



Managing the “Impostor” Within

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Impostor Phenomenon

A sense of inadequacy based on the belief that one's accomplishments are not due to genuine ability but are a result of external circumstances or qualities that not related to talent (Clance and Imes, 1978; Langford and Clance, 1993).



The **Impostor** Phenomenon in High Achieving Women: Dynamics and Therapeutic Intervention

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Abstract: The term **impostor** phenomenon is used to designate an internal experience of intellectual phonies, which appears to be particularly prevalent and intense among a selected sample of high achieving women. Certain early family dynamics and later introjection of societal sex-role stereotyping appear to contribute significantly to the development of the impostor

THE IMPOSTOR PHENOMENON

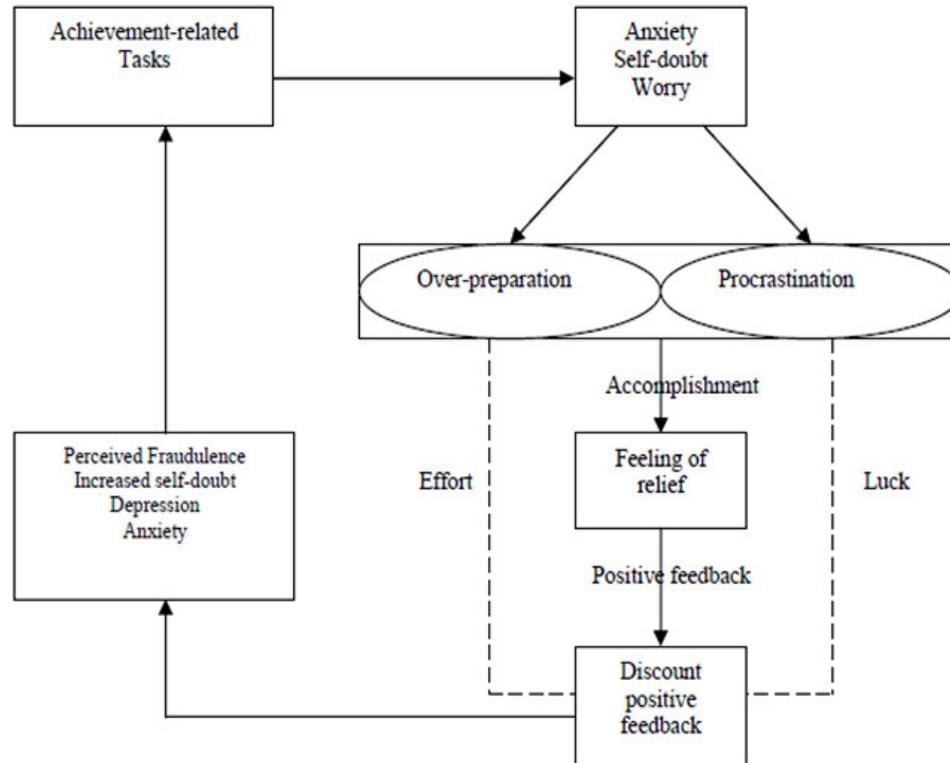


Figure 1. Diagram illustrating the Impostor Cycle based on Clance (1985). The cycle begins with the assignment of achievement related tasks.

Clance (1985) posited six characteristics of Impostor Phenomenon:

- Impostor Cycle
- The need to be special, to be the very best
- Superwoman/Superman aspects
- Fear of failure
- Denial of competence and discounting praise
- Fear and guilt about success

Impostor Phenomenon

- “So, for me, impostor syndrome is a feeling of being out of your depth, yet already entrenched in the situation. Internally, you know you're not skilled enough, experienced enough or qualified enough to justify being there, yet you are there, and you have to figure a way out, because you can't just get out. It's not a fear of failure, and it's not a fear of being unable to do it. It's more a sensation of getting away with something, a fear of being discovered, that at any time, someone is going to figure this out. And if they did figure it out, you'd honestly think, "Well, that's fair enough, actually." - Mike Cannon-Brookes, co-founder/ co-CEO, Atlassian, publicly traded software company





As a teacher, advisor, and mentor, I want to make sure I am a positive influence in the lives of my students. I integrate diverse and inclusive perspectives into my courses so students learn to celebrate not only their similarities but also their differences.

Sarita Ray Chaudhury, Business



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Accounts of being an Impostor . . .

