



**Professionals
Australia**
Gender and Diversity

OVERCOMING IMPOSTER SYNDROME

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The term imposter syndrome was first coined by researchers Pauline Rose Clance and Suzanne Imes in 1978¹. It is defined as individuals feeling like they are a fraud or a phoney and likely to be exposed as achieving their success for reasons other than the fact that they are competent and skilled in spite of being highly successful by external standards.

Clance and Imes found that women consistently had lower expectancies than men of their ability to perform successfully on a wide variety of tasks. Women, they say, “attribute their successes to temporary causes, such as luck or effort, in contrast to men who are much more likely to attribute their successes to the internal, stable factor of ability. Conversely, women tend to explain failure with lack of ability, whereas men more often attribute failure to luck or task difficulty.” So those who experience imposter syndrome may attribute their success to it being a fluke, luck or the result of an opportunity that others haven’t had. In spite of strong academic and professional accomplishments and high levels of professional recognition, they do not feel their success is authentic or a result of their abilities.

They are very often concerned that success cannot be repeated and believe either that they are not intelligent or that their talents have been overestimated.

The test group in the initial research was high-achieving women but research estimates suggest that up to 70 per cent of males and females will experience feelings of imposter syndrome at some stage in their professional lives.

How does the imposter syndrome impact women’s career advancement in STEM?

In career terms, the issue for female professionals in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) is that the self-doubt and lack of confidence in personal competence and ability attached to imposter syndrome may impede career progression. It can do this by preventing women applying for roles they see as beyond them or potentially involving a level of failure. It is an obstacle to women achieving their potential and fully contributing in a valuable and meaningful way.

1. Clance, Pauline and Imes, Suzanne (1978). The Imposter Phenomenon in High Achieving Women: Dynamics and Therapeutic Intervention. Available at http://www.paulineroseclance.com/pdf/ip_high_achieving_women.pdf







What are the links between imposter syndrome, family dynamics, perfectionism and gender stereotypes?

Clance and Imes found strong links between imposter syndrome, family dynamics, perfectionism and sex role stereotyping.

Business coach Suzanne Mercier, CEO of Imposterhood and Purpose to profit, says perfectionism and family dynamics play a significant role in imposter syndrome. "If we've been raised by people who are perfectionists, instead of looking at what we've achieved, we look at how far we've got to go until we're perfect rather than the achievements, which reinforces that feeling of not being good enough."

Imposter syndrome can be a factor in constraining career advancement for women in STEM where gender stereotyping of professions and technical roles is widespread.

The 2018 Professionals Australia Women in STEM Survey provided confirmation that second guessing and questioning of women's technical abilities are very often part of working in non-traditional occupations:

- I believe I have proved myself in meeting requirements, budget limits and specifications whilst being under resourced and under staffed, yet struggle for respect and remuneration.
- It's tiring always having to prove yourself compared to males.
- Being a female engineer there are certain expectations that I have to prove my worth which my male colleagues do not due to their gender.
- There is also more of the feeling that as a woman you are required to "prove" that you are competent in your role, whereas for male counterparts their competence is taken at face value.

Gender stereotypes in STEM are founded in stereotypes about smart women more generally - women may have concerns and real experiences that suggest that being smart and successful means she is considered exhibitionistic, big-headed, snobby or unfeminine by others. In male-dominated professions and technical roles, women may also be subject to gender stereotypes from managers and others that suggest they are not suitable for promotion into more senior technical and leadership roles. So a perfect storm of lack of self-belief and holding back combined with deeply-entrenched stereotypes about smart women and a lack of career support and recognition of competence from others that leaves women with imposter syndrome in STEM at a severe career disadvantage.

In what circumstances is it most likely to occur?

Mercier suggests that imposter syndrome can be triggered by a critical boss, judgemental friend or big life change. Ashley Stahl suggests it is likely to emerge if you're considering starting a new endeavour or stepping out of your comfort zone. Hugh Kearns, a lecturer and researcher at Flinders University suggests it is more likely to occur in situations where there is evaluation or assessment such as education, sports settings, among creative professionals or when we're required to speak in public.



