

IMPOSTER SYNDROME

WHY IT HOLDS US BACK

AND HOW TO BEAT IT

I was confident about my subject, I knew I was a good communicator and I was relishing the opportunity to speak on the TEDx stage. Then 4 weeks before the event, the event organiser released the bios of the other speakers and the first one I saw, sent me into panic.

He was a leading global negotiator, working with governments across the world and with a list of achievements longer than a cargo train (not to mention his books, all of them best-sellers of course)

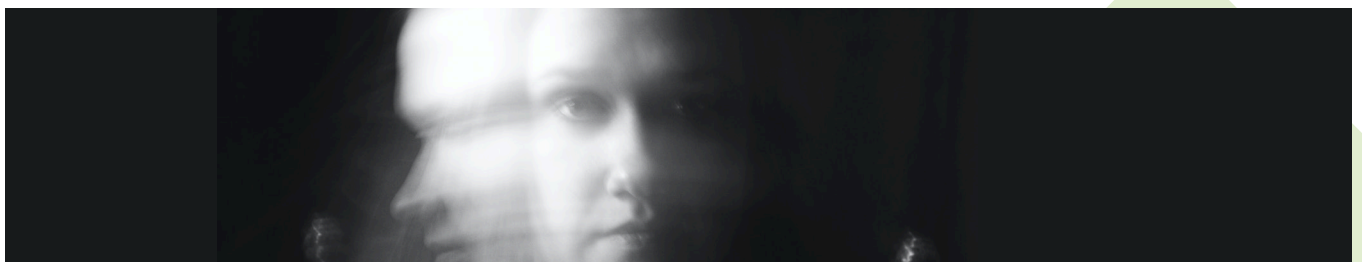
“I’m out of my depth”

“I’ll be shown up as a fraud”

“I’m not good enough for this event”

We’ve all been there (well, 70% of us have, according to research): **Imposter Syndrome**, it’s where you **doubt your ability, you feel like a fraud about to be exposed and you believe your accomplishments are not worthy of attention or respect**, either because they’re not particularly special or they’re entirely down to luck (rather than skill or hard work).

But how big a problem is **Imposter Syndrome** today and how do we tackle it?



Imposter Syndrome - a potted history:

Psychologists, Dr Pauline Rose Clance and Dr Suzanne Imes were the first to study this unwarranted sense of insecurity in the late 1970s because Dr Clance had noticed many of her undergraduates shared a concern, that whilst they had high grades, **they didn't feel they deserved their place at university**. The terms: **imposter phenomenon**, **imposter experience** and **imposter syndrome** were then established, with a fear of inadequacy and a fear of exposure, at the heart of the condition.

As the research widened and developed, it became clear that **Imposter Syndrome** is a problem across genders and cultures and has always existed. Even the genius, **Albert Einstein**, described himself as an **involuntary swindler** and struggled to see why anyone would be interested in his work.

What no one is saying and why it matters:

Most people talk about **Imposter Syndrome** as a single condition but from my observations of those I've coached, along with friends and family, I've noticed two types of **Imposter Syndrome**:

1 **Mild Imposter Syndrome:** it's temporary, it comes and goes and increases our levels of anxiety in certain social interactions or in moments of high performance or decision making. It doesn't prevent action but it makes action more stressful than it needs to be.

2 **Severe Imposter Syndrome:** it's all consuming, it never goes away and prevents people from sharing their knowledge/insights. It holds people back from applying for jobs which might stretch their skills or speaking up in team/board meetings. It can lead to self-loathing and bitter regret, and left unchecked, it can grow into extreme anxiety and longer-term depression.

Recognising both extremities matters because the simple, self-management techniques, which may kick **mild imposter syndrome** into touch, won't work as effectively with **severe imposter syndrome**. **Severe imposter syndrome** is surmountable, but a deeper and more holistic approach is required.



What causes Imposter Syndrome?

