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People who look and feel as if they're successful often play down their ability or intelligence. They're troubled by fear of failure and fear of success. They suffer from Impostor Phenomenon.

# Welcome to the faker fringe

Many people, haunted by fear, don't believe in their own success

BY NICOLA PULLING  
(OR AN UNREASONABLE FACSIMILE OF)

**T**hey say I am a perfectionist. I'm not. I've never done anything perfectly. They say I'm too hard on myself. And in my mind, that always leads to: They're going to find out. I've been in documentary television for 15 years. I've climbed from researcher-writer to producer-director. I've travelled the world for stories. Our teams have won awards. I look like I'm successful, but I feel like an impostor — I keep waiting for someone to tap me on the shoulder to say they've figured it out. And I'm not alone.

Apparently 70 per cent of us feel this way at some point — enough of us to merit a psychological label: Impostor Phenomenon.

People with impostor phenomenon don't believe their success is real. They deflect praise. They "made it" because of timing or luck, because they were charming or beautiful or because of their connections — never ability or intelligence.

Pauline Rose Clance and Suzanne Imes labelled it in 1978. The Impostor Phenomenon in High Achieving Women was a study of 150 women — from undergrads to med students to faculty to professionals. They were all exceptional and all convinced they'd duped the world into thinking they were intelligent.

I take Clance's Impostor Test. "A score higher than 80 means you often have intense impostor phenomenon experiences," she wrote in her 1985 book *The Impostor Phenomenon, Overcoming the Fear that Haunts Your Success*.

I score 81. Welcome to the faker fringe. "Having intense impostor phenomenon feelings does not mean a person has a pathological disease that is inherently self-damaging or self-destructive. It probably does mean, though, that the impostor phenomenon is interfering with that person's ability to accept his or her own abilities and to enjoy success," Clance wrote.

Yes. The doubts, fears and anxiety are exhausting. It drives who we think we are and squelches who we might want to be.

I'm in good company. I Googled impostor phenomenon and 5,240 websites popped up for engineers, lawyers, doctors, academics, business executives and artists.

Oprah interviewed Nicole Kidman, Julianne Moore and Meryl Streep a couple of years ago. Kidman said she tried to back out of *The Hours*. "They laugh at me, my agents, because I always call up and quit the movie the week before."

"Oh, me too," Streep added. "At the beginning of a movie I'm scared," Moore said. "By the middle, I'm doubting my choices. And by the end, I'm certain I've ruined the film."

That year, all three were nominated for Oscars, Moore twice. Kidman won. In confronting it, and writing about it, I met, read and heard about incredible people with incredible fear.

■ A tenured professor, two years from retirement, who thinks they'll find out she doesn't know anything.

■ A CEO of a multinational corporation, who is a Harvard graduate, who doesn't feel he deserves

## Advice for Parents:

Here is some simple advice for parents...

1. Be real with your kids — they know when you are pretending.
2. Don't over or under praise — they know what they have done or not done.
3. Give credit when credit is due.
4. Careful being critical — it can have devastating effects later on.
5. Don't lie to your children about their capabilities, but don't underestimate possibilities.
6. Set realistic and age-appropriate goals and reward when goals are achieved.
7. When praising children, be specific about what they have achieved.
8. Praise children specifically for who they are, not just what they do (e.g.: You were brave to try that even though you didn't win. You were a good friend to stand up for your friend to that bully. If you tried your best then that is all that matters, etc.)

(Courtesy of Cindy Stone — executive coach and psychotherapist — incidentalguru.com)

his position.

■ A law student who suspects admissions made a mistake letting her in, and has a breakdown in first year.

Impostors have two ways of handling new challenges. They attack with long hours, little food, no sleep and plenty of freaking out — or they procrastinate to the last minute — then freak out. If successful, overwork becomes a ritual that has to be repeated, procrastination becomes a ritual to avoid success altogether.

Because for some, the higher they go, the harder they fall. The more visible they become, the more visible their flaws.

The fear of failure and its evil twin, the fear of success, are core issues. "Some defend themselves from this fear by not succeeding at all, they avoid any situation that could lead to success," psychologist Joan Harvey wrote in her 1985 book *If I'm so Successful, Why Do I Feel Like a Fake?* "Others make the effort to achieve, but somehow sabotage themselves. Without knowing why, they find themselves procrastinating until it's too late to do a good job."

I find myself squirming inside. It's difficult to talk about. My close colleagues, men and women, and I have joked about it for years. In fact all my male friends have it. But few people, especially the most visibly successful, will go on the record to talk about it.

"Sometimes the more powerful the person, the more powerful the sense of the impostor syndrome," Cindy Stone told me. The executive coach and psychotherapist in Toronto figures about 90 per cent of her clients are dealing with impostor phenomenon to some degree.

"I work with a lot of men. I see it in a lot of people period," Stone said. "I was going to say that men tend to suffer from it more because they've had less access to their feelings as they're growing up. But I think it's pretty well split."

