

## Chapter 2

# Overcome Imposter Syndrome

## You Are Not a Fraud

*"I have varying degrees of confidence and self-loathing. I often doubt my talent...and fear they're going to find out that I don't know what I'm doing."*

—Meryl Streep

When I was an undergrad at the College of William & Mary, I wasn't a great student. Not at the bottom of my class, but definitely not at the top either; I was right in the middle. In high school, I hadn't had to work very hard to get good grades, and I preferred spending my time in the theater and with my friends over studying or doing homework. So when I got to college, I wasn't prepared for how rigorous it would be academically, and I still preferred hanging out with my friends to studying. So when senior year came along, and the big consulting firms and multinational corporations came to do on-campus interviews, I signed up for a bunch of them and didn't get a single follow-up call. They were only interested in the students in the top 20 percent of the class.

I graduated into the middle of a recession, and jobs weren't plentiful, so I moved back home and went back to the company I had worked at for the previous four summers, doing title searches at the county courthouse. After a while, I managed to get a job working for a small company that supported the Defense Department (I live in the Washington, DC, area, so a large percentage of the population is either government employees or government contractors). While there, I managed to impress the chief operating officer (COO) with how quickly I learned the federal regulations governing what we did and with the quality of my work. After I had been there about eighteen months, the COO left the company and told me that when I was ready to leave, I should get in touch with him, and he would bring me on board at his new company.

I was ready to leave then, but I didn't say anything because he was going to KPMG. KPMG was one of those firms that had interviewed me on campus and hadn't wanted me, so Stan was telling me not to bother calling. It took me six months to talk myself into calling him, but I eventually did, and KPMG hired me. For a while after I started, I felt like a fraud. I didn't believe that I really belonged there or that I was as smart and as good at my job as the people who had been hired on campus, but eventually, I did believe it.

Two years later, when Arthur Andersen called to recruit me away from KPMG, even though Andersen hadn't wanted me in college either, I jumped at the opportunity and ended up spending five really valuable years there. My experiences at Andersen gave me the confidence to walk into almost any room and not feel like an imposter. I own that I'm not great at everything, and I'm okay with that. I don't have to pretend like I am perfect to be respected for what I do bring to the table.

*Imposter syndrome* is the feeling that you are not qualified to be in the position you're in, that you're sure that people will figure out that you're a fraud or an imposter. It often occurs when someone is put into a leadership position for the first time or into a new role that they don't feel ready for.

Imposter syndrome was first defined in 1978 in the article "The Impostor Phenomenon in High Achieving Women: Dynamics and Therapeutic Intervention" by Dr. Pauline R. Clance and Dr. Suzanne A. Imes, and it was originally thought to be something suffered exclusively by women.<sup>4</sup> Further research over the years has concluded that men suffer from it as well. In fact, up to 70 percent of all people have it at some point in their lives.<sup>5</sup>

Even super successful people can have imposter syndrome. Many famous people have talked about it in speeches and interviews. Even Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor talks about having "a touch" of imposter syndrome when she was going through the Senate confirmation process.

In an interview with the online magazine *Rookie* in 2013, Emma Watson said,

It's almost like the better I do, the more my feeling of inadequacy actually increases, because I'm just going, any moment, someone's going to find out I'm a total fraud, and that I don't deserve any of what I've achieved. I can't possibly live up to what everyone thinks I am and what everyone's expectations of me are. It's weird—sometimes [success] can be incredibly validating, but sometimes it can be incredibly unnerving and throw your balance off a bit, because you're trying to reconcile how you feel about yourself with how the rest of the world perceives you.<sup>6</sup>

Lena Dunham told *Glamour* magazine in 2017:

Making my deal with HBO as a twenty-three-year-old woman, I felt that I had so much to prove. I felt like I had to be the person who answered emails the fastest, stayed up the latest, worked the hardest. As much as I loved my job, I really, like, injured myself in some ways. If I had felt like, "You're worthy of eight hours of sleep, not four; you're worthy of turning your phone off on a Saturday," I don't think it would have changed the outcome of the show. [But] I could have worked with a sense of joy and excitement, rather than guilt and anxiety of being "found out." The advice I would give any woman going into a job if she has a sense of impostor syndrome would be: "There will be nothing if you don't look out for you." And I can't wait, on my next project, to go into it with the strength that comes from valuing your own body and your own mental health.<sup>7</sup>

Successfully confronting and defeating imposter syndrome is another way in which we must connect with ourselves to be effective leaders. Seek to look inside yourself to discover why you feel like an imposter. Ask yourself questions about why you feel the way you do. Do you think it was just a lucky break (or breaks) that landed you where you are today? From an outside perspective, I can tell you that is unlikely. It's almost certain you didn't get where you are by sheer luck alone either.