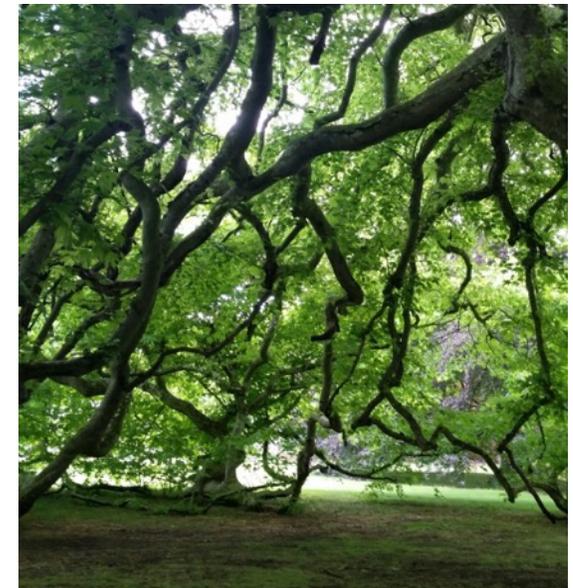
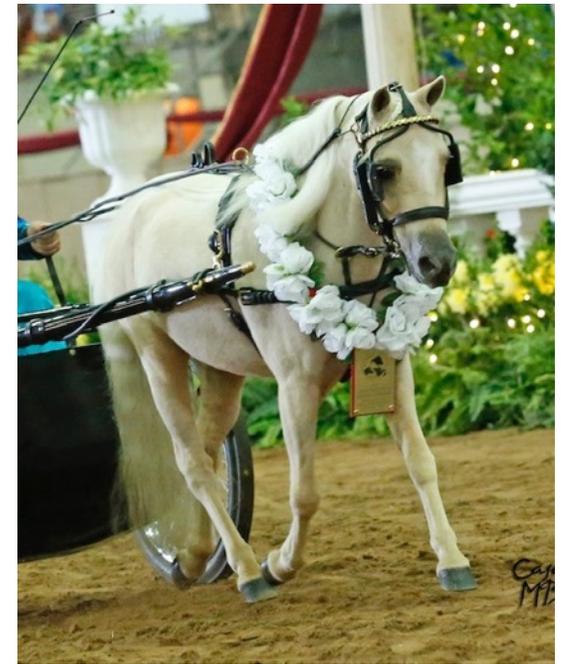
- For teaching, I sometimes feel that though I study the stuff, I've taught the same stuff for a long time that often students will ask something that I don't know, and I feel like I should know it. I've taught the stuff, I know the stuff, but I am always concerned that I don't know enough about stuff that I've taught for 20 years and my rationalization in part is that I don't always keep on top of stuff that I have been teaching for 20 years so I feel like I should be more up on them. I may bring myself more up to speed when I am preparing for a particular semester but something in the back of my mind says that I should be more on top of all these and someone is going to ask something and you are not going to know this, and you should be. - Beachfront

- Everyday. Yes. Here's how I see this impostor situation - part of what is happening is we are experiencing seeing ourselves one way, but others see us in a different way. So, what that looks like is "Oh, you should be in this leadership position, or you should take on this role but at the back of your mind, "I don't really know whether I'll be good at that," "I don't know if I have the skills or the expertise" . . . I have friends who say you could take on a department head of role or you could be so good in a provost role at some school. Part of it is I wonder whether I have the skills to do that and part of it is I don't want to lose what I have, my freedom. - Jamaica



The Impostor feels like . . .

- It felt afraid of getting "caught", "called out", having my lack of ability shown to the world, even though there really wasn't anyone who would have really cared, not in the long run. It is the feeling that I possibly have not done things perfectly. – Horse
- It feels awful, it's that pit of your stomach feeling where you are anxious and scared that someone is going to find out. I used to have this dream that someone is going to find out that I didn't do this one class for my undergraduate degree and that it immediately null and voided my Masters and my PhD because got into to these programs based on the assumption that I had done this work at the undergrad level. I laugh, say it's a dream but it's that fear that you didn't do something, that you didn't do enough of that, that you faked being smart. It's the fear that someone else will recognize it and then you are constantly hiding . . . if I share my vulnerabilities with you, then you might see the truth. – Tree



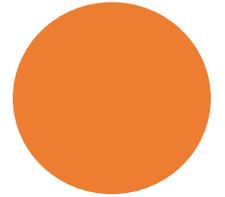
I address the Impostor by . . .

