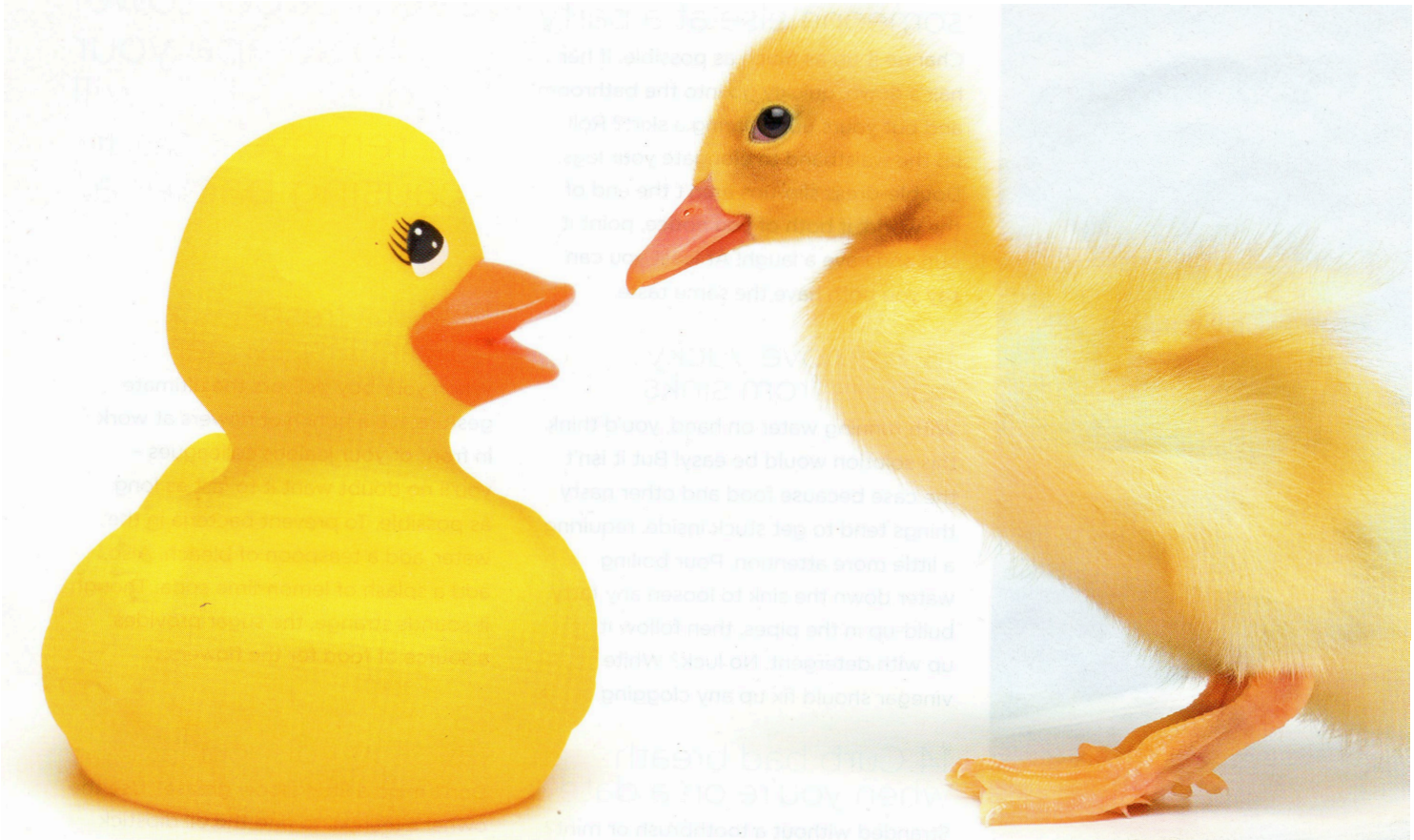

fraud squad.

Always over-thinking your work success and convincing yourself you're a fake? Here's how to duck those self-doubt thoughts. By Candice Chung

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It's after work and you're on the bus on your way home. You find a seat, fish out a copy of CLEO and start flipping through it. You land on this page and start reading.

At the back of your mind, you're still thinking about your day. All the meetings, deadlines, and things you haven't done. You try to shake off that niggling feeling and are quietly relieved to get through another day without any major disasters.

