

Episode 64: Imposter Syndrome

Mandy: Imposter syndrome, it might show up as a horrible, gnawing feeling in your stomach after you've answered that question in the client meeting and then thought, "Uh, that was not my best work", or, perhaps you downplay your achievements. Maybe even attribute them to luck. Or you might say things like, if I can do it, anybody can do it.

Or maybe it's a chronic thought pattern of inadequacy, "I'm not good enough, smart enough, confident enough, talented enough, and it's just a matter of time before I'm found out for the fakey pants fraud that I am." You might also find it hard to accept compliments, "Oh yeah, that was nothing." Sound familiar?

Well apparently, 70 percent of us have felt imposter syndrome according to data from research firm Waller, and by the way, that stat includes men and women. Research from KPMG shows that 75 percent of women executives have felt imposter syndrome at some point in their careers. So if you are a statistic, today's solo episode is an invitation to shift your relationship to imposter syndrome.

Before we kick off, welcome to Enough, the podcast. I'm your host, Dr. Mandy Lehto, ex investment banker turned executive coach. This is a show for high achievers in fast paced industries whose lives look shiny and successful on the outside, but inside they never feel quite good enough, no matter what they've achieved.

If that is you, you might be feeling burnt out, disgruntled, and secretly, you might be wondering, "Is this all there is?" Chances are you might have experienced imposter syndrome too. So welcome, I'm glad you're here. I feel you because I have been there too. I kick off today's conversation sharing three reasons why your imposter syndrome might be getting flared up.

Ready? Let's dive in.

I was listening to a podcast episode with author and psychotherapist Emma Reid Turell, which is linked in the show notes. She talked about three reasons why we might be experiencing imposter syndrome. So number one, visibility, and this is my take on that. So are you suddenly more out there or in the public eye?

Maybe you're in a new role or you're speaking on a stage soon, or you're starting at a new company. So something that makes you more visible. Number two, is there novelty? So my take on that, are you doing something new? Maybe you've been promoted, maybe you've never led this many people before, or maybe you've joined a mastermind group and you kind of don't know where you fit in yet.

And number three is minority. So are you the only, or the first, or as the title suggests, in a minority? So say the only person of color in a boardroom, or the only woman in a meeting. So, let's park these three for a moment. We're going to come back to them.

Think of a situation in which you felt imposter syndrome. So, I'll share one of mine, which might get you thinking. So, I was in my first year of my doctoral studies at Cambridge University, and I'm having lunch with a big deal professor at the high table of his college. But first, some backstory. So I grew up on a small farm in rural Canada, tending pigs and cows and chickens.

I was the first woman in my family to ever go to higher education, and I had this story that I must have been a statistic. Like they obviously needed more women studying my subject that year at Cambridge, or my supervisor felt sorry for me and took me on. So these were my beliefs, and I did my best to push them down.

Anyway, so we're at this lunch, and the professor seems fascinated by me and my subject. He's asking loads of questions. He's even laughing at my jokes. I am blooming inside. Plates are cleared away and replaced by trays of fruit. I take a banana. Still talking, I peel the banana and take a bite. The professor gets this slightly amused look on his face, and then he leans in towards me and says, "It's so refreshing how you're eating that banana, so unstuffy. Everyone else here would be eating that with a knife and fork." Time stops. I feel that red patchy shame rash creeping up my neck. Please, please, please let a trapdoor open under my chair and swallow me whole. Hick from the sticks. Hick from the sticks. Hick from the sticks. That is replaying in my head on repeat for weeks.

Sidebar, I later googled how the queen would eat a banana. The link is in the show notes in case you're ever in one of those situations. You're welcome!

That situation, amusing as it feels nowadays, felt so mortifying back in the day. Why? Well, it hit all three areas. Visibility, I was sitting at the high table at this professor's college. The table was literally on a platform. Novelty, well I was new to the university, in a new country, in a new program, around new people.

And minority, I was the only student at the table that day. All the others, if memory serves, were professors, and they were probably all men. So let's get even more meta. When these situations happen, there's a sequence you can start paying attention to. So I use this method a lot in coaching.

Thought. Feeling. Behavior. Result.

So you're in a situation where there might be more visibility, some novelty, or you're in a minority and a thought occurs, so here's mine.

'I'm a hick who is so unsuited to eating fruit in fancy establishments with highly educated people,' so the short form of that is I don't belong here.

