truly deserve something.

Family Labels

If you grew up with siblings, you may have identified with a certain role in the family, like the "smart one," the "sensitive one," the "competitive one" and so on. The danger of those family labels is that they can be hard to shed even if a child's behavior and disposition adapt away from that defining perception.

This can lead to deep self-doubt when an individual's personal view of themselves doesn't match up with what they've always been defined as and recognized for. For example, if you were always known as the competitive one compared to your siblings, but also excelled in the classroom, you may not have been congratulated that much on your academic achievements. That could lead you to doubt how smart you actually are.

4 Tips To Cope With Chronic Self-Doubt

Ultimately, the fix for Impostor Syndrome is to eliminate the underlying beliefs potentially rooted in your childhood that make you feel as though you don't deserve your success. That said, clearly it's not so easy to switch off a set of beliefs that have been instilled in you for years, possibly your entire life.

In the meantime, as you work towards breaking down intrinsic beliefs in order to truly luxuriate in your well-deserved triumphs, try these four suggestions for coping with Impostor Syndrome:

Think Quality, Not Quantity

Oftentimes, people who suffer from Impostor Syndrome measure themselves objectively against a ridiculously unattainable standard. They then (of course) conclude that they're bogus even when they're praised.

Try to think about success in terms of *quality* as opposed to picturing it as a quantitative commodity. There's no yardstick for professional success, so you're where you are in your career because you earned your way there, not because you're in a certain percentile or got a certain score or had certain boxes checked.

Embrace Praise Objectively

The next time you're given a compliment, internalize it as fact. Don't judge yourself against what was said, or analyze it for deeper meaning. Just accept it.

Stop the Word Vomit

Don't explain away your successes by revealing all the various reasons why what you did wasn't really that impressive. When you do that, you're trying to quell the discomfort you feel in being recognized for something you feel you don't deserve. Instead, when you get a compliment, practice saying "Thanks! I'm glad it worked out" and move on.

Take Luck Out of the Equation

Remove the word "lucky" from your vocabulary when it comes to describing your accomplishments. True, there is such a thing as being in the right place at the right time. But even in auspicious circumstances, hard work and technical ability are required for success. You aren't "lucky" you got the promotion, won the RFP or nailed the presentation. You put in the time and the effort. You earned it.

As you strive to become comfortable with internalizing your achievements, it may be helpful to assess how your upbringing influenced your feelings of security and self-worth.

The best news is that Impostor Syndrome is prevalent across all industries, genders and races, so if you're feeling like an impostor then many people around you are, too. Not everyone across the entire modern workplace can be faking it day in and day out. Translation: you're just as good as you're told you are by your boss, colleagues, contacts, family, and friends.