

When can I stop feeling like a fake?

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Doubting your own ability can undo all the good work you've done. *Photo: Tamara Voninski*

Do you go to work every day secretly waiting for someone to rumble you for the fraud that you feel like?

Even though you're well qualified and good at your job, you're convinced deep down that the promotion you just got handed was due to luck, affirmative action or a mistake in the HR department.

Welcome to Imposter Syndrome – that nagging feeling your success is unearned, you don't really know what you're doing and sooner or later the genuinely competent folk are going to find out and call you on it.

First described by clinical psychologists Pauline Clance and Suzanne Imes in 1978, the condition was initially associated with high-achieving women who struggled to internalise their successes and accomplishments.

It's a psychological phenomenon that rears its head for many people at different moments as they rise through the ranks. If unchecked, the persistent self-doubt can be crippling, personally and professionally.

Speaker and consultant Suzanne Mercier says it put the kybosh on her rise in the advertising world, two decades ago.

The first woman to be promoted to the board of George Patterson Advertising in 1990, just two years after joining the company, Mercier says she headed up to the executive suite expecting to be fired rather than promoted.

“I was totally gobsmacked, I didn't feel it was earned, I didn't feel I had the skills or the capability,” she says.

The appointment saw her promoted two levels above her existing position, leapfrogging a number of longer-serving colleagues in the process.

After privately deciding her elevation was the result of an affirmative action gesture, Mercier says she struggled in the role, afraid to ask for help and crippled by the thought of being found out and kicked out.

“I might have come across as a confident businesswoman – that wasn't what was going on in my head,” Mercier says.

“If you don't recognise your skills and capabilities, you can't own your successes ... we dismiss our talents and successes as anything but the fact that we've done something well.”

After two years of hiding her doubts from friends and colleagues – “there was no mentoring in those days” – she left to start her own agency, convinced she didn't have what it took to play in the premier league. “My take-out was that I wasn't good enough,” she says.

Edwin Trevor-Roberts, the CEO of career management consultancy Trevor-Roberts Associates, says Imposter Syndrome often strikes when people step up to their first executive role.

'Are you sure they picked the right person?' is a common thought, he says. Few are keen to vocalise it, in particular men who are programmed to feel they must appear the master of every situation.

Some avoid the problem by holding back from applying for higher roles for fear of drawing further attention to themselves and their shortcomings, Psychology Melbourne counselling psychologist Warrick Arblaster says.

It's a similar dilemma to that faced by game show contestants – take the money and run, or play on and potentially lose everything, he says.

“People think, 'I've got this far as a fraud, I'll just tread water now',” Arblaster says.

Working with an external mentor or executive coach can ensure self-doubt doesn't hamper the corporate climb, as can making a list of personal accomplishments.

“It can be useful to see your achievements in writing, versus going, 'God, I was lucky, will I be found out?'" Arblaster says.

“It's a continuum. You probably can't get rid of it, but you can stay on top of it.”

The Commonwealth Bank's general manager of affiliate business banking and its Women in Focus program, American-born Karen James, has worked in executive roles in Australia and abroad and is in demand nationally as a speaker.

As a graduate electrical engineer, she held her own in the male-dominated world of information technology in the 1980s and 90s.

Career achievements notwithstanding, she's loathe to describe herself as a high flier and has had to work to quash her inner doubts as she has risen through the ranks.

Before speaking engagements, she sometimes still asks herself, 'why would this group want to hear from me?'.
.

“There are two conversations – the one that's happening externally and the one that's going on in your head,” James says.

“Your childhood and how you're raised makes a difference – your experience, education and exposure culminates in your 'self talk'. 'I'm just a girl from New Jersey' – I had to get rid of that.” James believes cultivating a circle of supportive colleagues and friends early in your career is the best way to ensure self doubt doesn't run rampant.

“You have to work on it at a personal level – surround yourself with the right people,” she says.

“Having the full support of a good mentor, people around you who truly believe in you, strong positive influences, can help cull the self talk.”

Have you experienced Imposter Syndrome? How did you deal with it?

Read more: <http://www.smh.com.au/executive-style/management/when-can-i-stop-feeling-like-a-fake-20131102-2wsj9.html#ixzz2jeFEUkp2>

Comments:

This is just so true. Fantastic article.

I've been "lucky" to have risen pretty quickly in my career, been given roles in under 10 years that would have been reserved for decades-long people. With every new role, I felt exactly like this - "I don't feel at all ready for this; what if they find out I'm not actually as good as what they seem to think" was all pretty self-defeating.

I was very fortunate to have several key mentors who believed in me and a wife who would always encourage with her sensible, logical, rational manner.

