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*“You can only be **Yoursself**; Everybody else is already taken”*

- Oscar Wilde

You get the dream job, the one you have been waiting for your whole career. The job and the peer group recognition in your wildest dreams you never envisaged coming to pass. Awarded a long-awaited promotion, your contribution to the business, having been singled out! Given the reward of additional responsibility to lead and really make a difference, not just manage. So, what's the problem?

Feelings of nausea, embarrassment, concerns of being called a fraud, panic attacks, constant feelings of insecurity, fear, are all just some of the emotions many of us have to live with, under the umbrella heading of 'Imposters Syndrome'. A phenomenon, for those suffering from it, which is as all-consuming, as is the contradictory manner of its appearance. Robbing many of what should be a celebratory moment, to be replaced with a magician's smoke-like appearance, of self-doubt and worry suddenly on the stage.

Sufferers who include the rich the famous and the so-called elite of our society. Those who have appeared to have “made it”, by our societal measurements of success, yet remain in the clutches of these very same symptoms, as many of their fans and followers, living on the surface of things, (relatively speaking) far more “ordinary lives”.

I was first introduced to Imposters Syndrome, in the middle of a project that was coincidentally, going horribly wrong. One of the individuals I was counting on to remedy matters, came to me, with his own set of challenges. Their sense of inadequacy in the face of a recent promotion, setting off a series of thoughts – which completely transcended the boundaries of the current project, I was trying to save. The individual in question took on a world view which impacted their very identity of who they were, and their sense of what they were capable of. Their assessment concluding, that they were not ‘good enough’, they had never been good enough, and how they were relieved, this current situation (a project in flames) would serve the purpose of finally revealing that truth.

It was through an off-site review, away from the project, that we were able to introduce a degree of objectivity and begin the task of separating fact from fiction. We were also able to uncover just how long they had been suffering from this fear of being “found out”, despite the abundance of evidence to the contrary. The separation between reality and the imagined, having become almost non-existent.

Whilst we were not able to address immediately the genesis of the feelings they were experiencing, and how long they had been going around this particular loop, we were able to begin the journey of discovery, and in so doing, address the immediate paralysis, which was now so evident in the impact on their mental and physical wellbeing.

Finding a sense of their own identity – they could hold on to, which was both recognizable and accessible, was the immediate priority. This proved to be the cornerstone of an approach which enabled them to make a small step forward and past the present state of share panic. Whilst they did not remain on the project, we did remain friends. Subsequent conversations would reveal extensive amounts of introspective work they did with professional help.

A common definition of **Imposters Syndrome**: ‘Feelings of inadequacy that persist despite the evident success of those in its grip’.

Given the amount of time we spend at work, over any other activity, the conflation of thinking ‘that we are what we do for a living’, is understandable. Beliefs rooted in this kind of logic can help explain how one single event, planned or unplanned, can have such significant consequences (not just confined to work) for the individuals involved.

In much of the available research on this subject, a common occurrence for many of us experiencing this syndrome is often, being ‘promoted from one position to another, involving, seniority, responsibility, reward, visibility amongst a peer group, etc. Whilst the corresponding fallout can manifest itself in different ways. What is also common to those under this umbrella, is the prevailing feeling of inadequacy, affecting the very core and sense of self-worth.

“We are promoted to our level of incompetency”

The Peter Principle observation on trends in organisations – Laurence J Peter

Laurence J. Peters theory helps explains why there can be a natural fear factor being thrown into new situations, even if they are in familiar surroundings.

I once worked with a semi-professional footballer who explained what it was like during his ‘trials’ for a professional career. It was not the skill level or the fitness which caught him out, he would recall, it was the speed of response required; *“everything seemed to happen so much faster than what I was used to”*. The sense of panic of not having enough time to respond, which led to him consistently make, uncharacteristic mistakes throughout the trial. Past successes counting for nothing in the face of the new situation and context.

This rational and logical view could be used to try and understand Imposters Syndrome, but nowhere near sufficient. The reason being, the feelings of inadequacy, more times than not, have nothing to do with capability deficiency (in fact usually the exact opposite); instead, its roots can lay in a mental construct that is all too often unique to the individual - once described to me as, the previous successes which put them into the position to be promoted suddenly counting for nothing, and the future projection into the new scenario, revealing a sense of dark foreboding removing any light, when they thought about it. That somehow ‘everyone’ would know more about their deficiencies, than they would believe the reasons why they were thought eligible for the promotion in the first place.

