



Who They Foolin’?

From celebrities to CEOs, many successful people suffer from syndrome called ‘impostor phenomenon’

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By Kim Lamb Gregory

When she asked to be president of the National Association of Women Business Owners of Ventura County, Jerri Hemsworth smiled and accepted but inside she was thinking, “Do they really know I don’t know what the hell I’m doing?” she recalled with a chuckle.

The Woodland Hills businesswoman was just as self-effacing about the graphics design service she launched six years ago that has since blossomed into Newman Grace, Inc., a full-service ad agency.

“I sit back and I think, ‘I can’t believe presidents of companies and marketing directors are taking me seriously,’” she said. “In reality, I *do* know what I’m talking about, but I don’t feel that way.”

Contrary to the stereotype of the cocky CEO barking orders aboard a company jet, many successful people are more like Hemsworth: humbled and amazed by their success.

They wonder if it will all disappear the minute somebody discovers what they think is their terrible secret – that they’re really impostors.

Any moment, Hemsworth joked, she expects the Impostor Police to “knock on my door and say, ‘Hey! You didn’t go to art school!’” she said.

The fact of the matter is, folks like Hemsworth are not faking it. They are competent and conscientious but have a terrible time seeing what everybody else sees.

“I just created an ad for a new client and I’m still waiting for him to call up and say, ‘You’ve got to be kidding! You want me to pay money for this?’” she said. “I’m stunned when people call up and say, ‘You know, that ad worked so well.’”

Hemsworth could be among legions of successful people yoked to the “impostor phenomenon.” In spite of overwhelming evidence to the contrary in the form of academic degrees, recognition, promotions and awards, people suffering from this syndrome don’t believe they are as bright or capable as everybody else seems to believe they are.

The syndrome was discovered by two psychologists in the late 1970s. One of them, Pauline Rose Clance, Ph.D., says she still gets regular requests to this day for her 1986 book, “The Impostor Phenomenon: When Success Makes You Feel Like a Fake,” even though it is out of print.

“I get calls from college students, executives, editors – different people from a wide range of professions who are looking for the book,” she said.

The continuing demand for her book and testimony from people like Hemsworth suggest the impostor phenomenon is alive and well in the 21st century.

“I had thought perhaps, at some point, there might be a change as far as people experiencing the impostor phenomenon,” Clance said, “but it’s still very relevant.”

A phenomenon persists

Those laboring under the impostor belief system attribute their success to luck, timing, a fluke or’ some other capricious external circumstances.

“We feel like we’ve fooled people or charmed them and slipped through the system,” said Valerie Young, Ph.D., a Massachusetts-based writer/lecturer who travels the U.S. giving seminars on the impostor phenomenon.

Young is among those who have designed workshops, written books or conducted further research on the syndrome, after Clance and her contemporary, Suzanne Imes, Ph.D.; identified it in 1978.

Clance and Imes, now both psychology professors at the University of Georgia, discovered the phenomenon while working at Overland College in Ohio, where the admissions standards are steep.

Clance was working with students who excelled academically, while Imes was helping students who were failing or dropping out.

Clance and Imes were surprised to learn that students who excelled academically felt as if they were faking their achievements, whereas the poor students were downright arrogant.

“Those students were overestimating their abilities,” Clance remembered. “They’d say, ‘This is an ‘A’ paper,’ or ‘I’ve aced this one,’ and it would be a ‘C’ or a ‘D’ paper.”

The good students felt as if they were in over their heads.

“Here I was with these brilliant Overland students, and they were saying, ‘I don’t know how I got in here. Maybe the admissions committee made a mistake.’ “

Noticing the problem was especially grave among coeds, Clance and Imes researched and then wrote a 1978 report called “The Impostor Phenomenon Among High-Achieving Women.”

They hit a nerve.

Soon, Clance and Imes were getting calls for interviews and TV appearances, and Clance herself began to feel the stirrings of the syndrome she had helped discover.

“When I was getting book contracts and I was on the Donahue show and ‘The Today Show’ and Time magazine, I did begin to feel that way,” Clance said. “Fortunately, because) had worked with it, I could say, ‘OK, I’m getting “impostor” feelings.’ “

Gender-neutral syndrome?

Young, who has a Ph.D. in education, first became interested in the phenomenon after seeing it in herself.

