



# You're a fake, you're a fraud

## How to beat imposter syndrome

### What is it?

Imposter syndrome, a psychological term rather than an actual disorder, refers to a way of thinking and behaving in which people really believe they have only succeeded due to luck, and not because of any talent or actual achievements. This belief is then coupled with a real fear of being exposed as a 'fraud'.

Not actually a syndrome because it's not a mental health condition or personality trait, but a set of experiences based on situation, it's caused purely by conditioning and socialisation, i.e., what you have learnt or been told – particularly as a child, but also later in life.

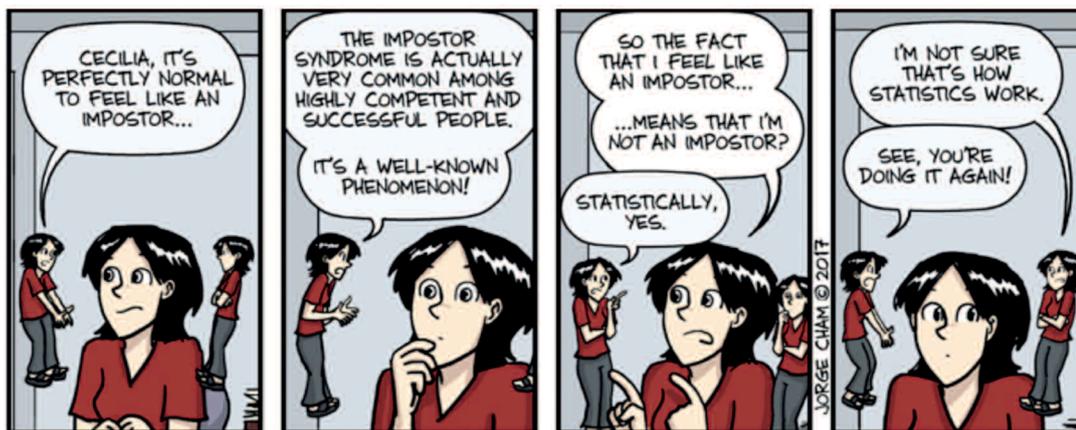
This phenomenon was first named by

clinical psychologists Pauline Clance and Suzanne Imes back in 1978, when they hypothesized that this was something only high-achieving women experienced, and found that, despite having plenty of tangible evidence to the contrary, these women remained convinced that they did not deserve their success. Rather, they called their success 'luck' or 'good timing', and dismissed any acknowledgement of their intelligence or competence.

### How it affects expats

Being a minority has been shown to especially trigger imposter feelings. One US study examined differences in minority status stress, impostor feelings, and mental health in a sample of 240 ethnic minority

university students. African Americans reported higher minority status stress than Asian Americans and Latino/a Americans, whereas Asian Americans reported higher impostor feelings. Minority status stress and impostor feelings were examined as predictors of mental health and shown to cause both stress and depression. This is because as human beings we feel more confident in situations where we look like everyone else, and when we are 'different' this can fuel the sense of being a fraud. I have personally worked with numerous expats and their spouses and this has certainly been the case.



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**The gender difference**

Since this initial study, the 'syndrome' has been found to impact both men and women, but again, in the latest study on imposter syndrome in 2018, it was found to be more prevalent in women than men. And you can see why - there is definitely a difference in upbringing from our male contemporaries: girls are often more likely to be told, or believe, 'no one likes a show-off', or how we should be 'nice', 'good', 'modest' and 'ladylike' (whatever that means).

In her book *Lean In*, Sheryl Sandberg cites a study which she says shows that people do seem to dislike women who are outwardly successful and acknowledge their own achievements, over men who do the same. In the now famous Heidi/Howard Experiment, business students were given a case study to read – that of a successful Silicon Valley venture capitalist. Half of those who took part received a case study featuring the name Heidi Roizen; while for the other half the name Heidi was changed to Howard. The students rated Howard and Heidi as equally competent. However, they liked Howard, but not Heidi – viewing her as more selfish and less worthy of being hired. This was exactly the same profile.

Remembering our basic human need to belong and to be accepted, it's no wonder that as women we worry about putting ourselves out there, being proud of our achievements, wanting to succeed, to advance – when power and success for women is still so clearly seen as a negative. I vividly remember my own example of this in a BBC appraisal. Sharing my achievements with my series producer, and passion about moving up to producer level

