

# Overcoming Impostor Syndrome

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How to Stop Feeling Like a Fraud



Are you hiding something about yourself that you desperately don't want others to discover? Something so worrisome you protect it at all costs? For many high achievers, that deep, dark secret is an unshakeable belief they are frauds, undeserving of their title and authority as a leader. Worse yet, they believe the moment others learn this "truth," they will be escorted out of the organization, banished from the ranks of the competent forever.

Sound familiar? This fear, often referred to as Impostor Syndrome, is very common among accomplished leaders who believe they are inadequate despite evidence to the contrary. They are convinced their success has been a result of luck, right place/right time, or their ability to fool those around them.





Psychologists Pauline Clance and Suzanne Imes first coined the term “impostor phenomenon” in their 1970s ground-breaking research on high-achieving women. During their study, they recognized a troubling pattern of successful individuals questioning their accolades and doubting their accomplishments even though they had built impeccable careers.

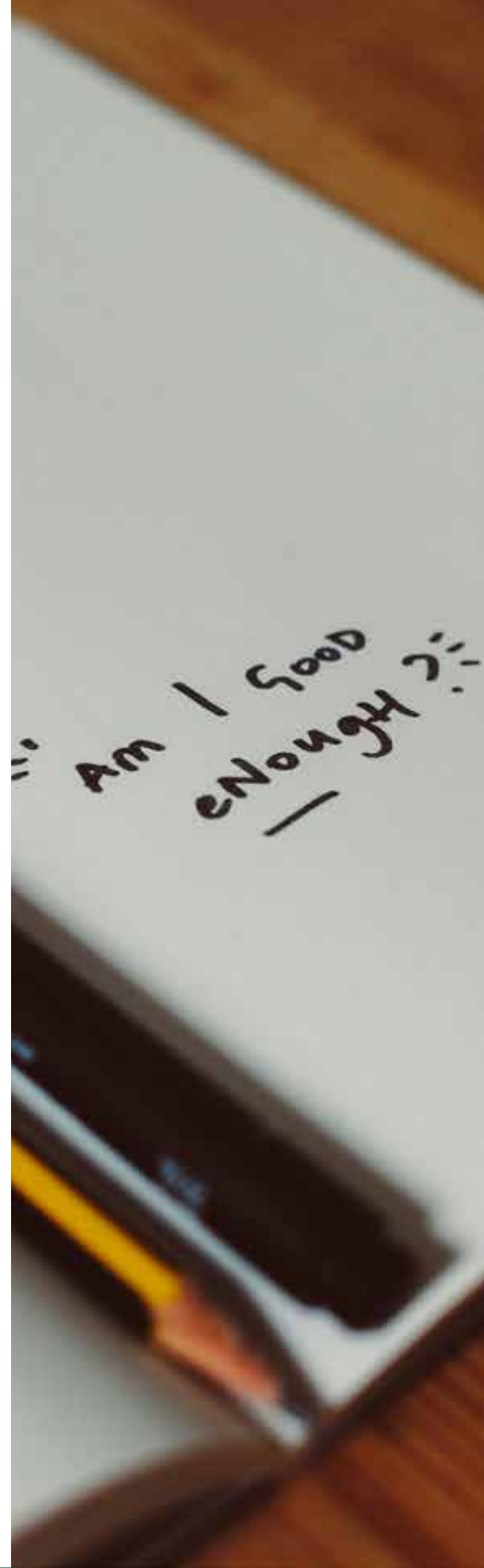
## The Price You Pay

Today Impostor Syndrome is widely seen in both men and women who have enjoyed significant success. In fact, behavioral science [research](#) indicates more than 70% of people will experience feeling like a phony at some point in their lives. Unfortunately, buying into the belief that you are not worthy causes all sorts of problems. Those who experience impostorism pay a big price. Common consequences include:

- **Heightened anxiety**
- **Dissatisfaction with work and life**
- **Workaholism**
- **Increased self-criticism**
- **Decreased self-confidence**
- **Achievement addiction**
- **Fear of failure**
- **Obsessive desire for control**
- **Unwillingness to try new things**

Suffering from one or more of these issues can wreak havoc on your mental and physical well-being, creating undue stress and accelerating burn-out as you spend needless time and energy guarding your secret.

