



How to overcome impostor syndrome

Introduction

Impostor syndrome is one of the often overlooked obstacles that women face as professionals in the workplace. It's the belief that you've become successful accidentally and that you don't deserve the position, wealth, fame, prestige or reputation that you have — despite the time, effort and hard work it took to get to where you are today.

Suffering from accidental success

Have you ever felt that some mistake was made along your pathway to success? Perhaps you're in your current position because of some fluke and it's only a matter of time before you'll be found out?

After running a successful company for 16 years, Suzan McDowell, president and CEO of Circle of One Marketing, admits that she has dealt with impostor syndrome. "I'm one of the most powerful black leaders in Miami and I'm not really sure how, since I feel like I have no idea what I'm doing and will be found out soon," she says.

McDowell says she's not sure why she feels this way, noting that it may be because of her middle child status. "When I get compliments on my success, one part of my brain understands [that] it's hard work and genius, but another part of my brain is like 'they're lying,'" she says.

Key takeaways



People with impostor syndrome tendencies doubt their accomplishments and often contribute their success to luck or chance.



While many women experience these feelings of inadequacy, men are known to face impostor syndrome too.



There are ways to move away from this mindset, including acknowledging your concrete accomplishments.

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Signs and Symptom

According to the American Psychology Association, impostor syndrome (or impostor phenomenon) is a psychological frame of mind, initially described by Suzanne Imes, Ph.D., and Pauline Rose Clance, Ph.D., in the 1970s. While not an official Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM) diagnosis, it is something that therapists are widely familiar with — especially among women and minorities. According to a study by researchers at the University of Texas at Austin, “Asian-Americans were more likely than African-Americans or Latino-Americans to experience impostor feelings. Interestingly, the researchers also found that these feelings more strongly predicted mental health problems than did stress related to one’s minority status.”

Marcia Reynolds, Psy.D, president of Covisioning LLC., and a master-certified coach, did her doctoral research on high-achieving women in the workplace. She found that, while some women are worried about being found out due to lack of confidence, many women also suffer from feelings of inadequacy for a few reasons. They often feel that:

- Their work must be perfect or outstanding, and it is never good enough
- They must demonstrate proficiency before they take on a job or task instead of learning on the job
- They must always know more and be better than men to be noticed and promoted

Focus on the effort

Instead of aiming for perfection, do your very best and believe in the work you put forth.

Learn as you go

It can be difficult to have all the answers, all the time. Accept that it's natural to keep learning.

Embrace your uniqueness

Acknowledge all the qualities that you bring to the table, rather than comparing yourself to others.



DeAnne Joy, a master transformation coach, speaker and author, says that women hone themselves to “unrealistic standards of perfection that we can never attain. As women, we often have the mistaken belief that perfection equates to excellence. What we fail to realize is that perfection is actually the opposite of excellence.”

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**DeAnne Joy, Master Transformation
Coach, Speaker and Author**



A level playing field?

Sacha Brant is founder and CEO of Sassy Lassies, a company that specializes in “helping to build businesses from start-up to stardom.” She questions whether women — or any specific segment — is more likely to suffer from this syndrome than others. She does, however, acknowledge, that women may simply be more likely to talk about it, which is a strength. “Once you can acknowledge that you’re dealing with it, you can take steps to rectify it.” Joy agrees: “While it may appear to be more common in women, 25 years of experience working with men and women from across the spectrum of life and business has made it clear that impostor syndrome does not discriminate. It may be more socially acceptable for women to acknowledge experiencing it — or it may be that it manifests more as overconfidence in men — but

both men and women experience it.”

Whether male or female, there are some steps you can take to move beyond feelings of inadequacy.

Getting beyond

How does McDowell cope and get herself back into the “I deserve this” mindset?

“I counter my impostor syndrome by acknowledging the concrete things and accomplishments you just can’t turn away from — like graphs of your ascent, or a project you can remember working especially hard for,” she says. “In those instances, the proof is overwhelming and you’re almost forced to concede [that] you may know what you’re doing.”

Jane Scudder is a certified leadership, personal development and career transition coach. In her practice, she works with entrepreneurs, leaders and new parents returning to work — most of them women. Women, suggests Scudder, “are out of practice with self-promotion.” In fact, she says, the phrase self-promotion itself “often sets off cringes in my female clients, whereas it launched men into stories about more of their successes.”

She recommends starting by sharing accomplishments with people who care about you — “not just your partner,

or Mom, but extend to friends or former colleagues.”

She offers a challenge: “The next time someone asks, ‘What’s new with you?’ share an accomplishment you’ve had recently. It may feel a bit strange to start, but this is a small step to make it more natural and second nature.”

In addition, she points out, by starting with a trusted network, chances are their response will be supportive — paving the way for more sharing in the future.

**We support you.
Together, let’s combat impostor syndrome.**

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