

Reinforcement

Rethinking Impostor Syndrome™

The term impostor phenomenon – or impostor “syndrome” as it is more popularly known – was first coined in 1978 by psychologists Pauline Clance and Suzanne Imes. It describes the unconscious belief that we are not as bright, capable, talented, or qualified as others “think” we are.

This belief persists despite evidence of abilities or past accomplishments or both. Instead, “impostors” attribute successes to luck, timing, personality (e.g. they “just like me”), connections, and other external factors.

If you lead, manage, mentor, train, or parent others, you need to understand impostor syndrome. Why? Because impostor syndrome is not just an interesting self-help topic. Impostor feelings lead to a host of unconscious behaviors used to avoid being “found out.” Among these behaviors are not living up to our full potential, chronic procrastination, and over-working and over-preparing. All of which are costly to individuals *and* their organizations.

In Valerie Young’s four decades studying and speaking on impostor syndrome she’s discovered three simple but non-negotiable tools you can use to immediately address impostor syndrome in yourself or others.

1) Normalize impostor syndrome

Family messages and expectations play a role in impostor feelings later in life. However, you need to also understand the situational, organizational, and societal sources of impostor syndrome. That way when you have a normal impostor moment you can do less personalizing and more contextualizing. Understanding that 70 percent of people have experienced varying degrees of impostor feelings can also go a long way in normalizing it.

2) Reframe competence, failure/mistakes/criticism, and fear

Everyone wants to stop feeling like an impostor. But that's not how it works. Feelings are the last to change. People who don't feel like impostors are no more intelligent or capable than those who do. They just think different thoughts. Specifically they think differently about three things: Competence, failure/mistakes/criticism, and fear.

The only way to stop feeling like an impostor is to stop thinking like an impostor. The next time you have a normal impostor moment, hit the pause button and become consciously aware of the conversation going on in your head. Then "reframe" it the way someone who is humble, but has never experienced impostor syndrome, would. In other words, like a Humble Realist™. Unlearning impostor syndrome takes time. To get the ball moving more quickly, start not on the feelings front but rather with your thoughts and behaviors.

3) Keep going regardless

Keep going regardless of messages you may have received growing up. Keep going regardless of being in an organizational culture that fuels self-doubt. Keep going regardless of whether you feel the pressure to represent your entire social group or are on the receiving end of social stereotypes about competence and intelligence.

Most importantly, keep going regardless of how confident you feel. In other words, don't wait until you no longer feel afraid, insecure, anxious, inadequate, or undeserving. The solution is to change your thoughts and behaviors first, and let your feelings catch up later.

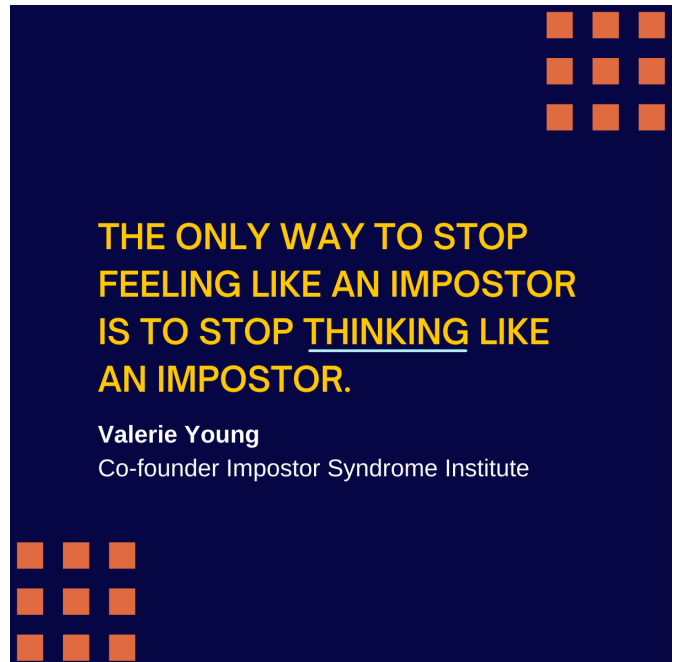
Remember too, this is not all about you. Everyone loses when bright people play small.

Transitioning from “impostor” thinking to Humble Realist™ thinking is not a one-time event. It is a process that begins with becoming consciously aware of the conversation going on in your head when you have a normal impostor moment – and then pausing to “reframe” it the way someone who is humble, but has never felt like an impostor would.

