

every  
woman  
WORKBOOK

# OVERCOME IMPOSTER SYNDROME



# About this workbook

At everywoman, we deliver a range of innovative products and resources that unlock the potential and talent of women in business globally. Whether you're just starting out, looking to progress your career, or even to build and develop your own enterprise, the everywomanNetwork provides a wealth of personal development resources, advice and inspiration to address the challenges you face at key stages in business. We produce workbooks on topics that matter most to our members and we're constantly listening to your views to give you the tools you need to propel you through your life's work, at a time and place that suits you.

*Welcome to our workbook, Overcome Imposter Syndrome.*

Have you ever felt that others are going to discover that you're a fraud and that you don't deserve your role, achievements or progression? Or that you've only succeeded in getting to where you are because of chance, and not because of your innate talents and learned skills?

These feelings lead to an overarching feeling of inadequacy, constant questioning, self-doubt and seeking to prove. This is often known as the imposter syndrome, and it can effect all kinds of people from all parts of life. The term was first used by psychologists Suzanna Imes and Pauline Rose Clance in the 1970s and when it was first introduced, it was originally thought to apply mostly to high-achieving women. But, through various studies, they found that the feelings of imposterism cut across gender, race, age, and occupations.

The Journal of Behavioural Science quotes that 70% of people experience at least one episode of imposter feelings in their lives. It is therefore a myth that women alone experience this phenomenon. Research by psychologist Audrey Ervin shows that men experience these feelings too, but their expression of it may appear differently. Due to gender norms and fear of backlash, men are possibly less likely to externalise their feelings. So, we encourage you to remind yourself that anyone can be exposed to feelings of imposterism.

This workbook is aimed at anyone who experiences imposter syndrome and contains four sections:

- What is the imposter syndrome, what causes it and why work on it?
- What might be triggering imposter syndrome in you?
- Spotting the different types of imposter syndrome.
- Strategies for managing imposter syndrome.

Imagine having some insights and practical ways to identify how the imposter syndrome can play out in your life and importantly how you can manage and control it? Experiencing moments or even prolonged episodes of imposter syndrome does not mean that it needs to define you in the long term. Tackling imposter syndrome can give you a sense of power, agency and inner peace — to find the best version of you.

We'd love to know how you get on – email us at [karenmax@everywoman.com](mailto:karenmax@everywoman.com) or tweet us @everywomanuk.

Max & Karen  
and the everywoman team

“Chronic feelings of inadequacy, incompetence, and fraudulence despite objective success. It’s hard to internalise success and genuinely hold the belief that you’re competent and capable.”

Psychologist Audrey Ervin’s definition of imposter syndrome

# What is imposter syndrome, what causes it, and why work on it?

Imposter syndrome is a tendency rather than a type of person. This means we must remind ourselves that in any given situation, we can all act in this way, whilst some people are more likely to respond in this way than others.

Imposter syndrome affects those who have been successful and are successful. Some examples to share with you include:

- Maya Angelou, a successful American poet, memoirist and civil rights activist. Even after writing 11 books and winning dozens of awards and more than 50 honorary degrees, she couldn't escape the doubt that she hadn't earned her accomplishments. She would say "I've run a game on everyone, and they are going to find me out."
- Albert Einstein described himself as an "involuntary swindler" who didn't deserve so much attention by others.
- Starbucks CEO Howard Schultz admitted to being insecure: "Very few people, whether you've been in that job before or not, get into the seat and believe today that they are now qualified to be the CEO. They're not going to tell you that, but it's true," he said in an interview with *The New York Times*.

Whilst not everyone may be in the public eye, there is a commonality by those experiencing imposter syndrome that they feel fraudulent and therefore not deserving.

The great news is that people who don't feel like imposters are no more intelligent or competent or capable than the rest of us. Therefore, we have a lot of influence over this which partly involves changing the way we think about ourselves and the situations we go for or find ourselves in.

1. Allowing your persistent self-doubt to characterise your past, present and future experiences.
2. Agonising over even the smallest mistakes or flaws in your work.
3. Attributing your success to outside factors or luck.
4. Being sensitive to criticism even if it is constructive.
5. Feeling like you will inevitably be found out as "faking it" or a "phony" even though objectively you have had previous success.
6. Downplaying your expertise, even in areas you are more knowledgeable and skilled than others around you.
7. Looking for validation to identify your self-worth and giving others the power to dictate whether you are great and/or successful e.g. your boss, parents.
8. Feeling that you don't deserve the success that you've had.
9. Feeling that failure is not an option.
10. Feeling that your ideas and skills are not worthy of others' attention and choosing therefore not to self-profile or accept praise and acknowledgement by others when given.

