

# Do you suffer from “imposter syndrome”?

**Experts offer quick strategies that'll help you give credit where it's due...to you!**

**H**ave you ever had a really big win—like landing your dream job or being nominated for a prestigious award—but instead of being filled with joy and confidence, you feel an undercurrent of doubt, stress and anxiety? And despite your triumph, you have a nagging feeling that you don't actually *deserve* the success...and even fear others will eventually discover you're faking it or you're a fraud?

“This is called ‘imposter syndrome,’ and it describes an experience of millions of competent, capable people who have a hard time owning their achievements,” explains Valerie Young, Ed.D., author of *The Secret Thoughts of Successful Women*. “Instead, they attribute their successes to factors outside of themselves, like luck and timing, explain their accomplishments away by saying things like, ‘Well, it wasn't *that* hard’ or minimize their victories by thinking things like, *I achieved this, but it's only because I have to work harder than others.*”

Often the fix for self-doubt is to reflect on past wins, but Young cautions that tactic doesn't work with imposter syndrome because the problem is our self-talk, not our résumés. “People who don't feel like imposters are no more intelligent, capable or competent than the rest of us,” observes Young. “Their secret: They build themselves up by fully claiming their accomplishments.” Here, find the imposter syndrome symptom you identify with and read on for strategies that'll shift your mind-set from stressed to self-assured.

## THE SYMPTOM

### Feeling “compliment anxiety”

After singing your first solo in the church choir, you're showered with praise from friends and family. You smile and thank them, but inside, the recognition makes you feel anxious. “You may be thinking, *If they knew what I know about myself, they wouldn't give me compliments,*” observes psychotherapist Karol Ward, author of *Find Your Inner Voice*. “But imposter thoughts can distort our self-perception.”

## THE Rx

### Poke holes in self-doubt

How do we feel worthy of kind words? “Start poking holes in your negative beliefs, which keep you from taking in the positive,” advises Ward. Next time you get a pat on the back, she suggests saying, “It's always been hard for me to hear positive things, but it really means a lot. I'll take your word for it!” Why it's effective: “When you're open and honest, it strips the power from the negative thoughts and gives you space to build on your self-esteem.”

## THE SYMPTOM

### Stepping out of the spotlight

The ladies in your volunteer group are encouraging you to apply for the organization's annual achievement award. You're flattered and thank them for their kind words...but in your head you think, *NO WAY will I put myself out there!* “I call it ‘flying under the radar,’ and it's a way of protecting yourself,” observes Young. “You think, *If I don't pop my head up, no one can judge me.* It feels safer to play small.”

## THE Rx

### Think big-picture

First consider what you're losing by trying to stay invisible, suggests Young. Ask yourself, *What opportunities will I miss out on?* Then think about the larger impact, like how the organization would miss out on what you can contribute. “Everyone loses when bright, talented people play small,” says Young. “But if that voice in your head says, *Who do you think you are?* flip it to, *Who do you think you are to NOT go for it?* You could make a big difference!”

## THE SYMPTOM

### Comparing yourself to others

You got a well-deserved promotion, but you can't stop thinking that you don't measure up to your superstar colleagues—and soon it will be very obvious. “Comparison is one of the biggest setups for feeling like a failure and an imposter,” says therapist Judith Belmont, author of *Embrace Your Greatness*. “No matter how accomplished you are, if you play the comparison game, you're always going to feel like you fall short.”

## THE Rx

### Take your own side

If you find yourself thinking, *My accomplishments aren't as impressive as theirs,* and feeling anxious, Belmont recommends saying, “That's just my anxiety talking. Actually, I was chosen because they are happy with what I've accomplished.” You can't just change a feeling like anxiety, but you can change the thoughts that lead to it, she explains. “This way, you're taking control of your own narrative and celebrating your worth.”

## THE SYMPTOM

### Over-preparing

Putting together your presentation for an upcoming conference is taking four times longer than it should because you're worried about screwing up and can't stop checking that you're ready for every contingency. “Over-preparing and over-working are coping mechanisms—you're trying to manage the anxiety of waiting for the other shoe to drop and being ‘found out,’” explains Young. “You're trying to avoid rejection, humiliation, fear and disappointment—but at a big cost.”

## THE Rx

### Get some mental distance

By viewing your negative thoughts differently, you can quickly feel more secure: “Imagine a train, and on each box car is one of your ‘imposter’ thoughts, like *I'm not good enough* and *They're going to find me out,*” says Belmont. Then picture yourself standing on a bridge or the station platform watching the train carrying these anxious ideas off into the distance. “With this exercise, you're observing these thoughts rather than buying into them,” she explains. Why it works: It puts space between you and the stressful voice in your head, freeing up your thinking so you can refocus on more productive self-beliefs, like *I've got this.*