

# Imposter syndrome—the silent career killer



**Helen Pameley** considers the effects of imposter syndrome in the legal world

## IN BRIEF

▶ What is imposter syndrome and how can it affect your work.

▶ Tips on how to tackle the negative thoughts and feelings.

**Y**ou don't know what you're doing.  
'At any moment, someone will expose you as the fraud you are.'  
'What made you think you were capable of attempting this?'

'You're a failure. A complete and utter failure.'

Recognise this narrative? This is the voice of imposter syndrome, and it plagues so many of us. It's our inner voice doubting our worthiness to be successful. It is a persistent detractor of our competence, often despite clear evidence to the contrary, and it is closely correlated with anxiety, depression, and burnout.

If you struggle with imposter syndrome, take heart—you aren't alone. In fact, up to 82% of people will feel this way at one time or another. Women are more likely to talk about it, whereas men tend to struggle in silence. Men will likely 'push on through', whereas women are more likely to let it hold them back from seizing their opportunities.

Worry and self-criticism effectively sabotage your chances of advancing. As women, imposter syndrome means we don't ask for the pay rise or promotion we know deep down we are entitled to, we don't speak up in meetings and demonstrate our true value and expertise, and we often don't accept credit where credit is due. It's our own self-imposed inner glass ceiling.

I recall as a new trainee not speaking up in an important meeting just in case I was wrong—even though I knew I was right. I wouldn't hand in work unless I had triple checked it. As I climbed the career ladder, I learned to portray myself as strong and confident and hide my vulnerabilities, because that's what I thought the corporate game required of me. Like many high-flying industries, in the legal world it can feel as though there isn't room for error or coming second. But it is only a matter of time until the harsh inner critic, accepting nothing less than perfect and demanding 'superhuman' performance, wears you down. For me, I realised that in giving in to the voice of the imposter, I was never going to be happy.

It also meant I gave away far too much energy to something which was, in fact, holding me back.

It turns out that imposter syndrome affects many successful and high-achieving women. A KPMG study (The 2020 KPMG Women's Leadership Summit Report), which polled 750 high-performing executive women just below C-suite (ie the highest ranking executive titles in a company), found that 75% had experienced imposter syndrome in their careers, and a shocking 47% said that their feelings resulted from never expecting to reach the level of success they had already achieved.

One of the world's most successful and influential women, Facebook's COO Sheryl Sandberg, confessed in her best-selling book 'Lean In: Women, Work and the Will to Lead' to having experienced imposter syndrome at work. She feels that it is a symptom of lack of self-confidence. Comparing women against men, she said that the latter can list out their skills and qualities, but their counterparts fail to admit what they are really good at. She admitted in her book that every time she excelled at work, deep down she felt that she had managed to 'fool everyone yet again', and that one day she would be found out. It is a common feeling, and therefore unsurprising that it feeds into why women struggle to make it to the top and are a disproportionately rare sight in boardrooms. It's women's silent career killer. So what to do? Here are five strategies for combatting imposter syndrome.

### 1. Give it a name

Give that inner voice—the one that's constantly criticising you, telling you you're not good enough and a fraud—a name. By externalising this voice you'll start to see that it doesn't speak the truth, and it isn't who you are. Weed out fact from fiction. Once you start to see the voice as separate, you give yourself a better chance of challenging it and offering yourself a more compassionate narrative to take its place.

### 2. Befriend imposter syndrome

If you try to push away your inner critic, you'll notice it only gets louder and digs its claws in deeper. But if you can approach it with curiosity and kindness, then its power dissipates. Invite it metaphorically in for tea, ask it why it's thinking in a certain way and what it's afraid of. You can then tell yourself that there's no cause for concern. You may

also realise that it's raising its head because in fact you're growing and putting yourself in situations that challenge you, which is completely normal and natural.

### 3. Make a 'well done' file

It's easy to focus on the fear rather than the opportunity. In fact, evolution has programmed us to remember and to fear a poisonous berry or a dangerous animal. But careers are not (usually) life-threatening, and we don't need to let our primitive fight or flight response take control of us in our everyday working lives. To combat focussing on the negatives rather than the positives, create a 'well done' file. Save emails and messages you receive with positive feedback, praise, and kind words. Whip this out whenever your sabotaging inner critic raises its ugly head.

### 4. What it means to be human

Remember that no one can be a ten out of ten in every area of their life. Many of us feel a pressure to be 'superhuman', but this just isn't possible. It can be helpful to step back and reflect on what it means to be human. Maybe you excel in some areas of life and not so much in others (again, depending on your own definition of success!), and maybe this fluctuates and changes with time. This doesn't mean you're a fraud, it just makes you a human being.

### 5. Connect with others

Imposter syndrome causes us to feel shameful, and shame is a silencer, which breeds a sense of disempowerment and disconnection. As bestselling author and shame researcher Dr Brene Brown said in her TED Talk 'Listening to Shame': 'If you put shame in a Petri dish, it needs three things to grow exponentially: secrecy, silence and judgment. If you put the same amount of shame in a Petri dish and douse it with empathy, it can't survive'.

So, to dispel the power of imposter syndrome, connect and talk with others who will meet you with compassion and love: a good friend, family member, coach or therapist. Bring the mean inner critic out from the shadows and watch it lose its power over you. You'll also be surprised how many 'me too's' you hear from others when you do start to talk about your inner imposter.

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