

THE IMPOSTER SYNDROME

Why successful people often feel like frauds

Hugh Kearns





FEEL LIKE A FRAUD?

What do Meryl Streep (Academy award winner), Sheryl Sandberg (Chief Operating Officer of Facebook) and Gabriel García Márquez (Nobel Prize winner) have in common? At various stages, they have all felt like frauds or imposters, that they don't have the skills or abilities that other people think they have.

Many of us are waiting for that tap on the shoulder. Or for someone to come along and say “We need to have a chat”. If you've ever had that feeling, well, that's the imposter feeling. And you're in good company. Lots of people experience it.

“ [I felt] like an imposter, faking it, that someday they'd find out I didn't know what I was doing. I didn't. I still don't. ”

Oscar winner, Jodie Foster

“ You think, “Why would anyone want to see me again in a movie? And I don't know how to act anyway, so why am I doing this? ”

Meryl Streep, most Academy Awards nominated person of all time

“ There are an awful lot of people out there who think I'm an expert. How do these people believe all this about me? I'm so much aware of all the things I don't know. ”

Margaret Chan, Director General of the World Health Organisation

These are famous examples. But imposters are to be found everywhere. They could be:

- a student wondering if they are clever enough for the exam
- a person getting ready for a job interview
- a new parent wondering if they are fit to be a parent
- someone who has just been promoted to a new challenging job
- a sportsperson wondering if they will perform well enough

In fact, most people will have imposter feelings from time to time. It's pretty normal actually. But sometimes they can get a bit out of control. That's when the imposter feelings develop into the imposter syndrome. It starts to affect what you do and how you think about yourself.





ARE YOU AN IMPOSTER?

How do you know if you're an imposter or not? After all imposters do exist. We regularly read in the media about con-men who defraud people, people who impersonate doctors, students who get accepted into prestigious colleges without any qualifications. Maybe you're one of them. Maybe you've just been good at fooling people.

Well it's pretty easy to work out really. To distinguish between real imposters and people who just feel like an imposter you only have to look at the evidence.

<i>Real Imposter</i>	A real imposter is a person who pretends or claims to be able to do something or have specific abilities, despite not having the skills, background or experience.
<i>Imposter feelings</i>	Occasional feelings that you are an imposter or fraud despite evidence that you are not. These usually pass and don't have much impact on what you do.
<i>Imposter syndrome</i>	A person with the imposter syndrome feels like an imposter a lot of the time in spite of clear evidence that they are not. The feelings can be powerful and the person may be convinced that they are a fraud. It will affect what they think, feel and do.

The crucial feature of imposter feelings and the imposter syndrome is that there is clear evidence that you are not an imposter but you still feel like one. So if you want to know whether you are an imposter or not – look at the evidence.

