

IT'S NOT YOU, IT'S THEM

Navigating Imposter Syndrome and Standing in Your Full Power

by Brittany Davis, LMSW, LEAP Cohort 8

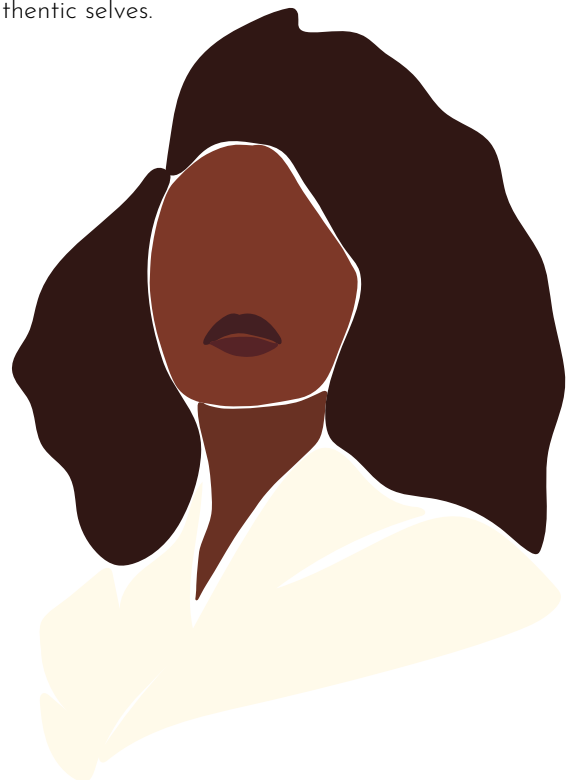
Are you a woman who feels like she doesn't deserve her success? Do you downplay your accomplishments to family and friends? Are you constantly surprised that you landed where you are professionally? If you answered yes to any of these questions, you are not alone. You may be wrestling with what some have called imposter syndrome, and others have rightfully reframed as a byproduct of oppressive structures in our society. Either way, it's not your fault and you belong where you are!

WHAT IS IMPOSTER SYNDROME?

Imposter Syndrome refers to feelings of self-doubt and the perception that your place in the world and your accomplishments may not be deserved and could be exposed as fraudulent. It was coined by psychologists Pauline Rose Clance and Suzanne Imes in the late 1970s after studying high achieving women. Clance and Imes explored the ways in which women explained their successes and failures. Women were more likely to associate their successes with coincidence, luck, or hard work, whereas men were more likely to attribute their successes to their innate intellect or ability. Failures and mistakes for women, on the other hand, were associated with an internal sense of lacking ability, while men attributed negative performance to the difficulty of the task.¹ Imposter syndrome has been known to lead to or exacerbate a variety of challenges including anxiety, low self-esteem, depression, burnout, job dissatisfaction, and more. It can even cause people to engage in behaviors that may hinder their future success, including procrastination, perfectionism, avoidance of help-seeking, hiding one's authentic opinions, and even disregarding promotions or better job opportunities.²

HOW DOES IMPOSTER SYNDROME IMPACT WOMEN OF COLOR?

Most of the women studied by Clance and Imes were white middle-to-upper class women between the ages of 20 and 45. Their initial work is missing the importance of an intersectional analysis that contemplates systemic racism, classism, sexism, and other oppressive power structures that impact the daily lives of women of color. Realities that contribute to imposter syndrome include: lack of representation of people of color, especially women, in positions of power; racial and gender bias and internalization of negative racial and gender stereotypes; lack of support and opportunities, among others. Not only do women of color experience imposter syndrome, but they may also feel the pressure to conform to societal standards of professionalism (often rooted in white supremacy) that may not always align with their authentic selves.



This, for many, exacerbates feeling like an imposter not only on a professional level but also a personal level. Feelings of inadequacy stemming from imposter syndrome are reinforced by racist and sexist societal messages. In fact, a recent study found that, for Black students, experiences of imposter syndrome often coincided with depression and anxiety related to experiences of discrimination.³

WHAT CAN I DO IF I'M EXPERIENCING IMPOSTER SYNDROME?

Though imposter syndrome is a societal issue, here are some strategies that may assist you in shifting your mindset and overcoming its personal effects on you.

- **Consider the following reflection questions:**
 - What are my strengths? How can I use my strengths in my job?
 - What are possible areas of growth for me? How can I ask for support in these areas?
 - What is the evidence that supports my belief that I am an imposter? What is the evidence that I am not an imposter? Is my thought a fact or an opinion? Is my thought fair? Are there other thoughts that are more true?
 - Will this matter in a week, a month, a year from now, five years from now?
 - Is it more likely that I've defrauded my supervisor, peers, friends, family, and HR department or that I'm good enough?
- **Develop self-affirmations.** Words matter, especially the words we say to ourselves. They can impact the way we feel and how we act. Affirmations are statements that can help shift your thinking from something negative to something more positive. Remember to create affirmations that feel authentic to you.
 - I belong in this room.
 - I am prepared and ready to tackle the day ahead of me.
 - My voice and perspective are important.
 - I can ask for help when I need it.
 - Create your own.

