



# DO YOU FEEL LIKE A FRAUD? AN IMPOSTER IN YOUR OWN MIND

For the last 18 months I have been working with some large New Zealand companies' executives. One of these clients came to me to help them deal with something called the Impostor Syndrome. While I have understood and helped thousands of people deal with the common experience they have about the feeling of being a fraud, or being found out to be not as accomplished as their accolades show.

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In Wikipedia, 'impostor syndrome', sometimes called 'impostor phenomenon' or 'fraud syndrome', is described as a psychological phenomenon in which people are unable to internalise their accomplishments. Despite external evidence of their competence, those with the syndrome remain convinced that they are frauds and do not deserve the success they have achieved. Proof of success is dismissed as luck, timing, or as a result of deceiving others into thinking they are more intelligent and competent than they believe themselves to be. I accept this definition, and intend to expand it throughout this article from sharing my own experience of the people I have worked with for many years who deal with this phenomenon, such that you can have some access to dealing with it better in your own life. It is my personal view from working with thousands of people from all walks of life that, on some level, almost all adult human beings who have any level of success in some area of life do at times question or doubt their own level of success, along with how or why it happened. Whether this is product of our culture, socialisation or just an innate human survival mechanism of not appearing to be as "good" as we really are, I am not really meaning this general type of experience we often have as human beings in a competitive and very personal-achievement oriented marketplace. The kind of impostor or fraud phenomenon I am talking about in this article is more aimed at those business professionals where your actions, thinking and experience of yourself are being negatively impacted by this phenomenon.

These executive clients especially those high up the corporate ladder, and other very successful entrepreneurs and business owners I work with, come to me for a number of reasons primarily because of the levels of stress they are experiencing in their various roles and the pressure to perform. But more specifically, the better they and their companies do, the more anxious, worried and plagued by the stress of being found out to be a fraud they tend to be – the source of which, is having to "pretend" all the time that they are someone that they are not. Most of my clients come to me after recognising that their levels of stress are close to their limit and they are a mental, physical and emotional train wreck in the making from trying to just soldier on and keep up the façade – that everything is OK. In short, some are often at a breaking point. Unfortunately for many of my highly intelligent and accomplished clients however, they don't recognise this early enough and come to me after being forced to take time out

from work for stress-leave, being put on medications for depression, anxiety or sleeping issues, having some sort of major health crisis, getting divorced or having to get counselling for their marriage/family or some other effect of not dealing with their chronic levels of stress. I always admire those that come to me before this has happened, and those who were willing to see past the bravado of having to suck it up and keep pushing through it all ('harden up' as we like to say), and let go of the stigma around having to be seen as having it all together and handled, and are actively seeking out help – which so many of you are unwilling to do. What results from this reluctance is you suffering, thinking that if you get any help you will be seen as weak, unsuccessful, a fraud, inadequate or some other adjective to describe someone who may not be coping with either the load of stress they have physically or mentally in their professional (or personal) life.

When I start working with these clients, I learn about everything they are dealing with at work and at home, and everything starts to make sense for both of us as to why they are feeling the way they are. Mostly it's that they are working hard which is physically demanding and relentless during the week and sometimes weekends – with long hours, extra time spent on time off and weekends obsessing about things getting done properly by themselves and those they managed to ensure nothing went wrong (ever if possible!) and the toll this takes on their sleep and often wife/spouse and children. Then there is the mental duress they are under from the frequent negative thoughts and self-criticism of their own performance that are filling up their mind (a little like background chatter in a crowded room while trying to remain focussed on listening to someone talk to you). The psychological barrage that ensued if anything happened that threatens their performance being questioned or judged, especially of feeling like they are an actor in some play and that soon they would be found out they are acting and not really who everyone says they are. When I first meet many of my clients, they are often close to actually considering giving it all up (or at least that is the thoughts crossing their mind in the pressure they are under), just to rid themselves of the pressure and threat of it all unravelling, ultimately being found out to be a complete fraud (and a failure). While this may sound extreme, a big part of why I am writing this month's article on this topic is that if this happening to the kind of people I coach and train, who are some of the most highly accomplished human beings that I have met both professionally and in other areas of their life, then people generally who have any level

of success they are dealing with in their own fields of profession or expertise must be dealing with the same.

