


BRAVER
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Feeling Phoney?

An introduction to the impostor phenomenon
and what you can do about it.

Dr Terri Simpkin

“You are braver than you believe,
and stronger than you seem,
and smarter than you think”

A.A. Milne



“Logically, I know I’m capable of anything. I can take on the world. In practice, I’m terrified I’ll be found out because I must be faking it.”

As part of my research into the Impostor Phenomenon in women in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) I’ve been hearing this comment and variants of it from women all over the world. Women, who on the face of it are capable and clever, confident and resilient, have been telling me stories of their internal struggle with their conviction that they are a fraud; an impostor in their own occupations and a faker in their workplace.

While the stories differ in regard to depth and years spent struggling with an internal turmoil that delivers ongoing anxieties and fear of failure (or of success), the underpinning tale is essentially the same. Dealing with the experience of feeling like an impostor is at best tiring and unfulfilling, at worst it can be a debilitating barrier to job satisfaction and professional advancement.

Dr Pauline Clance and Dr Suzanne Imes first identified the ‘Impostor Phenomenon’ in 1974 and it describes the inner fear, guilt and perhaps dissatisfaction people feel when contemplating success.

People experiencing impostor feelings often attribute their success to luck, other people or some other external influence. It is not a fishing exercise for praise, but a genuinely held belief that they’ve had little overt control or influence over achievements. Put simply, they are unable to internalise their own success. However, they often are more likely to take responsibility for failure or lack of success even where it is clearly not of their doing.

Interviews conducted with women from a wide range of occupations, ages and workplace experiences suggest common themes. There is often an outward confidence or self assurance that women project to the world, but reports indicate that internally, a woman may well be seething with insecurities and fear of not being good enough; of not being able to live up to the expectations of those around her.

Women spoke of being crippled with doubt about their own capacity to achieve despite compelling evidence to suggest that past challenges have been overcome with ease. Interviewees often suggested that once they’d taken on a new challenge, role or project they were beset with panic about not being able to deliver despite the assurances of others they were perfectly qualified and able to do the work.



Women variously spoke of their work being so easy that “really, anyone could do this so I’m not sure why I should get praise for it” or “I’m surrounded by a good team and it’s they who should get the praise, not me” and “I just got lucky, that’s all”.

All of the above suggests that in the four decades since the original work on the Impostor Phenomenon was completed, an underlying inability to internalise success and recognise one’s own achievements is still rife, particularly in women.

After attending my introductory workshops people often request more information on what can be done about the incapacity to internalise one’s own achievements. So, I’ve put together a brief list of actions to address impostor feelings/experiences. It’s not an exhaustive list, nor is it intended to replace a well-considered response to impostor experiences, but it’s a catalyst for thought and a prompt for some critical self-examination of where these feelings and thoughts might be coming from and how they might be diminished.

Seek evidence: Find someone who is able to provide honest, direct and more importantly, evidence based feedback. Discussions with research participants have revealed that people providing appraisals of achievements must be thought of as competent to give well-informed commentary on achievement.

“My manager provides me with glowing reports on my work, but frankly, he’d not have a clue as to what I do or whether it’s good enough.”

Look for someone who has the capacity to provide informed feedback. Ask them for logical, factual and evidence based feedback or appraisals of work. Someone with no vested interest (not a friend or close colleague, for example) is more likely to be dispassionate and therefore will be better placed to lay the facts on the table.

Next, accept their reports as honest. It’s known that people will diminish their achievements and attribute them to luck, other people or will suggest that it was something that anyone could have done. If someone is giving you clear, honest feedback, learn to accept it and internalise the achievement.



Allow yourself 'worry' time: Clance (1985) identifies an "impostor cycle" and suggests that worry about not being good enough or feeling inadequate is a key part of the cycle. She suggests allowing a 'worry allotment' whereby it is accepted that there will be some anxiety about a new project or new job for example.

Know where worry ceases to be useful is where that worry should stop. Put a time limit on it and then try to dismiss worry in a conscious manner.