So, that thought gives me a feeling, and for me, that feeling was shame. Shame makes me contract, go inwards, where my inner self talk is horrendously vitriolic, and I become quiet, awkward, and hugely self-conscious. And that behavior creates a result, meaning I get nervous and anxious about any future invitations, and I hold back. So let's try a different scenario.

I have a lot of very successful coaching clients who are afraid of public speaking. So here's an anonymized run through of this same process from a real coaching scenario. So my client has a thought, I am truly hideous at public speaking. And the feeling this person gets when they need to speak, my heart is racing, my mouth has turned into the Gobi desert, I feel nauseous, I am going to crash and burn, I feel truly awful.

So, the behavior is, I'm so nervous, I end up reading the slides, this is my client talking, I don't include any of my personality, I don't trust how well I know this material. And the result? The feedback that the person gets is, well, the talk was a little... dry.

So here's a technique, when that unhelpful thought occurs, and you notice it's creating a feeling, try this. So step one, take a double in breath. Stanford professor Andrew Huberman calls this the psychological sigh, and says it's the quickest way to calm ourselves down. So we're taking a deep in breath through the nose, and when your lungs are full, without exhaling, you're taking another short top up breath on top of the original breath.

And then there's a long exhale through the mouth, so do a couple of cycles of that. Number two, name the feeling that you're feeling. Psychiatrist and professor Dr. Dan Siegel calls this name it to tame it. If we can keep the prefrontal cortex online by naming the feeling, getting logical about it, identifying it, then there's less chance of your limbic system kicking in to fight, flight or flee.

So for me, I didn't know how to do that and at that moment, I went into bunny in the headlights, I lost my words, which was probably freeze, and I got awkward, banana still in hand. So now I know, I am feeling shame. Number three, you've done your double in breath, a couple of cycles, you've named the feeling. And now what we're doing is rerouting your brain to the plentiful archive of ample evidence that you can in fact handle and recover from whatever gaffe or error or catastrophic story that is running right in your

head in this moment, remind yourself of your resilience. So, think about a time when you've recovered from a setback and remind yourself of that. Have a story in your back pocket, a situation where you felt exceedingly capable. So my client thinks of a moment when they got a raving review, haha, after public speaking of after using these techniques.

And I think about this moment, I'm sitting at the mic talking to you, telling you about my high table lunch story, and right now it actually feels light and funny, and I can give that younger me so much self-compassion, no more banana shame. So double in breath with the long exhale, a few cycles of that, name the feeling, name it to tame it, and then number three, reroute your brain to a more positive story.

And a little self compassion never hurts. If you're really struggling, do the breathing, name the feeling, and then think of what you'd say to a friend. and say it to yourself.

Here's a controversial thought, what if imposter syndrome wasn't actually bad? Basima Tewfik is an assistant professor at MIT Sloan School of Management and she says that feeling out of your depth, not feeling enough, these can actually make you a better team player.

She suggests that imposter syndrome can make us more other oriented, more empathetic, more open. It can even make us better listeners. So you'll find her quote in a really interesting article in the Stylist magazine, which is linked in the show notes, really worth a read. Maybe, just maybe, imposter syndrome is also a sign that you're up to something that really matters to you.

When you start feeling those doubts, when you start questioning yourself, maybe you're coming to the edge of your comfort zone. And we all know what happens when you have a few toes outside of your comfort zone, that's where change can actually happen. So, I'm curious, maybe imposter syndrome isn't all bad.

And thinking back to all the people that I've coached who have spoken about their imposter syndrome, a lot of it relates to those scenarios where we started. Visibility, novelty, minority. Those doubts and moments of caution that come with these scenarios, are incredibly normal, garden variety emotions.

Self-doubt, holding yourself back, I'm curious is this really a syndrome, which sounds almost medical and really heavy. The term initially evolved from a 1978 study around imposter phenomena by psychologists Suzanne Imes and Pauline Klantz. And I'm wondering if the term itself... is becoming outdated. There's a line in which these positive qualities of being other oriented, empathetic, open, a great listener, maybe there's a line in which they become maladaptive.

Kind of like we had our expert talking about perfectionism in episode 57, Catherine Morgan Schaeffler, if you haven't already heard it. So there are some great qualities to being a perfectionist, it's when they become over torque, and when it starts to become maladaptive, it's starting to pay attention to that balance.

So with imposter syndrome, some caution and self-doubt isn't necessarily a bad thing. It's when it becomes debilitating and starts holding you back, that is the balance that's worth a thought.

