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FRAUD! IMPOSTOR! FAKE!

You're SMART AND SUCCESSFUL... and still feel like a failure?
Evelyn Lewin has the cure for IMPOSTOR SYNDROME

Carey Mulligan has it. So does Diablo Cody (writer of hit film *Juno* and 2011's *Young Adult*). Even Kate Winslet admits to it. They're all wildly successful artists with a global profile, and yet... they feel like frauds. As Cody explained to an interviewer not long ago, "Women who experience any degree of success tend to often believe deep down inside that they've fooled everyone and that they don't actually have any talent or skill. And I feel like that every day of my life."

Sound familiar? It does for Peta-Jo Whitney. The 32-year-old newspaper journalist and mother of two is also an award-winning novelist. Yet she doesn't exactly feel like a roaring success. At work, she worries her boss will decide she's not capable. She frets over the fact that her book that was initially self-published makes it inferior. (It's since been picked up by a publishing house.) And don't get her started on her parenting skills. Whitney constantly compares herself to other mums – and each time, she feels she falls short. "[Other mums] just seem to have it so together, and I sort of look at them and go, 'Why can't I be like that?' I second-guess everything that I do."

MODEST TO A FAULT

She's not alone. Though it's not commonly discussed – who wants to admit this aloud? – many women *do* feel like they got their job because they were in the right place at the right time or nabbed their partner by sheer luck of the draw. And when something good happens, we tend to attribute it to external factors, such as timing, luck or chance, rather than crediting our brains, our skills, and our abilities. In other words, our inherent worth. But why?

Valerie Young is a self-confessed "recovering impostor" who first heard about impostor syndrome when she was at university.

A classmate brought in a paper written by the professionals who named the malady, "and I went, 'Oh my God, that's me.'" Young had always felt her colleagues, whom she admired, were "more intelligent and more deserving to be there than me". As her classmate read aloud from the paper, she began nodding her head. And when she looked around the room, she saw everybody else was doing it too – even her professor. It was a light bulb moment. "It was stunning," Young says, "because these were my role models."

Impostor syndrome was first labelled as such in the '70s. Put simply, sufferers feel they're faking their way through life. They're modest to a dangerous fault. They're not comfortable accepting compliments, because they don't believe them. And they have a knack for explaining away achievements. Young says sufferers will say things like, "Well if I can do it, anyone can do it, so it can't be that hard." They also dismiss achievements that involve effort. "They think, 'If I was really smart I wouldn't have to work hard, I could just do it naturally.'"

And if they believe charm was to thank for their success? Then the achievement is downplayed. But being likeable is a valuable skill, says Young, not to mention a sure-fire sign of emotional intelligence. He reckons sufferers have a tendency to view failure as "proof of their ineptness". This fear was partially to blame for Suzanne Mercier's decision to quit her job soon after becoming the first woman on the board of directors of a leading advertising agency. Mercier says she resigned because she actually couldn't comprehend why she had been promoted, "and I really was sitting there waiting for somebody to figure out that I shouldn't have been".

Young says such a response is common. When a sufferer has a reputation to defend, they panic. "They're thinking, 'I don't know how I did it the first time. How could I possibly recreate this?'"

It isn't just individuals who suffer from this kind of thinking. Companies can also fall prey. In fact, once Mercier realised how

"huge" the impact can be on an entire workplace, she developed Liberate Leadership, a business that aims to address these concerns. "If [sufferers are] not feeling good enough, they're not going to be willing to put their ideas forward," she says. "They're fearing criticism." As such, organisations can then miss out on key skills such as engagement, innovation and teamwork. And we've all been a part of (or surely heard about) offices where those are in short supply – they're disaster zones.

"Women who experience any degree of success tend to often believe deep down inside that they've fooled everyone"

THE GREAT PRETENDER

When I spoke to Young, she cited a study of high achievers that revealed a staggering taboo: approximately 70 per cent of successful people identify with impostor syndrome. Seventy per cent! That means a majority of corner offices and executive suites are filled with people who – despite impressive accolades and worthy achievements – still can't help but feel they're skating through life. And it's not just limited to women; Mercier assures men suffer in equal numbers. "We don't realise that everybody else – well, pretty much everybody else – is feeling the same way."