Now 48, she was sitting in a graduate studies class at the University of Massachusetts one day in the early ‘80s when another student rose to read excerpts from “The Impostor Phenomenon Among High-Achieving Women.”

As she listened to a report espousing the theory that some people -- especially women fear they are not deserving of their success and, are in fact fooling everybody, Young found herself nodding vigorously in understanding.

“When I snapped out of it, I looked around and all of the other women graduates were nodding their heads, too,” she said.

A few weeks later, she started a support group, then began doing her doctoral research on understanding and eliminating the psychological barriers preventing women from embracing their full potential.

Both Clance and Young’s empirical research suggests women are just as likely as men to suffer from the impostor syndrome but women are far more likely to admit it.

“Men were more likely to acknowledge impostor feelings in an anonymous survey,” Clance said.

Clance believes that’s because men are largely socialized to deny fear, or at least defy fear.

“In some ways, they have been given a little bit more socialization to go ahead in spite of the fear,” Clance said.

The Star asked four men to be a part of this article, but all either declined, or decided they felt too much mastery to fit the mold.

Young is not surprised.

“Anecdotally, there are men whom I tell (about the impostor syndrome) and they say, ‘Oh yeah,’” Young said, “but so many more of them look at me like I have two heads.”

Young believes one of the reasons men may be less prone to feelings of fraud may lie in the different way men and women define “expertise.”

“In general, women are more likely to look at success as needing to be an expert,” Young said. “There’s always one more book to read, one more skill to learn.”

Men grow up learning how to wing it, she said.

“(Men learn) how to exaggerate and boast and bluff,” Young explained. “Girls feel like that’s lying. We do ‘true confessions,’ like, ‘Oh, you liked that presentation? Actually I forgot what I was saying halfway through. And there was a typo on page 3.’”

Who feels like a fake?

Women in fields dominated by men are among those groups prone to “I don’t belong here ~ I’m faking it” feelings.

Vicki Arndt, 45, owner of a Westlake Village ‘financial planning business, knows the feeling well. She opened Eagleson Arndt Financial Advisors seven years, ago.

Besides competing in the male-dominated, field of finance, she found her ability really put to the test when the economy tanked.

“This has been the most dramatic decline of the market since the Great Depression,” she said.

“And my business has grown. I tend to discount that, unfortunately.”

Other subsets of people who may be prone to the impostor syndrome are first-generation professionals and newly promoted supervisors.

Even those who don’t usually suffer from the impostor syndrome might suddenly feel unauthentic when they find themselves promoted.

“They feel like, ‘Maybe I have gone in there and sold myself to do this project or convinced my boss I could do this and I really can’t,’” Clance said.

If you sprang from blue-collar roots and are the first in your family to finish college or work as a professional, you could feel like a fraud, Clance said.

The director of a leadership group for Hispanic teens sees this all the time.

Gil Cuevas, founder and executive director of Fillmore-based Future Leaders of America, works with students whose families have just arrived in the US from Mexico. When these first-generation Mexican-Americans surpass the family’s educational ceiling, the fake feelings can start.

Cuevas recalls one local student who was accepted into Harvard University.

“He was brilliant. There was nothing to stop him academically, but the environment was so alien to him; he was from a traditional family,” Cuevas explained. “He had to take a leave of absence after one semester, came home and got his bearings, then went back.”

There’s another peril to becoming the first in a working-class family to move into the professional world. The feeling of fraud can be exacerbated by family members who may feel abandoned by the high-achieving family member. They may subtly sabotage him or her with messages that he or she doesn’t belong in “that” world.

“There’s a price to be paid from a class perspective,” Young said. “If you’re successful, people in your family and your community look at you like, ‘Who do you think you are?’”

Family values

Reasons people develop the impostor syndrome are often rooted in their families of origin.

“It could be, ‘How did your parents define or perceive success?’” Young explained.

Success in Arndt’s family, for example, had a lofty definition.

“Our parents were extraordinary,” said Arndt, whose one sibling is an attorney. “My father was on the state Supreme Court. ... My mother was president of everything - Woman of the Year... We had a lot of modeling.”

Westlake Village businesswoman Julie Ferman, 42, also had the success bar set high. She also is acquainted with the impostor syndrome.

“I’ve been suffering from this all of my life,” she said.

