Impostor Syndrome: Why I felt like a fraud, and how I overcame it

by Jason Cohen on January 18, 2010

Most high-performing people experience Impostor Syndrome. I did too. When you understand the cause, you can defeat it.

"**I feel like a fraud.** I've been at this for 16 years and I still feel like a fraud. I'm just waiting for the day they see through the façade, but they keep coming back every year."
—Jason Young

Ah yes, the awe-inspiring words of confidence from the seasoned entrepreneur. My friend Jason intended this as soothing words of solace during (one of my) periods of personal freak-out while Smart Bear was in its infancy.

I felt like a fraud every day. Here I was, selling a wobbly, buggy tool and pawning myself off as an expert in a field that didn't exist[1]. Every second I felt like I was putting one over on the world.

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[1] Our software was the first commercial tool for peer code review. Now a standard practice for many developers, and a standard feature in many development tools, at the time we were creating a market that didn't exist.

I would explain how our tool "cuts code review time in half," but was that actually true or had I just repeated the argument so many times that I stopped questioning it? I would orchestrate purchases, but should I be handling large sums of money with no knowledge of accounting,

cash-flow, invoicing, purchase orders, all while being relentlessly belittled by Accounts Payable? I would instruct customers on "best practices" for code review, even publishing a whole book about it, but who am I to tell other people how to critique code?

Aren't I too young? Isn't the tool too crappy to charge for? Aren't I too inexperienced? Don't I need an MBA or at least some sales training?

Is Smart Bear a "real company?" What does that even mean?

Objectively, and with hindsight, my feelings were misplaced. The tool really did save time and headache; customers said so. As much as I doubted the title "Code Review Expert," I had developed more experience with more teams in more situations than any one person could (because everyone else was busy doing their actual jobs). And sales isn't as mystical and unknowable as I feared.

Still, **emotions don't respond to logic.** Jason was telling me that these feelings don't go away, even when they ought.

The other thing he was saying is: **You're not alone.** It's not just business founders. Mike Meyers said "I still believe that at any time the No-Talent Police will come and arrest me." Jodie Foster said "I thought it [winning the Oscar] was a fluke. The same way as when I walked on the campus at Yale. I thought everybody would find out, and they'd take the Oscar back." June Huh, who dropped out of high-school to become a poet, and later won the Fields Medal—mathematics' highest honor—says "Of course you are happy, but deep down, you're a little bit worried that they might eventually figure out that you're not actually that good. I am a reasonably good mathematician, but am I Fields Medal-worthy?"

"I think instead of worrying about why people don't believe in you, we should worry about why you don't believe in *yourself*."

The name for this is Impostor Syndrome. Studies show that "40% of successful people consider themselves frauds" and that "A staggering 84% of the entrepreneurs and small business owners surveyed had scores indicating they feel like an imposter at moderate, frequent, or intense levels." Ask any small business coach; they'll confirm how prevalent these feelings are. It's also common with PhD candidates. People constantly complain of it on Twitter, and that's just the <1% who are (a) on Twitter and (b) willing to admit it.

Although not an official psychological disorder, and generally not crippling, if you have these feelings it's useful to know that it's common and there's something you can

do about it.

See if these sound familiar:

- You dismiss compliments, awards, and positive reinforcement as "no big deal."
- You are crushed by mild, constructive criticism.
- You believe you're not as smart/talented/capable as other people think you are.
- You worry others will discover you're not as smart/talented/capable as they think you are.
- You think other people with similar jobs are more "adult" than you are, and they "have their shit together" while you flounder around.
- You feel your successes are due more to luck than ability; with your failures it's the other way around.
- You find it difficult to take credit for your accomplishments.
- You feel that you're the living embodiment of "fake it until you make it."

But wait, how can this be? **This overwhelming lack of self-confidence is the opposite of the traditional entrepreneurial stereotype.** Don't founders forge ahead even when others say success is impossible? Doesn't a founder invent a new product based on her confidence that others will want it? Doesn't the very idea of starting your own company scream "I'm doing it my way, and my way is better?"

Here's why it makes sense. Consider what it means to be a perfectionist. The perfectionist sees flaws in everyone else's work; there's always a way to make it better—*her* way. She doesn't respond well to authority dictating how things must be; neither is she comfortable delegating to those who (by her definition) clearly don't care as much as she does.