In addition, by doubting your abilities, you don't take chances that could be game-changers. You hesitate to apply for promotions, volunteer for stretch assignments, put forward unique ideas, or launch that business you've been dreaming about. As a result, you systematically hold yourself back from becoming all you are capable of being as a professional and as a leader.








## Different Types of Impostors

While Impostor Syndrome is common, not all impostors are the same. In her book, "The Secret Thoughts of Successful Women: Why Capable People Suffer from the Impostor Syndrome and How to Thrive in Spite of It," Dr. Valerie Young dives deeply into the reasons accomplished people (both men and women) struggle with persistent fraudulent feelings. She paints a portrait of five different types of impostors.

Which type are you? To answer that question, take a few minutes to review the brief descriptions of the five classic impostor patterns. Then spend some time reflecting on your current beliefs and behaviors. Complete the self-assessment below to help you identify which type resonates most with you.

### Five Impostor Types

	<b>The Perfectionist</b>	You believe you should deliver unblemished performance 100% of the time.
	<b>The Natural Genius</b>	You expect to know without being taught, to excel without effort, and to get it right on the first attempt.
	<b>The Expert</b>	You believe competence requires absolute knowledge. As a result, you endlessly pursue information, experience and credentials before putting yourself out there.
	<b>The Rugged Individualist</b>	You believe true competence equals solo, unaided achievement. Asking for help is a sign of weakness and imposes upon others.
	<b>Superman/ Superwoman</b>	You believe you must be the master juggler, delivering unblemished performance 100% of the time in multiple roles.

Source: "The Secret Thoughts of Successful Women" by Valerie Young, Ed.D.



# Self-Assessment: What Impostor Type Are You?

Instructions: Read through the characteristics of the five impostor types in the table below. Rate how true each characteristic is for you using a scale of 1-5 with 5 being the highest. Then complete the reflection questions to help you identify which impostor type most resonates with you and the impact it is having on your life.

Impostor Type	Characteristics	True About Me
1. Perfectionist	• I take pride in my consistent effort, energy and attention to detail.	1 2 3 4 5
	• I am more than willing to overprepare to ensure everything is as it should be.	1 2 3 4 5
	• I make frequent edits and adjustments before letting something get out the door.	1 2 3 4 5
	• At times others have called me a “control freak.”	1 2 3 4 5
	• Rather than engaging with others, I often think “I’ll just do it myself” to ensure the result meets my expectations.	1 2 3 4 5
	• When someone finds flaws in my work, I beat myself up and ruminate on my mistakes.	1 2 3 4 5
2. Natural Genius	• I believe mastery of a skill should come quickly and without a lot of effort.	1 2 3 4 5
	• I am embarrassed when it takes me longer than others to grasp an idea.	1 2 3 4 5
	• I expect to get things right the first time I try.	1 2 3 4 5
	• I am used to scoring well or earning an “A+” on anything I attempt.	1 2 3 4 5
	• I don’t pursue getting a mentor or coach because that would indicate I’m not smart enough to figure things out for myself.	1 2 3 4 5
	• I avoid taking on challenges where I fear I’ll look foolish in the attempt.	1 2 3 4 5
3. Expert	• I measure my competence largely based on what I know.	1 2 3 4 5
	• I worry others might not think I’m smart enough or experienced enough to be in this role.	1 2 3 4 5
	• I hesitate to apply for promotions or opportunities unless I meet nearly every single requirement.	1 2 3 4 5
	• I frequently pursue trainings and certifications to ensure others see me as credible.	1 2 3 4 5
	• I like to know as much as possible before giving something new a try.	1 2 3 4 5
	• I often study up on a topic more than is necessary to feel more confident and avoid being asked a question I can’t answer.	1 2 3 4 5