It’s far easier to replace current impostor thoughts when you have new ones to draw from. The first 10 reframes were covered in the *Rethinking Impostor Syndrome* session you attended.

- No one wins them all, why should you?
- Constructive criticism is a gift – seek it out
- It’s how you handle failure and setbacks that matter.
- Not everything can - or needs to be - perfect.
- You can’t know everything in the beginning - or ever.
- The key is to not know with confidence.
- No one excels at everything.
- The more you do anything the better you’ll get.
- Wise people seek help, advice, and feedback.
- Everyone loses when bright people play small.

There are a compilation of quotes on the following pages that represent Humble Realist™ thinking. Put a check mark next to any reframes you find personally helpful. Star the one you most need to embrace. Finally, review this reframe often until you actually believe it.



REFRAMING COMPETENCE, KNOWLEDGE, AND EXPERTISE

I was gratified to be able to answer promptly. I said I don't know. *Mark Twain*

I use not only all the brains I have, but all I can borrow. *Woodrow Wilson*

One person's simple is another person's "huh?" *David Stone*

It's not what you know, it's how fast you can find it out. *John Fraraccio*

I have no particular talent, I am merely extremely inquisitive. *Albert Einstein*

The secret to creativity is knowing how to hide your sources. *Albert Einstein*

The ideas I stand for are not mine. I borrowed them from Socrates. I swiped them from Chesterfield. I stole them from Jesus. And I put them in a book.
Dale Carnegie

It's what you learn after you know it all that counts. *John Wooden*

Never bother to memorize something that is easily accessible. *Albert Einstein*

Everybody is ignorant, only on different subjects. *Will Rogers*

Competence Reframes from *The Secret Thoughts of Successful Women*

The words you use really do matter. You'll be amazed at how differently you feel simply by changing your response from, "I am so stupid!" to "Boy, did I feel stupid." *Valerie Young*

The assumption that you have to know everything before you consider yourself competent is a big reason why you - and a lot of other people - walk around feeling like a clueless fraud. *Valerie Young*

This belief that "If I didn't think it up first, then it's too late" is utter nonsense. Whether it's coming up with a new cookbook or doing scholarly research, there is always more to say on any subject. *Valerie Young*

There is no "end" to knowledge. When you try to know everything... it's like trying to get to the end of the Internet. It's simply not possible. The quest for ultimate knowledge is based on a delusion. Instead relax and just do the best you can. *Valerie*

Competence does not mean knowing how to do everything yourself. Instead competence means knowing how to identify the resources needed to get the job done. *Valerie Young*

If you embrace the idea that you are both *capable* of figuring things out as you go along and that it really is *okay* to do so, it changes everything. *Valerie Young*

Competent people (scholars included) are always building on the work of other competent people. *Valerie Young*

Clarity and confusion, deficiency, and mastery, knowing and not knowing all are part of the... process. ... once you recognize these extremes for what they are, you'll be able to accept your own low points without self-incrimination. *Valerie Young*

The Peter Principle says people rise to their level of incompetency. But for many people with the impostor syndrome the opposite is true. Instead they embody the Paula Principle by which capable people fail to rise to their true level of competency. *Valerie Young*

When you see yourself as a work-in-progress, you're automatically less likely to experience feelings of inadequacy. *Valerie Young*

REFRAMING PERFECTIONISM

Perfection is terrible, it cannot have children. *Sylvia Plath*

Perfectionism has nothing to do with getting it right. It has nothing to do with having high standards. Perfectionism is a refusal to let yourself move ahead. *Jennifer White*

If at first you don't succeed, you're running about average. *M.H. Alderson*

Don't agonize. It slows you down. I'm a non-perfectionist. I don't look back in regret or worry at what I've accomplished. *Isaac Asimov*

To do all that one is able to do, is to be a man; to do all that one would like to do, is to be a god. *Napoleon I, attributed*

Have patience with all things, but first of all with yourself. *St. Francis*

...if we wait for the moment when everything, absolutely everything is ready, we shall never begin. *Ivan Turgenev*

Perfectionism Reframes from *The Secret Thoughts of Successful Women*

When you expect yourself and your work to always be perfect, it's a matter not of *if* you will be disappointed but *when*. *Valerie Young*

By striving to be the best student, worker, spouse or partner, mother, friend, homemaker, hostess and more, you've succeeded at only one thing - setting yourself up to fall short in multiple roles. *Valerie Young*

Rather than enabling your success, perfectionist thinking is actually a gigantic barrier. *Valerie Young*

The next time you're tapped for something that feels out of your league or someone compliments your work - even if you know it could be improved - say "Thank you." Then zip it. *Valerie Young*

Perfectionism is impossible to sustain in even one area. To shoot for it in all aspects of your life is a recipe for failure - and disappointment. *Valerie Young*

REFRAMING FAILURE, MISTAKES, AND SETBACKS

Whenever I make a bum decision, I just go out and make another.

