

Impostor Syndrome

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It's time to work on YOU. So sit back and listen to practical, actionable advice to accelerate your progress.

Today we are looking at Impostor Syndrome. If you've not heard of Impostor Syndrome before, it is the devil on your shoulder that tells you that you are not good enough, that you don't belong, that you don't have the skills for the work you are doing, that you are not good looking enough for your partner.

That nasty voice inside your head is exactly that: just a voice inside your head. It's not a true reflection of reality.

This track is aimed at anyone who struggles with impostor syndrome. We're going to talk about how common impostorism is, some of the reasons behind it, and how we can more accurately judge our self-worth.

This track is also perfect for a manager or colleague looking for techniques to support a person with impostor syndrome at work.

Let's get going!

First, I want you to think of the five people whom you most admire in the world. Maybe they're an old boss, a parent, a friend. Think about how incredible those people are. What is it that characterizes them? Their ability to empathize? Their loyalty? Their prodigious talent?

What do they share?

Statistically speaking, one feeling that four of the five would share is perceived fraudulence. That they haven't earned everything that they have.

That's right: up to [82% of people face feelings of Impostor Syndrome](#).

Yet we often think we're alone in doubting ourselves because nobody else voices their own doubts. It's an effect called [pluralistic ignorance](#).

Over the next few minutes, we're going to talk about the irony of impostorism. We're also going to discuss what you can do to be more confident not knowing everything, and how you might help others.

As Charles Darwin wrote in his book *The Descent of Man*, "Ignorance more frequently begets confidence than does knowledge."

This phenomenon is so well recognised that it has a name: the Dunning-Kruger effect. The [Dunning-Kruger effect](#) is a cognitive bias stating that people with low ability at a task overestimate their own ability and that people with high ability at a task underestimate their own ability. It's worth keeping this in mind the next time you wonder why so many others seem more confident than you are. Confidence doesn't necessarily positively correlate with ability.

Albert Einstein famously called himself an 'involuntary swindler'. Sheryl Sandberg - Facebook COO, billionaire and philanthropist - [admitted](#), in her book *Lean In*, that every time she excelled at work, she felt that she had managed to "fool everyone yet again", and one day she would be caught. Tom Hanks has said "No matter what we've done, there comes a point where you think, 'How did I get here? When are they going to discover that I am, in fact, a fraud and take everything away from me?'".

But hey, your feelings of inadequacy are actually valid, unlike theirs, right? You just really don't know anything, right? No!

It's natural to recognise that we could know more, or that we could have more experience, but it isn't necessarily logical to worry about that. Because that will always be true of every person in every job - it doesn't just apply to you. There's always more to learn, and that should be what makes a job engaging. But it doesn't mean your achievements up to now are worth any less - quite the opposite.

So far, we've discussed what impostor syndrome is and highlighted the cute irony that it's actually most prevalent among high achievers who know the most. But what we haven't discussed are the best ways to deal with impostorism.

People with feelings of impostorism and those who manage them will know that performance-related praise often fails to ease that anxiety. Instead, a more open conversation about impostorism may be required. The most effective tactic for a manager is to show a little vulnerability - to admit they feel or have felt similar feelings. After all, there's a seriously good chance that is the case.

But this shouldn't be something for just managers and reports - having honest conversations with peers can be a great help. Opening up to peers and family

members about these insecurities is comfortably the most effective way to help ourselves. Recognising we aren't isolated and alone can be a huge relief.

Another way to combat impostorism is to embrace being in the midst of learning curves. Non-impostors don't expect to start a new job and be able to do everything perfectly. Your manager will expect a certain amount of mistakes, because it's okay to make mistakes. Richard Branson once said '[You don't learn to walk by following rules. You learn by doing, and by falling over.](#)' It's also okay to ask for help! Barack Obama says '[Asking for help isn't a sign of weakness, it's a sign of strength. It shows you have the courage to admit when you don't know something, and to learn something new.](#)' These are some of history's most successful leaders. So question, does your impostor self - the devil on your shoulder - know more about what it takes to be great than these people? Embrace learning, and turn inevitable mistakes into great opportunities.

Our final strategy is to reframe impostorism. No, we're not saying accept it, but think about what it says about you: you're challenging yourself. You're trying to grow as a person, and for that, you should be praising yourself.

Once we become aware of toxic self-doubt and impostorism, as well as why we feel it and how commonly felt it is by others, it becomes much easier to manage. We can revisit positive feedback, and remind ourselves that learning is part of growing - if we can do a job with our eyes closed, we're likely stagnating.

Or we can remind ourselves of the 5 people whom we admire most, and remember that they likely have exactly the same thoughts as we do. Just like Albert Einstein, Tom Hanks, Sheryl Sandberg... you get the point.

If you're struggling with any of the feelings talked about today, we encourage you to speak to at least one person in your network, and to see how it makes you feel.

Remember, this is probably going to be as useful for them as it is for you!

If there's one thing to take from today, it should be this: If you want to stop feeling like an impostor, you have to stop thinking like one. Those are the words of Valerie Young, widely recognized as the leading expert on impostor syndrome. Stop accepting the negative thoughts your impostor self is creating as facts. They're not. Embrace learning curves. Celebrate growth.

Reading List

- [Article] [How to overcome impostor phenomenon](#), Chris Palmer.
- [Article] [Pluralistic Ignorance Across Issues and Over Time](#), Jacob Shamir, Michal Shamir.
- [Article] [The Dunning-Kruger Effect](#), Kendra Cherry.
- [Video] [What is Impostor syndrome and how can you combat it?](#), Elizabeth Cox.

- [Video] [President Obama's Message for America's Students](#), Barack Obama.
- [Article] [Why Impostor Syndrome is a Good Thing](#), Caroline Castrillon.
- [Article] [The hidden upside of Impostor syndrome](#), Peter Rubinstein.
- [Article] [8 in 10 Experience Impostor Syndrome Because They Ignore a Universal Truth About Success](#), Jeff Haden.
- [Article] [Prevalence, Predictors, and Treatment of Impostor Syndrome: a Systematic Review](#), Dena M. Bravata, MD, MS.
- [Article] [You learn by doing and by falling over](#), Richard Branson.
- [Article] [Sheryl Sandberg's Secret To Success & Breaking The Glass Ceilin](#), The Economic Times.
- [Book] *Lean In*, Sheryl Sandberg.