Imposter Type	Characteristics	True About Me
4. Rugged Individualist	• I pride myself on handling all aspects of my work.	1 2 3 4 5
	• I often hesitate to delegate or collaborate to avoid imposing upon others.	1 2 3 4 5
	• I believe that asking for help is seen as a sign of weakness.	1 2 3 4 5
	• I frequently reject offers of help from others.	1 2 3 4 5
	• I frame any request for help as driven by the needs of the project, not my needs.	1 2 3 4 5
	• I know that if I were truly competent, I wouldn't need help from others.	1 2 3 4 5
5. Superman/Superwoman	• I usually work later than the rest of the team, even past the point that I've completed the day's tasks.	1 2 3 4 5
	• I get stressed when I'm not working and feel that downtime is wasteful.	1 2 3 4 5
	• I've let my hobbies and passions fall by the wayside.	1 2 3 4 5
	• I feel it is a sign of competence to constantly juggle many things at once.	1 2 3 4 5
	• I tend to measure my self-worth in terms of productivity and value doing over being.	1 2 3 4 5
	• I set and simultaneously pursue ambitious goals in multiple areas of my life.	1 2 3 4 5



## Reflection

Which impostor type(s) most resonates with you?

How is feeling like an impostor hurting you professionally? Personally?

How would life be different if you could overcome feeling like an impostor?



# Strategies for Overcoming Impostor Syndrome

Regardless of the impostor type(s) you relate to, there are many steps you can take to combat a persistent sense of inadequacy. Consider the strategies below to see which ones might help you overcome Impostor Syndrome.

## Name It to Tame It

There's something to be said for acknowledging your feelings. If you ignore them, they'll surface in more damaging ways and contribute to the shame and fear Impostor Syndrome often perpetuates.

Instead, when you're feeling like a phony, stop and say what you're feeling. For example: "I'm worried I'm not experienced enough. That's just my Impostor Syndrome. Lots of people feel this way, too." This simple step of naming your self-doubt employs a very useful cognitive strategy called labeling, which works like this: When you verbalize something, it tends to reduce the emotional impact of it.

Why? To identify the emotions, you have to think. This puts your prefrontal cortex in charge (thinking response) while quieting your limbic system (emotional response). That explains why labeling has earned the nickname "name it to tame it."

**Write a "name it to tame it" statement that will help you acknowledge your feelings and reduce the emotional impact of them.**







## Consider the What and the How

Another strategy for overcoming a feeling of inadequacy is to recognize what you have accomplished as well as *how you did it*. Both are important to identify and reflect upon. Here's how.

Using the space below, take a moment to write down two or three important achievements in your career. For each one, list the specific steps you took that led to your success. Once you're finished, review the list objectively. You should begin to recognize a system or process you have in place for getting results.

Your process might include, among other things: how you set a goal, the plan you created to achieve it, the time and effort you devoted to work towards it, how you overcame obstacles to reach it, and finally how you eventually attained your goal and celebrated success.

In other words, luck or timing have played a minimal role (if any) in your achievements. Your system, along with knowledge, skill and experience, are the primary drivers of your success.

**Important achievements**

**Steps that led to your success**



## Journaling

I recommend you keep a “what and how” list in a journal you can refer to — and add to — often. You can also make note in your journal of the compliments and acknowledgements you receive from others. Capturing these things ensures you don’t readily ignore or discount praise people have rightly offered to you.

Journaling is a healthy habit that allows you to get things out of your head and down on paper. This is a particularly valuable practice when you focus on the things you are grateful for and feel good about. Writing things down forces you to pause and reflect non-judgmentally on yourself, something that is quite useful in overcoming self-criticism and reducing anxiety.

## Adopt a Growth Mindset

Every impostor type struggles with a fear of failure. While no one likes to fail, it is a timeless truth that failure can be a great teacher. Shifting your mindset to view failure as normal and a catalyst for learning will give you the confidence to tackle difficult challenges and the courage to try new things.

Adopting a growth mindset is key. What is a growth mindset? Stanford professional and psychologist Carol Dweck, who is also the author of “Mindset: The New Psychology of Success,” coined the term to explain how individuals learn and grow. In her book, she identifies two distinct learning mindsets:

- a fixed mindset, and
- a growth mindset.