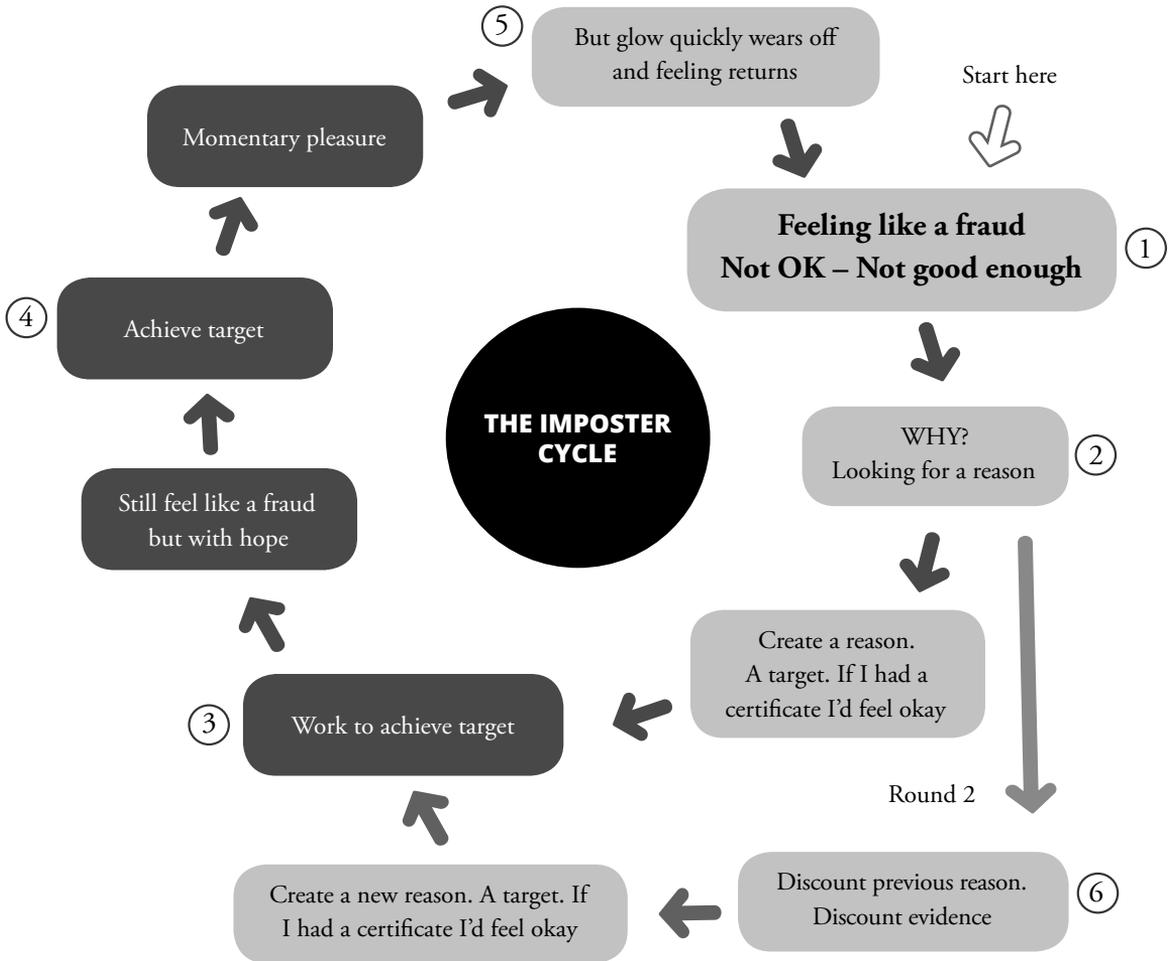
But even though you have the evidence you can still feel like an imposter. And that's quite normal. In fact up to 70% of people experience imposter feelings. And between 30-50% of people will have consistent imposter feelings that will affect what they think, feel and do – the imposter syndrome.

So are you an imposter? If you have evidence that you have the skills, the knowledge and the qualifications that you claim then you are not an imposter.



THE IMPOSTER CYCLE

This diagram shows you how a person can feel like an imposter but still be very successful. Imagine you are about to start a new project or prepare for a presentation and work your way around the cycle.



1. The cycle begins—you have some imposter feelings
2. Search for a reason—I need a qualification, more experience, more practice
3. Work hard to achieve your goal—now you have hope
4. Achieve your goal and momentary pleasure
5. The feelings return
6. Off you go again—Round 2



SELF-SABOTAGE

The wooden leg

If you were in a running race and had a wooden leg, then no one would expect you to win—in fact, they would probably praise you for your efforts. So if you didn't win, you wouldn't have to feel bad. After all, you did have a wooden leg. You had a handicap, a reason, an alibi.

Self-sabotage or self-handicapping means that you build in a handicap or an alibi, so that if things go wrong you can say, "It wasn't me, it was that thing over there".

Self-sabotaging strategies

Procrastination

You leave everything to the very last minute. Then, if you don't do well on the test or the project, you can say, "Well what can you expect. I only started on it last night. If I had more time I would have done better".

Perfectionism

You set yourself very high standards, so high, in fact, that you probably never start and definitely never finish. You never start the novel because it has to win the Man Booker prize. You never start the research project because it has to win the Nobel Prize. The alibi is, "I know I didn't get it done. But I'm not procrastinating or avoiding. I just want it to be as good as it can be".

Overcommitting

Being busy, ideally too busy, is a wonderful alibi. You should have got the report in by Friday but you had an important meeting, an urgent commitment, an opportunity sprung on you at the last minute and so you couldn't fit the report in.

Sickness/crises

Have you ever noticed how grannies always seem to get sick just as a deadline for a student's assignment approaches? I'm sorry. I couldn't get the assignment in because my granny was admitted to hospital last week.

Lack of effort/avoidance

You just don't try. Then you can always tell yourself or others "If I had tried harder it would have gone better. I really am very clever but I just can't be bothered".

The problem with all of these strategies is that they might give you an alibi for when things go wrong but they also make it more likely that you will not achieve your goals or your potential.





WHERE DOES IT COME FROM?

Early in your life the significant people around you, your parents, siblings, teachers play a huge role in forming your expectations, your beliefs and your self-image. You learn what is valued, what gets approval and, very importantly, what gets disapproval. Your imposter feelings and the imposter syndrome probably have their origins in your early life experiences.