## CAUSES OF IMPOSTER SYNDROME

Research shows that whilst anyone can be prone to experiencing feelings of imposterism, there are a number of causes to imposter syndrome which fall across these categories:

### Personality traits

Those that have perfectionist tendencies, are self-focused, and have a tendency to be emotionally reactive are prone to experience feelings of imposterism.

### Family life

Families that have valued achievement above effort, learning, experimentation and failure, or families that have had a low support ethos but high conflict.

### National culture

Some cultures value individualism and therefore there is a pressure on individuals from a young age to be successful and achieve rather than just 'be'.

### Organisational culture

Organisations that value high achievement and create an internal competition to raise to the top, accelerate career success.

### Institutionalised, marginalised or under-represented groups

A sense of belonging fosters confidence — the more people who look or sound like you, the more confident you feel. Conversely, the fewer people who look or sound like you, the more your confidence is likely to be negatively impacted. This is especially true of those who belong to a group that attracts stereotypes about competence.

## WHY WORK ON IMPOSTER SYNDROME?

Feelings of imposter syndrome can be a drain on your emotional and physical energy. They can induce feelings of lack of inner-confidence and produce anxiety, in turn impacting overall wellbeing. They can also be a roadblock to career advancement; the imposter sufferer might neglect to put themselves forward for opportunities, challenges, promotions, or new roles. Lack of fulfilment can set in when the imposter sufferer settles for a lesser role because they fear the challenges they might face. In turn, they earn less influence and advancement, which serves to reinforce those imposter feelings. If you have imposter feelings, then working in these is to expand your choice in what you believe, think, see, hear and do. By having the courage to dive into uncertainty, you'll be able to focus on all that you've achieved and propel yourself forward.

# What might be triggering imposter syndrome in you?

Nature and nurture together create the tendency to experience the imposter syndrome. However, the feeling remains latent until it is triggered by something external to us; something we react to; something that tips us into actively feeling not good enough. Below are some of the most common triggers of imposter syndrome:

## Category 1 – Our experience with others

- Not being invited to a situation or to contribute.
- Being challenged when you voice an opinion.
- Being spoken to abruptly or being interrupted.
- Interacting with strong, assertive and outwardly confident personalities.
- Demanding people.
- Interacting with those who have greater expertise.

## Category 2 – Our perceptions of others towards us

- Not being listened to.
- Not being understood by others.
- Not being valued by others.
- Being ignored.
- Being disrespected.
- Not being accepted for who you are.

## Category 3 – Ambiguity and uncertainty

- Being exposed to new situations (e.g. promotion, a new position or role, a new organisation).
- Being exposed to challenging situations where you feel personally exposed, or don't know what the outcome will be or how others will react.
- Receiving unsolicited feedback on how you could do something better.
- Receiving feedback that has caught you by surprise.
- Not knowing the ground rules in a new situation.
- Encountering politics in any environment.
- Mistakes and disappointment leaving a number of question marks for what this might mean going forward.





## EXERCISE

**Reflect on the last 6- 9 months, which of the above triggers bring out the feeling of being an imposter?**

**What pattern/s do you notice and what is this telling you?**

*For example: lack of self-control, your own worth and success being defined by others in what they think of you, feeling a victim in certain situations, personalising a situation and making it about you rather than asking yourself what it tells you about that person...*

Understanding your triggers will help you be more consciously aware of times that you are likely to feel the imposter syndrome. Knowing that situation and context are key will help to remind you to not give yourself the label of being an imposter. Secondly, it helps you think about what is present within the environment or your relationship with it. Thirdly, it will help you pinpoint any patterns in your thinking, feelings and behaviour which will enable you to strategise more quickly.

# Spotting the different types of imposter syndrome

Dr. Valerie Young, author of *The Secret Thoughts of Successful Women: Why Capable People Suffer from the Impostor Syndrome and How to Thrive in Spite of It*, has identified five types of “imposters”.

In this section, you will be introduced to the different types of imposter syndrome that exist, asked to identify which types you mostly experience and reflect on the consequences to you.



Score yourself using the rating scale provided against the series of actions below. Once complete total your scores and read about where you may have the greatest tendencies and what this could mean for you.

