

The Impostor Syndrome—Part 3

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*“Our doubts are traitors and cause us to lose the good we oft might win, by fearing to attempt.”
William Shakespeare in “Measure by Measure,” Act 1, Scene 4*

A sad effect of the impostor syndrome is that capable people hold back. Rarely conscious or intentional, we sufferers sometimes don't even try. Perhaps because we've not given our all, it feels (and looks) as if we've not failed. However, “by fearing to attempt,” we “lose the good we oft might win.”

Do you want your team members to “lose the good” that could benefit your customers and employees? Since most sufferers of the impostor syndrome do so silently, you'll never know.

Readers of my first two articles on this topic have told me, “I had never heard of ‘the impostor syndrome,’ but I sure recognize the vivid feelings of inadequacy. Where do they come from? And how do I shake the doubts when they seem to consume me?”

In my first article on this topic, I cited two books answering those questions. (Those references are on my website. Click on “Article Archives.” Scroll down to find “The Impostor Syndrome—Part 1.”)

Want something more recent than books from 1985? Consider Valerie Young's 2011 book, *The Secret Thoughts of Successful Women: Why Capable People Suffer from the Impostor Syndrome and How to Thrive in Spite of It*.

Don't let the title mislead you. She wrote about her doctoral research, which she conducted with successful women. The book, however, is for men as much as it is for women. Dr. Young writes, “Numerous studies have found no difference between men and women” when it comes to the impostor syndrome.

She continues, describing the much broader scope of gender differentiations: “The similarities [between men and women] are more common than the differences. [However], there *are* differences.” The book is laden with multiple examples for how women view their circumstances differently from men. For example, “The tendency is for females to blame failure on a lack of ability. Males do just the opposite. They credit themselves for their accomplishments and point to outside reasons for failure.”

After 200+ pages of guidance leading your “transformation from worrying about being unmasked to owning success and competence,” Dr. Young provides a very different observation. Instead of fearing inadequacy or even failure, she offers the idea that you may have a reluctance to pursue success.

She quotes Linus, Charles Schultz' young and gifted character in the *Peanuts* comic strip: “I am burdened by a great potential.” Remember, all the impostor syndrome studies have been conducted on successful individuals. Deep down, you know you are capable--and have even greater potential than you now exhibit. It's not a matter of being competent enough; it's more a matter of being confident enough.

Dr. Young cites Marianne Williamson's quote from her 1992 book, *A Return to Love*.

Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, ‘Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous?’ Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God.

Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you.

Granted, humility (which is “strength under control”) is appropriate also. Be a role model for others, not a steamroller arrogantly flaunting your authority. Finding the right balance is a continual challenge for leaders!

Leaders often tell me about the circumstances that hold them back. Consider to what extent the constraints may actually be self-imposed limitations that keep you from contributing beyond your current level.

Your self-doubts are traitors, causing you to “lose the good” you often might contribute. Whatever caused your shackling self-doubts, vow to throw off the restraints. Find a trusted colleague, confess your former limitations, and seek his or her support as you expectantly, yet humbly, move forward into your greater service to others!