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Imposter Phenomenon

When Even The Most Successful People Have a Gnawing Feeling They're Fakes

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By Carol Stocker, Globe Staff:

A certified public accountant who receives the highest test score in the CPA Boards in the state of Massachusetts attributes her success to the fact that "it's a small state."

After applying for a job in Boston, a woman is told she is the best candidate the search committee has seen. She attributes the good impression to the fact that the interview was held on July 5 and the panel "is probably hung over from July 4 parties."

A conference participant at Simmons College says she feels that the standards for her doctorate were too low. "I figure if I can get a PhD from Harvard, anybody can."

All these women suffer from a very common syndrome that's been dubbed the "Imposter Phenomenon" -- the secret and subjective experience of feeling like a phony, despite a documented record of achievement, and the accompanying fear of being unmasked.

Ironically, these "imposters" are usually very competent. And the phenomenon especially strikes those who have received public recognition for success.

Victims of the Imposter Phenomenon measure accomplishments on a trick scale, "where only the negative evidence counts," said Valerie Young, an associate at New Perspectives, Inc., an Amherst-based training program and consulting organization.

"And they have very long memories for failures . . . As I got closer to getting my doctorate," Young recalled, "I started having a recurring dream where someone would go back in my records and find I had failed to complete some requirement in the first grade."

Philadelphia clinical psychologist Joan Harvey, who has studied the syndrome, said, "Lawyers have it a lot because they're on display all the time. I got a letter from a lawyer who got a perfect score in the law school admissions test and did well in school, yet he had never tried a case in a courtroom because he was afraid. He wrote me, 'I would be exposed by a merciless judge as the fraud I know myself to be.' So instead he went into corporate law -- and was the first among the graduates of his college to be promoted to a partner."

Although it is not a new problem, the Imposter Phenomenon didn't have a name until 1978, when the term was invented by Pauline Clance and Suzanne Imes, two psychologists at Georgia State University.

Since then, interest has snowballed. At least two popular books have been published on the subject in the last year: Harvey's "If I'm So Successful, Why Do I Feel Like a Fake," which just went into paperback, and "The Imposter Phenomenon" by Pauline Clance. And Peggy McIntosh, a program director at the Wellesley College Center for Research on Women, has written "Feeling Like a Fraud," which is available from The Stone Center at Wellesley College for \$4.

Originally diagnosed as a problem unique to women, it is now being debated whether the imposter phenomenon is just as common -- though less often admitted -- among men.

Harvey found the same rate for both men and women, blacks and whites in research she conducted in affiliation with Temple University.

"One thing that did make a difference was whether they were the first generation of their families in a profession, the first generation to go to college," Harvey said. "Also, women in traditionally masculine careers were more apt to feel like imposters. And so did men in traditionally feminine careers."

McIntosh feels that the syndrome has class, race and gender components. "The larger culture has taught women and lower caste men that they do not belong in positions of power, creating policy and opinion."

Apparently all of the research and most of the workshops surrounding the issue have been conducted by women, who often see it as a feminist issue.

Harvey's explanation is that "men take it for granted and just live it, while women want to do something about it."

While men typically try to hide their insecurities, "Women turn themselves in," Young asserted. "They say -- 'You liked that report? I lost my train of thought in the middle.' They say 'You like this dress? I got it at a tag sale.' Men understand better that a mistake doesn't count unless it's found out."

Young has been offering workshops on the Imposter Phenomenon for women for four years. One reason why, Young said, is that few men would attend such a seminar to discuss their insecurities. "Men are more comfortable bluffing their way through difficulties, while women are much more comfortable discussing their problems."

But Young also agrees with McIntosh that society does more to encourage these feelings of inadequacy in women than in men. "What's seen as talent for a man is often viewed as luck for a woman. When Juanita Kreps was Secretary of Commerce in the Carter cabinet, a reporter asked how she explained the incredible luck in her career. 'Luck had nothing to do with it,' Kreps answered. But many women feel that they got into graduate school because Venus intersected with Saturn the day their applications were evaluated."