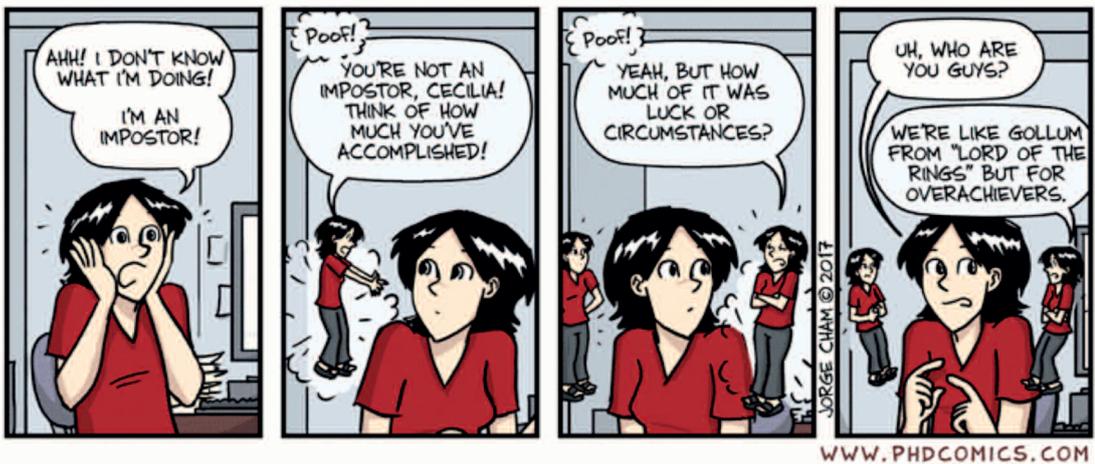
and making the kinds of films I wanted to make, he made it very clear he thought otherwise, with a sneer, saying, "You're very ambitious aren't you?"

On top of all of this, research also shows that women and girls are typically more likely to internalise failure, mistakes and criticism, while boys and men are typically more likely to externalise them. The impact being that if as women we don't do well or we 'fail', we will see it as yet further evidence that we're not good enough for the role or task at hand – that we are a fraud. Yes, I have had male clients feel like this - typically when just promoted, but I have never had a male client bring this as a major, underlying issue they want to change, as I have had with countless female clients (One theory being that men feel more shame about admitting this in the first place - so there is double the amount of shame and imposter feelings to contend with). With my female clients, so many of them have been the only woman in the boardroom and often had their opinions overlooked only to have the exact same view accepted by a man in the same meeting. I even had one client recently whose opinion was openly laughed at by every single man in the room. How do you think that behaviour fuels feeling like a fraud?

**The effects**

Imposter syndrome can be utterly debilitating. Its effects are huge and I've seen it lead to: feeling like a failure unless you do more and more training, earn more and more qualifications; not applying for jobs unless you meet the exact criteria; not asking questions or speaking up in meetings for fear of looking stupid; not asking for help for fear of looking like a

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failure; pushing yourself harder and harder to prove you are good enough. All of these manifestations have a huge impact in themselves, and can also cause stress, anxiety, burnout, low self-esteem, increased levels of shame, and even depression.

When we work in industries and systems where progression and promotion depend upon being able to own and openly voice one's achievements, and having them be known and recognised by others, you can see how Imposter Syndrome can cause serious problems. Ultimately it stops you going out in the world, being courageous, seizing opportunities, and living the most meaningful, satisfying life possible.

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## How to overcome it

To sum up, the key element of Imposter Syndrome is the inability to internalise your own wins and achievements – instead attributing them to either luck, or the work of others. Challenging and shifting this ingrained mindset is not easy, it does not happen overnight and I work with clients over several months to fully get a hold of it. However, the following exercises are intended to give you a way of starting to be more conscious of how it holds you back, and beginning to offset the imposter voice in your head:

### 1. Get evidence

Go back through work appraisals and seek out evidence-based feedback of your wins and achievements. Make sure this feedback is also from people who you view as honest, credible, and whom you respect, otherwise that imposter voice in your head will easily discount it.

### 2. Celebrate your wins and achievements

Collate this evidence-based feedback including sources and direct quotes. Put a copy of this up somewhere, or on your phone or desktop, anywhere you will see it every day. Read it out loud whenever possible.

### 3. Find an imposter buddy

Remembering that this friend has to be honest and factual, and someone you respect, ask and agree that you can call her/him when the imposter voice kicks in. Share your imposter feelings with them (knowing they will set you right by listing your wins and achievements at a time when you really can't remember them, let alone acknowledge them). If possible, have this friend also be someone who suffers the same, and have it be reciprocal, pay it forward.

### 4. Stop dismissing praise

When people do acknowledge your successes, do not brush them aside with an "Oh it was really my team that made it all happen" or "It was purely down to luck really". Instead, say thank you. Take a moment to let the acknowledgement sink in, even share an aspect of what you did do to make it happen.



**Sue Belton** is an author and coach specialising in coaching ambitious established professionals who have a track record of achieving great things, but now want more meaning to their work, want to overcome self-doubt, want more influence and impact, and work smarter not harder so they can spend more time with family and friends. Sue's new book is *How To Change Your Life In 5: Practical steps to making meaningful changes in your life*.

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