

5 Types of Imposter Syndrome and How to Stop Them

Many high achievers share a dirty little secret: Deep down they feel like complete frauds—their accomplishments the result of serendipitous luck.

This psychological phenomenon, known as imposter syndrome, reflects a belief that you're an inadequate and incompetent failure despite evidence that indicates you're skilled and quite successful.

In short, it's a hot mess of harmfulness. It can also take various forms, depending on a person's background, personality, and circumstances. If you're familiar with the feeling of waiting for those around you to "find you out," it might be helpful to consider what type of imposter you are so you can problem-solve accordingly.

Expert on the subject, Dr. Valerie Young, has categorized it into subgroups: the Perfectionist, the Superwoman/man, the Natural Genius, the Soloist, and the Expert. In her book, *The Secret Thoughts of Successful Women: Why Capable People Suffer From the Imposter Syndrome and How to Thrive in Spite of It*, Dr. Young builds on decades of research studying fraudulent feelings among high achievers.

Through her personal research, Young uncovered several "competence types"—or internal rules that people who struggle with confidence attempt to follow. This categorization's often overlooked in the conversation, but her reading of it can be really helpful in identifying bad habits or patterns that may be holding you back from your full potential.

Below is a summary of the competence types Young identifies so you can see if you recognize yourself. I also provide some examples you might relate to in your day-to-day life, as well as questions you can ask yourself.

1. The Perfectionist

Perfectionism and imposter syndrome often go hand-in-hand. Think about it: Perfectionists set excessively high goals for themselves, and when they fail to reach a goal, they experience major self-doubt and worry about measuring up. Whether they realize it or not, this group can also be control freaks, feeling like if they want something done right, they have to do it themselves.

Not sure if this applies to you? Ask yourself these questions:

- Have you ever been accused of being a micromanager?
- Do you have great difficulty delegating? Even when you're able to do so, do you feel frustrated and disappointed in the results?

- When you miss the (insanely high) mark on something, do you accuse yourself of “not being cut out” for your job and ruminate on it for days?
- Do you feel like your work must be 100% perfect, 100% of the time?

For this type, success is rarely satisfying because they believe they could've done even better. But that's neither productive nor healthy. Owning and celebrating achievements is essential if you want to avoid burnout, find contentment, and cultivate self-confidence.

Learn to take your mistakes in stride, viewing them as a natural part of the process. In addition, push yourself to act before you're ready. Force yourself to start the project you've been planning for months. Truth is, there will never be the “perfect time” and your work will never be 100% flawless. The sooner you're able to accept that, the better off you'll be.

2. The Superwoman/man

Since people who experience this phenomenon are convinced they're phonies amongst real-deal colleagues, they often push themselves to work harder and harder to measure up. But this is just a false cover-up for their insecurities, and the work overload may harm not only their own mental health, but also their relationships with others.

Not sure if this applies to you?

- Do you stay later at the office than the rest of your team, even past the point that you've completed that day's necessary work?
- Do you get stressed when you're not working and find downtime completely wasteful?
- Have you left your hobbies and passions fall by the wayside, sacrificed to work?
- Do you feel like you haven't truly earned your title (despite numerous degrees and achievements), so you feel pressed to work harder and longer than those around you to prove your worth?

Imposter workaholics are actually addicted to the validation that comes from working, not to the work itself. Start training yourself to veer away from external validation. No one should have more power to make you feel good about yourself than you—even your boss when they give your project the stamp of approval. On the flip side, learn to take constructive criticism seriously, not personally.

As you become more attuned to internal validation and able to nurture your inner confidence that states you're competent and skilled, you'll be able to ease off the gas as you gauge how much work is reasonable.

3. The Natural Genius

Young says people with this competence type believe they need to be a natural “genius.” As such, they judge their competence based ease and speed as opposed to their efforts. In other words, if they take a long time to master something, they feel shame.

These types of imposters set their internal bar impossibly high, just like perfectionists. But natural genius types don’t just judge themselves based on ridiculous expectations, they also judge themselves based on getting things right on the first try. When they’re not able to do something quickly or fluently, their alarm sounds.

Not sure if this applies to you?

- Are you used to excelling without much effort?
- Do you have a track record of getting “straight A’s” or “gold stars” in everything you do?
- Were you told frequently as a child that you were the “smart one” in your family or peer group?
- Do you dislike the idea of having a mentor, because you can handle things on your own?
- When you’re faced with a setback, does your confidence tumble because not performing well provokes a feeling of shame?
- Do you often avoid challenges because it’s so uncomfortable to try something you’re not great at?

To move past this, try seeing yourself as a work in progress. Accomplishing great things involves lifelong learning and skill-building—for everyone, even the most confident people. Rather than beating yourself up when you don’t reach your impossibly high standards, identify specific, changeable behaviors that you can improve over time.

For example, if you want to have more impact at the office, it’s much more productive to focus on honing your presentation skills than swearing off speaking up in meetings as something you’re “just not good at.”

4. The Soloist

Sufferers who feel as though asking for help reveals their phoniness are what Young calls Soloists. It’s OK to be independent, but not to the extent that you refuse assistance so that you can prove your worth.

Not sure if this applies to you? Ask yourself these questions:

- Do you firmly feel that you need to accomplish things on your own?
- “I don’t need anyone’s help.” Does that sound like you?

- Do you frame requests in terms of the requirements of the project, rather than your needs as a person?

5. The Expert

Experts measure their competence based on “what” and “how much” they know or can do. Believing they will never know *enough*, they fear being exposed as inexperienced or unknowledgeable.

- Do you shy away from applying to job postings unless you meet every single educational requirement?
- Are you constantly seeking out trainings or certifications because you think you need to improve your skills in order to succeed?
- Even if you’ve been in your role for some time, can you relate to feeling like you still don’t know “enough?”
- Do you shudder when someone says you’re an expert?

It’s true that there’s always more to learn. Striving to bulk up your skill set can certainly help you make strides professionally and keep you competitive in the job market. But taken too far, the tendency to endlessly seek out more information can actually be a form of procrastination.

Start practicing just-in-time learning. This means acquiring a skill when you need it—for example, if your responsibilities change—rather than hoarding knowledge for (false) comfort.

Realize there’s no shame in asking for help when you need it. If you don’t know how to do something, ask a co-worker. If you can’t figure out how to solve a problem, seek advice from a supportive supervisor, or even a [career coach](#). Mentoring junior colleagues or volunteering can be a great way to discover your inner expert. When you share what you know it not only benefits others, but also helps you heal your fraudulent feelings.

No matter the specific profile, if you struggle with confidence, you’re far from alone. To take one example, [studies suggest 70% of people](#) experience imposter syndrome at some point in their career.

If you’ve experienced it at any point in your career, you’ve at one point or another chalked up your accomplishments to chance, charm, connections, or another external factor. How unfair and unkind is that? Take today as your opportunity to start accepting and embracing your capabilities.

This article has been updated to reflect the name change of one of Dr. Young’s competence types, and to explain her findings in more detail.