**Scale**

- Never = 1
- Rarely = 2
- Sometimes = 3
- Always = 4

Section A	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Always
Put a great deal of pressure on self.				
Focus on becoming better rather than taking stock of achievements.				
Have a feeling of “if I want something done right, I need to do it myself.”				
Find it harder to recover from mistakes – accept, learn and move on.				
<b>Total Score:</b>				
Section B	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Always
Feel guilty at not being the super-heroine in all aspects of life.				
Work all hours on a piece of work.				
Burn out often or feel so overwhelmed that demands on self exceed capacity.				
Don't accept the trade-offs in fulfilling different roles in personal and professional life.				
<b>Total Score:</b>				





## EXERCISE

Section C	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Always
Underrate value of own expertise.				
Hold back from finishing a task or piece of work until know everything about the subject.				
Feel scared of being caught out and therefore taking a step back from leaning in or contributing.				
Questions own value which stops or impedes contribution and perspective.				
<b>Total Score:</b>				
Section D	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Always
Have an unrealistic expectation of what comes with the journey towards achieving ambitious goals.				
Lowers the bar around goals to not disappoint self.				
Compare self to others.				
Assume others have had an easy and quick ride to their success.				
<b>Total Score:</b>				
Section E	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Always
Don't ask for help from others.				
Put constant pressure on self to be good at everything.				
Turn down help from others in an attempt to prove own self-worth.				
Scared of sharing vulnerability with others in a room.				
<b>Total Score:</b>				



## EXERCISE

# INTERPRETING YOUR SCORES

### **If your highest score is in Section A, you are showing tendencies of the Perfectionist type:**

Your sense of self-worth comes from how well you've done something. This means you struggle to feel satisfied and are left telling yourself "I could have done or do better". When asked "what does better look like?" you are unable to give a benchmark, so this is never ending. You tend to set yourself excessively high goals and when you fail to reach these, experience major self-doubt and worry about how you measure up. You fixate on flaws and find it hard to accept that part of success is to make mistakes and learn from them.

### **If your highest score is in Section B, you are showing tendencies of the Super-heroine type:**

You often experience feelings of inadequacy which create a need to work as hard as possible and put in extreme effort. You measure success on your ability to fulfil varying and numerous roles e.g. mother, sibling, parent, career achiever.

### **If your highest score is in Section C, you are showing tendencies of the Expert type:**

You are concerned with the "what" and "how much" you are capable of doing. You have an eagerness to learn more coupled with a constant dissatisfaction with your current level of understanding. Therefore, there is a consistent need to search for more information to fill gaps.

### **If your highest score is in Section D, you are showing tendencies of the Natural Genius type:**

You tend to measure your worth by the "how" and "when" accomplishments happen. You base your success not only on getting things right, but doing so first time round. You place significance on gaining a real mastery of new skills quickly and easily, then feel ashamed, crushed, and demotivated when you don't meet your own ambitious goals first time round.

### **If your highest score is in Section E, you are showing tendencies of the Soloist type:**

Your preference is to work individually and sort everything out for yourself, as you believe self-worth comes from productivity. You tend to believe that you cannot take help from others as doing so would be a sign of weakness. Whilst it's a strength to work independently and figure things out, it can become problematic when there is an avoidance to seek help to prove self-worth.

The common theme across all of these types is that they all attempt to be the best, put huge amounts of pressure on themselves, and can take over the mind if and when high unrealistic standards are not met.



## EXERCISE

Which type/s of imposter do you predominantly experience and in what types of setting?

What are the consequences/implications for you in your personal and professional life?

What could be different for you if you worked on your feelings of imposterism?

# Strategies for managing imposter syndrome

## Question yourself

Every time you have a negative thought about your abilities or wonder if you're qualified for a job, pause and ask yourself:

- Is the thought actually (truly) accurate?
- Is this emotional experience real or am I responding based on other outside variables?
- Does this thought help me move forward and achieve what I have set out to, or does it hinder/hold me back from achieving what I have set out to?

## Reframe your thinking

Start to put your feelings and thoughts into perspective. For example, you might receive a salary increase or a promotion, so you feel distress or guilt because you believe you didn't deserve it. Limiting beliefs are irrational, however they do drive what we see in ourselves, the dialogue we have with ourselves, or the pictures we create in our mind about ourselves.



## EXERCISE

What are you holding to be true about yourself that is limiting? E.g. I'm not good enough, expert enough, old enough, worthy of this etc.

What are the consequences of holding onto this belief? E.g. sleep deprivation, nervousness around others.

What evidence do you have to support this limiting belief being true? Is there something in the past that has happened or is it in your mind?

What would you need to hold true about yourself that is more empowering that starts with "I am"? E.g. "I am refreshing", "I am a catalyst for change", "I am a creative inventor", "I am a considered problem solver", "I am a provocative disruptor"

What actions could you be taking if you really lived out of your "I am" statement? Think of different situations at work where the imposter syndrome plays out.

You are in total control of what to believe about yourself. This can either empower and enable you to move forward or hold you back. Beliefs are in the unconscious state, yet they drive 65% of our behaviour. Imagine if you started to consciously think about what you believe in yourself, how that could drive your behaviour and results? When you take action and you get results, you will shift a belief paradigm and then you will start to believe something about you that is more enabling and in service of you.