I don't think you ever get 'rid' of it, but the conclusion I have is nor do you want to. I've decided that in a healthy dose, a small amount of doubt will be useful to spur you on to continue learning and growing. Like anything, too much or too little - neither is good.

I've found much inner freedom in this approach. It doesn't stop the inner-critic popping up, but with each new experience I realise that most people feel like this, and those that don't probably ought to.

Commenter *bjs*
Location Sydney
Date and time November 04, 2013, 8:50AM

Cue the hordes of people 'oh I've got that' which is code for a brazen piece of faux-modesty. You probably don't have it, or it's just the standard human response to being promoted. Or, you're actually not very good at your job and you know it.

Commenter *Faniya*
Location Melbourne
Date and time November 04, 2013, 11:18AM

Cue the smarta**se knowalls who think they are a little cleverer than everyone else, but occasionally wonder why they get overlooked for these 'easy' plum roles. (hint: it's the smarta**e bit).

Commenter *markx*
Date and time November 04, 2013, 12:01PM

Maybe it is because my partner is rich and family are millionaires and we have been together for 10 years now... maybe my mentality is a bit relaxed? See I understand what you are saying but actually believe it or not being more relaxed towards the situation and not stressing yourself out over it actually get's you further. Don't know how it works but for me I just rock up to work do my job and go. I strive for performance and reaching my KPI's as more of a personal challenge I guess above than what the company requires that I do. I have found that being relaxed towards reaching to the next stage in your life actually gets you further as people can sense confidence a mile away. Not sure what it would be like if I didn't have a partner who was rich knowing that what ever happens happens. Maybe I am out of touch of reality? I don't think so because I like to try and remind people above me that not everyone that walks through that door each and every morning is the same as the person next to you. We are all different and we all come from different walks of life. If you are stressing so much, take a step back... think to yourself... how worse could it get? There will always be another opportunity. Hence this is why I don't just count on my relationship for my success... it's a competitive market everywhere... work, family and relationships. I say to my friends.. "Look, you won the race before you were born... you are capable of doing anything. You were meant to be born to succeed" Wish you all the luck and go for it! :)

Commenter *The Other Guy1*
Location Date and time November 04, 2013, 12:07PM

Faniya, I actually am good at my job. I'm not boasting or being arrogant, but I do do a good job. My response to the article was just to identify that many of us do feel this way at some point. Despite the success, accolades or material rewards, people still feel somewhat like they shouldn't be deserving of said success.

Commenter *bjs*
Location Sydney
Date and time November 04, 2013, 12:56PM

Interesting to see how people try to rationalise success, "I'm here, so therefore I deserve it"

Commenter *Asher*
Location Black Palm
Date and time November 04, 2013, 1:07PM

Once you realise that most people are incompetent in their jobs, the problem goes away.

Commenter *mark*
Location sydney
Date and time November 05, 2013, 6:18AM

I totally relate to his. Just didn't realize there was a 'diagnoses' and a term for it!
Coincidentally, I am actually in the process of teaming up with a career coach.

Commenter *FemIT*
Location Date and time November 04, 2013, 8:56AM

Yes - there is a diagnosis for behaviours that require 'ironing out' so to speak. I personally knew of somebody that was simultaneously suffering from Delusional Jobseeker Syndrome, Fake It Till You Make It Syndrome, Serial Positive Thinker Syndrome and Vacuous Victim Syndrome. Thankfully they have now been medicated....

Commenter *Dee*
Location Brave New World
Date and time November 04, 2013, 3:09PM

I can relate to this. But when such a long string of lucky undeserved good things happen in my professional life I start to think people obviously hold me in much higher regard than I do. It's the constant battle between rationality and low self esteem

Commenter *Mick*
Location Date and time November 04, 2013, 10:33AM

Yeah, why bother questioning the incompetence of those in charge, when you can milk them right?
Is that not win, win?

Commenter *Asher*
Location Black Palm
Date and time November 04, 2013, 12:35PM

I saw the potential in a person and asked them if they wanted to be a team leader and was politely turned down so went for the next person on my list. Was both disappointed and pleased to see that when my second choice was not quite up to solving a problem first choice came in and resolved it then quietly went back to what he was doing. When asked why he didn't want the job, said that he didn't think he was up to it and didn't want the responsibility.

Commenter *rastus*
Location Date and time November 04, 2013, 1:00PM

i'm the opposite. i thought people would judge me on my performance, and i made a great effort and achieved much. what happened was others kept me in the dark, and one actually took credit for my work, and left me looking like i didn't do much. it's not effort and results that is rewarded anymore,

it's obsequiousness to bosses that works.

Commenter *Martin*

Location Date and time November 04, 2013, 10:39AM

Career coaches? - puhlease!