Harry S. Truman

Be bold. If you're going to make an error, make a doozy. *Billie Jean King*

Failure is only the opportunity to begin again more intelligently. *Henry Ford*

A life spent making mistakes is not only more honorable but more useful than a life spent doing nothing. *George Bernard Shaw*

Freedom is not worth having if it does not include the freedom to make mistakes. *Mahatma Gandhi*

He who has never made a mistake is one who never does anything.

Theodore Roosevelt

When we can begin to take our failures non-seriously, it means we are ceasing to be afraid of them. It is of immense importance to learn to laugh at ourselves.

Katherine Mansfield

The way I see it, if you want the rainbow, you gotta be willing to put up with the rain. *Dolly Parton*

Challenges make you discover things about yourself that you never really knew. They're what make the instrument stretch – what make you go beyond the norm. *Cicely Tyson*

Obstacles don't have to stop you. If you run into a wall, don't turn around and give up. Figure out how to climb it, go through it, or work around it. *Michael Jordan*

Persistence is what makes the impossible possible, the possible likely, and the likely definite. *Robert Half*

Our greatest glory is not in never failing, but in rising up every time we fail. *Ralph Waldo Emerson*

Failure+Mistakes Reframes from *The Secret Thoughts of Successful Women*

Did you know:

- Michael Jordan was cut from his junior varsity basketball team.
- Walt Disney was fired from a newspaper job for “lacking ideas.”
- R. H. Macy failed 7 times before his store in New York caught on.
- Novelist John Creasy got 753 rejection slips before he published the first of his 564 books.
- Thomas Edison was thrown out of school in the early grades when the teachers decided he could not do the work.
- Bob Dylan’s classmates booed him off the stage at a high school talent show.

Some of the feedback you’ll receive in your life will be dead-on. But that doesn’t mean there aren’t plenty of critics who will get it wrong.

Valerie Young

What if you were able to see critical feedback as a form of compliment? That’s not to say it doesn’t hurt, because it does. Once you’ve licked your wounds, remind yourself that those whose opinions matter are not going to give you feedback if they didn’t think you were competent enough to use it. *Valerie Young*

Your best defense against criticism, may be to go on the offense by proactively seeking it out. *Valerie Young*

You can be at the top of your game and still strike out more often than not. *Valerie Young*

Why do you think engineers spend so much time engaged in the process of failure analysis? They recognize that you can learn just as much from studying what went wrong as you can from what went right. *Valerie Young*

There will be days when you turn out a top-notch performance and days when you bomb miserably. One day the critics – your professor, advisor, boss, clients, readers – love you, and the next day they pan you. Sometimes you’ll nail it the first time, and other times you’ll need to do multiple retakes. *Valerie Young*

REFRAMING RISK-TAKING AND FEAR

You may be disappointed if you fail, but you are doomed if you don't try.

Beverly Sills

It is not because things are difficult that we do not dare; it is because we do not dare that things are difficult. *Anneus Seneca*

First ask yourself: What is the worst that can happen? Then prepare to accept it. Then proceed to improve on the worst. *Dale Carnegie*

Life is about not knowing, having to change, taking the moment and making the best of it, without knowing what's going to happen next. Delicious ambiguity.

Gilda Radner

Unless you are willing to walk out into the unknown, the chances of making a profound difference in your life are pretty low. *Tom Peters*

Fear is excitement without breath. *Fritz Perls*

When in doubt, make a fool of yourself. There is a microscopically thin line between being brilliantly creative and acting like the most gigantic idiot on earth. So what the hell, leap. *Cynthia Heimel*

You must do the thing you think you cannot do. *Eleanor Roosevelt*

Risk-Taking Reframes from *The Secret Thoughts of Successful Women*

Confidence comes from taking risks, owning the wins, and learning from the losses. *Valerie Young*