That's what the flood of studies on impostor phenomenon has shown since Clance and Imes first detected it in women.

"It's not uncommon for CEOs to feel the im-

postor syndrome," Stone said. "Unfortunately it really weakens their position. They should get a coach right away and start dealing with it because it can profoundly impact their position and the company."

"I don't remember a time when I didn't have it," Kelly Lyons told me. The computer scientist runs IBM's Toronto Lab Centre for Advanced Studies. "I always lacked confidence, but it came out most dramatically when I did my PhD. It became an issue at work because I wouldn't put myself forward for jobs because I'd be worried I wouldn't be able to do it."

A frustrated mentor at IBM set up an "intervention" between Lyons and a renowned professor at Princeton University. They sat down for coffee and the professor just started talking about her own experience with impostor phenomenon. Lyons, who had never heard of it, was blown away. "I went home with tears in my eyes. It was so exactly how I felt," she said.

"A popular thing that I hear from a lot of people is that I just look good on paper," said Valerie Young, who runs workshops on impostor phenomenon throughout the United States and Canada. "And I often reply, 'so what — you're a figment of your resume?'" It's kind of like Peter Pan's shadow. There's a disconnect between us and our accomplishments."

Young was a PhD student at the University of Massachusetts when a fellow student presented Clance's research to the class. It changed Young's life. "I sat there like a bobble-head doll with my head bobbing up and down ... That was the first time I realized there was a name for the feeling. And when I looked around the room all the other women were nodding their heads."

Young changed her PhD topic. She's been running workshops now for 25 years for more than 30,000 clients. She says her research was her therapy. I know the feeling.

"One of the things that I get people to laugh at is the incredible creativity that goes into making this stuff up," Young said.

A woman came to Young's workshop with the highest score in the Massachusetts CPA exam for accountants. She couldn't accept it until she rationalized that if she'd been in a bigger state, she would never have done as well.

It's one of the few visible markers of clever impostors — other than the frenzied overwork of success or unfrenzied procrastination of deliberate underachievement — we can't take compliments. We can't take credit, because in our

minds and souls, it's not ours to take.

"That's the problem," Young said. "We don't claim our accomplishments. If we consistently do that, every time we accomplish something, it's kind of emotionally unclear to us how we got there."

Most agree impostor phenomenon is a symptom of things much deeper: Somewhere along the way we let others define success and failure for us. We disconnected, put on a mask, and lost our way.

Most therapists attack impostor phenomenon by asking clients to think back to the messages they got as kids — at home and school. Were they brilliant? Were they the loser in the family? Children can be over or under praised, over or under criticized, and it can lead, ironically, to the same place.

"Someone you'd identify with impostor phenomenon would be somebody whose parents said, 'Oh, you can do anything.' And then they get out of school and find out that they can't necessarily," said Janice Berger, a Newmarket therapist who has run workshops on impostor phenomenon and wrote *Emotional Fitness* discovering our natural healing power. "Or they may be smart in an area that parents don't value. If they get no praise or no acknowledgement of their talents because the parents thought that would make them arrogant, that's also the kind of person who is afraid of being an impostor."

Therapists try to get the client to turn inward, to redefine what competent means and generate their own belief in their achievements. There is evidence that impostors are "motivated by the need to look smart to others and are shaped by an overriding concern with other's impressions."

"How many people are living through their lives, being who their parents told them they should be, who their teachers told them they should be ... rather than living from the sense of their own personal authentic centre core being," Stone said. "When you meet someone who (doesn't have impostor phenomenon), you see somebody who is not trying to impress anybody, not trying to be anybody else other than who they are ... they are at ease, they can make mistakes without falling apart."

Books and websites can guide you through the terrain. But if the wounds are deep, don't go it alone — get professional help. Finding a mentor or a coach can be extraordinarily helpful.

*Special to The Hamilton Spectator*

## Are you an impostor?

1. Are you afraid people will find out you are not as capable as they think you are?
2. Do you believe you got where you are because you were in the right place at the right time, knew the right people, were just lucky or there was some kind of error?
3. Do you have difficulty accepting praise?
4. Do you ever feel good about successes?
5. Do you experience acute anxiety when you make a mistake?

Some tools to fight it:

■ Make note of how you react to praise and criticism — why you doubt the former and overemphasize the latter.

■ Look back and figure out what messages you got from your family and others.

■ Imagine telling your peers and superiors how you have fooled them. Realize how ridiculous you would sound. (Courtesy of Janice Berger, Newmarket therapist)

## Resources:

*The Impostor Phenomenon, Overcoming the Fear that Haunts Your Success*, by Pauline Rose Clance, Peachtree Publishers Ltd.

*If I'm so Successful, Why Do I Feel Like a Fake?*, by Joan Harvey with Cynthia Katz, St. Martins Press  
*Emotional Fitness, Discovering Our Natural Healing Power*, by Janice Berger, Penguin Canada  
*The Incidental Guru, Lessons in Healing from a Dog*, by Cindy Stone, Fitzhenry & Whiteside Limited  
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