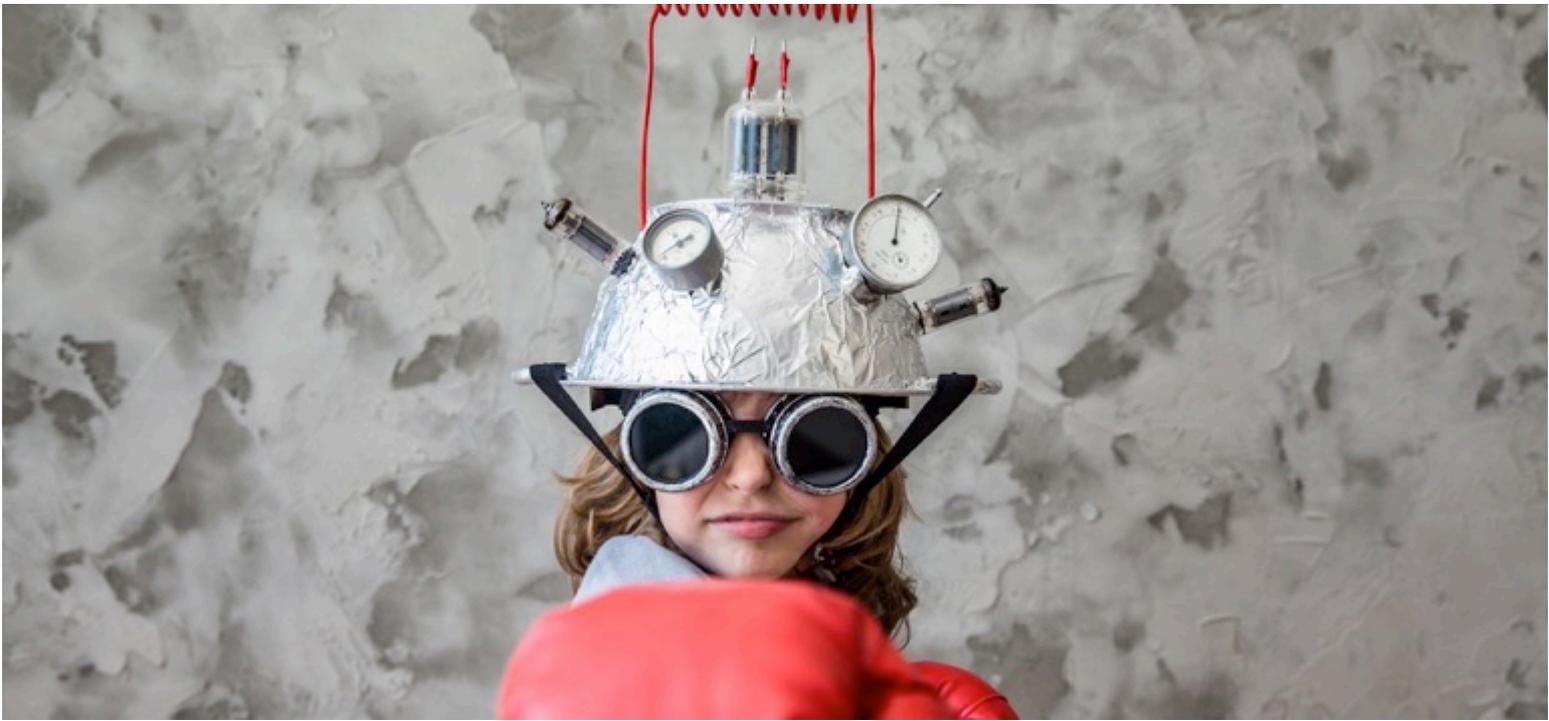
Stop needing to be the best: People who experience impostor feelings are also likely to be disappointed if they're not seen to be the very best or very special in comparison to others. The need for perfection and exemplary performance can drive a sense of disappointment when it does not happen even though performance is still of a high standard and often above that of others. Review the sense of failure and critically appraise the need to be perfect. Be realistic and review the criteria for success in an objective manner (call on your mentor!).

Accept praise: One of the most common manifestations of the impostor phenomenon is the incapacity to accept praise for achievements. Instead, any complimentary feedback is shrugged off and praise is deflected to other people or 'luck'. This is not simply a means of being modest. It is more often an honest dismissal and incapacity to internalise accomplishment and achievement.

When asked how well she accepted praise for a job well done, one of my interviewees responded, "my toes are curling at the very thought of it now. I find it very, very uncomfortable. I'd much rather not talk about it."

Indeed, it can be highly uncomfortable but once the learned and habitual response is noted, it can be addressed by consciously responding in a different manner. For example, stopping the immediate learned response of "oh, it was nothing" or "it was my team", or "I just got lucky" and instead just saying "thank you for your feedback" or similar. Over time, it is suggested, that the conscious response will override the need to externalise praise for achievement.

Help others: "Hi, my name is Terri and I feel like a fraud". Once people have come to grips with their own responses to feelings of being an impostor, then it's easier to identify the behaviours and responses in others. Call it out. Support others in being clear about where praise is deserved and where anxiety about future performance should be diminished. Insist on giving honest appraisals. Provide evidence of achievements and identify where praise should be placed.



Learn more about the Impostor Phenomenon:

People often tell me of their surprise that this is a recognised phenomenon. Women have literally cried with relief to know what this is something that others also experience and that it has been investigated for decades. "Oh, I'm so glad this is a thing!" It is, indeed, a "thing". Once it can be put into context and 'named up', then it can be dealt with and diminished.

Develop contemporary leadership capabilities:

As global business contexts shift and a whole raft of workplace complexities become more complicated to manage, the capabilities needed to be an effective leader need a good overhaul. Identifying where your strengths can bring value to a broader team is imperative.

As a researcher and a self confessed 'impostor' myself I find the phenomenon fascinating and frightening in equal measure. My research has informed a suite of workshops currently in development under the banner of BraverStrongerSmarter.

Work Braver Stronger Smarter for organisations
Learn Braver Stronger Smarter for universities/students
Coach Braver Stronger Smarter for professional coaches



Bespoke programmes are a specialty to accompany consulting and advice services.

The Lead Braver Stronger Smarter for example, programme is a world first that melds four decades of research about the impostor phenomenon and an evolutionary leadership tool. The GC Index® provides unique insight to personal leadership effectiveness and dovetails into a distinctive professional development programme based on past and current research. The impact and resolutions of the impostor phenomenon on individuals and leadership capacities are explored to build a more rounded and effective approach to leadership in today's dynamic environment.

See www.braverstrongersmarter.com/leadershipprogramme/ for more information.

Programmes are variously designed for individuals, managers, research supervisors and teams in organisations. The focus is on developing leadership capability and diminishing the impostor phenomenon to be a more effective leader.

More information on the Impostor Phenomenon and the suite of workshops and consultancy available can be found at www.braverstrongersmarter.com or contact me

[e] DrTerriS@uptomischief.co.uk
[p] +44 (0) 7774 717 629