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Imposter syndrome is so tough. For so long, women and girls have been told we don't belong in the classroom, boardroom, or any room where big decisions are being made. So when we do manage to get into the room, we are still second-guessing ourselves, unsure if we really deserve our seat at the table. We doubt our own judgment, our own abilities, and our own reasons for being where we are. Even when we know better, it can still lead to us playing it small and not standing in our full power.

-Michelle Obama in an interview with Vogue Magazine⁴

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To further anchor these messages, you can incorporate a grounding exercise called the **Butterfly Hug**. For this exercise you should fully or partially close your eyes. Then you should cross your arms over your chest with your palms facing your chest and your fingers pointing upward and alternate tapping your shoulders with the palms of your hands mimicking the wings of a butterfly. Use the speed and pressure that feels good to you. While tapping, repeat your affirmation to yourself and take several deep breaths. Do this for 30 seconds to a few minutes if it continues to feel soothing.⁵ You can watch this short video for a helpful demonstration: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iGGJrqscvtU>.

- **Give yourself your flowers.** Keep a running list of your accomplishments at work and celebrate your successes, no matter how small (e.g., a thank you note from a colleague for supporting their initiative; planning a large event; submitting a grant application, securing grant funds; engaging in a speaking opportunity). This can serve as a reminder that you have a positive impact on your workplace and can even be useful in your annual review process.

- **Be gentle with yourself.** Remember that you are operating in an environment that may not have been designed for you. If you are struggling to feel like you belong, you are not alone. Remember, mistakes are a normal part of the learning process and they help us grow and enhance our craft. Also remember, it is impossible to know everything. If you ever feel overwhelmed by feelings of inadequacy at work, take a step back and contemplate how you might support a friend who is going through the same thing. We're often more supportive of our friends than we are of ourselves.
- **Seek support.** Support can look different depending on the person. Confiding with trusted peers about how you are feeling, seeking out a mentor within your field, asking for help from your supervisor (especially around job tasks you don't feel as strong in), and listening to podcasts featuring other women of color who have navigated imposter syndrome are just a few options.⁶ If you find yourself continuing to struggle with low self-esteem and are experiencing anxiety and depression or the continued negative impacts of racial and gender bias on your personal and professional life, it may be beneficial to see a trained therapist for additional support.
- **Promote racial and gender equity.** This may involve hiring a diversity, equity, and inclusion consultant to conduct listening sessions to understand the experiences of your staff and offer tailored training as appropriate.
- **Conduct regular reviews of policies, practices, and partnerships** to ensure equitable and anti-oppressive practices are and remain in place. This includes reviewing employment practices to ensure the hiring and promoting of diverse candidates, especially in leadership positions, and implementing salary transparency mechanisms to ensure pay equity.
- **Create a culture of transparency and support on your team.** Make sure new team members feel welcome and valued on the team. As a leader, expect mistakes and use them as learning opportunities for you and your team; always provide support in navigating them. Do not be afraid to share the challenges of your role and encourage your team to do the same and find ways to support one another. Be sure to uplift exemplary individual and team work.

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I've been there plenty of times. What's helped me most is remembering that our worst critics are almost always ourselves. Women and girls are already up against so much: The fact is that you wouldn't be in that room if you didn't belong there. And while negative thoughts are bound to crop up as you take on new roles and challenges, you can acknowledge them without letting them stop you from occupying space and doing the work. That's really the only way we grow—by moving beyond our fears and developing trust that our voices and ideas are valuable.

—Michelle Obama in an interview with Vogue Magazine⁷

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WHAT CAN I DO AS A LEADER TO SUPPORT MY STAFF MEMBERS WHO MAY BE EXPERIENCING IMPOSTER SYNDROME?

Western society has a tendency to focus on the individual, but the issues impacting imposter syndrome are societal issues - combatting it requires a collective response. For women of color leaders, this means that, as is often the case, we are making changes not only for those who come after us but also for ourselves. Organizations should:

- **Offer formal mentorship opportunities for junior staff members.** Ensure these mentorship relationships are meaningful and provide opportunities for mentees to receive feedback and support towards their personal and professional goals. Note: informal mentoring can also be beneficial. However, given that these relationships often develop due to informal relationships, which may not be as accessible to people experiencing imposter syndrome or people of color in predominately white spaces, other mechanisms should also be in place.⁸ Affinity groups based on identities and shared interests may also be helpful.

- **Provide ample training for staff members,** especially as they transition into new and/or leadership roles. This ensures employees are not set up to fail and understand their new responsibilities and how they should approach their role.

Imposter syndrome can be challenging to experience, but there are always ways to reacquaint yourself with your inherent worth in the workplace and beyond. Remember, if the world can make someone as accomplished as Michelle Obama feel like an imposter, there's something wrong with the world and not you. And for leaders, we can do better to meaningfully support those who work on our teams and create a more equitable world where we all feel able to stand in our full power.

About the Author

Brittany works in the anti-violence movement as a training and technical assistance provider helping communities across the country enhance their response to gender-based violence. She is also a mental health clinician and works with survivors of child sexual abuse and other forms of trauma. She was in Cohort 8 of VALOR US's LEAP Fellowship, which is a leadership development program for women of color leaders in the field to end gender-based violence.

Endnotes

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6. Listen to various podcasts here: <https://www.spreaker.com/user/14799492/tobis-final-episode>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BoHDDgeQtIc>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-aqOX9ir9-s>
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