

Fake! Fraud! Impostor!

Get Over Insecurities and Give Yourself the Credit You Deserve

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By Ginger Rue

Allison,* 36, wasn't worried when she got a prestigious job in public relations. The Alabama resident had been one of the top students in her advertising program, and PR wasn't so different. But when she assigned her staff their first big project, someone asked a question using PR lingo she didn't know.

"I had no idea what the guy was talking about, so I bluffed my way through the meeting," Allison explains. Afterward, she grabbed an old PR textbook and berated herself about her shortcomings. "I told myself I had no business being there," she says. "I felt like a fraud. I figured it was just a matter of time until everyone else realized it."

Lots of people have had an experience like Allison's. The phenomenon even has a name. It's called Imposter Syndrome—a mindset in which smart, successful people believe that they have fooled others into thinking they're more intelligent and competent than they really are.

Public speaker and workshop leader Valerie Young, Ed.D., hosts seminars to help people like Allison break free from Imposter Syndrome. "You would think that the more successful a woman becomes, the less fraudulent she would feel, but for a lot of people, the more successful they become, the more those feelings become intensified," she explains.

Do you feel like a sham at work? Dr. Young says you probably have unrealistic expectations for yourself. Here's how to turn your thinking around.

Expectation

"If I were really smart, I'd know everything."

Helen, 23, of Washington, DC, recalls a mistake she made in her first job as a journalist. "I read on the Internet that a big celebrity was coming to town, so I wrote it up for my editor," she says. Turns out, the information wasn't true—and Helen hadn't verified her work. "I had to deal with angry calls for over a month," she says. "I felt stupid and totally unqualified to be a journalist." Of course, Helen wasn't stupid—just learning the ropes.



Tell yourself: I may not know everything, but I'm smart enough to learn. When you make a mistake at work, view the experience as an opportunity to grow and build up your skill set.

Expectation

"If I were really smart, I wouldn't need anyone else."

Another way to explain away success is to attribute it to others. People with Imposter Syndrome may believe that they owe their job to social connections or lucky timing. Amy, a 33-year-old from Ohio, is one of the most respected teachers in her school system, yet she questioned the glowing review her superintendent recently gave her. "The day he dropped in, I didn't feel that I was at my best," Amy says. "I wondered if he gave me a good review because I helped him with a project and he likes me."

Tell yourself: Connections wouldn't get me anywhere if I weren't qualified. Think about it: No one is going to risk career suicide by hiring or covering for an incompetent.

Expectation

"If I were really smart, I'd never question my abilities."

Intelligent people sometimes experience a paralyzing fear of failure. "It can cause perfectly capable people to drop out of school or never finish important projects," Dr. Young explains. Liz, 23, of Oregon, says, "I was a straight-A student through college and got tons of scholarships, yet sometimes I think maybe I would be happiest being a housewife one day, because I'd be able to avoid any chance of career failure or disappointment."

Tell yourself: I've accomplished a lot so far, and I can take on any challenge I choose. The only people who never make any mistakes are those who never try anything difficult.

Expectation

"If I were really smart, things would come easily to me."

Those with Imposter Syndrome often think that they can keep up with their peers only through constant hard work. When Emily, now 25, graduated from a top university, she began a career as an actuary in Los Angeles. "People often referred to me as being very bright," she says, "but there were many days that I felt clueless and it seemed I had to work and study so much harder than my coworkers."

Tell yourself: I'm just as capable as anyone else, or I wouldn't be here. Everybody's good at different things. It's normal for some things to be hard and other things to just flow.

Expectation

"If I were really smart, I'd push myself to do more."

The worst part about Imposter Syndrome may be the relentless pursuit of success. Like hamsters in a wheel, people with IS furiously chase the next challenge. Sonia, a 30-year-old

artist in Texas, says, “I have a bachelor’s degree and a master’s, yet I feel I need to do more. This feeling won’t go away, and probably never will.”

Tell yourself: It’s OK to feel satisfied. Take a look at your successes with an objective eye. Be proud of what you’ve accomplished.

A Chick Thing?

When Pauline Clance, Ph.D., and Suzanne Imes, Ph.D., first wrote about Imposter Syndrome in the ‘70s, they thought the mindset was unique to women. Later studies revealed that guys can also experience IS, but Dr. Young notes that in her many years of speaking about Imposter Syndrome, women have often been more likely to identify with her presentation.

The reason? Men may be less likely to consider feeling not-so-qualified a problem. “Guys learn how to boast and exaggerate as part of growing up,” Dr. Young explains. If a man bluffs his way through something, he might even be proud of his ability to fake it. For women, feeling like they’re the real deal tends to be more important.