

Turning the Tides of Impostor Syndrome Together

Women of color are particularly vulnerable to struggling with Impostor Syndrome. One of the hallmarks of this syndrome is the constant and nagging sense that you are a fraud, that what you have is due to luck, circumstance or social skills alone. This leads to overworking and overproducing in an effort to demonstrate one's competence. When as women of color leaders, we constantly experience having to work twice as hard for the recognition that those from privileged groups have to just show up for, Impostor Syndrome is easy to identify with.

The concept of impostor syndrome was hypothesized in 1978 by psychologists, Pauline Clance and Suzanne Imes. It usually contains the following dimensions: a fear of failure, attributing success to luck or overwork, denial of ability, discounting praise, and having the characteristics of Superwoman. It's not a psychological disorder, but a constellation of behaviors and thoughts that create this phenomenon, usually seen in high achieving people. Impostor syndrome makes it very difficult to appreciate one's own talents and accomplishments and perceive them as one's own.

When it is societally expected of women of color to be less than (i.e., not as capable as our peers, requiring additional support), developing Impostor Syndrome can be more common. While having Impostor Syndrome can lead to an image of being a hardworking superstar, it often coincides with burnout and overworking, as well as struggling to take risks, accepting praise, trusting our worth and belief in our capacity to succeed.

So, what can we do as a sisterhood to impact this phenomenon culturally and to put an end to characteristic Impostor Syndrome in women of color?

We can mentor. We can support other women of color and encourage them to accept their accomplishments, and to know that accepting these stellar aspects of yourself will not inevitably lead to some slip up that makes you a fraud. We can teach our mentees through example about how not to overwork to prove our worth, how to accept praise, and to have confidence in our ability to succeed. We can cushion their fall when they inevitably make a mistake, and teach them how to learn from it, rather than see it as proof of being deficient.

We can watch our thoughts and the thoughts of others. We can move away from all-or-nothing thinking and seeing mistakes as catastrophic. We can validate each other when we have experiences of being perceived as less than, but we can agree that we are not less than and that this is a method of oppression that we cannot participate in. We can be forgiving of ourselves and others and more focused on our learning and abundance, not hierarchy or who is better or worse.

We can observe and adjust our behaviors that illustrate that we feel less than. We can stop valuing overworking as a virtue and see it as trapping and reinforcing of our insecurities, which also leads to less balance in our lives. We can choose not to work

for people and organizations that include us conditionally, where we constantly feel like we have to prove ourselves over and over again.

We can form a sisterhood against Impostor Syndrome. We can understand how Impostor Syndrome shows up for women of color and insist that we combat it within ourselves and offer to others support to fight their experiences of Impostor Syndrome. We can notice when we see others overfunctioning to prove that they are worthy, when we know that they already are. We can make sure that we never manage others in ways that reinforce Impostor Syndrome by creating uncertain evaluation processes, cultures that overwork, and support unhealthy competition and insecurity.

Impostor Syndrome is possible to overcome, but it's critical that we can identify the behaviors and thoughts that feed unhealthy behaviors. We don't want to support or create cultures meant to keep people insecure and unstable in their perception of their accomplishments and leadership abilities. We, together, can create an intolerance for Impostor Syndrome and the ways in which it oppresses women of color and prevents them from fully embracing themselves and their talents. When we question our skills, it creates greater instability about the direction of our careers, and allows opportunities to constantly be left to the whims of others and their evaluations. The perpetuation of work cultures and situations that support Impostor Syndrome, especially for women of color, also supports structural inequities. However, as a sisterhood, we can work to eradicate it in ourselves and others, and create opportunities for us all to believe in ourselves, our futures, and value all that we have done, will do, and are capable of doing.