3 Tactics to Manage Imposter Feelings & Self-Doubt
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As an executive coach and leadership development consultant, there is a phenomenon I encounter frequently with leaders I work with. It shows up more frequently when someone is moving into a new role, experiencing a transition, or operating outside their comfort zone. I find it to be particularly prevalent with women leaders I work with, and I have experienced it myself. I speak to audiences about this phenomenon often, and teach a workshop on it in women’s leadership programs.

What is it, you ask?

It is the occurrence of intense feelings of inadequacy and feelings of being a fraud or an imposter in the role you are in or in what you are engaged in. It includes the secret thoughts that you are not as good as others at what you are doing, and that there is something you must be missing that others have and you don’t.

The 2020 Leadership Summit Report published by KPMG, a leading international consulting company, found in their interviews with executive women that 75% of women experienced these imposter feelings at some point or different points in their careers. Numerous famous women have shared their experience with these feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt in media interviews and commencement addresses, further reinforcing that this is not an uncommon experience. Women like Jodie Foster, Beyonce, Sheryl Sandberg, and Arianna Huffington have all described their experiences with feelings of inadequacy and feeling like an imposter. Some notable quotes from other famous women include:

“I’ve written 11 books, but each time, I think, uh-oh, they’re going to find me out now. I’ve run a game on everyone and they’re going to find me out”
- Maya Angelou

“The beauty of the imposter syndrome is that you vacillate between extreme egomania and a complete feeling of ‘I’m a fraud! Oh God, they’re on to me! I’m a fraud!’”
- Tina Fey

“If I’ve learned one thing, it’s that self-doubt is one of the most destructive forces. Self-doubt is consuming and cruel. My hope is that we can all collectively agree to ban it.”
- Justice Sonia Sotomayor
In popular literature and in pop culture we often see the term “imposter syndrome” used to describe these feelings. Actually, the psychotherapists who first wrote about it labeled it “imposter phenomenon”, which more accurately describes the feelings as a “phenomenon” that occurs rather than a “syndrome”, which lends itself to describe a condition. Pauline Rose Clance and Suzanne Imes were these two psychotherapists who studied 150 high-achieving, successful women in the late 1970's. They found that despite their achievements, advanced degrees, and recognition from others, these successful women did not experience an internal sense of lasting success. They in fact experienced recurring feelings of inadequacy and feelings of being imposters in what they were doing.

While the root causes of this phenomenon are pretty complex and include childhood experiences, cultural conditioning, the presence of gender stereotypes, and/or one's own identity development, the fact is that the experience is pretty common, especially when one is experiencing a change, job transition, or is doing something out of their comfort zone. The internal strife is often hidden from the view of others, so while others can't see it, the experience is stressful and can cause one to avoid new situations, jobs, or learning opportunities that bring up these feelings.

It can also lead to a vicious cycle of addiction to praise, with the need for constant validation and approval from authority figures or from others.

What to do? While getting rid of these feelings completely may be difficult, learning to manage them is a good start. What are some things you can do if you feel like you are in the grip of an imposter feelings or a recurring self-doubt attack? I teach a full-day workshop on this topic and we still just scratch the surface of the complexity of reprogramming our own thought patterns. I will offer three tactics in this post that you can at least use to help circumvent the internal cycle of negative thoughts that are produced from these feelings.

**Tactic #1: Separate Yourself from the Feelings and Name Them**

You are not your thoughts, but you can become them. Learning to separate yourself from the negative chatter in your mind that comes from these imposter feelings or feelings of inadequacy is key to detaching from and observing them from afar. This helps you become aware of the negative, self-defeating narrative that you are playing in your head and choose to change the channel. When you hear the same negative tune in your head, name it. Who is that person in your mind who is telling you these self-defeating stories? What is her (or his) name? When you distance yourself from the chatter and name it as separate from your identity, you gain more control and can observe it from afar. “There’s Esmerelda again, telling me how over my head I am, or comparing me to everyone else.” This allows you to silence the voice by observing it as outside yourself.

**Tactic #2: Keep a Kudos File and Draw on It When Feelings of Inadequacy Arise**

Take a file folder and label it KUDoS with your name on it. In it, keep copies of any notes of gratitude people send you, awards and recognition you have earned, things you are proud of, speaking engagements, and the like. You can write something that went well on a dated note-card and put it in there. In mine, I have included thank you notes from my clients that were

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attached to flowers and gifts they sent me as gestures of gratitude for their work with me. Personalize it with whatever makes you feel good about your accomplishments or a positive impact you have made. When imposter feelings arise, pull out the kudos file and go through it. The positive self-validation from the file will go a long way in reframing your negative rumination.

Tactic #3: Carry a Reminder Talisman or Symbol
Whether it is a bracelet you wear on your wrist, a special stone, or a bookmark with a reminder affirmation on it, carrying a tangible reminder to “snap out of it” when you are in the grip of these imposter of inadequacy feelings can help reboot your brain. The senses of sight and touch along with the association of the object distracts your rumination and then brings to your awareness what you are trying to circumvent or interrupt. The reminder serves as a way to stimulate your senses and make a conscious choice to reframe your thoughts in the moment.

While these are just a few of many simple tactics that can serve to help you stop the thought patterns arising from the intensity of self-doubt, they won’t necessarily stop the thoughts from coming. What you are doing, however, is recognizing them for what they are and consciously choosing to circumvent and reframe them in the moment, so that they don’t become your debilitating truth.

The ultimate task is not only to apply tactics such as these above in the moment, but to do some deeper identity work that helps you become clear about your contribution and to separate your identity from achievement or social approval. That deeper grounding can help you take the focus off of yourself and the questions of “how am I doing?” and “how do I compare?”

For the time being, it may help to change the focus from the questions above to these three fundamental questions:

- What can I contribute?
- How can I serve?
- What am I learning?

It is a fundamental shift of your personal focus that has dramatic results.

About the Author:
Janet Ioli is an executive coach, writer, and speaker. She has over 25 years of experience leading leadership and organizational development, talent management, and Human Resources functions in four Fortune100 companies and specializes in leadership presence and women’s leadership. She is the President of Power Presence Academy and has worked with the Key Executive Leadership Program since 2013. You can find out more at janetioli.com.