- Only doing what is comfortable (not recommended)
- Focusing on my own situation
- Sitting with the negative feelings, examining them
- Finding a mentor that you can be honest with
- Assembling and calling upon a personal support team
- Communicating honestly in the work domain
- Challenging the self talk by tallying the evidence
- Focusing on the big picture and my priorities
- Embracing the imposter and the discomfort as a pathway for growth
- Gathering information, preparing, and then preparing some more
- Sharing my knowledge differently

I address the Impostor by . . .

Assembling a personal support team:

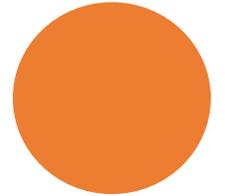
- I talk to my family a lot. I speak with my mother a lot. She is my voice of reason. And my uncle because he is also a faculty member at another institution. They reflect on what I have done in the past (“but you have done this, this, and this”), they remind me of what I’ve done in the past and how that affects what I am talking about. They might give ideas on how I can, have you considered this avenue, have you considered doing this, etc. For me, you forget what you do, so you need someone to remind you of what you have done. – Chocolate box
- I talk with a close friend. If I don’t have anyone to rely on close by, I will keep in inside me, my days to day colleagues may not see that, but my sister, my close friends, I will talk about and try to understand the situation. I choose to talk to people who can uplift my mood. - Dolphin



I address the Impostor by . . .

Communicating honestly in the work domain:

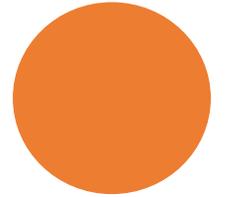
- Okay, so sometimes it helps to just get around people who are okay with us being this way. With sitting in this little space of doubt, it becomes somewhat of a motivator . . . we kind of help. So, I might not be able to pull my own bootstraps to help me get up, but you can, and you'll say “well, you know what we're going to do this, we're going to do this, and we're going to do this.” – Jamaica
- This past semester, my college worked on a new curriculum and class rollout. The four professors teaching the management course met on a weekly basis to go over challenges of the course and talk about assessment, etc. All of us were women. It was interesting to hear stories from the other ladies about their self-doubt and issues they experience in our profession. It was almost like a makeshift support group, although that was not the purpose, we were meeting. Especially dealing with professional issues and complications from Covid, I found the support of the other ladies critical for me getting through the semester in one piece. - Mini horse



I address the Impostor by . . .

Challenging the self talk by tallying the evidence

- We are trained to look for empirical evidence, I cannot deny that there is evidence to support that I am not an imposter, there is evidence to support that I have been published, that my peers have validated my research, that my research is been cited. I have evidence to support that my service contributions are meaningful, I have evidence to support my teaching, not just student evaluations but peer evaluations from my colleagues, and my own sense of feeling that classes are going well. “Yes, that one lecture may have been terrible, I may not have covered that particular concept well but I have evidence that I have been teaching well for years.” I also look at the outcomes, my students going on to grad school, I think of my honours student who is now doing research on concepts she learned in my third-year class calling to talk about how her work ties into what we talked about then. So being trained to think empirically offsets the impostor phenomenon, it helps vanquish the impostor, she still shows up over and over again, but she is not able to sit as long as she did when I first started the PhD program. – Tree
- I realize that this being an impostor is a common feeling which helps me to know I am not alone. It's common for me to feel as though I could or should be doing better in most things I do. However, I am aware that these internal voices do not serve me well. I look at what I have done . . . remind myself that I am doing the best I can...something I remind my clients of regularly. – Pretty salad



I address the Impostor by . . .

Focusing on the big picture priorities:

- As I get older, I reflect on what my priorities are . . . I try hard to put things into perspective as in, is this really that important? Does it matter as much? One thing I have done in the past couple of years is to see things through the lens of my children. What will they think, what will my kids think if I'm not this super accomplished, published person, would they care? Does it matter to them, would it make a difference? Of course, they are interested, and they would be proud if I am successful, but in terms of it making a significant difference for them, I don't think it really matters. In terms of roles, my first role is that of being a mom more so than my profession so how I spend my days is informed by that . . . – Girl with lilies painting





I address the Impostor by . . .