SO, WHAT TO DO ABOUT IT?

Call it out and reframe the conversation in your head

Experts suggest acknowledging the imposter “voice” and learning to recognise that voice when it comes up is critical to beginning to deal with imposter syndrome. Valerie Young talks about developing a new response to failure and mistake-making and “getting those with imposter feelings to become consciously aware of the conversation going on in their head so they can then reframe it the way a non-imposter would”. She advocates for developing a new script, for example, when starting a new job or project instead of thinking “Wait until they find out I have no idea what I’m doing” to “Everyone who starts something new feels off-base in the beginning. I may not know all the answers but I’m smart enough to find them out.”

Break the nexus between humility or losing with being a fake

Commentators including Kyle Eschenroeder make the point that there is a significant difference between humility and believing you’re not good enough, quoting C.S. Lewis who says “humility is not thinking less of yourself but thinking of yourself less”. He also suggests that in dealing with imposter syndrome, it’s important to break the nexus between being wrong or losing with failure on a larger scale - “Losing,” he says “is just part of the game .. don’t let it make you feel like you’re not a real contender.”

Accept that everyone says stupid things and makes mistakes

Everyone’s dropped a clanger in front of their peers that they regret - it could be anything - the possibilities are endless! Don’t relive it, beat yourself up for the next five years, stop putting yourself out there or take yourself off the grid because of it - chances are everyone else has forgotten about it while you’re still at the “mortified” stage. As Babe Ruth said “Don’t let the fear of striking out keep you from playing the game”. It is OK if you don’t always know the answer, to ask for help, to stuff up or have an off day. As Valerie Young says: “just because you may feel stupid doesn’t mean you are.”

See yourself as part of a diverse, talented and brainy STEM community

There is no doubt that working in STEM means you can meet a lot of very, very talented, smart people and this can be at times overwhelming. You can come across subject matter experts, highly-educated and prolifically-published researchers, highly-respected CEOs and Directors, Oxford scholars, well-recognised leaders and some really amazing people who are so impressive they can knock your socks off. They can leave you thinking I don’t know as much as them and I’m not sure I have a right to say anything on that topic. Get over it - make sure you know your stuff, qualify your contribution with parameters around it if needed, acknowledge that you don’t know everything in your field but value what you do and respect your own experience. As Eschenroeder says, “You’re not a fraud - you’re just you.”

Step back from the pressure of being an expert

In technical and professional roles, there can be an expectation that you’re an expert about a particular topic. Remember that this does not mean that you know everything about it - accept that no-one knows everything about anything - there are specialisations and fields of expertise within every field of knowledge and diversity of views and approaches is a good thing. Frame your contribution as being about bringing something to the table, not nailing the whole field - if necessary, point out the complexities, nuances and fields within fields and accept that your knowledge is always part of a larger picture.

Look at the bigger picture

In looking at imposter syndrome in the context of STEM, it is worth noting that while personal confidence and psychological profile are factors in women's career advancement, gendered systemic practices and serious gender biases play a major role as obstacles in equal opportunity for advancement for women in the workplace. Issues around gender equity in STEM need to be looked at beyond the level of the individual to dealing with the broader constraints and obstacles faced - gender inequity in STEM can't be fixed simply by curing the imposter syndrome experienced by women.

The 2018 Professionals Australia Women in STEM Survey painted a complex picture of the workplace impediments and personal and professional tradeoffs facing women STEM professionals.

Respondents confirmed, among other things, that:

- women were more likely to be promoted on proven ability while men were promoted on their potential;
- in their workplace, women's ambition and potential often remained unrecognised and untapped;
- women in STEM often traded off working to their full potential for part-time work and flexible work arrangements;
- organisational recognition and reward strategies can penalise those working part-time;
- that a career break to raise a family can be an obstacle to promotion;
- there is often bias in access to career-building activities including access to professional development, mentoring, role models and networking opportunities;
- young women are less likely to be provided with career support because it is assumed they will be taking time out to have a family; and
- unconscious bias in decision-making and recruitment is widespread;
- there is a high incidence of sexual harassment on the job in STEM workplaces; and
- gender stereotypes that suggest women in general and women with caregiver responsibilities are less serious and committed to their careers and less interested in promotion or advancement persist.