I went to one once. His response to my imposter syndrome was to repeatedly ask: "But why do you think that your company is paying you so much?" My answer was that the company was run by people who were even less capable than I, but the fact that my bosses were useless didn't make me feel any better!

Commenter *Stephen*

Location Date and time November 04, 2013, 10:45AM

This is a problem of our own making. The enlightened society created affirmative actions for all types of "discriminated" individuals, promoted their interests to sooth our conscience. Instead we created doubts and many more unhappy people, those who are favoured and those who are discriminated. I say bring back the good old survivor of the fittest regime.

Commenter *gian*

Location sydney

Date and time November 04, 2013, 10:52AM

Wrong. Affirmative action has nothing to do with it. Most people who suffer from this feeling are white, middle class, well educated males who are probably very talented as well. It's facile to dismiss the syndrome as the reusult of just another social blunder.

Commenter *JS*

Location Date and time November 04, 2013, 11:44AM

I know a few people in my office who will benefit from reading this.

Commenter *roxy chick*

Location sydney

Date and time November 04, 2013, 10:53AM

Tony Abbott has been getting away with it for a few months now!!

Commenter *Steeden*

Location Date and time November 04, 2013, 11:00AM

Hmm, now was it the \$300bn debt or was it the 1000+ drowned that brought on one of the biggest electoral defeats in Australian political history?

I'm guessing those numbers were the proofs that got the masses to wake up.

Commenter *Alex*

Location Finley

Date and time November 04, 2013, 11:48AM

Steeden, hey that was my line. Exact sentiments he's so full of it, we'll just have to bide our time. And he's not alone in that chosen career choice.

Commenter *A country gal*

Location Date and time November 04, 2013, 12:03PM

Throw in Hunt, Bishop, Morrison and especially Hockey who all look like they are barely muddling through. Now wonder they are avoiding any real scrutiny.

Commenter *WalkyTalky*

Location

Date and time November 04, 2013, 12:41PM

The good news for Tony is that he won't have to worry about numbers, since everything's secret now.

Commenter *Party Stooge*

Location Date and time November 04, 2013, 2:33PM

In answer to the question posed in the heading - "When can I stop feeling like a fake?" - It's apparently 10 years according to Kyle Sandilands.

Commenter *Dim Witt*

Location Date and time November 04, 2013, 11:09AM

If you are neither authentic nor articulate, of course you will feel as though your life is a lie. If all you do is copy and paste and remit what others say and do or expect you to say or do, well yeah you're gonna feel like a robot, an automaton. Merely responding to stimulus, reading from a script, restless mind and heart, get togethers can feel like meetings, your "friends" are mere clones of you. All symptomatic of a person who has too many embedded rules in their behaviours and expectations of other people's behaviour. You will become free when you own your own opinions, you say what you want, and mean what you say.

Commenter *Asher*

Location Black Palm

Date and time November 04, 2013, 11:13AM

So good to read this I have finally begun to get over this at 48, I was GM of a small company and I now work for myself after being made redundant and going it alone. I worked out at 33 I wasn't thick but that is only half the battle. At 48 I have worked out I am not going to get rumbled as a fake, I don't need to get back behind the counter with a badge on even though I feel I have more in common with the hospitality staff at a function than my business peers.

Commenter *Peter T*

Location N.Melbourne

Date and time November 04, 2013, 11:15AM

Not just employees feel like fakes.

I joined as a partner in a small business (4 partners, 4 employees). 20 years later I am the only boss with over 50 employees.

Every day I think that I am not qualified to lead this fantastic group of people - I'm just a 20 year old kid in a 50 year old body.

Commenter *Morris*

Location

Date and time November 04, 2013, 11:17AM

I quit my job as a lawyer because of this syndrome. I took every single mistake I made at work, no matter how minor, as an affirmation that I was too dumb to be working there.

This persistent self-doubt spiraled me gradually into depression and thoughts of self-harm, to the point of me now feeling unable to take on any form of paid work because of the responsibility.

I'm well aware that my self-defeating thoughts are exaggerated and unreal, but I can't help believing them, a year of therapy sessions notwithstanding. Positive thoughts like "somebody has to do it, so it might as well be me", and "other people make mistakes too" don't work. All my former classmates who scored lower marks than I did are working great jobs now, yet imposter syndrome has me too afraid to even work as an administrative assistant.

I didn't know this syndrome existed until I read this article. I also thought I was the only person to experience this. Hopefully people who diagnose this problem early can overcome it through understanding. Thanks for writing this article.

Commenter *That's me!*

Location Date and time November 04, 2013, 11:29AM

Ah - the flip-side of the Dunning-Kruger effect.