So if "everybody" feels this way, just how real is impostor syndrome? Could it simply be little more than a fancy, pop-psych term to describe bouts of insecurity, which are universal? Mary Magalotti, director and principal psychologist of Life Resolutions, concedes the syndrome isn't officially listed in the key textbook of psychological conditions (the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders IV*). However, she says, "That doesn't mean it doesn't exist." Young vehemently believes it's "a very real phenomenon." So real, in fact, she penned the book *The Secret Thoughts of Successful Women* with the intriguing subtitle: *Why capable people suffer the impostor syndrome and how to thrive in spite of it.*

But simply saying impostor syndrome is real doesn't make things cut and dried for those who suffer from it. Take Young, who helped form a support group to discuss issues of inadequacy. "It went very well for a few weeks," she recalls, "but then I started having this nagging sense that even though they were saying they were impostors, I knew I was the only *real* impostor." →



None of this stopped Young from pursuing a successful career. After all, she explains, there are two types of sufferers. One is "successful no matter what", because feeling like a fraud can actually provide further impetus to succeed, full stop. "Certainly there are people it drives more because of this need to prove themselves," explains Young. Whitney agrees, acknowledging that as a result of constantly working to prove herself, "The view from the outside is probably that [I'm] doing *better* than everybody else."

The other kind of sufferer shies away from taking chances. As Young says, "They don't write their novel, they don't go for jobs or promotions." Or, like Mercier, they reach dizzying career heights only to step back. Such was the case for Mary, an American woman Young interviewed for her book. Not only did Mary graduate top of her class – receiving a full scholarship to university – the dean of law was so impressed with her grades he admitted her without looking at the application. Mary chose to do a doctorate instead, but after starting a family, she dropped out. Years later, when she realised she was just short of completing her degree, she opted not to finish it because, as she saw it, "I couldn't possibly know enough to deserve a Master's."

If you can relate to this story, "You're in very good company," says Young, "because there are so many famous, talented people who have these feelings." (See the box, right.) Young likes to cite three-time Oscar winner and universally beloved actress

"Seventy per cent of successful people identify with impostor syndrome"

Meryl Streep as a prolific example. The actress once told a reporter: "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?" Young finds this particularly enlightening. "Meryl Streep [feels this way], for crying out loud!" she says. "If that doesn't tell you something about how normal and absurd impostor syndrome is, nothing will."

In the end, it's not about whether you feel like an impostor or not. What's important is what you do about it. This is one area where we could actually learn something from the other gender. Mercier explains that women with impostor syndrome tend to retreat, while "men will go for it anyway". For example, she says, women won't apply for a job when they've got nine out of 10 prerequisites. Men jump if they've got just four. That's because, says Mercier, they're more likely to "think the organisation is lucky to have them".

So it's time to rewire your thinking. Let go of those unrealistically high expectations, stop beating yourself up if you fail (we all do, after all) and start taking credit for your achievements. It's okay to feel like a fraud; what's not okay is to let those feelings stop you from aiming high.

After all, those feelings aren't real reflections of who you are. Think of them, if you will, as impostors.

Celebrity impostors

Carey Mulligan

"I always think, 'Oh fuck, they're going to find me out...'. There's a scene in every film which I look back on and think, 'That was the day I couldn't act.'"

Kate Winslet

"Sometimes I wake up in the morning before going off to a shoot, and I think, 'I can't do this. I'm a fraud. They're going to fire me.'"

Renée Zellweger

"Sometimes I wake up at night and go, 'What were they thinking? They gave me this role; don't they know I'm faking it?'"

Tina Fey

"The beauty of the impostor syndrome is you vacillate between extreme egomania and a complete feeling of: 'I'm a fraud! Oh god, they're on to me! I'm a fraud!'"

Michelle Pfeiffer

"I still think people will find out that I'm not very talented. I'm really not very good. It's all been a sham." **m**