These comments from the survey show how blunt and pervasive some of these views and practices can be:

- In my workplace, men are promoted for potential, women are promoted for performance.
- I am not challenging myself or working to my full potential - the trade-off is flexible working arrangements.
- I have been informed on several occasions that my annual performance review result was downgraded from the highest level to a lower level as it is policy that no one in a part time role is to receive above a "meets expectations" result.
- I have observed that younger employees are selected for 'fast-tracking'. It took some time for managers/supervisors to tap my potential and recognise that I too have ambition.
- I feel that the potential of young women is not fostered as much as young men on site partly because there is an assumption that the woman will in the next few years leave to go on maternity leave at least once and is likely to come back to a non-technical or non-site based role after that.
- I was literally told I was not allowed to attend a weekly networking lunch because I was female and [there were] "no girls allowed".
- Being a mother does not mean I am any less competent at my role than the fathers in the workplace. But I seem to be not given a go at learning new skills and offered opportunities less skilled and qualified male colleagues take on. I feel my contribution to the workplace is not valued and is seen as less important than my male counterparts.
- I never get given any interesting work or any challenging tasks that will help me to progress. I have been prevented from attending training, even when it falls on my working days, on the basis that other people will have more opportunity to use the outcomes of the training as they work more hours.
- I will be skipped over for training or simply not told if I don't happen to be at work that day.
- I've been allocated menial work/leftover work because I am part-time. This means I miss out on important projects which affects my resume, and I then miss out on further opportunities.
- I have ended up doing a variety of small jobs to fit around family responsibilities and thus I now have no depth on any one field - that is what they promote on. The organisation does tend to groom people for promotion but I am not on the list.
- I recently realised that because I have lacked female role models in management positions I sub-consciously believed that I couldn't have those management roles. If I was in a bigger centre or a non-STEM field maybe I would have had a different experience and therefore felt differently.
- Since coming back to work after mat leave (going from full-time to part-time) there has been a big shift in the type of work I am given. Previously I used to run substantial, complex projects and now I'm given small tasks.
- Women leaving work to deal with children issues is stigmatised but men seem to be able to come and go with impunity.

projects, less fieldwork, lengthier explanations - all of which has eroded my confidence.

- There are still men out there who think that we don't know what we are doing or are less qualified to make technical decisions because we are female.
- As a young female it is always expected that I will take minutes in meetings even when a male with equivalent (or less) experience than me is also in the meeting. I also get asked to do the admin tasks that no other engineer in my team (all others are male) would ever be asked to do.
- There have been many instances of staff members asking opinions of others before undertaking direction from me and people not taking advice unless confirmed by other male team members.
- I'm often treated differently to my male colleague - simpler projects, less fieldwork and lengthier explanations.

These comments show that in the context of the STEM professions, you need to, as Valerie Young suggests, instead of feeling self-doubt and feeling inept, "recognise that (your feelings) might be a normal response to being an outsider".

To recap:

- Call out the imposter voice in your head and reframe the conversation;
- Break the nexus between humility or losing with being a fake;
- Accept that everyone says stupid things and makes mistakes;
- See yourself as part of a diverse, talented and brainy STEM community;
- Step back from the pressure of being an expert; and
- Look at the bigger picture.

And what do we come away with?

There is of course no instant fix to imposter syndrome - women need to accept their inherent abilities and take credit for their accomplishments rather than attributing the reason for success to luck or some other external cause. Their abilities need to be recognised and supported by others. We need to ensure we don't subscribe to a definition of success and being clever as, as Clance and Imes put it, "perfection with ease". No-one can live up to that. And of course remember that imposter syndrome is always correlated with success - you just have to believe your successes arise out of your unique abilities and the work you've put in.





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