## ACCEPTING IMPERFECTION AND FAILURE

Learn to accept that human beings are imperfect and that includes you. Therefore, it's a natural part of your journey to make mistakes given that nobody is 100% flawless. Next time you make a mistake it's an opportunity to gather new data about yourself, others and the situation which will inform your decision making. Making mistakes is part and parcel of the learning journey to self-discovery and experimentation and the only thing that can come of it are learnings and opportunities that you can take forward. You cannot change what has been and gone, but you can and do have influence over your interpretation of events. This is what matters in taking you forward to drive the outcomes you are after.



### EXERCISE

**Next time you experience a mistake, or a failure ask yourself the following questions:**

**What has this taught me?**

**What learning will I take forward?**

**What do I now have that I didn't before? E.g. a new skill, a new perspective, a new relationship, a new opportunity, additional responsibility.**

## EMBRACING SUCCESS

If you have imposter syndrome, it can be tempting to invalidate even the smallest win by putting it down to chance or focusing on what could be better. Resist that temptation by listing every success and attributing it to your contribution and allowing them to resonate emotionally.

Over time, this practice will give you a realistic picture of your accomplishments and help affirm your self-worth. It will also help you find counterevidence when your mind goes to a place of not feeling that you are enough or are a fraud. Having something you can access when you need it in moments of imposterism will re-focus the mind!

Focusing on your success and assets will also help you steer away from a need to externally validate. No one has the power to make you feel good about yourself other than you.



### EXERCISE

**List your achievements over the last 6 months in your professional and personal life.**

**What do these achievements tell you about your strengths, assets, qualities?**

**What patterns do you notice?**

**TIP!** Make a habit of capturing achievement-based affirmations and personal based affirmations to remind yourself of your brilliance.

## TAKING THE LEAD ON FEEDBACK

Be the agent of your own feedback with different people in your personal and professional life.

Drive conversations that give you insight to:

1. What others value in you and why, and the impact this has in your role or career success.
2. What change/s they would like to see in you and why to have greater impact in your role or career success.

Set yourself up to receiving feedback that either reflects or challenges your self-perception to avoid being surprised. Remind yourself that somebody's perception is their reality, but it doesn't present total reality. Also remind yourself that you can choose whether to act on somebody's feedback or not. As Eleanor Roosevelt stated, "no one can make you feel inferior without your consent." Remember that the next time you receive feedback and you find yourself crumbling or feeling crestfallen.

Have the courage to be clear with others if you are choosing not to act on their feedback – you have this right to do this. You will not only be empowered, but you will also have set and managed expectations.

## PRACTICE IN-TIME LEARNING

Rather than have to be knowledgeable about everything upfront or skill yourself before you've arrived at a role or project or activity, practice in-time learning. Embrace the opportunity that comes with learning as you go and experience. Think about what you are excited about as you walk into this new experience or remind yourself why you are doing it or what it will give you on your CV that you don't have today. Focus your mind on leaning into the situation.

## TALK IT OUT

Whether it's a mentor, friend, family member, boss or peer, talk to someone else about how you're feeling. Getting an outside perspective can shake irrational beliefs and ground you in reality.

Sometimes we think that we are the only one to have feelings of imposterism only to find that others have it too when we have conversations with them. Remember that if 70% of people are to experience at least one situation of feeling like an imposter then there are a lot of people in your network who will be feeling or have felt what you are currently experiencing. When you talk to others, it can also normalise what you are going through. This will get you more into the space of acknowledging that it is not only you and will get you collaborating with others to work on feelings of imposterism. Dr Amy Cuddy in her new book *Presence* writes about "the more we communicate about our fears and anxieties, and the smarter we are about how they operate, the easier they'll be to shrug off the next time they pop up."



# Final reflections



## EXERCISE

What are the main triggers for bringing out feelings of imposterism in you?

What techniques will you use to manage these situations so that you feel a greater power and agency?

What have you found out about yourself and this topic that is liberating and empowering?

# Overcome imposter syndrome

## Further reading

Valerie Young – *The Secret Thoughts of Successful Women*

Jessimy Hibberd – *The Imposter Cure*

Dr Amy Cuddy – *Presence*

[Dr Pauline Rose Clance – The Clance Imposter Phenomenon Scale](#)

[TED Talks on fighting imposter syndrome](#)

## everywomanNetwork Resources

[Webinar: Overcoming imposter syndrome](#)

[Love Your Imposter by Rita Clifton CBE](#)

[Ditching imposter syndrome with Clare Josa](#)

[Overcoming self-limiting beliefs and imposter syndrome](#)

[6 steps to beating imposter syndrome](#)

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