Fixed Mindset 	Growth Mindset 
<p>The belief that your abilities and intellect cannot be markedly improved, so therefore you should avoid challenging situations.</p> <p>This mindset is characterized by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>Fear of failure</b></li><li>• <b>Unwillingness to try new things</b></li><li>• <b>Concern that mistakes are a commentary on your intelligence</b></li><li>• <b>Focus on why you can't</b></li></ul>	<p>The belief that your skills and abilities can change. Working through challenge helps you grow.</p> <p>This mindset is characterized by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>View of failure as normal and part of the learning process</b></li><li>• <b>Strong sense of “try”</b></li><li>• <b>Persevering spirit despite obstacles</b></li><li>• <b>Focus on why you will</b></li></ul>



While a growth mindset can be useful on a daily basis, it is especially valuable when you find yourself in unfamiliar territory, facing a big decision or leading through a time of change. Indeed, leaders frequently shrink back out of fear in these situations. Perhaps you have experienced something like this:

- **You hesitated to make a difficult decision for fear of being judged or criticized.**
- **You were unwilling to take on a stretch assignment because you might look foolish in the attempt.**
- **You worried that making a mistake would be a commentary on your intelligence.**

These are fears that stem from a fixed mindset. As we so often learn, our fears are largely unfounded and driven by our inner critic. A fixed mindset holds us back from leading courageously.

By adopting a growth mindset, you can enjoy many benefits:

- **Greater confidence tackling difficult challenges**
- **Accelerated learning by trying different approaches**
- **Feeling more comfortable with uncertainty**
- **Expanded skills and knowledge**
- **Increased resiliency.**



**“Don’t be afraid to fail.  
Be afraid not to try.” –**

**Michael Jordan**



## Exercise

Think of a challenging situation you are facing. Complete the assignments below to help you apply a growth mindset.

### Write an “If/Then” Statement

Challenges are often unexpected. It helps to decide in advance how you’ll bring a growth mindset rather than a fixed mindset to a situation. Here is one example: “If I’m worried that gaps in my knowledge make me appear incompetent, then I will remind myself that I’m doing the best I can, and no one knows it all!”

**Write an if/then statement that will help you maintain a growth mindset in this situation.**

### Ask Yourself One Question

When you feel unqualified or unsure, instead of telling yourself, “I’m not good at this,” ask yourself, “What am I missing?”

**Write down some potential resources or individuals with expertise who might be useful as you face this situation.**

### Try a New Path

When one strategy isn’t working, try a different route to get there. Almost always, you have more options than you think you do.

**If you’re feeling frustrated by a strategy that isn’t working now, write down one alternative strategy you could try to be successful in this situation.**





# Strategies by Impostor Type

While many of the impostor types share common challenges, there are some differences that require unique solutions. Following are a few specific solutions for each impostor type. See which ones might be helpful to you.



## For the Perfectionist

Here are some things to try.

- Reframe “quality” and “standards” to something more realistic.
- Stop the endless editing and get something out the door. You can always modify as you go.
- Be selective about what you put your efforts behind. Know when “good enough” is good enough.
- Avoid customizing routine tasks and processes. Establish systematic approaches to increase your efficiency.
- Don’t agonize over every little thing. Focus on the things that matter most.
- Remember there is something compelling about imperfection in leaders. Perfect is unapproachable; imperfect is endearing, relatable and authentic.

Write down one solution you are willing to put into practice.



## For the Natural Genius

Here are some things to try.

- Give yourself time to learn new things. Mastery doesn’t happen overnight.
- View your first attempt as just that – a good first attempt, not the final result.
- Know that true expertise is a lifelong process that comes through hard work and persistence.
- Actively seek the advice of others who can offer wisdom and insight different from yours.
- Break learning down into bite-size chunks so you can tackle things over time.
- Stop telling yourself you’re just not good at something. Believe that your intellect and abilities can grow.

Write down one solution you are willing to put into practice.





## For the Expert

Here are some things to try.