Sounds like the stereotypical attitude of the arrogant startup founder, but wait! At the same time, the perfectionist is never happy with her *own* work either, seeing (inventing?) a never-ending stream of flaws that require attention. No matter how highly others regard her work, the perfectionist insists it's incomplete and unsatisfactory.

She can't accept the idea that others would be impressed with her accomplishments, because to her eyes they're mediocre works-in-progress. She worries that one day they'll realize she's right.

Our entrepreneurial motivation is not confidence, it's an insatiable desire to do it our way. Doing it our own way is not the same as being confident that it is the correct way. It's about never accepting any idea as being best, even if you like your current ideas better than everyone else's.

Can these feelings be constructive? Yes, if they're a sign that you're striving to learn and improve. As Andy Wibbels says:

> If I don't feel like a fraud at least once a day then I'm not reaching far enough.
>
> If you aren't scared shitless then why bother?

Here's what it looks like when you're channeling these self-doubts into something **constructive**:

- I doubt my title as "expert," so every day I read, write, and immerse myself in my field.
- I doubt the quality of my software, so I fix bugs as fast as possible, I write unit tests proactively, and I thank my customers for their patience.
- I doubt I deserve my reputation, so I work hard to earn it.
- I'm not as good as I want to be at speaking/writing/ programming/designing/managing, but I can see myself slowly improving.
- I'm not a "<u>real company</u>" yet, so I concentrate on making my customers successful, so they don't care about corporate size or structure.

On the other hand, here's what it looks like when these doubts are **harming** you:

- I doubt my title as "expert," so every night I worry about what will happen when I'm discovered as a fraud. I'm absent-mindedly looking for trivially-easy

jobs I could take where this pressure won't exist. (Looking for an "escape-hatch" is a well-documented behavior.)
- I doubt the quality of my software, so I spend lots of time covering it up with graphic design and heavy sales pitches.
- I doubt I deserve my reputation, so I live in constant fear of exposure. I can't sleep at night and I loathe myself for lying.
- I'm not as good as I want to be at speaking/writing/ programming/designing/managing, so I go out of my way to avoid any of it, and feel like a trapped animal when I'm forced to do it.
- I'm not a "real company" yet, so I feel guilty every time someone gives me money or believes anything I say.

If you're letting these feelings get to you too, at least recognize it so you can deal with it logically.

"Turns out my imposter syndrome was pretty much right on."

Here's some specific ways to answer the Impostor voice in your head:

…yet
Whatever it is you think you're not good enough for, append the word "yet." I can't do this job… yet. This article isn't good enough… yet. I don't deserve the title I have… yet.

"Am I a curious student?[2]"

A: When you meet a student, who is honesty, energetically, and humbly pursuing learning and growth, do you think "That's awesome, good for them, how can I help," or do you think "They're an impostor for not already being an expert?" So, when you act as a curious student, that's not being an impostor, that's the state of being a student. Which is awesome.

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[2] Inspired by Mihir Patel's article

"Do I deserve to be peers with my peers?"

A: Yes, unless you think Neil Gaiman doesn't deserve to be at the same party as Neil Armstrong or vice versa, because they feel the same way, and you know they're both wrong.

"Do I deserve the [title/position/responsibility] I have?"

A: Do you think some idiot gave you a hand-out for nothing? If not, then yes, you deserve it.

"Sometimes I feel stretched and that I don't know what I'm doing."

A: That is the human condition, for humans who strive. Only someone who is ignorant and foolhardy doesn't realize there's more to know, more to learn, and to be careful with confidence. If Mike Meyers isn't sure whether he's funny, then it's just the human con-

dition. Even if sometimes you *are* stretched too far, that's the normal condition for striving. It's something to embrace and work on, not evidence that you shouldn't be doing it at all. Unless you think "learning and growing" is something you should never do, or if you think "learning and growing" should never feel uncomfortable.

And when logic fails, maybe this will help:

You believe that Mike Meyers and Jodie Foster are talented, right? And June huh deserves that medal? You might even believe that I'm an expert in peer code review and startups in general. Yet we doubt ourselves every day. *And we're wrong*.

So if we're wrong, you're wrong too.

Don't stop striving, just stop holding yourself to an impossible standard, and don't worry what other people think.

They're not thinking about you at all.

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