Usually as I begin to understand the facts about where most of my clients are actually at with their results in their companies and businesses, we establish that they are actually performing well and the company is doing well due to their efforts, hard work and determination for success. While I am rarely surprised at this experience they are having about feeling like a fraud and it being only a matter of time until it was exposed that they aren't really as successful or accomplished as the facts demonstrated over their career, I am more interested having them understand why they are suffering from things like the impostor or fraud phenomenon. And that is why I wanted to focus this month's article on this. As you read on you will see that studies back up this assertion, and one of my commitments is to have you understand that you are not alone, and that this is normal – you can deal with this experience when it comes up and prevent it from having the kind of grip on your mind and brain that many people experience when at the top of their game professionally.

One thing I will say up front to any of you reading, is that this phenomenon of Impostor Syndrome, fraud or impostor phenomenon or any other label others may give it, is often very subtle, can be somewhat running in the background guiding your reactions and thinking, and not obvious to you when you are in the throws of trying to perform at your best in a competitive marketplace. It takes actually stopping to observe some of your own narratives and things you say (internally and externally) and reactions you have to certain circumstances and situations for you to be able to recognise the effect it may be having on you, and how it may be robbing you from actually being satisfied or experiencing satisfaction from what you accomplish in life. So before you do what many ambitious, driven and successful people may do and dismiss this as something other people have (for reasons already described above), just stop and consider whether that is just your own ego, or lack of understanding of yourself running the show. See if there is more to see than meets the eye about your own relationship to what you have accomplished in your life professionally, and personally. I don't find it difficult nor think it is very complicated to work out the source of why people feel like an impostor or fraud in their own mind in relationship to their accolades and accomplishments in comparison to the way others see them. And, as I have demonstrated with the numerous clients I have worked with who deal with some version of this, it comes down to different life events that have happened in our "life library" of events, where some extremely threatening situation happened that had your brain produce a high state of stress or fight/flight response, which then set your brain up to do its best to never repeat experiencing that again. Getting to the source of the behaviour associated with the impostor or fraud phenomenon is only a small part of the battle, as what really takes some work, practice and conscious mind management, is to be able to continue being in the same environments and situations that trigger those feelings of being a fraud, quickly recognising them, and being able to choose new ways to act and behave that are conscious and not you reacting to some perceived threat.

## IMPOSTOR SYNDROME

In a news article titled *High-achievers Suffering from Impostor Syndrome*, it quoted many celebrities and successful people in other fields as exhibiting the feelings associated with Impostor Syndrome. It went on to say, "despite often overwhelming evidence of their abilities, impostors dismiss them as merely a matter of luck, timing, outside help, charm – even computer error. Because people who have the impostor syndrome feel that they've somehow managed to slip through the system undetected, in their mind it's just a matter of

time before they're found out... These people (falsely) believe others have over-estimated their talents and that their superiors will, at any moment, realise they'd been fooled." There are many quotes in the article, some from books by Dr Valerie Young and Susan Pinker on the subject, from people such as Tina Fey, Chris Martin (Coldplay), Jodie Foster, Don Cheadle, Kate Winslet, Michael Uslan (*Batman* Producer), Denzel Washington, Chuck Lorre (writer of *Two and a Half Men* and *The Big Bang Theory*), Renee Zellweger, Meryl Streep, Darren Lockyer (Rugby League legend), Maya Angelou, Dr Margaret Chan (Chief of the WHO), and Michelle Pfeiffer all sharing their own version of the thoughts they have and things they say to themselves about feeling like some kind of fraud, impostor or not being able to recognise and acknowledge their own success.

I like what another article by Diane Zorn from York University says about it:

"The impostor phenomenon (IP) often strikes high-achieving individuals – managers, CEOs, university professors – and manifests itself as an internal feeling of intellectual phoniness. It doesn't matter what level you're at in your career, or even how long you've been doing your job. Often people at high levels live in constant fear that they'll be revealed as 'frauds'."

Wouldn't a good therapist solve the problem? "Not really," she says. "This isn't a psychological problem. My research argues it's a cultural phenomenon, not a psychological trait. It's a shared learned behaviour common to high achievers – people are left on their own; competition is intense, and there's not much of a mentor system. As a result, individuals develop an 'impostor cycle' – over-preparing,

procrastination etc. They live in fear they won't ever be good enough." This over-preparing and the fear of it never being good enough is a common thing that comes up with many of my clients.