Commenter *Scott*

Location Melbourne

Date and time November 04, 2013, 11:49AM

Australians can only accept tall poppies in certain circumstances like sports but are quite intolerant high-achievers (read- big earners) in other situations. This is why a lot of blue collar workers command much higher income than their counterparts in first world countries so that the middle-class income gap is much narrower than other society.

If you behave like you deserve that high income and privilege that was bestowed on you, then there will be many out there to cut you down to teach you a lesson about your arrogance (in their perception).

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tall_poppy_syndrome

Which is why there are still many sportspersons and high profile personalities portray humbleness in the public eye, not because they don't think they deserve it but for fear of being a target by others. Talk to successful Americans and Europeans and you will realise they display their self confidence and flair without coming across as too arrogant.

On the other hand I can confidently say that most CEO of large national and multinational companies will not suffer from Imposter Syndrome, since I don't recall any of them knocking back large payouts and bonuses before or after the GFC (barring a rare few with their own untold stories).

And if there is any truth in the popular mock-fictions about Psychopaths on corporate ladder, then there will be many Psychopath who are CEOs and certainly they will have absolutely no guilt.

Commenter *PsychoFraud*

Location Date and time November 04, 2013, 11:37AM

Relax we have a totally fake Federal Govnt. with phoney Tony as pretend PM so total deception is the new norm and don't allow any information to disseminate .

Commenter *KEEPITREAL*

Location Date and time November 04, 2013, 11:47AM

hear! hear!

Commenter *JL*

Location Date and time November 04, 2013, 12:42PM

The only reason you feel like a fraud - floundering in your elevated role - is because you are one. All the careeer coaches, psychotherapists, life coaches, ego massueurs, and other snake oil salesmen in the world will not help you one iota in this regard. That is unless they dare you to address the real questions here (like): why are you wasting your time and others doing something you do not have the confidence to do? what would you really like to do? what are you really suited to? what is in your heart? what is your calling? Most people unfortunately are never brave enough to do this...and they waste their lives and others in ill-suited careers and roles. A wasted life is a wasted life - and that is tragic.

Commenter *Fat Cat*

Location Feelin' mighty real

Date and time November 04, 2013, 11:59AM

Well, glad to hear that. All those people who study psychology for years and decades and believe this is a legitimate condition will be greatly relieved to know they were wrong.

Commenter *DM*

Location

Date and time November 04, 2013, 12:28PM

In the public sector this syndrome is widespread, if not widely discussed, among the ranks of the Senior Executive Service. The Australian Public Service Commission (APSC) has been actively pushing the concept of the generic SES for many years now - and the chickens are coming home to roost. While it's true that some skillsets are highly portable (communication, interpersonal skills etc) there is a deep and very obvious lack of understanding of the businesses that many SES are supposed to be running - across a number of commonwealth Departments.

The APSC - and some of the SES themselves - will tell you that the specifics of the business aren't important; what's important is that they have EL staff - middle management - to advise them on the running of the businesses so that they can add "strategic value" by engaging in "big picture thinking". More often than not, this equates to SES talking amongst themselves and their entourages (who they move with them from their last department) in a language that is highly conceptual and littered with catchy management ideas, but not well linked to anything that the Department actually does. SES movement and promotion policies actively encourage the mobility of senior execs, ensuring the perpetuation of the trend by making sure that promotion from within is minimised. Meanwhile, the EL staff who know the business continue to actually run the show, while having to

"manage up" every time their SES come out with another wacky concept that needs to be operationalised.

Where this is the case (and there are some notable, very professional exceptions) only the most cynical or shortsighted execs really believe that they're really adding a lot of value to the process.

Commenter *PS perspective*

Location

Date and time November 04, 2013, 12:01PM

In my experience I've come across a lot of people that are faking it.

Not many people actually do a job long enough to get good at it anymore. I know a lot of people who jump from job to job before their stuff ups can become apparent. By the time it is realised that they don't have a clue, they have already moved on to another company and into an even more senior role.

Commenter *Syd*

Location *Sydney*

Date and time November 04, 2013, 12:01PM

This is brilliant. I read a profile piece on Amanda Keller in 2012 which resonated with me so much that I kept the following excerpt handy ever since:

"I used to think it was just me who felt 'Any minute now I'm going to get caught out. I'm not qualified for this job and all my friends could do it better than me.' But you muddle through, and I've discovered that no matter who we are, we all have that imposter syndrome. That realisation is liberating."

Amanda Keller, SMH 4-2-12.

Commenter *swissmade*

Location Date and time November 04, 2013, 12:26PM

Read more: <http://www.theage.com.au/executive-style/management/when-can-i-stop-feeling-like-a-fake-20131102-2wsj9.html#ixzz2mMYTLD9P>