

# Is This Woman an Impostor? Are You?

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“I’m Valerie Young, and I’m a recovering impostor.”

So speaks the serene, secure and very-much-in-control-of-the-situation woman at the front of the room. It’s 9 o’clock on a Saturday morning, and those of us seated in this back room at the First Congregational Church in Northampton steal suspicious glances at each other. From brief introductions, we know that our group includes an Ada Comstock Scholar convinced that her scholarship was given to her by mistake, two graduate students already sure that their upcoming foray into the job market will be a disaster, a college student who feels that, in her case, the University of Massachusetts’ admissions department made a big error, and a striking, vibrant woman who - amazingly - seems to take no pride whatsoever in the fact that she once swam the English Channel. And me, of course. The one who’s here to write about it all.

As they look at me, and as I look at them, I’m reminded of something Valerie Young warned me of over the phone last week: “Women always look at each other and think, ‘Gee, how could she suffer from self-doubt? She looks so competent to me!’” And indeed they do. Only, here and there around the room, does the odd tapping foot or hair-twisting finger display unease. That and the fact that the owner of that foot or finger is here to begin with.

“Here” is, technically, an all-day career-related workshop for women, focusing on the “Impostor Syndrome.” According to the workshop literature, this refers to “the surprisingly vast number of bright and capable women who, despite external evidence to the contrary, continue to doubt their competence. By downplaying or dismissing their abilities and accomplishments such women are stymied in their careers and operate by the disabling belief that they are, in effect, ‘impostors,’ or ‘fakes,’ or ‘frauds.’ Moreover, this debilitating fear of being ‘unmasked’ can and does interfere with the productivity, effectiveness and advancement potential of its adherents.”

Women who suffer from the impostor syndrome, Young explains, employ an elaborate array of rationalizations to justify their seeming successes, including sheer luck, timing, the ease of a task and the suspicion that they have “charmed” people into believing they are competent. The stories Young tells would be funny if they weren’t so sad: a woman who received the highest score on a C.P.A. exam in the entire state of Massachusetts justified it by reminding herself that Massachusetts is a small state; a woman receiving her doctoral degree was convinced that her examiners merely weighed her hefty thesis but never actually read it; a woman enthusiastically offered a teaching job at M.I.T. rationalized that, since it was the day after July 4, her interviewer had probably been suffering from a hangover. “We must,” Young says dryly, “at least give ourselves credit for immense creativity.”

Young first became interested in the Impostor Syndrome as a graduate student at the University of Massachusetts, and wrote a doctoral thesis entitled “A Model of Internal Barriers to Women’s Occupational Achievement.”

At that time, the phenomenon of self-sabotage among professional women was just coming to light. Three years earlier, the journalist Betty Rollins had published a “Hers” column in the New York Times entitled “Chronic Self-Doubt: Why Does It Afflict so Many Women?” In it, Rollins recounts the sheer terror that accompanies each and every journalistic assignment she receives, and the attendant conviction that this time she will be found out for what she is: an incompetent. At one point, she talks to a male colleague about these fears. Does he ever worry that a story won’t work out? Nah, he answers. What if he makes a mistake? Aren’t I entitled to make a mistake once in a while?

To Rollins, this response is nothing short of stunning. “Sure,” she writes. “And so am I. But I don’t feel entitled. And I know why. It’s because they let us in and we feel we have to be perfect. Never mind how many women are out there working. The work place is still, for the most part, owned and run by men, and we’re there because they’ve allowed us to be there - sometimes because they had to - and we know it and they know it and they know we know it. So we better be good.”

Young began giving seminars on the subject about eight years ago, and estimates that she has offered the session about 50 times. In addition, she has consulted for a Fortune 500 company, and is currently the assistant director of marketing communications for a company in Connecticut. Given this background, I’m not surprised to see that Young is looking very businesslike indeed in a crisp, professional suit and heels. But this is Northampton, after all, and jeans seem to be the uniform of choice among workshop participants. This being the case, Young takes the opportunity to dash home during the lunch break and reemerges in the afternoon looking decidedly less formal.

A slender woman with vivid blue eyes, she radiates a confidence that is, she informs us, hard won. Over the course of the day, she leads us through the seminar’s three objectives: to understand the dynamics of the impostor syndrome, to identify its sources, and to attempt to unlearn the self-limiting responses that it engenders. We break into small groups to discuss patterns in our childhoods, recall the messages received from our parents about achievement and success, and analyze our responses to childhood failures and triumphs.

