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Field Guide to The Self-Doubter: Extra Credit

by Susan Pinker

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Rosalyn Lang has a Ph.D. in molecular biology, has just completed a postdoctoral fellowship at Duke University, and recently launched her own consulting firm. In other words, she's a walking advertisement for what it takes to be successful in science: smarts, opportunity, and perseverance. Yet when she looks back, she takes little credit for her successes. "I felt inadequate the entire time I was in graduate school. If I got a nice compliment, I just felt, 'What? They're trying to pull my leg! I can get kicked out at any minute.'"

One of just two women recruited to her graduate program in the department of molecular and cellular pharmacology at the University of Miami, Lang was also a Florida Scholar—an honor that funded her entire graduate education. Despite these distinctions, she felt undeserving, attributing any triumphs to luck, affirmative action, and sheer elbow grease. "It's a kind of panic driving you to work harder than anyone else," she says.

Lang now realizes she wasn't really an impostor. She just felt like one. Like many highly accomplished women, Lang suffered from "impostor syndrome." On the outside, she was a star and a role model. Secretly, though, she chalked up her successes to powers beyond her control, and meanwhile felt personally responsible for any failures—a feeling shared by 93 percent of African-American female college students, according to one study.

When it comes to personal happiness, Rosalyn Lang was in a no-win situation. If she received awards or praise, she didn't think she deserved them. And if she didn't receive these honors, she tacitly agreed. This strategy can protect you from disappointment, to be sure, but it also deadens the sense of satisfaction that should come with accomplishment. When one self-described impostor was informed that she had been selected for a prestigious scholarship funding two years of study abroad, her reaction was similar to Rosalyn Lang's: "'Really?' All I've been thinking ever since is, 'Oh no, they'll discover they picked the wrong girl!'"

What might explain the yawning gap between these women's self-assessments and the judgments of everyone around them? Like many high achievers—especially female high achievers—they have the sense that their abilities are illusions. One renowned expert in infectious diseases told me that everything she'd achieved in an illustrious career was "a fluke." And despite being in demand as a speaker, she needed to do much more research and reading to prove herself. "There are an awful lot of people out there who think I'm an expert. I'm so much aware of all the things I don't know."

Such dissonance can fuel further achievement, but it also creates anxiety. According to recent studies of medical, dental, and nursing students with impostor feelings, the phenomenon is

linked to perfectionism, burnout, and depression. This was true for Rosalyn Lang, whose impostor feelings drove her to work harder. "The work ethic was great. That's the kind of focus you need to get everything done in graduate school," she said. But "internal agony" was how she described her psychological state.

Depression and shying away from challenges are often part and parcel of the syndrome. Despite these risks, impostor syndrome is not a psychological disorder. It doesn't necessarily impair one's ability to live life day to day, and is not listed in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)*.

But since the late 1970s, when it was first identified by two clinical psychologists at Oberlin College, Pauline Rose Clance and Suzanne Imes, a number of studies have confirmed that the syndrome exists. When Clance and Imes first happened on impostor feelings in a study of 150 highly successful female doctors, lawyers, social workers, and university professors, they discovered that a high number of these competent women attributed their high salaries, academic honors, and promotions to being in the right place at the right time.

Continued successes, paradoxically, can just add to the anxiety. Valerie Young, a psychologist who leads workshops on impostor syndrome, describes how "rather than offering assurance, each new achievement and subsequent challenge only serves to intensify the fear of being found out." Even fame and fortune can't wipe out that self-doubt— Kate Winslet is an admitted sufferer.

Highly placed public officials have hinted at impostor feelings, too. Take Margaret Chan, who, as head of the World Health Organization, is the most powerful public health official in the world. Yet when asked by a *New York Times* reporter how she rose to her position, the superbly qualified Chan said it was all a matter of luck. Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor, too, has sterling credentials. Her perspective? "I am always looking over my shoulder wondering if I measure up."

Certain situations are more likely to elicit impostor feelings: new experiences where one is expected to act like an expert (being an interning physician); highly competitive environments (the Ivy League); or being a "pioneer" (the first in one's family to go to university, or the first minority to succeed in a certain endeavor.)

People who direct critical thoughts or feelings inward are more likely to feel like impostors. So if they receive a negative performance review, internalizers blame themselves, not their boss. Women are more likely than men to be internalizers.

The syndrome affects some men but thrives among women, according to research by two Purdue psychologists, Shamala Kumar and Carolyn Jagacinski. But self-doubt doesn't always make one avoid competition. The women who had the highest scores on the impostor scale were also eager to prove to themselves what other people already knew—that they could excel. And they were different from the men in the comparison group, who, if they felt unsure of themselves, wouldn't enter a contest they thought they wouldn't win.

There's no doubt: People with impostor feelings are often highly motivated strivers. In a race to avoid detection, they out-prepare and out-credential everyone else, so paradoxically, their efforts result in ever higher kudos. Though they continue to succeed, relief comes only with recognizing

that impostor syndrome constitutes a real phenomenon. Rosalyn Lang agrees. "Once you recognize it, you can always talk it down. You can say to yourself, 'I've gotten this far for a reason. I'm here because I'm doing great work, and it's where I'm supposed to be. And perfection just does not exist.'"

Susan Pinker is a PT blogger. Read her blog: [The Open Mind](#)

Own Your Accomplishments

Six steps for matching perceptions to reality. (See impostorsyndrome.com for more.)

- Separate your self-assessments from objective evaluations of your skills. Group-based evaluations, promotions, and letters of reference are less biased than the world seen through "impostor"-colored glasses.
- Give yourself opportunities to compete. Don't let your self-judgment prevent you demonstrating what you know.
- Reduce your isolation. Talk about your feelings with trusted friends and colleagues.
- Seek out a mentor or advocate in your organization who believes in you.
- Enjoy your successes and acknowledge praise when it comes your way. Resist the impulse to deny and deflect compliments.
- Remember that those who project an air of confidence may not know more than you do. Research shows that most people overestimate their abilities.

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