Lauren Weiner, CEO of WWC Global, a Defense contracting firm in Tampa, FL, told me a story about her experience with imposter syndrome. She said,

When I was in my PhD program at Dartmouth, the woman who coined the phrase “imposter syndrome” and did all of the major research on it came to do a brown bag workshop. I was sitting at the table, hoping nobody would look at me or they’d figure out I was actually the imposter. I very clearly missed the concept of the talk because I was so terrified of being found out. Is that irony?

I asked her why she felt like an imposter, and she responded,

Because I didn't think I deserved to be in that program, in that room, at that table. Even though I had succeeded at every point in my life to that juncture, I thought it was somehow that I had lucked into it, that people were just being nice, that everyone else had "it," and I was just faking my way along.

I knew objectively I belonged, but there was (at that point particularly) some thought that somehow I had just tricked everyone into thinking I belonged. I definitely felt that way early in my career as well. I was objectively extremely successful and fit into my cohort well, but they all seemed to have it together. By outward appearances, so did I, and I didn't realize that I was only seeing their outward appearance as well. I think it took some honest talks with peers to see that they had the same doubts that I did. That nobody was as together in their mind as they appeared and that was actually success. If we knew how to handle everything, we weren't growing and maturing, but that growth was messy.

I asked her if she still felt like an imposter, and she answered,

No, I've lost almost all of that over the last twenty years, and I generally own where I am and how I've gotten there...but every once in a while, I do have a moment of "How the heck did I get here, and why does everyone seem to think I know what I'm doing?!" I talk a lot about that to other young women. There's a whole lot of “faking it until you make it” that happens legitimately in successful people. You can't know every answer to every sticky question.

As Lauren mentions, one way people recommend getting over imposter syndrome is to fake it till you make it. Pretend like you believe you belong, and you're just as qualified as everyone

else, and eventually, you'll start to actually believe it. As we discussed in the previous chapter, your inner voice is very powerful, and if you tell yourself something enough times, you'll eventually believe it. If you're not comfortable with that, just give it time. Imposter syndrome generally fades as you gain more experience and self-confidence from seeing that you do actually have what it takes to get the job done and done well.

At an event in London during her book tour in 2018, Michelle Obama talked about how she got past imposter syndrome when she became First Lady and was dealing with very accomplished people:

I have been at probably every powerful table that you can think of, I have worked at nonprofits, I have been at foundations, I have worked in corporations, served on corporate boards, I have been at G-summits, I have sat in at the UN. Here's the secret: they're not that smart. There are a lot of things that folks are doing to keep their seats because they don't want to give up power. And what better way to do that than to make you feel you don't belong...you have to prepare yourself, because when you get those arrows thrown at you, all you can fall back on is your experience and your ability.

Lisa Marie Platske, a leadership coach and the President of Upside Thinking, a leadership consultancy in Alexandria, VA, told me that she really suffered from imposter syndrome when starting her business because her business was very different from her previous career in federal law enforcement, and she didn't think she had the right credentials to be credible. Without a business degree or even any business experience, she worried that she wouldn't make enough money to support herself:

Imposter syndrome was really strong. I constantly told myself, *You're not good enough, you're not smart enough, you'll never figure this out.* I felt like this because I didn't have the pedigree. I didn't have the connections.

When I put on my first event, I gave away so many tickets because I wanted to be generous. At the end of the event, I had a ten-thousand-dollar bill, and I had to take out a business loan. It

just didn't even dawn on me that there'd be the consequence at the end from wanting to be generous—because I didn't understand business from a tangible standpoint. Then I felt crappy about myself, thinking that if only people knew how little I knew about what I was doing.