Whether you take risk or run from it, you're probably defining risk too narrowly. The fact is women take risks every day. It's just that society doesn't recognize and appreciate them as such. *Valerie Young*

On the relationship front women take calculated risks all the time: putting all their eggs in one basket by expecting a man to be their retirement plan, interrupting a career to raise children, or supporting a spouse/partner through school with the promise of future reciprocity. *Valerie Young*

You don't have to bungee-jump to engage in physical risks. Women in poor countries routinely put their very lives at risk to bear children. If men did that, they'd erect shrines to those who have lost their lives in the line of duty. *Valerie Young*

Women have always had a more layered definition of success, which means it's just as likely that your anxiety could be signaling a mismatch between the social definition of success and what matters most to you. *Valerie Young*

Being bold is not about being right, being perfect, or knowing it all. Rather it is about marshaling resources, information, and people. It involves seeing problems as opportunities, occasionally flying by the seat of your pants, and ultimately being willing to fall flat on your face and know you will survive. *Valerie Young*

Instead of the proverbial question "What would you do if money were no object?" try asking, "What sort of difference could I make if fear were not a factor?" *Valerie Young*

It takes not one more ounce of courage or energy to dream big than it does to dream small. And you've got a lot more to gain by shooting high than by shooting low. *Valerie Young*

It's unlikely that you'll totally stop caring about what people think of you or about the effects of your decisions on others. And that's okay. Instead, strive to not be so consumed with other people's needs and opinions that it keeps you from moving up, speaking up, or otherwise saying yes to success. *Valerie Young*

Not taking risks may be the riskiest move of all. *Valerie Young*

REFRAMES ABOUT CONFIDENCE

If you think you can, or if you think you can't, you're right. *Henry Ford*

The last of the human freedoms is to choose one's attitudes. *Victor Frankel*

Little things affect little minds. *Benjamin Disraeli*

The one important thing I have learned over the years is the difference between taking one's work seriously and taking one's self seriously. The first is imperative and the second is disastrous. *Dame Margot Fonteyn*

Perpetual optimism is a force multiplier. *Colin Powell*

He who laughs, lasts. *Mary Poole*

What does not destroy me makes me strong. *Freidrich Nietzsche* Pain is inevitable. Suffering is optional. *Source Unknown*

In three words I can sum up everything I've learned about life: It goes on. *Robert Frost*

The best way to predict the future is to invent it. *Alan Kay*

Not knowing when the dawn will come I open every door. *Emily Dickenson*

And life is what we make it. Always has been, always will be. *Grandma Moses*

Don't take life too seriously, you'll never get out alive. *Bugs Bunny*

Confidence Reframes from *The Secret Thoughts of Successful Women*

If you feel selfish or guilty for being driven, remember that to have children is to experience a certain amount of guilt - period. *Valerie Young*

Stop asking for permission and start acting like you deserve a place at the table. *Valerie Young*

As you whittle away at your impostor feelings, you'll probably have to wing it a little - or a lot, especially in the beginning. The key is not to wait until you feel confident to act confident. *Valerie Young*

Faking it till you make it does not mean you have to choose between self-doubt and self-righteousness or modesty and puffery. You can speak with measured confidence without being self-important. *Valerie Young*

Whether you call it bullshitting, bluffing, winging it, holding your own, flying by the seat of your pants, or just plain chutzpa is not important. What matters is that you start to act as capable as you really are, even - no *especially* - when you don't always feel it. *Valerie Young*

Years from now no one will remember all the extra projects you took on or your meticulously organized garage. What you will recall is the time you said no to a work assignment to take your kids to the science museum or when you ignored household chores to enjoy the sunset. *Valerie Young*

Just because you *feel* inadequate doesn't mean you *are* inadequate. *Valerie Young*

It's hard to feel real when you're wearing a mask. And that's exactly what happens when you're trying to win at someone else's game or when you're fulfilling someone else's dream. Seen in that light, ambivalence about success may be a wise choice. *Valerie Young*

"... just because you *feel* inadequate doesn't mean you *are* inadequate. I can practically guarantee that sometime in the next twenty-four to forty-eight hours you will have the opportunity to feel stupid just like the rest of us. It's called life. *Valerie Young*

Buried under all the debris of fear and self-doubt is the certain knowledge that you are infinitely capable. *Valerie Young*

Your fear of being inadequate pales in comparison to your fear of being extraordinary. *Valerie Young*

For more information, insight and tools for your team or organization visit impostorsyndrome.com.

