

COULD YOU HAVE IMPOSTER *Syndrome?*



PSST! FOR ALL YOUR ACHIEVEMENTS, DO YOU SECRETLY FEEL LIKE A FRAUD? IT'S A COMMON FEAR AND CAN KEEP YOU FROM RELISHING YOUR SUCCESSES AND REACHING FOR YOUR GOALS

BY GLYNIS HORNING

YOU'VE WORKED

for success, so why do you struggle to enjoy it, and suspect you don't deserve it? Chances are you have what some psychologists call imposter syndrome.

Although not a formally recognised mental health disorder, it's been the subject of a rash of research articles and books since a study by US psychologists Dr Pauline Clance and Dr Suzanne Imes 40 years ago, who coined the term. They examined a group of high-achieving women who had high levels of self-doubt and struggled to internalise success, dismissing it as the result of good timing, chance, or somehow deceiving others into thinking them smarter than they really were.

According to a review article in the *International Journal of Behavioural Science*, imposter syndrome may affect up to 70% of us at some stage in our lives. It affects students to CEOs, actors to accountants, men as well as women, says Durban based psychologist and coach Claire Newton. But in a recent South African study, the women in the sample were more prone to experience the syndrome, says psychologist Dr Caren Scheepers, senior lecturer

at the University of Pretoria's Gordon Institute of Business Science.

Spot the signs

Do you secretly worry that others will find out you're not as smart and capable as they seem to think you are? Do you dismiss your achievements as a lucky fluke or no big deal? Do you find yourself shying away from challenges because of self-doubt?

Are you crushed by even constructive criticism, seeing it as evidence of your incompetence? Is your definition of competence perfection - all the time? Does the thought of not knowing 100% of something you consider important strike fear in you?

If so, join the club! It's a big club, but not a happy one: When you have imposter syndrome, your confidence is low, your self-image poor, and it can hold you back in your personal life and career. It can prevent you asking questions as a student, or contributing at work and in social situations, because you're afraid of being shown up as less worthy or intelligent than you think people believe you to be.

Because you dread evaluation, failure and exposure, you tend to play it safe, which can stop you applying for new projects, promotions or raises, and prevent you reaching your potential, says Dr Scheepers.

Even if you are able to steel yourself and push ahead, with imposter syndrome, the greater your success, the greater your stress may be, because the higher the expectations the more you fear that you may not be able to meet them.

Believing that every decision must be perfect, because there is so much to lose, you can become paralysed - prone to withdrawal or angry outbursts that can affect your relationships and your physical and mental health, leaving you at risk for depression and burnout. Interestingly, Dr Scheepers reports that most real imposters don't suffer from any such feelings!

UNDERSTAND THE ORIGINS

Imposter syndrome has no clear cause. It's been linked to personality traits such

as anxiety, to family or behavioural causes, and to environmental factors. Some psychologists trace it to growing up in the shadow of a gifted sibling. Others to being constantly told in childhood how bright and special you are - then as you grow up, and inevitably encounter challenges you can't easily cope with, you find you might not be exceptional after all. 'You can struggle under the pressure of real and perceived expectations and not want to let people down,' Scheepers says.

Parents should rather praise children's efforts than their traits, says Scheepers and Newton: 'You worked so hard at that!' rather than 'You're so clever!'

Not conforming to stereotypical expectations around gender and ethnicity can be a factor in imposter syndrome too - as when you are the first in your family to go to university or have a career, especially when you find yourself in a position of authority.

Rapid promotion, particularly if you are part of a previously disadvantaged group, can add to the problem, creating a gap between how others see you and how you see yourself, say Dr Joan Harvey and Cynthia Katz, authors of the classic *If I'm So Successful Why Do I Feel Like a Fake?* 'The issue is that if you are from a minority group, you don't fit the prototype leadership because of societal norms,' Scheepers says.

Find a solution

FIRST IDENTIFY THE FEELING OF BEING AN IMPOSTER and realise that you are not alone. It can help to share what you're feeling with a trusted friend, life coach, or better yet, in a group therapy session or support group, says Claire.

TAKE A REALITY CHECK

Separate your feelings and beliefs from facts. Everyone has moments when they feel inadequate or stupid, but that doesn't make you pea-brained.

DELIBERATELY LET GO OF YOUR PERFECTIONISM.

Yes, it can indicate a healthy drive to excel, but it's important not to obsess over everything being just

so, and to forgive yourself when you make a mistake. Remind yourself that mistakes are how we learn, grow and progress. Make a mantra of what industrialist Henry Ford said: 'Failure is only the opportunity to begin again more intelligently'.

ASK FOR HELP. Remind yourself that you've as much right as anyone to be wrong sometimes, have a bad day and need assistance. 'By being more open about self-doubt, you will get more support and encouragement,' says Scheepers.

WORK AT CHANGING YOUR AUTOMATIC THOUGHTS

When you begin a new job, instead of worrying that people will find out you don't know what you're doing, remind yourself that everyone starting out feels anxious and makes mistakes, but you're bright enough to get on track. 'You may need a professional to help you do this, for example, a psychologist who works with cognitive behavioural therapy,' says Claire.

CONSIDER OFFERING TO TEACH OR MENTOR OTHERS.

Contrasting yourself with those who are starting out can give you perspective on your own success. If you are still struggling with imposter syndrome, and it's starting to affect your personal or work life, then it's best to get professional help, says Claire: 'Not only so you don't regret not living life to your fullest, but because you don't want the associated risk of depression, anxiety and low self-esteem'. **EL**