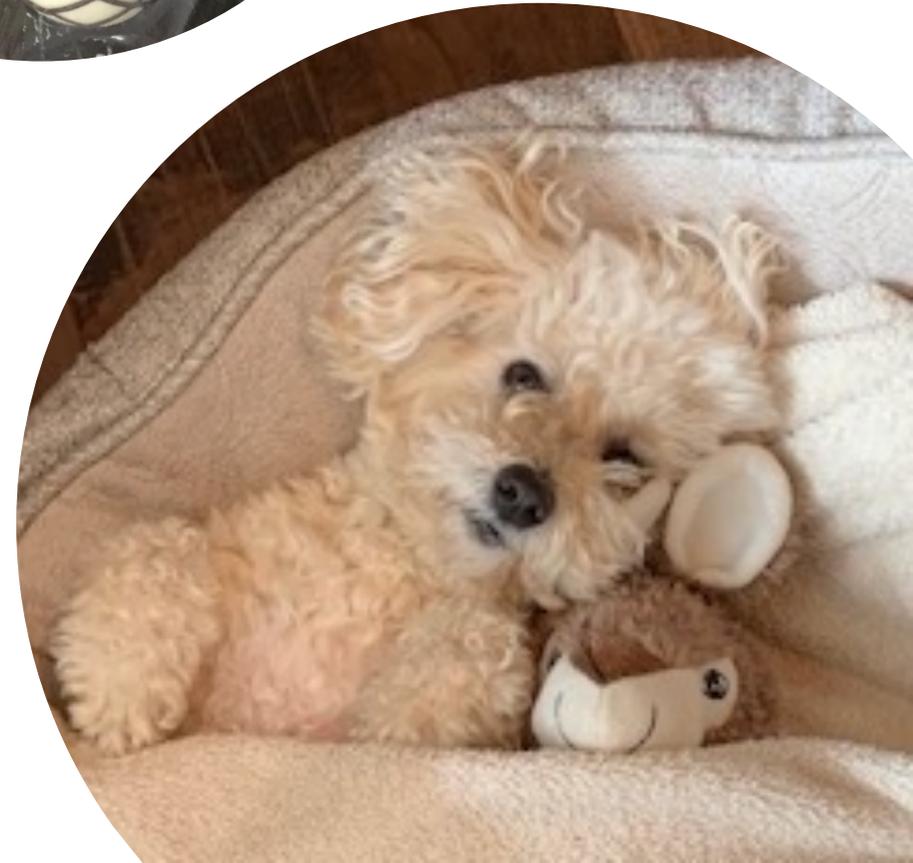
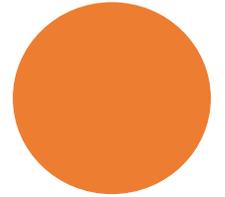
Embracing the impostor and the discomfort as a pathway for growth:

- A few years ago, we introduced a new course . . . I was the first person to teach this class and it seemed that the class was going along terribly . . . I thought “Oh my God, why did I want to do this course, what was I thinking, never going to do this again.” Then I got feedback from students saying, “loved it, it was my favourite course, “and I was like “aha, that’s interesting because your experience is different from mine.” My experience was that I didn’t feel good while teaching this course, but they didn’t know any different, so it helped me reshape the course in the subsequent semesters . . . since then, I’ve taught it four times in total and each time I feel so much better, but I still remember that first semester feeling like an impostor . . . Then I realized that it’s because I was trying to teach the course in a way that was not authentic to who I am so I revised it. I also realized that all of this wouldn’t have happened if I didn’t challenge myself to take on a new course so I think you can avoid the impostor syndrome if you play it safe, but I think that’s terrible . . . If you do challenge yourself, you need to give yourself permission that the first time you are going to feel like an impostor, the second time you are going to feel like it, it gets better with time and it gets better when you stay true to who you are rather than try to emulate another version of who you think you should be as a teacher, an a colleague or whomever. – Tree
- I actually place myself in situations that are out of my comfort zone, where I will feel like an impostor, knowing that the end result will be increased self confidence. – Pretty salad

I address the Impostor by . . .