For a good year and a half or longer, my conversations with my husband, Jim, at the dinner table were up and down. “This is the greatest thing. This is awful. I'm a failure. This is the greatest thing. I don't have any clue what I'm doing.”

One day, after a few years, he said, “I'm done. I'm tired of this conversation. You're either in or you're out. You're either doing the business or you're not doing the business, but I'm not having this conversation every time that you're not feeling it, telling you how great and capable and wonderful and able you are.”

The conversation with Jim was truly the “Come to Jesus” moment. I can't say it stopped then. What it did was it put me at the edge of the cliff—are you in or are you out? Are you really committed to doing this or are you really committed to your sad story? I decided that I can really make a difference. I can do this. There still were a lot of bumps and a lot of bruises and a lot of failures. But it was that moment in time where I decided I was in, and I can do it, and I stopped thinking of myself as an imposter.

Jenni Romanek, the Director of Analytics for Instagram, told me that she discovered early in her career that just about everybody has imposter syndrome. Which meant to her that if everybody feels like they're an imposter, that can't possibly be true because there's no chance that every single living human is an imposter. Before joining Instagram, she worked at Facebook and told me this story:

When I started at Facebook, one of the reasons I took the job is that I was really inspired by this woman named Cheryl, who was director of analytics for the Facebook ads team who had interviewed me. We really hit it off, and when I was deciding whether or not to make the move from Twitter, she did a phone call with me. It was on a Sunday afternoon, and I later learned that she had had a couple of glasses of wine sitting in her backyard.

And we had this really brutally honest conversation where she told me about the times when she had left meetings crying, how she had felt really alone because her peer set was, at the time, all men. And I was just totally enamored of her, and I was like, “Oh my gosh, this woman's badass. She's doing such a cool job, and she's being really open about the challenges but also telling me she really loves her job.” So she became a really good friend and mentor from that moment on. And I decided to roll. And I remember a couple months into working with her at some point over tea, she shared with me how much she felt like an imposter.

It shook me to my core because she was beloved. She had a team of three hundred people. I can't imagine a leader who people liked working with more. And I just felt like, “No, you're not an imposter. You're so real, and that's what people really like about you.” And it was just the light bulb of, *Wow, Cheryl feels this way.*

I also remember having that conversation with a male colleague who was a director of engineering who people were kind of scared of, who came off sounding very confident. He didn't speak up much in meetings, but if he spoke up, he had something really smart to share. As we got to be friends, at some point, he shared with me that he felt this immense sense of imposter syndrome. And it was shocking to me because it was so diametrically opposed to how everybody viewed him.

I also had this idea in my mind at the time that if you are a successful, wealthy, confident-sounding, straight, white male, then there's no way in hell that you had imposter syndrome. But it's so prevalent that we all share it but are too embarrassed to talk about it. That was just another light bulb moment of knowing that this is something everyone deals with, which means that we're actually all good enough. And we're all kind of getting in our own way. Figuring that out helped me get over it.

Jenni's point about discovering that almost everyone has imposter syndrome was interesting to me because, in my interviews for this book, I was shocked at how many of the women leaders I spoke to admitted that they had suffered from it during their careers. Probably the most surprising to me was when I spoke to Melanie Thomas Armstrong, who had been the youngest woman ever to make partner at Arthur Andersen in the practice I worked in. I had always seen

her as being supremely competent and confident, and to find out that she felt imposter syndrome was not something I was expecting when we talked. She told me:

When I made partner at Andersen in 2001, I had really wanted to make partner, and I made partner. But the whole time, I actually felt like I didn't deserve to have made partner. I had the feeling I wasn't good enough to make partner and somehow scammed my way into making partner. Then, of course, the firm went under with the Enron thing, and the practice was acquired by Unisys. And then, I went to PwC, and they offered me the position of a managing director (MD) [which is a lower level than a partner]. I was happy and took the job. I would never have pushed them to bring me on as a partner. I didn't feel like I should be. Then I decided that I wanted to be a partner again. And then when I made partner again, I went, *Oh my God, maybe I wasn't a fraud because I made partner twice*. Then I thought about it and realized I was just as accomplished as the other people who made partner.

