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Impostor syndrome: How self-doubt and lack of confidence hold you back, and what you can do about it

ABC Health & Wellbeing [Cassie White](#)

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When Fred walked up the steps and across the stage to collect his award, one thought ran through his mind: "I don't deserve this."

Standing at the podium making his acceptance speech, in front of the biggest wigs in his field, he couldn't shake the feeling that he was about to be found out. Fred was convinced he had no idea what he was doing and he didn't have what it took to be in his position. He figured pretty soon everyone else would know too.

In reality, Fred was great at his job. He deserved that award and the many accolades he has since received. He also happens to have something many of us are familiar with: impostor syndrome.

It's normal for everyone to have bouts of self-doubt and insecurity, business and management coach Suzanne Mercier says, "but this is the far more insidious feeling where you can't see your strengths".

Those feelings are so deeply entrenched in your core belief system that you don't see how you've earned the good in your life, despite all the evidence.

Whether it's a job, PhD, healthy family or general happiness, impostors can't shake the feeling that they haven't really earned their success. Instead they believe it is all comes down to luck, charm, trickery or being in the right place at the right time.

So they live in fear that any minute now they'll be exposed as the con artists they really are.

"I often thought I was bluffing my way through my success and felt I wasn't worthy of the award," Fred says.

"It made me increasingly anxious because now people expected me to deliver, all eyes were on me, and I was bound to be exposed."

Ms Mercier also knows what it's like to experience impostor syndrome first-hand.

After being promoted to sit on the board of Australia's largest advertising agency (the first woman ever), she quit.

"I felt like I didn't have what it took to be a leader; that I wasn't smart enough or prepared enough," she says.

Despite all evidence, "I spent the next two years thinking, 'I can't do this. I don't deserve it and I'm not good enough'."

If their stories sound familiar, chances are you know what I mean when I talk about impostor syndrome. You might be waiting right now for the fraud squad to bust down your door, drag you into the main street and administer a public flogging. (If none of that rings a bell, then congratulations — you're someone who feels worthy of your achievements. Either that or you're completely delusional.)



PHOTO: Can't shake the feeling that you haven't really earned your successes? (iStockPhoto/jakubzak)

Get your butterflies 'flying in formation'



Most of us have been told to take a few deep breaths and calm down when we start to experience performance anxiety. But there might be a better way to get a handle on the jitters.

Impostor syndrome, also known as impostor phenomenon, isn't something new dreamed up by Generation Y. It was first described back in the 1970s, and while it's not listed in the DSM-5 as an official diagnosis it is something many psychologists are familiar with.

Most research points to successful women being the main cohort to experience impostor syndrome, but Fred (yes, you're right it's not his real name) is proof that sometimes men are also afflicted.

Many of us have taken a joyride on the HMAS Impostor. So take comfort that our fellow passengers include the likes of Meryl Streep, Tina Fey and Sheryl Sandberg, who have all donned the impostor syndrome tiara of shame. Apparently, the bigger your deal, the bigger the fraud you are.

So what is it that makes us feel like such frauds? Pressuring parents growing up, anxiety, or your own impossibly high standards are said to plant the seed. Whatever the cause, feelings of phoniness, low self-confidence and fear of failure often stop sufferers from going after (or holding on to) things we really want in life.

"I always tell people to imagine their obituary saying, 'She always wanted to . . . but was too afraid to try!'"

Dr Valerie Young.

Dr Valerie Young is a leading expert on impostor syndrome. She has written a book on the subject and speaks at universities and businesses internationally about it.

She says if you suffer from an acute case of phoniness, keep reminding yourself that most of us feel self-doubt at times — and never let it stop you from striving for the things you want.

The consequence is that you may never reach your full potential — and that would be a tragedy, she warns.

"I always tell people to imagine their obituary saying, 'She always wanted to ... but was too afraid to try'."

Impostors, take heart, there are things you can do that can help you put impostor syndrome back in its box (wrapped in chains at the bottom of the Pacific).

1. Fake it . . .

Your inner fraud tells you that you're not ready. But is anyone ever really ready?

Of course we aren't — so just fake it until you've done it long enough that it starts to feel natural.

"You can't wait until you feel confident to take risks and accept challenges, because you could be waiting a very long time," Dr Young says.

In fact, Dr Young believes that a certain amount of fakery in life is actually necessary.

"Recognise that fear goes with the territory. Some of the most talented people on the planet get cold feet, but they still step up."

Besides, aren't we all faking our way through being adults anyway?

2. . . . But not too much

It is possible to take fakery too far — like when it becomes dangerous or illegal. "It's about being ethical," Dr Young says.

"If you're starting a new business, it's perfectly fine to pretend you're a little more established than you are. But I don't want my heart surgeon faking it."

3. Get outside your comfort zone

Hear this: being great isn't the same as being perfect. "You're never going to know it all," Dr Young says.

If you want to get noticed at work, for example, take on a project you think is slightly beyond your qualifications, Ms Mercier suggests.

"We need to find the courage to make decisions every day, to push ourselves that little bit further outside our comfort zones," she says.

That's easier said than done, especially because everyone else is funnier, smarter and more attractive than you, so you're obviously going to crash and burn.

This thinking is exactly why you need to take a risk. So get out there and prove to yourself that you can take care of business.

4. Keep your mouth shut

While for some of us impostor syndrome stops us speaking up, for others, it means we can't seem to shut up — and this tends to be more common in women. Dr Young explains: "We're over-sharers."

Especially if we're nervous or intimidated, like when talking to the boss. All of a sudden your meeting turns into an episode *Taxicab Confessions*.

"Women are more likely to publicly admit things they don't know and to apologise for it," she says.

"Depending on the situation, don't even bring it up. You need to practise a little self-protection."

The next time someone pays you a compliment, say thank you, then zip it.

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