She too, expects the Impostor Paratroopers to parachute into her front lawn and swoop her away, even though her Internet dating service, Cupid’s Coach, has garnered national attention.

Intrigued by her emphasis on finding dates for singles over 50, producers from “Good Morning America,” “The Today Show” and “Oprah” and reporters from The Wall Street Journal are among the national media who have recently contacted Ferman for interviews. Yet, Ferman still wonders if she’s fooling people.

“Every organization I was ever in, I always rose to the top,” she said, “but in the back of my mind, I remember my dad’s critical eye.”

Families who set the bar too high for their children may be setting them up to feel like frauds, Clance said.

Ferman believes that was the case in her family. No matter what she achieved, her father, though well-meaning, would come up with more things she could have done.

“I looked to my dad for approval for so long,” Ferman said. “Dad died, so I couldn’t get it.”

As Clance explained, the child of a hypercritical parent feels that, no matter what he or she accomplishes, it will never be good enough. When as adults they receive outside praise, they can interpret that as: “I was never a success at home, so I couldn’t possibly be a success now. If these people don’t see that, the only explanation is that I must be fooling them.”

Syndrome symptoms

The impostor phenomenon can manifest itself many ways, including perfectionism and procrastination.

To cover up the fear that they’re faking it, many “impostors” work twice as hard, bludgeoning themselves with unrealistic perfectionism.

“There is just no room for anything less,” Young said. “(Anything less) just becomes proof that, ‘If I were really competent and qualified and intelligent, I would know everything.’”

At first, that was how Arndt felt. Failing at her business was not an option, and she felt she had to have all the answers to the stock market decline.

“Getting OK with not having the answer has been a process,” Arndt said. “The truth was that nobody had all the answers.”

Procrastination can be another coping mechanism.

“They figure, ‘If I wait (until the last minute) and then I don’t do so well, then I can say I just didn’t have the time,’ rather than, ‘I really don’t have the ability to do this,’” Clance explained.

Getting real

Conquering the impostor phenomenon starts with the knowledge that you’re in good company.

“There are a lot of people who have similar feelings and these are normal feelings,” Clance said.

Next, take a realistic look at the feedback you’re getting from yourself and others.

“People have learned to discount compliments,” Clance said. “Inside they may be saying, ‘I did that well because I had a lot of help,’ or, ‘It really wasn’t as hard as people think it was.’”

If you have had positive feedback from three or four objective sources, chances are you’re not faking it - you’re performing well.

When facing a challenge that summons those “false” feelings, Young also recommends “re-framing” your thoughts.

“Instead of saying, ‘Oh my God, I don’t know what I’m doing,’ tell yourself, ‘It’s OK not to know everything right away.’”

Also, confide your fears to a mentor or friends you can trust. Just acknowledging the fear and having friends help her put those fears in perspective is what helped Ferman.

“That’s the beautiful part of it,” she said.

“Little by little; I finally started getting over it. My friends and girlfriends have really helped.”

Finally, both Clance and Young recommend that people fake it till they make it. Go ahead in spite of the fear. Change can happen “from the outside in,” Young said.

“People kind of wait until they don’t feel like impostors anymore before they take a risk,” Young said. “If you wait until you’re completely confident, it’s never gonna happen.”

Are you feeling like you don't deserve it all?

Are you an impostor? Rather, do you think you are? Here are some questions to clue you in on whether you might suffer from impostor syndrome, which makes people think they shouldn't have as much as they have:

1. Do you secretly worry that others will find out that you're not as bright and capable as they think you are?
2. Do you sometimes shy away from challenges because of nagging self-doubt?
3. Do you tend to chalk your accomplishments up to being "a fluke" or "no big deal" or to the fact that people just "like" you?
4. Do you hate making a mistake, being less than fully prepared or not doing things perfectly?
5. Do you tend to feel crushed by even constructive criticism, seeing it as evidence of your "ineptness"?
6. When you do succeed, do you think, "Phew, I fooled 'em this time, but I may not be so lucky next time."
7. Do you believe that other people (students, colleagues, competitors) are smarter and more capable than you are?
8. Do you live in fear of being found out, discovered, unmasked?

"If you answered 'yes' to any one of these questions, join the club," wrote Valerie Young, Ed.D. and self-described "recovering impostor."

Source: Valerie Young, Ed.D, who runs workshops and speaks across the United States about "The Impostor Syndrome."

