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Feel Like A Fraud?

Words by Annie Darling

The fear of being exposed, that you don't deserve success, or aren't as good as others. This is Imposter Syndrome, and it's a feeling many women know well.

Imagine you just received a great bit of news at work – a promotion. You're feeling a range of emotions. It's probably taken months, maybe even years, to snag this lofty title, but the day has finally come and you've been notified that your hard work has paid off. Only problem is, you feel undeserving of your success. 70 per cent of people feel this way, according to a study in the *International Journal of Behavioral Science*. It's called Imposter Syndrome, and you're not alone. Hugh Kearns is a renowned public speaker, educator and researcher who regularly lectures at universities across the world, including Oxford, Cambridge, Harvard, Berkeley and Stanford. "Imposter Syndrome is the feeling that you're a fraud or imposter, despite there being clear evidence that you are not," he tells

MOJEH. "Imposter Syndrome comes about because we are not very good at accepting the evidence of our achievements. We tend to discount them." He adds, "In some cases, this might be cultural, or perhaps it was the way you learned to behave in early life." People who experience Imposter Syndrome often report having feelings of inadequacy. They also tend to be high achievers who are unable to accept their success, regularly attributing their accomplishments to a lucky break rather than dexterity. These negative thoughts regularly amount to more than an anxious temperament; they can become detrimental to one's self-esteem and typically affect women, especially when they're doing well. "Women tend to report imposter feelings more often than men," explains

Kearns, "but many men experience it, too." He elaborates, "Many women will attribute their success to external factors, including luck and being in the right place at the right time, or people liking them rather than respecting their abilities or efforts." The syndrome was first identified in 1978 by Pauline Clance and Suzanne Imes, who published a report entitled *The Imposter Phenomenon in High Achieving Women*, which examined 150 successful women who believed they were neither intelligent nor talented, and had somehow fooled everyone into thinking otherwise.

Award-winning novelist Maya Angelou, Academy Award-winning actress Kate Winslet, and comedian Tina Fey have all admitted suffering from Imposter Syndrome. After winning Best Actor for *The Accused* in 1988, Jodie Foster revealed she thought there had been a mistake and that she'd have to give her Oscar back. UN Women Goodwill Ambassador Emma Watson has expressed similar sentiments, telling an interviewer: "Any moment, someone's going to find out I'm a total fraud – I can't possibly live up to what everyone thinks I am."

Lauren Drogos is a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Calgary, Hotchkiss Brain Institute, and her research frequently studies women's mental health. "I hate admitting this, but yes," she concedes, when asked whether she suffers from Imposter Syndrome. "The number of women in academia decreases as the rank increases, meaning that there are fewer women in senior positions. Right now, I'm at a critical transition in my career – looking for a faculty position. I have watched many extraordinarily talented women struggle to find a faculty position and this is often the source of my struggle. If these other amazing women can't find a job, why would I?"

Research has long suggested women undervalue themselves and it's a phenomenon that's especially apparent in the workplace. The Institute for Fiscal Studies put the gender pay gap for graduates in the 10 years after leaving university at around 23 per cent.



Mariam Al Hashemi, Executive Director at Dual Investments, tells MOJEH, “When I first started [at Dual Investments], I was definitely guilty of undervaluing myself, but with continued experience I am learning my true value and capability day by day.”

While the evidence continues to indicate that women are less self-assured than men, girls are achieving more than ever before – they regularly outperform boys in the classroom, and female undergraduates are growing at a faster rate than male university students. Alia Khalifa Al Nabooda, co-founder of VoucherSkout, has always been ambitious. “I think women in the Middle East, particularly in the UAE, have proven what they are capable of accomplishing. You see them today as leaders across various sectors and industries.”

Nonetheless, a survey by the Girl Guides Association claimed that 87 per cent of young women felt they were judged on what they looked like, rather than their ability. “Historically, women have always had to work twice as hard to achieve half as much,” reminds Al Hashemi. We have a history of being discriminated against in the workplace, and while overt displays of sexism are fortunately less frequent, subtler and more ingrained cognitive biases remain deeply rooted in our society.

For example, “When you think of a scientist, you’re unlikely to think of a woman,” explains Drogos. Women are under-represented in many high-earning, traditionally male-dominated roles. The statistics are well known: At the top, especially, women are nearly absent, despite making up half the workforce. “The further away a person is from the image of someone who embodies their profession, the more they’ll struggle with feeling like an imposter, no matter how great their achievements.”

Living with unsettling anxiety or a need for perfectionism can be debilitating, and while Imposter Syndrome is more likely to affect women, Al Hashemi reminds MOJEH that men are also susceptible to feelings of self-consciousness. “Whether someone



undervalues themselves isn't a gender issue," insists the business-driven Emirati, "it's about their mindset. It's an issue of self-confidence. In a world where social media, as well as the media, creates unrealistic expectations – especially for women – we can often feel like we don't measure up."

Earlier this year, a study from Pew Research found that 62 per cent of people say social media makes them feel inadequate about their life and achievements. That means at any given time, six out of 10 of your colleagues are experiencing emotions associated with Imposter Syndrome. Essena O'Neill, a teenage Instagram star with 612,000 followers, deleted her online accounts after

outing herself as a phony. She revealed that the lifestyle she had depicted on social media was fictitious and relied upon the financial backing of corporate brands.

According to research from EY, formerly Ernst & Young, the number of millennials taking on leadership roles has surged, yet we continue to feel as though we have something to prove. Millennials are the 'Trophy Generation'; we grew up hearing mixed messages from our parents, who alternated between over-praise and unwarranted criticism – just 39 per cent of respondents perceived millennials as hard workers. According to the American Psychological Association, this upbringing has increased the risk of fraudulent feelings.

For those of us who are parents, the opinion of others matters even more. Millennial mothers report feeling overwhelmed and judged, according to a report by Baby Center – more so than baby boomers or generation X. While conventional wisdom tells us to suppress this unforbearing voice, self-recrimination can be difficult to ignore. Perhaps those who suffer from Imposter Syndrome have unrealistically high standards, muses Drogos. "Research has suggested certain traits are more associated with the feeling of Imposter Syndrome, including a high need for achievement, self-monitoring, social anxiety, and depressive symptoms."

If it's not perfect, it's a disaster; if we're not the best, we're useless. Negative thoughts are natural and inevitable, but there's a fine line between self-deprecation and self-destruction. Millennial women are more likely to bottle up these feelings. We project confidence and stoicism when we're with our friends and family, but behind closed doors we desperately try to ignore painful feelings of self-doubt. "Although I think modesty is important, I believe that humility is more important," reveals Al Hashemi. "You should also be proud of your achievements, and not feel embarrassed for having accomplished something, no matter what it is."

New research by Ghent University has found that, rather than addressing their insecurities, those with Imposter Syndrome immerse themselves in their tasks and pretend to be self-assured. They avoid extra responsibility, preferring to remain unsure rather than seek advice and help. To combat the syndrome, it's important to acknowledge that these uncertainties are all in your own head. Refusing to respond to a negative thought gives us time to recognise it for what it is: a thought, not a fact.

Examining negative feelings, softening them, and acknowledging them for what they are will better inform our future decisions. Take time to reflect on your success – by doing so, you'll know that you're capable of handling new responsibilities and challenges.