When I made partner for the second time, I realized it wasn't a fluke. I went to PwC as an MD, and it took me three years to make partner there. Two men came in right after I did, also as MDs from other firms, and six months later, they were announced as new partners. They negotiated it as part of their employment agreement. Basically, if they didn't set the building on fire for six months, they were going to be named partners. That would never have occurred to me. And I think that was a big shock for me. I would never negotiate myself into a partnership. Because then I would have felt more like an imposter. I had to earn it and know that I had earned it. I couldn't feel good about it if I hadn't done that.

Recently, researchers have started to push back on the concept of imposter syndrome as a problematic notion, some saying that it's actually a good thing and others saying it's an invented concept created to make women feel less confident about themselves.

In his book *Think Again*, Wharton professor Adam Grant states that having imposter syndrome can be beneficial, especially for people early in their careers, because it causes them to be more careful and thorough in their work. He cites a study showing that medical residents with imposter syndrome make fewer mistakes and have a better bedside manner with patients than residents who are more confident in their abilities.

In 2021, the *Harvard Business Review* published an article called “Stop Telling Women They Have Imposter Syndrome” by Ruchika Tulshyan and Jodi-Ann Bury. The article states that imposter syndrome is a problematic concept that excludes the effects of systemic misogyny, racism, and other biases in the workplace. They state that

*“imposter syndrome puts the blame on individuals, without accounting for the historical and cultural contexts that are foundational to how it manifests in both women of color and white women...imposter syndrome took a fairly universal feeling of discomfort, second-guessing, and mild anxiety in the workplace and pathologized it, especially for women.”<sup>8</sup>*

When I posted a link to the article in my Facebook group, Thresette Briggs, CEO of Performance 3 LLC and a certified John C. Maxwell Coach, stated,

*“Excellent article. I totally agree with the sections on the systems that perpetuate the problem, and instead of attempting to fix the systems and understand and leverage the strengths and diverse cultures of women, especially women of color, there's a tendency to try to fix them, which only makes it worse.”*

Kristina Bouweiri, CEO of Reston Limousine and Founder of Sterling Women, Sterling, VA, told me that

I had imposter syndrome for years. When I started running the company that my husband founded, I had no relevant experience, and I didn't believe I was qualified; I felt like an imposter. I didn't know how to run a business; everything I knew was what my husband had taught me. But I didn't want to run the company the same way my husband had because I didn't like how he ran it and how he treated people, so I really lacked confidence that I was doing it right.

The thing that made me get over it was at a Vistage event. I was the only woman in my group, and the speaker had everyone write anonymous notes to everyone else saying how they felt about them, and one note I got said that I was the smartest person in the room. That completely changed my mindset. Then when I started Sterling Women, it was a huge success right away. It

grew so quickly without me even really doing anything. That gave me the confidence to divorce my husband and buy him out of the business, and I never felt like an imposter again.

I think many leaders do have occasional imposter syndrome. Sometimes our confidence takes a hit. And sometimes, we feel unworthy or feel like a fraud. We exude confidence publicly yet question ourselves privately. That's normal. For many leaders, getting past imposter syndrome happens when they look back and see what they achieved and realized that they were truly capable after all. For others, relief comes from realizing that they are just as qualified, as smart, and as good as the other people in the room, or from realizing that the other people in the room aren't smarter or more qualified than you as you originally believed.

## Chapter Takeaways

- Imposter syndrome is extremely common; up to 70 percent of all adults (not just women) have had it at one time or another. Even extremely successful people get imposter syndrome. Don't let imposter syndrome stop you from pursuing your goals.
- People with imposter syndrome often do a better job because they are more careful and conscientious than overconfident peers.
- To get over imposter syndrome, identify and evaluate what is causing it. Do you feel like you lack the experience you need to be qualified? Some kind of educational qualification? That you're just not as smart as people think you are? Identify the specific way you think you're less qualified, and work on that. You can take a class, do extra research, or volunteer to serve in a capacity that will give you that extra experience.
- Compare your qualifications and achievements to your peers, and you'll find that you're not as lacking as you fear. Ask your peers for feedback on how they see you; it will probably be more positive than you expect.