One woman, a graduate student in anthropology, says that success in her mother’s eyes meant marriage and children only; another woman reports that her parents instructed her to save the world and, along the way, make enough money that she will never have to depend on a man. Around the room, heads nod in recognition, and sporadic “Me too’s” ring out.

As the afternoon session begins, Young unveils the “Trumpet Process,” a worksheet based on a guide developed by University of Massachusetts professor Gerald Weinstein. It asks us to recall a situation in which we felt like an impostor, then analyze it in detail. Ultimately, this analysis will bring us to something called the “crusher” - that is the deep dark secret that is at the root of our fear of exposure - “I’m stupid,” say, or “worthless,” “incompetent,” “pitiful.” Whatever it is, Young insists, whatever our particular fear, “a crusher is always a lie.” While we are somewhat reassured by this, we’re not entirely convinced. All of us feel raw and exposed, a little depressed, a little sheepish. “This is the low point of the seminar.” Young says merrily. “After this it’s all uphill.”

And she's right. When at last we turn our attention to strategies designed to break the pattern of chronic self-castigation, there is a palpable sense of relief in the air. Perhaps, we think, that capable achiever we've pretended to be all these years wasn't just an act; after all. We did write that prize-winning essay once, or score that goal back in high school, or get accepted into that professional theater company. In fact, now that we think about it, no "impostor," no matter how strong, could actually have propelled someone across the English Channel.

I'm sitting on the couch with Judy, a woman from Natick who is here visiting her daughter Liza for the weekend and ended up accompanying her to the seminar. We're talking about the future. "I'd like to take an art class." Judy confides, then shyly she begins to tell us about her painting. Sometimes, she paints on clothing, and many of her friends have tried to commission work from her, though of course she has never done it. But secretly, she says, her dream is to start a small company to sell her work. "What a wonderful idea!" I say, but Judy shakes her head sadly. "I'm really a bad painter," she assures us.

This, coming after hours of talk, confession and sometimes brutal soul searching, sets us off into fits of hysterical laughter. After a moment, Judy joins in too. "This is so interesting," someone says. "You're never going to see us again in your life. Why is it so important that you have to tell us you're a bad painter?" Judy's daughter Liza wanders over to see what the commotion is, and when we tell her she shrugs. "Of course she says her work is terrible," Liza tells us. "Why do you think she's here?"

Old habits, Young reminds us, are hard to break, and while she is clear in promising us "no magic pill," she does offer an array of strategies that we can use to break our patterns of self-sabotage and self-doubt.

"Positive daydreaming," for example, creates an alternative to anticipating the worst in a job interview or work assignment. Instead of imagining ourselves floundering, we should try to visualize ourselves as relaxed, confident and knowledgeable. We should recognize, too, the subtle distinction between feeling like an impostor and actually being one (there are, Young reminds us, real impostors out there).

Finally, we are asked to recognize the arrogance implicit in feeling like a fraud - "After all, all those people you fooled must be pretty stupid." Imagine phoning up old Professor Brown and letting him know how you fooled him way back when with that paper he gave you an A for. That was a terrible paper! He must have been a real jerk not to see how bad it was!

Young's parting advice is deceptively simple. "Just fake it," she says. "The meaning will follow." But wait a minute. Isn't this what we're already doing? How is "faking it" different from masquerading as a competent person?

Young explains. Often, she tells us, she is challenged by the women in her workshops on this very point. Is she telling them to act like men? Or to falsify credentials? Not at all. "Faking it" is about not holding oneself back because of a perceived inadequacy. Act as if you can do it, and don't wait to apply for that job or ask for that raise until you no longer feel like an impostor.

"There are times," Young says, "when everyone flies by the seat of their pants, and sometimes women don't give themselves permission to be in that learning mode." When the situation is right, she tells us, we should allow ourselves to wing it.

It's evident that there IS a change in the women who emerge from the First Congregational Church that evening, a sense of calm and, perhaps even more important, a sense of humor. With that in mind, I recall a snatch of conversation from hours earlier, in the quiet moment before the workshop attendees began to drift in. Valerie and I had set up the room, arranged the chairs and set up the coffee machine. As she prepared to give a presentation she had given many times before and obviously knew cold. I asked her if she ever thought, "I can't do this. Everyone will find out that I know nothing about this subject, that I have no wisdom to bestow, that I shouldn't be giving this workshop."

To my surprise, she nodded. "I think about it for two minutes or so," she says, a little ruefully. "It's automatic."