Karen Brown, a 24-year-old graduate student, admitted she had believed that her acceptance to Princeton as an undergraduate was because of a mix-up. “I spent most of four years thinking they confused me with another applicant because I have a common name.”

She was one of two dozen young women who told of such anxieties, often accompanied by the laughter of shared recognition, at a recent morning seminar Young held at the Boston University Medical Center. Most of the women were doctoral candidates in biochemistry, a predominantly male field.

The problem isn't confined to students. Women in television production, real estate, human services, muscular therapy, job counseling, law and computers attended another seminar Young conducted at Radcliffe Career Services, a Radcliffe office that helps alumnae and the general population with career issues.

The feeling of “faking it” is most common among first year college or graduate students or among people starting a new job, and it tends to vanish or recede as people learn the ropes. It is also commonly associated with writing and with public speaking -- which Young calls “the No. 1 fear in America. Dying is No. 2.”

But for a few, the Imposter Phenomenon is chronic and debilitating.

“In therapy, I'm seeing people who were successful but dropped out because they couldn't stand the anxiety. One of my patients was a gifted child and got a full scholarship to college,” said Harvey. “But he started drinking and never finished. And he's drifted from one thing to another. When he ran track in high school, he said, ‘I would find myself out in front and drop back to the rest of the pack.’”

Harvey thinks the phenomenon combines both a fear of failure and a fear of success. “I have a patient right now applying for a job who has to write an essay and is totally paralyzed. Consciously she's afraid she can't get a job. Unconsciously, she's afraid she will.”

Perhaps the most important function Young's workshops serve is to allow people to share their secret and learn that others have the same feelings.

Young, who describes herself as a “recovering imposter,” was working on her doctorate in education at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst when she first heard about the syndrome at a school seminar. “I felt unmasked. Then I saw that others I knew to be competent were nodding their heads, too.”

She and her classmates formed a six-week “imposter support group.” Whenever possible Young urges those who attend her seminars to start similar groups.

There are also techniques which Harvey and Young suggest reduce or help eliminate the syndrome:

- Make a list of the situations in which “imposter” feelings are likely to strike. When you can warn yourself to expect these feelings, they're easier to recognize and deal with.
- Separate feelings from reality. Remind yourself that feeling like an imposter is different from being an imposter.

- “Imposters” often have conflicting images of themselves as either geniuses or total idiots. Give yourself permission to be somewhere more in the middle, where most of us are most of the time.
- Be selective about what you go “all out” for and give yourself permission to have occasional “off” days.
- Set a modest goal for confronting this fear and think up a couple of steps you can take in the next month toward reaching it. For instance, if criticism triggers these feelings, ask a friend to gently critique some of your work on a regular basis. If you fear speaking in public, make it a habit to raise your hand once in every meeting.
- Try to break frightening tasks into several parts. If possible, start with the easiest part.
- Keep a written record of your accomplishments. Feel a sense of ownership for them.
- Talk about your secret fraudulent feelings with trusted friends. Find and give support.
- Don’t turn yourself in. “Fake it till you make it.”

To McIntosh, the phenomenon has further dimensions that are not addressed by confidence raising.

In fact, she sees a lot of authenticity in feelings of fraudulence. “When women apologize or falter in public, or refuse to take individual credit for what they’ve done, I think we should listen twice.

“Those who really think they are the best and the brightest are the real frauds,” McIntosh contends. “I think our feelings of fraudulence are very promising. They may, if we trust them, help us to alter the arrogant behaviors of power holders and question the myth that those who have power individually deserve it. We need new ways of using power to share power, of using privilege to share privilege. When women feel fraudulent, often they are trying to share power, privilege and credit in ways that have not yet been recognized.”

There are others who have good things to say about feeling like a fake.

Such as the male corporate executive who told Harvey he credited it with spurring him to work harder for success. “It’s a fear I can deal with. It’s very positive and I don’t want it to stop,” he told Harvey.

He admitted that the constant anxiety took a toll on his health, but he had his own solution: “I work out as much as I can.