Prevailing theories have characterized the different forms this may take, including in the excellent work done by Valerie Young – Secret Thoughts of Successful Women. An exploration of the myriad of reasons why people can feel undeserving of their own hard-won successes.

“How you define and experience competence, success and failure, has everything to do with how confident and competent you feel”

Secret Thoughts of Successful Women - Valerie Young

Her extensive research, calls for, and unbiased reflection of self, in order to make change likely. The challenge being, getting to a place where such a reflection is possible and overcoming the reasons preventing it, which includes: Self-induced external pressure – put on by the individual on themselves as the feelings are not necessarily evidenced-based, so they need to be created.

The genesis of the feelings whilst triggered by the here and now, can have their origin rooted in childhood occurrences, or even transferred by relationships with parents, or siblings, which have remained cocooned within the individual. The feeling of isolation that, there is only 'you' affected in this way, adding even more pressure on the individual, using this type of internal focus and siloed thinking.

The case of the 'perpetual winner', driving unrealistic expectation on themselves, of being able to predict future success, particularly when the individual does not know, what they don't know about the new situation.

Common to many of the different symptoms of this syndrome are thoughts that are created, no longer rooted in the real world, instead fostered by the imagination, which appears as fact.

Here we go again!

My own relationship with Imposters Syndrome, (when I look back over my career), I came to refer to as, "here we go again - same shit different, different day". The expression founded by, the consistency and formulaic nature of the occurrences. The series of triggers whilst being different, seem to have a common framework of responses from me:

- Massive amounts of self-doubt, having accepted an assignment or position, which would have the effect of scaring me to my very core. Driven by a sense of, *'I had finally done it, and bitten off more than I could chew'*.
- The familiar feeling of nausea at the pit of my stomach, as a returning companion throughout the process of getting my head around the fact, this change was real and now actually happening.
- Interrupted sleep patterns, becoming the new norm.
- The need for visual stimulus at all hours – specifically, re-runs of programs or films I had seen before. Content that I could watch them, knowing the outcome in advance. In that visually aided process, allowing my unconscious mind to carry on in the background, making sense of whatever it was pervading my thoughts, responsible for the interrupted sleep.
- Copious amounts of research, trying to bridge the gap between the levels of known and unknowns in the new situation.
- All of these doubts and fears clouding my world view, sitting on a foundation of irrational thinking, despite the volume of evidence to the contrary, supporting the reason why I was given the opportunity in the first place.

Moving forward:

- ⇒ Recognition that the roots of the triggers are real and that they need to be honored and respected.
- ⇒ The creation of a remedial and iterative process, that is proportionate to the impact and turmoil created during these moments of extreme self-doubt.
- ⇒ Being open and honest to the cycle of negative behavior and include others as an external support structure.

From this external position of trust, it enabled me make sense of which way is up. Done well and overtime helping me discover the value that can be extracted from something which appears to be negative; yet has the potential to be life-changing. My true value as a contributor to society emerging from the shadows into the light of recognition. Not only to be seen but, understood sufficiently and incrementally over time, making it part of my new reality.

“To improve is to change, to perfect is to change often”

- Winston Churchill

As in most transitions, there is no such thing as guaranteed outcomes, despite the desire for it. This Winston Churchill quote opens up a series of thoughts to one becoming comfortable with the idea of being uncomfortable, through seeking continuous change. I used this as my approach in coming to terms with my own degree of self-doubt, by continually putting myself into new situations. Forcing me to practice the very process of coping on a routine basis, and iteratively trying to improve it, in each new instance.

One of the coaches I used along the way as part of the coping process, used a simple but yet effective mechanism to keep me rooted in reality as opposed to an imagined one.

Using the acronym for **FEAR** in a certain way; **F**alse, **E**vidence, of things that **A**re not **R**real. This enabled a conversation that would separate the negative imagined thoughts about the new situation and the ones rooted in fact. This process would prove to be a foundational one, which would be repeated on cue, with the same frequency and consistency as the negative thoughts about the new situation.

*“I have had a lot of worries in my life,
most of which never happened.”*

- Mark Twain

To this day I routinely repeat this process as part of the **'celebration'** of a new assignment, with a group of my trusted advisors. Interestingly, in performing this role myself for many others over the years, I am often humbled by the integrity of the experience, in holding up a reflective mirror of truth. Objectivity, being a key in itself to beginning the process of change, combined with the courage to explore the root causes of our self-doubts and limiting beliefs. Ultimately as in all things, it is not what happens to us which defines us, it is the subsequent actions we take (post-impact of the event), which will determine where we end up!

End of Insight