You must be perfect, mistakes are bad

If you were rewarded for being perfect, and missed out if less than perfect, then you will find mistakes are very scary. They prove that you are not perfect, which might mean losing the approval of significant people.

Being overpraised

If you are feted for everything you do, told how clever you are, how you will achieve great things, then you can get a bit worried about what will happen if you don't live up to these great expectations. Will people still like you if you don't achieve?

Low expectations

If you have been told that you are not bright, not athletic, not good at maths, your expectations have been lowered. Then when you do end up in university, or in an important role, you can feel that you don't belong. People like us don't go to university or get important jobs.

Fear of failure

You worry that if you try something and it doesn't work, that the shame and humiliation will be unbearable.

Fear of success

You worry that if you try something and it does work, that things will change. Perhaps people won't like you any more. Perhaps the expectations and pressure will increase.

For imposters, making mistakes is bad, very bad. It is the time when you risk being exposed. So somewhere along the line you picked up the belief that mistakes are not OK. And since mistakes are a part of life, you have a problem. And so you feel like an imposter.





LET'S GET REAL

The thing that distinguishes real imposters from people with imposter feelings is evidence. There is evidence that you are not an imposter, but you use lots of tricks to deny, dismiss and discount this evidence.

Dismissing evidence

Black or white thinking	Either I'm perfect or I'm useless.
Filtering	You overlook the good stuff and just pay attention to the mistakes.
Discounting	I was lucky, they're just being nice, the task was easy.
Moving the goalposts	I did OK but I should have done better.
People's expectations get higher	Now they will expect more.
This time it's different	My previous experience doesn't count here.

Fabricating evidence

Magnifying	A molehill is turned into a mountain.
Mind reading	I know what they're thinking.
Fortune telling	I know what's going to happen next.
Jumping to conclusions	This tiny scrap of evidence proves everything.
Distorting the evidence	I know that's what they said but this is what they really meant.

Rationalising why we are imposters

It's because I'm young, old, different.

Evidence supporting the imposter syndrome

Celebrity frauds	There are real frauds.
You know some imposters	Maybe I'm one too.
You've faked before	Sometimes I don't know, but have faked that I do.

These techniques are the reasons why you can still feel like an imposter, despite clear evidence that you are not.





FEELINGS ARE NOT FACTS

It's very easy to confuse feelings with facts. When you feel something strongly, you are inclined to believe that is it true. But it may not be true. Cognitive Behavioural Coaching is a useful strategy for sorting out feelings and facts.

Describe the situation.

Write down your feelings.

Automatic Negative Thoughts (ANTs)—write down all the negative thoughts that are running through your head. Do this quickly, don't edit them or try to argue with them yet.

And so? If these thoughts were true what would that mean? What bad things might happen?

More Accurate Thoughts (MATHs)—now is the time to turn on your logical, rational brain and begin to look at the facts. What do you know for sure? What evidence do you have?

Situation:		
Feelings:		
DIY Cognitive Behavioural Coaching		
ANTs Automatic Negative Thoughts	And so?	MATHs More Accurate Thoughts
This time I won't be able to meet their expectations.	They'll find out I don't know very much.	I have done well in the past. I know I will be able to do some of the job at least. If I do my normal effort it's likely to be OK. They've told me that I'm doing well.
I might forget something during the presentation.	It might be really important and I'll look stupid.	I have my notes so I can't forget the main points. And if I forget something minor, no one will even notice and I can follow up on it later.
This time it's different.	The stakes are higher and I'll look like a fool. I won't be able to do anything.	It is a bit different but not completely. I can draw on my previous experience and I can learn the new bits. I've done new things before and they've worked out.
I'll make a mistake.	People will see how incompetent I am. They will realise that the appearance of confidence is just a facade.	People make mistakes all the time. A mistake does not wipe out my other achievements.
<i>Add your own...</i>		





IMPOSTER BUSTING STRATEGIES

Realise that imposter feelings are normal

Most people have imposter feelings from time to time. It's normal to question yourself, to ask how you're going. Then you need to look at the evidence.

Know your imposter moments

There will be times when you are more likely to experience imposter feelings. If you know your imposter moments, than you can prepare yourself.

Objective standards of success

Before you start on a project or task, write down what you would consider a success. This will stop you changing the goalposts later.

Setting realistic standards

Set goals and standards that you can achieve. If you set outrageous standards, it makes failure more likely and you might avoid starting at all.

Prepare for mistakes

Mistakes can stir up imposter feelings. Since mistakes are inevitable, it is a good idea to prepare yourself. Expect to feel annoyed but then decide what you will do.