Your manager thinks you're a star, yet, somehow, you find it hard to believe. Others say you're a hard worker, but they have no idea just how much effort you have to put in to get everything done. If only they knew what was going on inside. If only they realised that, deep down, you've been feeling like a fraud.

impostor or high achiever?

For business owner Nyssa Berryman, 31, the false belief of being a fraud is something she's been wrestling with for some time. Despite being nominated for several prestigious business awards for her successful PR company, The Buzz PR, Berryman still finds it hard to relate to her own accomplishments at times.

"I'm usually a very confident person, but, privately – every now and then – I'll sort of pause and think, 'Do I know what I'm talking about? Do people even trust me?' ... And I'm hit with a feeling where I don't know if I'll ever find real success."

Although Berryman has always been a high-achiever, external praise and recognition only offer her a limited sense of reassurance. In fact, it is often when she stops to evaluate her successes that she feels a heightened sense of anxiety.

"It's a bizarre feeling to have. When I verbalise it to someone, they might tell me [my fears are] ridiculous. I'd try to overcome it by reminding myself of what I have achieved. But, then, the next day, I could have the exact same feeling again ... It's like I'm my own worst critic and my own worst enemy," she says.

What Berryman has been experiencing is, in fact, a classic case of the "impostor phenomenon" – a concept first discovered in the 1970s by clinical psychologists Pauline Clance and Suzanne Imes. The pair conducted a study with 150 women who, despite their outstanding accomplishments, believed that they weren't smart and had "fooled anyone who thought otherwise".

Those who identify with the syndrome often feel that other people have, somehow, overestimated their intelligence and abilities. Their skewed perception could also be accompanied by a fear of being "found out" and a tendency to dismiss their success as luck or the result of a disproportionate amount of hard work and effort.

the parent trap.

Many theories exist about the origin of "impostorism", but Clance and Imes believe our early family dynamics form a crucial part of the cause. The researchers discovered in their study that "impostors" tend to come from one of two categories.

One group of women grew up with parents who labelled their sibling as the "brighter" one in the family – causing them to internalise the belief they're less intelligent or capable, while, at the same time, wanting to disprove the perception through hard work and success.

The other group of women are told in their childhood that they're smart and can do anything they want with ease. When confronted with problems they can't solve "easily" later in life, they begin to doubt their own abilities and their parents' idealised perceptions of them.

fear of rejection.

Ironically, these self-imposed feelings of fraud are most prevalent in high-achieving women. Corporate consultant Suzanne Mercier (**imposterhood.com**) has been training clients about the phenomenon for the past 18 months.

Mercier argues that it comes down to a fear of rejection. "Impostor syndrome is about feeling scared that somebody is going to discover we're not good enough and that if we let them see who we really are, they won't like what they see."

She adds, "[People with self-doubt] tend to live with incredible stress because they're often super-vigilant about making sure nobody figures out they're 'not good enough'. For example, someone might become a workaholic and put in lots of extra hours so that nobody can ask them a question they won't know, or find fault with what they're doing."

silencing the fake.

Louise Schultze, 30, CEO and founder of marketing company **ibidam.com**, says it's often hard for successful women to open up about feeling like a fraud – because many don't realise their peers are facing the very same struggles.

"You see yourself with all your flaws. [But other people] see the gloss, they see the articles, they see you standing up onstage in front of a crowd, or all done up in a photograph. I guess they don't see the hard part," says Schultze.

Having been asked to speak at the National Small Business Summit alongside former PM Kevin Rudd and key business figures, Schultze admits it's difficult to silence the "inner impostor". She recalls, "I kept thinking, 'What if they ask me a question and I haven't got my stats right, or if they catch me out on something?'. I have this opportunity to be in a room with some of the most influential people, yet I [still sometimes] question whether it's my place to say anything."

While it's impossible to banish all self-doubt, Schultze believes it's important to stay strong and forge ahead despite our fears. "I understood early on what it's like to push yourself through the parts where you're uncomfortable, or you don't like, so you can get to the other side – where those feelings of reward and sense of achievement are great."

To do this, Mercier believes we should first address any feelings of anxiety. "Fear is real, but the perception that we're not good enough isn't necessarily so. We can only break the pattern by separating our feelings from what we perceive as the truth, and then questioning it."

And, for some people, the simple realisation that the impostor phenomenon exists, and knowing that they're not alone, can actually be enough. □