Gathering information, preparing, and then preparing some more:

- To deal with these feelings on a day-to-day basis, it is just a matter of staying focused, staying on schedule, staying current and staying positive. I'd say that I am a gatherer of any and all information that will help me in my professional activities. Both in the short-term and in the long-term, I look to stay current by reading, researching and striving to acquire valuable information for educational, professional and personal betterment. - Puppy
- As soon as I feel it, I start doing work . . . I don't get caught up in it, I immediately try to stop it. Even if I am working on a project, and I am like oh my gosh, they are going to figure out that I can't really do this. The first thing I will do is everything I can to make sure that I am knowledgeable, and things don't crash on me . . . as soon as I feel it (the imposter), I shift into doing something to stop it. If I feel it in teaching, maybe I need to go take more classes, so I am knowledgeable in the area that I feel like an imposter. Right now, the area where I am trying to work on being a better advisor and mentor . . . I fall back on professional development I am reading every website on advising, on mentorship, because I need to fix where I feel like I am deficient. For me] . . . as it enters, "what do I need to do, what do I need to read," and I read everything in sight. – Chocolate box



I address the Impostor by . . .

Sharing my knowledge differently:

- Do somethings that translates experience and knowledge into new areas. Would I feel the same way if I were using my knowledge and skills in different areas? For example, I am writing a book on diversity and inclusion, so would I feel the same way if I were to consult for an organization? . . . Crafting interesting ways to share the knowledge that we have, like podcasting or webinars, where you are presenting information that you have, and people are coming to learn about x, y and z because they want to learn more. So, these different ways of packaging out knowledge and experience, for me that's a long term strategy . . . I will be doing things in my own term, so I won't feel the same kind of impostor issues as I did earlier in my career. – Beachfront



My organization can help me by . . .

- Creating an inclusive environment
- Clearly articulating reasonable expectations, and providing role clarity
- Offering mentoring and sponsorship opportunities
- Providing training and professional development opportunities

My organization can help me by . . .

Creating an inclusive environment:

- Create inclusive environments with practices that are not necessarily diversity/ inclusion related . . . morning meetings/ team huddles, what went well yesterday, what can we change . . . include people, draw in the silent ones. - Beachfront
- People are talking a lot about diversity . . . in my university, some of the people on these diversity committees and the ones mistreating other people. Diversity is lip service, mask or shield . . . have to be more intentional about including people . . . right now we are talking about women in science more than ever people . . . this cannot happen suddenly, they are changing things on paper but in reality people might still be mistreated, looking down at the capabilities of a female . . . people have to reflect and address this, I don't know if a university or an organization can do something . . . when we are working with people, we tend to focus on the work, we need more people working on meaningful things, getting to know each other. - Dolphin



My organization can help me by . . .

Clearly articulating reasonable expectations, and providing role clarity:

- This pressure comes from the field, there are certain expectations, wherever you work, they set up the expectations . . . Feel pressure in academia in general, expectations in the field, publish or die, be a rock star in the field . . . this is communicated everywhere in the field . . . it is not unique to any organizations . . . regardless of what area you find yourself in, these expectations are set . . . and passed from one generation to the next regardless of whether it is a high-pressure environment or a low-pressure environment, you hear them across schools . . . Maybe we need to consider our standards, maybe we need to consider what impact these standards have on people in the field, are they living their lives, are they well or are they under so much pressure to meet them and then they feel they are not enough. – Chocolate box
- I am expected to be an expert . . . what is an expert . . . this raises anxiety . . . There needs to be a bit more candour that this happens. At a university during a hiring process, you are hiring all these new shiny people but there is an assumption that is inherent that they know what they are doing. They don't, they are new. They don't know how a university runs, they don't know the politics, they game, instead of interacting with the Chair as a student, now you are interacting with your Chair as a peer, so without proper onboarding again, it leaves space for a lot of the imposter to set in because we are allowing you to create your own image of what you are supposed to do and often this image is so much bigger than what it's supposed to be, so we build a superstar in our head. So, if the organization does a better job of clearly articulating what it would look like that is more realistic with tangible examples, well this is what is expected, this is what it will likely look like, this is the research people are doing, this is what people are doing in their classes. And I think that gives us a better sense of "Ohh, this is what a teacher looks like here, and where do I want to fit in here", as opposed to I think I know what a teacher looks like based on some romantic, tv version of a professor who randomly talks and knows everything. – Tree



My organization can help me by . . .