Some people link **Imposter Syndrome** to childhood trauma, competitive parents, or years spent working in results-driven environments, and with the number of UK google searches for the term, '**Imposter Syndrome**', topping **74,000** in **October 2022** (a **511% increase** on the numbers from **October 2016**) it's tempting to think that the issue is getting worse.

But if 70% of the global population have experienced **Imposter Syndrome** at one stage or another, perhaps it's just that the human need to belong and be accepted has always run deep in our psyche, so much so, that it creates an irrational fear of being ousted and exposed as an imposter.

Add to that human need, a daily barrage of information about everyone else's good bits on social media, which drives us to compare ourselves with others more than ever: we shouldn't be surprised that so many people feel so inadequate!

How do we tackle Imposter Syndrome?

Create **3 new assumptions** about success and value. Without adjusting your assumptions, tackling **Imposter Syndrome** will always be an uphill battle.

ASSUMPTION 1

There is rich value in ALL experiences and achievements, whether it's life, work or academic experiences/achievements.

What delivers more value in building wisdom?

- A** A PhD and completion of a best-selling book?
- B** A painful divorce leading to life as a single parent and just about holding it together?

The answer is neither!

Whether you're a fresh faced graduate, about to retire, or going through a mid-life crisis, your unique frame of reference brings a richness of insight to the board room table, team meeting or company conference.

We should have the deepest of respect for those who have strived and secured a PhD, just as we should have the deepest of respect for the divorced single parent or recent graduate. Once you accept that every unique set of experiences has value because every frame is different and there is extraordinary power in harnessing diversity, then respecting everyone whilst fearing no one, becomes easier to achieve.



ASSUMPTION 2

Superstars, slackers and grafters: they all share similar pains, stresses and worries.

Everyone has struggles, which darken their lives and cause pain or fear. It could be the executive stressing that his/her marriage is over and how to break it to the children, or the health worries due to a smoking habit that you just can't break, or the headache of managing searing debt.

Accepting that we all carry painful baggage wherever we go, is a great leveller.

ASSUMPTION 3

No one escapes the moronic phase of learning.

There are 3 phases of learning something new and the first phase stops many people from even trying.

Phase 1 – the moronic phase:

There's no hiding it, it could be learning the piano or learning to drive: try as you may, you look like a moron and feel like a moron. You can't do it. You're in the moronic phase of learning.

Everyone else doing that same thing is better than you right now and it's humiliating for you (and amusing for others). No one wants to go through the moronic phase of learning but that's part of the deal if you want success. There is no escape from the moronic phase and with gritted teeth, you either trudge on, or give up.

Phase 2 – the mediocre phase:

You're not great but you're ok. No one is laughing anymore or feeling sorry for you and it feels good to know you've progressed, but there is so much more you need to do to move beyond this phase. It's no longer painful or embarrassing as you trudge forward. Depending on how much you choose to invest, you'll either stay in this phase or you'll press on.

Phase 3 – the mastery phase:

You're a rock star and the people who laughed at you in the moronic phase are now wishing they were you. To remain in the mastery phase requires ongoing effort, but there is no embarrassment. Even if on a bad day, you don't believe you deserve the admiration from others, on a good day, you can at least recognise that you're pretty good! Getting here has cost you and you're conscious of the sacrifices made.

There is no escaping the moronic phase of learning ... not for anyone. For any new skill at any time, there are 3 phases of learning and the moronic one is the hardest of all ... always has been and always will be.

With new assumptions as our foundation, it becomes easier to knock out imposter syndrome so even if it does get back up, it's shaky on its feet.

I'm a TEDx speaker and ICF accredited coach on a mission to prevent burnout and create decisive and resilient communities of people.

My most booked talks/workshops in 2022 are:



1

How to make critical decisions when the stakes are high.

2





How to stop burnout so work/life balance is a reality not a utopia.

3

How to delegate so the job gets done to the standard you want.

To book me for your next event (online or in-person) get in touch and let's talk!

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