



Unmasking the Imposter

Look behind the mask of the imposter phenomenon, a scary name for a manageable problem.

By Zoe Turner

You enter a conference hall filled with people. As you walk through the crowd, you can feel the eyes of the people that pass you landing on your face. They know. Your heart starts pounding. They know you don't belong here. You avoid their gaze to hide that you also know you don't belong here. They'll soon see you for what you are. A fraud.

"Despite the fact you know your stuff, you have plenty of experience, you're perfectly good at what you do, you walk into that space thinking they are going to look at you and think 'Who is that non-person? Who does she think she is? She's a bit useless, she's pretending she knows what she's talking about'", says Trisha Lewis, now 61, who has struggled with imposter syndrome since she was a teenager.

The imposter phenomenon, more commonly referred to as imposter syndrome, is a cycle of feelings of doubt about one's accomplishments and a fear of being exposed as a fraud. Since the late 1970s, this psychological phenomenon has been studied as a 'women's issue', as early studies focused solely on

women in office spaces.

"If you receive a compliment [from a client] your brain thinks 'I need to get out of here as quickly as possible because someone's paying me a compliment!'", she laughs, "and I nearly run away because any minute now they're going to look at each other and say wait why did you say it was good, it was rubbish, and you think they'll start chasing you shouting 'Get back here, that was rubbish, we want our money back'."

Trisha is a communications coach based in London, working with people to overcome personal barriers such as imposter syndrome, as well as issues with self-confidence and self-doubt. In her work, she encounters many people who describe behaviours linked to the imposter phenomenon, who have never heard of it, let alone know how to manage it.

"If you work really hard at understanding it and recognising the moments when it's happening,

“You get through a day and you feel you’ve just survived it, rather than enjoyed it or lived it. At the end of the day you feel exhausted instead of thinking ‘Hey, that was a good day, I did a good job”

-Trisha Lewis

because it’s a feeling, but then pressing pause on the thinking prior to the behaviour, the better you get at blocking it from having negative effects. It’s not something you can cure because you can’t cure feelings, the bit you have to work on in the pause button between the feeling and the action.”

Self-doubt issues can manifest themselves in different ways depending on the individual. In women, says Trisha, they can appear more prominently as women are reacting to outside sources of doubt. This is particularly the case in professional fields dominated by men. She recalls her experience of climbing the professional ladder in the beginning of her career in the 70’s, a period when men were dominant in the working world.

“At work it was a bit top heavy on the male front and the general attitude towards women. I had a sense that maybe I didn’t fit in, that what I had to say wasn’t useful or sensible or would have been laughed at. Would I be taken seriously?”

“You feel really alien to everyone else, you compare yourself to everyone else, they’re all putting on a front, you believe they’ve all got it together in ways that you haven’t, but there’s no proof, it’s just a feeling.”

-Trisha Lewis

This phenomenon is most common in successful women. Celebrities such as actress Emma Watson, first lady Michelle Obama, and poet Maya Angelou have all spoken openly about their fight with imposter syndrome. The imposter phenomenon can affect anyone.

According to a study by Access Commercial Finance, two-thirds of women in the UK have experienced the imposter phenomenon at work in the past 12 months. The study also concluded that while men also experience the imposter phenomenon, women are 18% more likely to face impostorism.

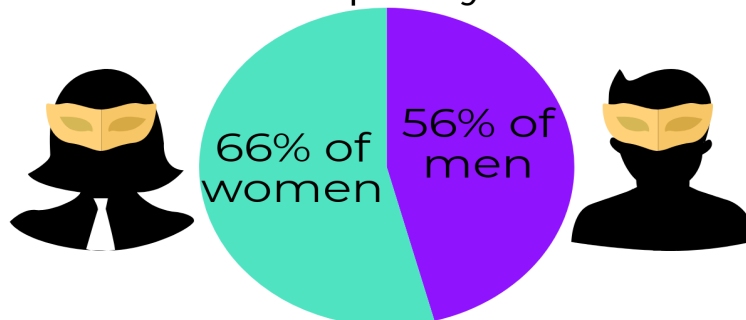
Dr Theresa (Terri) Simpkin says that the difference in gender in society plays a large part of why this is the case.