Another article about Impostor Syndrome notes that psychological research done in the early 1980s estimated that two out of five successful people consider themselves frauds; "[and] other studies have found that 70 percent of all people feel like fakes at one time or another. Some people, the more successful they become, the

more they feel like frauds," says Valerie Young, who leads workshops and professional development programs on the subject. "They feel as though they're fooling people. There's a dissonance between self-image and external reality." She goes on to say that "another Achilles' heel has to do with expectations. The public assumes CEOs will be knowledgeable about every aspect of their businesses, and business is getting more complex. In the corporate world, where the impostor syndrome is well documented, self-doubters may turn down promotions or switch jobs to avoid exposure. Entrepreneurs sometimes decline interviews and speaking engagements, or even designate someone else to be the public face of their companies." Many wear away their noses through ceaseless application to grindstones. "They think, 'Sure, I'm successful but it's only because I'm working 80 hours a week,'" says Young. "If I let up for a second, it's all going to fall apart."

## STRESS AND ITS EFFECT ON THE MIND/BRAIN

As I move into looking at ways to help you deal with this feeling of being a fraud or an impostor, I want to first give you a little review of stress and how it affects the mind and brain from previous articles I have written. I have decided to do this because in the work I have done with many clients, and their feedback on what happens when they are experiencing those feelings of being a fraud, impostor or they are uncomfortable about a compliment or acknowledgement they have received about their performance or accomplishments, shows that it increases their stress. Stress levels go up when in that experience and dwelling in the thought patterns and narratives in

your mind that come along with them, and the feelings are driven by reactions in your brain to stressful events from the past that in turn are being triggered by some perceived threat in that moment. To be able to see what those unconscious and automatic patterns of behaviour and reactions are can give you a much greater access to being able to stop the downward spiral that can ensue when you are gripped by the impostor or fraud phenomenon. Understanding the way stress affects your mind and brain is also very important for being able to understand that if you have a high load of stress and it has been like that for some time, then your ability to rationalise, regulate your emotions and capacity to exert self-control by way of your prefrontal cortex to stop certain thought patterns. And from that point, your ability to “think about your own thinking” in the moment is drastically reduced and sometimes paralysed if your limbic system (stress centre) is too over-stimulated and taken over your brain function. Because of the threat to the brain of being ‘found out’ or ‘exposed’, these feelings that capture what this impostor or fraud phenomenon is actually cause a spike in the human stress response as described below, adding to your load of stress (allostatic load). And for people with chronic stress levels, often further compounding the effect that trying to maintain your level of performance is having on your mind and body.

While the survival response of our caveman predecessors some 50,000 years ago gave him the necessary mental and physical capacity to act against an immediate life threat, that stress response is not quite appropriate for the modern day. Today’s threats to survival come in the form of overbearing bosses, work deadlines, or angry wives and girlfriends to name a few common ones. Despite the similarities that an angry partner or boss may share with a hungry saber-toothed tiger, they don’t actually pose a threat to our immediate survival (most of the time). However, our minds and bodies still perceive these stressors in a similar way as the survival threats that existed in caveman times. Though our stressors now may not seem as threatening as those of our predecessors, they are constant, and our brains spend long periods of time in “stress response” mode.

Most people I work with relate to stress as some “feeling” they get when they are under pressure, anxious/worried or not coping. The conscious feeling of stress is not actually what stress is, it is just your interpretation of the feeling that the physiological human stress response produces when it is triggered – otherwise known as the fight/flight/freeze response.

The other important thing to understand about stress is something called your “allostatic load”. The term, coined by McEwen and Stellar in 1993, is defined as the physiological consequences of chronic exposure to fluctuating or heightened neural or neuroendocrine response that results from repeated or chronic stress. It is used to explain (and measure) how frequent activation of the body’s stress response, essential for managing acute threats, can in fact damage the body in the long run. In terms of how this affects your life, the higher your allostatic load over a period of time, the more your body and mind will have to adapt to deal with the levels of stress hormones and other chemicals the body produces in response to the stressors, eventually leading to declining levels in performance, productivity and overall wellness.

If your brain did not have this innately intelligent threat response machine in it to detect and signal to us when we are in danger or when there is a real or perceived threat to our survival, we would possibly not be alive today. However, in the 21st century modern day world it is almost never a physical threat to our life that has us in a fight or flight state; it is the way we perceive what we are feeling threatened by that produces this heightened state of stress.