Here's a few other coachy thoughts before I close today. So it's really important to understand that imposter syndrome isn't just in your head, and it isn't simply an individual problem.

There are systemic challenges in which discrimination and marginalization are still happening that makes it especially difficult, say, for women of color, for people who are differently abled, people who are neurodiverse. And, although it's beyond the scope of this particular episode, I want to leave you with a really thought provoking piece that I'll link in the show notes on what the authors say, 'We shouldn't be talking to women about imposter syndrome anymore because it really is a larger systemic challenge'. So that's worth a read if you want to explore that topic further. The second thing I want to leave you with, educate yourself on imposter syndrome so that you can come up with your own conclusions.

I recommend Valerie Young's book, *The Secret Thoughts of Successful Women, Why Capable People Suffer from the Imposter Syndrome and How to Thrive in Spite of It*. She refers to some really interesting deep dive questions based on Dr. Gerald Weinstein's work. So if you think about imposter syndrome as a self-limiting pattern, which it is, consider the following questions.

You might want to journal on them, you might want to even take them to your coach. So what does my behavior help me to avoid? So think about those behaviors associated with imposter syndrome. Maybe it's not putting yourself forward. Maybe it's hoping your work will speak for itself. Maybe it's those self-deprecating things that you say.

So what do those behaviors help you to avoid? Well, maybe it's to avoid goofing up in a meeting or saying something stupid. Or if you pre condemn yourself, maybe when the critical feedback eventually comes, because eventually it will, maybe it won't feel as bad, which is a lie, but anyway.

Question number two, what does my behavior help to protect me from?

Again, I want you to think about those behaviors that might be associated with imposter syndrome. So well, it could protect you from looking stupid. It could protect you from criticism. It could, well, it gives you the false sense of being protected. It gives you the false sense of being protected from gossip or being fired.

And here's the question that really gets me, number three, what does my behavior help me to get?

Hmm, so if I'm super hard on myself, maybe I'll get sympathy. Maybe the other person won't be as critical because I've already been so darn hard on myself. Right? So the other behaviors associated with imposter syndrome, think about what else they help you to get, there's a payoff.

Maybe having a low profile might give the protection of anonymity. So if you're in a meeting and you're not putting your hand up and there's that challenging person in the room, maybe you'll get away with not showing your knowledge gaps. All self-limiting patterns protect us from what Dr. Weinstein calls the crusher. And the crusher is a core belief that we have about ourselves. It might be about a feeling of inadequacy or a feeling of unlovability or some kind of unworthiness or unacceptability. I am not enough, that's a crusher. And here's the thing, all crushers are lies. I'm gonna say it again for the folks in the back.

All crushers are lies. And the more you can grow your emotional capacity to sit in uncomfortable feelings when you're more visible, when you're a novelty, when you're a minority, the less you get triggered by your crusher thoughts and the feelings, actions, and results that those create.

We've covered a lot of ground in this episode, so you've learned some ideas of what might inflame your imposter syndrome, to do with visibility novelty and minority. You've learned a technique when you're in the grips of it so remember your double in breath and the long exhale through the mouth do a few cycles of that then name it to tame it, what is the feeling give it a name and then finally reroute your brain to a time when you've knocked it out of the park. Remind yourself that you have so much capability and so much resilience and so much bounce back ability no matter what happens. You have also learned that there might actually be some benefits to imposter syndrome. It's watching for when those become maladaptive.

I've also asked you to go deep in your journal or with your coach around those self-limiting patterns, what might those be about? And what we're really trying to uncover is that crusher thought. What crusher thought is your imposter syndrome guarding? And if you struggle to find a crusher thought, think about what you would hate for people to be saying behind your back, that'll give you some clues. I would be mortified for anybody to say, "Ugh, who does she think she is?" I would hate for people to say she's incompetent, talentless, full of herself. And I've noticed whenever I get imposter syndrome, I'm managing my image against those crusher thoughts of not enoughness. And my overarching invitation for this episode, doubt your thoughts, not yourself.

I have a really fun quiz if you want to dive even further into imposter syndrome. It's on my website So go on to mandylehto.com and scroll through quizzes or find it in the show notes. And before you leave Spotify or Apple podcast today, I would love it if you'd hit the follow button, so you never miss an episode. It also really helps the show to grow and speaking of growing if you know anybody who needs this episode in their headphones right away, thank you so much in advance for passing it on.

I am on retreat in Italy for the next week or so, having a creative break and filling my tank, so I'll be back in a couple of weeks. Please enjoy any episodes you've missed in the meantime.