“Imposter phenomenon in and of itself should not be viewed as a gender-based issue because we know both men and women experience it. But women experience it differently because they’re dealing with a whole range of other social issues, and workplace issues, that fuel it.”

Terri’s interest in the imposter phenomenon was sparked as a PhD candidate before handing in her thesis.

“I was sitting in my car, with my completed PHD in my lap when I was meant to hand it in. And I couldn’t move. I was absolutely paralyzed. I knew that once I handed this piece of work in that everybody would know that I shouldn’t be doing a PHD, that it would be a complete and total failure and that the whole world would understand I was just a fake. Somehow, I had gotten through five years of working on this thing, and it was all a bit of a joke. I thought my supervisors were just humouring me, and that the assessors would come back telling me ‘What the hell are you doing, you shouldn’t have been

Have experienced the imposter phenomenon in the past year



doing a PHD in the first place'. And I was absolutely convinced that's what was going to happen."

This moment of panic led to a life of research devoted to understanding the imposter phenomenon, and mentoring others with issues of self-doubt and self-belief. Through her organisation "Braver, Stronger, Smarter", she organises talks and workshops for companies looking to empower female professionals. Opening a dialogue for women to voice their emotional barriers and speak publicly about their experiences with the imposter phenomenon is imperative to helping people understand how to overcome emotional barriers, explains Terri.

"A mentor can be really blunt and hold a mirror up to the measures of success the person is trying to diminish in themselves."
-Dr Terri Simpkin

"People have been successful because they are good at what they do. They have got the capacity they've got the qualifications and they've probably worked incredibly hard. 'Imposters' tend to be highly perfectionist, so they tend to put more effort into things, over and above what is actually required.

But along with help from an outside source like a coach or mentor, much of the work needs to be done from within.



"What story are you trying to make true? And that means going back to childhood and understanding the internal narrative."
-Dr Terri Simpkin

Lisa Fisher is a coach at Engaged Minds, a life and business coaching company based in Leeds. She works primarily with university students that are graduating and says that self-doubt issues such as the imposter phenomenon are some of the problems she encounters the most.

"When graduates have left university and they're going for a new role it's a particularly common thing. They say they feel they're not good enough, because they're in the interview process, so they're getting asked questions about their experience."

She hypothesises that social media is another factor for the number of self-doubt cases she

sees. Those with problems with self-doubt already regularly compare themselves to their peers, and this behaviour is prominent in university students as well. Graduating students are introduced to a new world of competition, and are more likely to post their successes on social media, worsening people's need to compare themselves to others.

"People tend to portray the positive aspects of their life. It's easy to put personal pressure on ourselves"
-Lisa Fisher

To help the students that come to her with signs of imposterism, Lisa suggests to her clients self-care tips such as saying positive affirmations: repeating positive messages about oneself and bring about positive feelings.

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Lisa suggests to her clients self-care tips such as saying positive affirmations: repeating positive messages about oneself and bring about positive feelings.

“A lot of [my clients] have heard of these terms like ‘positive affirmations’ but they’ve just not invested that time to do it. It’s fine when you read about these things but to actually implement it is quite different.”

Self-doubt develops for various reasons, but Lisa feels the first step to overcoming the thoughts caused by the imposter syndrome is to look within and learn to embrace one’s accomplishments.

“We should look at ourselves, what we’re doing well, and not compare ourselves to others. I would try to dig a little bit deeper. I ask the client where they are now and where they want to get to and we put a plan in place. Changing someone’s belief system is not something you do overnight, you need to put small steps in place to help them overcome that mindset.”

Although fighting against the thoughts and doubts that plague those that suffer from the imposter phenomenon can feel daunting, there is hope and many ways to reclaim success. So the next time you go for an interview or a conference, take off the mask and hold your head up high, you deserve the crown.