I like to break stressors down into three categories to make it simple to see what you can do about the ones you have that are causing you unnecessary stress in your life:

**1.** Stressors in your environment: You either put these stressors there or they are part of your lifestyle. For example: children, work and living situations. You have less control over these particular stressors, and you will need to learn to manage their effect on you i.e: if your children or your boss/colleagues are a stressor you can’t just get rid of them to deal with this stressor.

**2.** Stressors that are physical: Injuries; pain; not moving your body sufficiently; what you do or don’t put in your mouth; when you eat and how regularly; how much you eat; chemical or toxic things you are subjected to. You mostly have control over these particular stressors, and you can reduce, mitigate or remove them.

**3.** Stressors that are mental/emotional: Thinking negatively; your view of yourself; the stories and conversations you have about yourself; what you say when things don’t go your way; your reaction to stressors in your state of mind; how you react to what others say to you; how you perceive what others say to you. You have complete control over these particular stressors. This is where the impostor or fraud phenomenon happens.

We are going to focus on the third category of stressor as I find this is really the source of these feelings, and most unnecessary stress levels that affect peoples performance, productivity and overall wellness, and is directly connected with the effect of the first two.

When in the moment of a stressor triggering a threat to your brain, what I find makes the difference in working with my clients is how you manage your mind (mindfulness) and being conscious of the thoughts and narratives you are saying to yourself (your internal dialogue) which gives you the chance to actually control and inhibit your automatic reactions, patterns and behaviors that cause you undue stress and impact your day to day performance. When you understand the relationship between stress, your brain, your conscious mind and language you can get access to elevating your levels of performance moment to moment.

Language, or more simply put, the narratives and interpretations we have about our life constantly and how we human beings use language is such an important thing to understand when it comes to dealing with your stressors and stress. If we did not have the capacity for language we would probably respond to stress a little like a cat or a dog. When a dog or a cat feels sick (signaled by a stress response to their brain) they will often go and eat grass and vomit. But because we can use language to describe our feelings and situations we encounter we have a unique way of dealing with stress.

Compared to the caveman of 50,000 years ago, we deal with stress differently because our brains are bigger and some parts have become much more advanced, creating a mind that can be mindful and consciously inhibit the mindless, more ancient parts of the brain, and we have the capacity for language and can make up narratives and interpretations of the stressors that are coming at us on a day to day basis.

Our brain is wired for five primary social threats and always on alert for them - status, certainty, autonomy, relatedness and fairness (known as the SCARF model). Because we have had so many things already happen in our past, our brain has come up with as many possible indicators that something dangerous might happen any moment, so without knowing it we react to things that happen or things that people say with some narrative or interpretation that we made up some time ago. The release of stress hormones from stressful events from the past causes our brain to remember those short term events such that we avoid the experience of them in the future or so our brain can trigger a fight/flight response if a similar event is perceived to happen imminently.

## DEALING POWERFULLY WITH THE FEELINGS OF BEING AN IMPOSTOR OR A FRAUD

To use your mind powerfully to reduce, mitigate or remove this stressor that is causing you undue stress, there are some fundamental points I will make when it comes to dealing with stressors in general and thriving in the 21st Century. When these are understood in a holistic or more holographic way, they can give you an insight into how to start mastering and managing your mind to enable you to inhibit the effects your ancient brain can have on you in response to threats, to give access to a new level of performance, productivity and overall wellness.

- We are fundamentally and foremost physiological and biological beings
- We are also linguistic beings and have the capacity to use language to describe and articulate things
- Our physiology has not evolved or changed since it was designed
- Our linguistic capacity and ability to use language has evolved
- Our environment has changed rapidly and drastically
- We misinterpret the physiological responses of our body/mind to this environment

To sum up these points, here is the main point – you need to understand your physiology and the power of language to deal with stress and improve your performance, productivity and overall wellness. Understanding our basic and fundamental physiological nature and how our brain is wired to constantly be on the look out for potential threats needs to be understood in conjunction with understanding that because we are human when our brain spits out a bunch of chemicals into our body to try and survive some perceived threat we will be compelled to give it some interpretation or which are usually a pre-programmed narratives from the past that will potentially contribute to or increase the feelings of being stressed. If you can observe the feelings that come with your mindless brain signalling a threat, and then engage your conscious mind, be mindful and aware of the subjective narrative or interpretation you have of what is happening, then you will be able to reduce the level of stress that the stressors such as this feeling of being an impostor or fraud and other stressors you have in your environment can cause.