Mind your language

Stick to the facts. Was it just good luck or did you work hard? Did others do all the work or did you contribute too?

Get external evidence

Rather than just relying on your opinions, seek out evidence, ask others, get facts.

Do some behavioural experiments

Try things out to see if your assumptions are true.

Create a fact file

Write down the facts in a fact file. Use this when an imposter moment strikes.

And a brag file

Keep a record of your achievements and positive feedback.

Remember you are in charge

Even though they may be compelling, remember feelings are not facts.





HELPING OTHERS

Imposter feelings are very common. You can be fairly sure that amongst your family and friends, your work colleagues and the people you meet, there will be many who regularly feel like imposters. So what can you do to help them?

Talk about your own experience of imposter feelings

While internally you are aware of your imposter feelings, the external impression you probably give is of someone who has it all together and never has a doubt in the world. It can be very reassuring for others to find out that you have these feelings too.

Focus on facts

Reassuring comments like “You’re fine, you’re great, you have nothing to worry about” tend not to make much difference. It’s more helpful to point to specific evidence. Imposters tend to ignore positive evidence so it’s helpful to point out the facts.

Dealing with mistakes

None of us like making mistakes but imposters find mistakes very scary. This means that how you respond to somebody’s mistakes is important. Make it clear that mistakes are a normal part of learning and focus on how to make things better rather than criticising or blaming.

Transitions

Imposter feelings will often arise when a person is going through a transition such as moving to a new job or starting a new task. At these times, you can help the person by focusing on facts and clarifying expectations.

Your children

We develop our imposter feelings early in life, especially in learning how to cope with mistakes and setbacks. Your child can develop a growth mindset, a belief that they can learn and improve with practice. Or they can develop a fixed mindset, that they are born with finite abilities and can’t do much about it. The fixed mindset is likely to result in a fear of mistakes and regular imposter feelings. To help your child develop a growth mindset, focus on learning, reward effort and make it clear that mistakes are not final. But children learn more from what you do than what you say, so develop a growth mindset for yourself.





TEN THINGS YOU CAN DO

1. Imposter feelings are normal.

Most people have imposter feelings, even if it's only occasionally. It's normal. But now you also know that feeling like an imposter does not mean you are an imposter.

2. Feelings are not facts.

Feelings are important and can be compelling, but they are not facts. When you are in the middle of an imposter moment force yourself to look at the facts.

3. Straighten out your thinking.

It takes practice but you can teach yourself to think more accurately. Challenge your assumptions, your black and white thinking, your mental filters and your tendencies to jump to conclusions.

4. Mind your language.

Notice how you deny, dismiss and discount your achievements. Rather than saying it was good luck or that it was nothing, say thanks.

5. Create a fact file and a brag file.

To speed up the process of facing facts, write them down. It can be hard to remember the facts when you need them, so write your fact file now, and keep adding to it.

6. Set objective standards.

Stop moving the goalposts. Before you set off on a new project or task, write down what would count as success. And be realistic!

7. Gather evidence, do some behavioural experiments.

Rather than assume that you can predict the future or know how other people will think and react, try things out. See what really happens.

8. Know your imposter moments.

Get prepared ahead of time. When you are starting something new or are likely to make a mistake get yourself ready. Get clear about the expectations, get your fact file out and think straight.

9. Get used to your imposter feelings.

It doesn't go away. But you get used to it. And eventually when you have the doubts, you force yourself to face facts and get on with the job.

10. Be brave and take action.

Our fears and doubts can hold us back. It might be a fear of failure, of being exposed or in some cases a fear of success. So gather up your courage, prepare yourself and take action.



THE IMPOSTER SYNDROME



I'm in over my head.

I was lucky this time.

The next time will be harder.

They're going to find out I can't do this.

At any moment they're going to find out I'm a fraud.

Now they're going to expect me to be able to do this well every time.

How is it that successful people can often feel like a fraud? Despite clear evidence that you are doing well you still have that nagging feeling that at any moment someone is going to tap you on the shoulder and say "We need to have a chat. You're out of your depth aren't you. You shouldn't be here." This book draws on the best research in psychology to explain where these feelings come from and how to deal with them.

About the author

Hugh Kearns is an internationally recognised speaker and author on the topic of self-management. He regularly lectures at leading universities and organisations all over Australia and around the world including Harvard, Stanford, Cambridge and Oxford. He lectures and researches at Flinders University in Adelaide, Australia.

He is a prolific author with many very popular books and articles published in leading journals including Nature.

And he regularly feels like an imposter!