- **Apply for promotions when you meet more than half the criteria, not every single requirement.**
- **Trust your ability to learn as you go to acquire the knowledge necessary for tackling new challenges.**
- **Don't hesitate to ask good questions that allow you to tap into the knowledge or expertise of others. Curiosity is often considered a sign of intelligence.**
- **Temper your desire for credentials with the belief that real-time experience can be just as valuable for bolstering your capabilities.**
- **Remember that no one knows it all. Learning is a lifelong journey.**

Write down one solution you are willing to put into practice.



## For the Rugged Individualist

Here are some things to try.

- **Invite others to work with you on specific projects believing that their contributions will enhance the result.**
- **Remember that asking for help can make others feel valued and needed.**
- **Acknowledging the contributions of others will endear you to them and build a bond of trust.**
- **There is great wisdom in the old adage, "Two heads are better than one." Stop and consider how someone else's perspective could improve your thinking.**
- **Seek out a mentor or a trusted tribe of colleagues you can lean into regularly for advice and guidance.**
- **When someone offers you advice, simply say, "That's helpful, thank you."**

Write down one solution you are willing to put into practice.





## For the Superman/Superwoman

Here are some things to try.

- **Competence is not a function of how many things you do, but on what you do. Focus on a few things that will have the biggest impact.**
- **Delegate and collaborate freely to allow others to join you in learning, growing and leading.**
- **Consider how more balance in your work/personal life will set a better example for your children or other younger family members.**
- **Set aside time to enjoy simply being with friends and family. Engage in the simple pleasures of life such as going for a walk or exploring a farmer's market together.**
- **Instead of pursuing extrinsic rewards such as money, power and fame, find fulfillment through intrinsic rewards such as a sense of mastery, impact or purpose. This will allow you to determine how much work is enough and to what end.**
- **Remember, you can have it all. Just not all at the same time.**

Write down one solution you are willing to put into practice.



## Confidence vs Courage

One last thought I want to share on overcoming Impostor Syndrome regarding confidence. It's normal to want to feel confident before tackling challenge. But if you wait until you're confident, you'll miss out on so many opportunities. This is one of the biggest consequences of Impostor Syndrome: your belief that you're a fraud shakes your confidence and prevents you from reaching higher.

Don't be fooled – confidence doesn't happen first. Courage does.

Courage is moving forward despite your fears. Courage is trying something new even when you don't know everything. Courage is giving it your best knowing you might fail anyway.

Confidence comes next. It is earned through practice and effort. From having faith in yourself and believing your abilities can be developed over time. From turning “no I can't” into “not yet, but I will.”



**“Courage is not the  
absence of fear, but the  
triumph over it.”**

– Nelson Mandela





## Reflection

- What fear is holding me back from taking on a challenge?
- What would it feel like to move forward anyway?
- What is one action I can take?
- Showing up as “courageous me” looks like...



If you suffer from Impostor Syndrome, remember, you're not alone. Many high achievers struggle with feeling like a fraud. The good news is you can overcome that nagging sense of inadequacy. Try putting some of these strategies into place and see if your courage and confidence begin to increase.

Above all, practice self-compassion and patience. Remember leadership is a journey, not a destination. We all get there one step at a time.



I'm Elise Mitchell, a three-time CEO, leadership strategist, executive coach, business consultant, author, wife and mom. My passion is helping high-performing leaders achieve more.

Over the past 15 years, I've coached, consulted and trained leaders from a wide variety of industries ranging from non-profits to Fortune 500 companies. My goal is to inspire and equip you to lead at your best.



## What would you like to change?

Every leader has gaps holding them back. I work with clients to help them strengthen their leadership, resolve pressing business problems, and get the results they want.

This is achieved through three core services:



### Leadership Development

Customized programs that equip you and your team to manage complexity, think more strategically and mobilize others



### Business Advisory Services

Guidance and tools to help you address challenging business issues, from driving change to planning an exit strategy



### Executive Coaching

Inspiring, results-oriented coaching using neuroscience and business insights to help you achieve your most important goals