## PRACTICES AND ACTIONS TO REDUCE THE EFFECT OF THE IMPOSTOR/FRAUD PHENOMENON

There is a lot more I could say about this phenomenon or syndrome from my own personal experience in working with people, but what I would like to leave you with is some practices and actions you could try to help you deal with it when it happens, enabling your maintain or elevate your performance without the drive or threat of having to keep it up just so you don’t get “found out”, and reduce the severity of this stressor on your overall stress levels. My commitment would be that you can actually experience satisfaction, enjoy and even acknowledge yourself for whatever things you have accomplished in your life without the narrative chiming in to cut down the facts and truth about how successful or accomplished you really are. There is nothing wrong with actually feeling good about the fact you have worked hard and taken the time and effort to succeed at something, and taking compliments and acknowledgement of this from others. New Zealand and Australia are steeped in a cultural stigma of “the tall poppy syndrome”, and I am always out to challenge and even attack this narrative or view when I see it in others and especially my clients. It is flawed and does not make you happy or satisfied to be suppressed and concerned/worried about what others will think if you are overtly proud of what you have accomplished. I am proud to say that many of the executives I have worked with have got themselves over this stigma, and have had the courage to express themselves about what it has taken to succeed, acknowledge their accomplishments and provide leadership in allowing others they manage and work with to do the same. It’s one thing to walk around big noting yourself for some self-gratifying egotistical endeavour which I don’t promote, but I say it actually allows people to grow and develop when they can accurately assess the results/consequences

of the work they have done and actions they have taken, to be able to draw proper conclusions about how to continue that in the future, and train and develop others to do the same.

**Here is what you can practice and try to help you when you experience the feelings of being a fraud or an impostor in your own mind:**

**1.** Work with someone who has the specialised knowledge of being able to help you see where in your “life-library” of events you had things happen that caused a big spike in your stress levels, where your brain mapped that experience as one you never want to have again because of the interpretation in your mind you formed in that moment, creating some core negative narratives about yourself that have you react to similar events in future - all to protect you from some experience that you perceived as stressful, traumatic, negative or threatening. These reactions are triggered when your brain perceives some situation that may threaten something about yourself that happened in the past, but when you don’t know where they came from, they will be unconscious, automatic patterns of behaviour and thinking that will grip you, take over and run the show in a situation if the perceived threat to your brain is big enough. From the last 15 years of working with people to see these triggers, they are mostly hidden from your view and blind spots, and things you just dismiss as “well thats how I have always been” or “I just get like that in those situations” or the like. I have worked with enough people with the impostor or fraud phenomenon now to witness them being able to almost rid themselves of those feelings coming up, as they have identified, and gained some level of mastery at recognising in the moment of when one of their unconscious, automatics patterns of behaviours gets triggered, that it is not the situation itself (objectively) that is causing the reaction, it is just their brain reacting to some perceived threat that it recognises from the past as similar to the situation at hand - and if you just think logically about the impostor or fraud phenomenon, the feelings are all about getting found out, or exposed, which is a common incident that happens in all our lives at some point when we failed a test; couldn’t read something in front of class; came last in a race; got embarrassed public speaking etc. Hence why I say that the impostor or fraud phenomenon is directly correlated to the things that have happened in your “life-library” of events that had you declare in your mind, “I am never going to have that experience, or let that happen again.....”.

**2.** Write down all the factual things about your accomplishments and accolades and anything you have achieved that is worth noting, that has contributed to your success in any given field or discourse that triggers the feelings of being an impostor or fraud. Then track back and actually articulate the actions that you had to take over time consistently and deliberately to have those accolades or accomplishments. When you do this you will be able to separate what happened in reality (objectively) for you to be who you are and have the success or achievements you do from what your mind says about it (subjectively) or your interpretation of the facts - and this will enable you to ground yourself and be honest and truthful about why you are where you are in your profession, business, or any other discourse where you have gained some success, and find it hard to internalise and accept that you have got there because of all the actions you have taken to get there - not because of some fluke, luck or good fortune.

**3.** Talk about it with others who you know will be honest and straight with you - peers, spouse, work colleagues - and allow them into your own thoughts about yourself in relation to the feeling of being a fraud or impostor , so you can get their feedback and assessment of how they really see you. This will enable you to see a different perspective of yourself, distinct from what your own mind may say to you. When I get into this with my clients we often get to the point when they see how ridiculous some of the claims they make about themselves in their own mind really are in comparison to the facts about themselves in reality. **M2**

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