Providing training/ professional development:

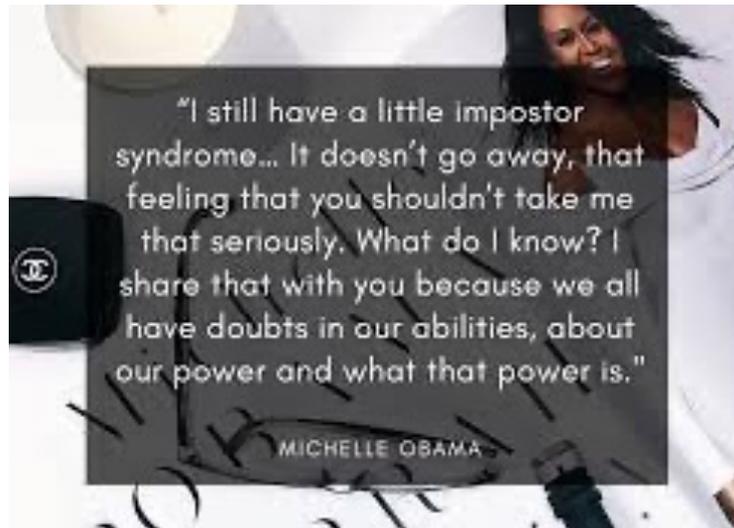
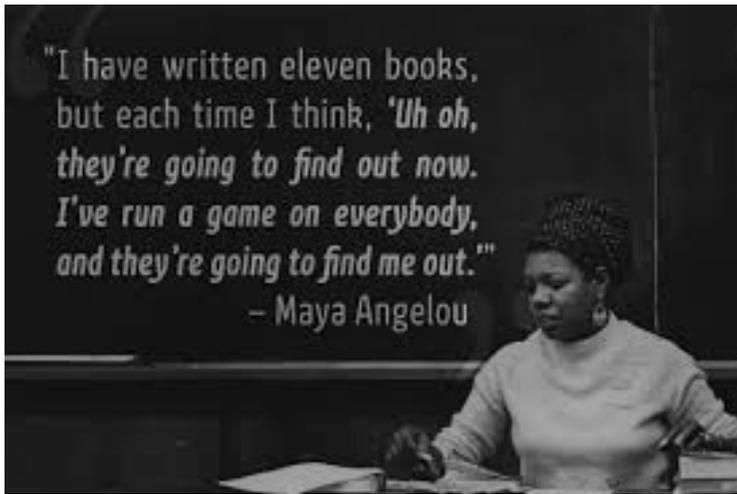
- Universities don't talk to faculty enough to find out what it is that we're really going through. They have extraordinarily high expectations that just because you have the PhD that you know how to teach that you know it's almost like the day you get the degree the CD gets downloaded and voila . . . find out how they can assist us in navigating these hurdles . . . Training or something so I know that there's a way for me to navigate through so I feel more confident that I can do those things rather than an imposter. – Jamaica
- Professional development . . . especially in statistics/ research methods. - Elephant



My organization can help me by . . .

Offering mentoring, sponsorship opportunities:

- And there are gender politics also . . . there aren't enough women in positions of power and on top of that, when women are in positions of power, because they also can't look vulnerable because it might work against them, they are often bigger than life. This is also intimidating to women who look at them and wonder, "can I ever get there?" So more ladder-mentorship in terms of how you move up the ladder and what each step looks like, and that opens the space to be more open, if you think that person is there to cheer you on, you may be more comfortable with sharing your messes. - Tree
- If there's a way to identify what groups of faculty members would more likely be going through this . . . create coaching situations. Where people who have gone through barriers . . . can actually reach back and help coach others through.- Jamaica
- Talk about it, mentorship would help and even help at this point. . . Not just mentorship in the sense of this is why you need to do to navigate the politics of tenure/ promotion, but deeper things like how you are feeling, get you moving in the right direction, helping you goal set and move towards what you are interested in. – Girl with lilies
- Research on effective mentoring programs, sponsorship more effective where someone is standing behind you saying I would like to develop this person, they will be great in the role as a dean, as a VP, learn the ropes and get them to an opportunity like that. Having someone who has done it – a woman of color who has ascended the ranks, has seen enough about the overall academic environments, avoid pitfalls, expose to different options that will, build those skills. Having support will be one thing that would really address this issue. You are kind of in your head about this, you are generating this internally, but other people see you differently, they see your value differently than you can, if you have someone who can see that and present a reality to you and expose you to different opportunities to build more confidence about what you bring and knowledge of pitfalls and things that are out there and show you the different paths you could be taking, this will alleviate it. – Beachfront



Individual Level

- Assembling and calling upon a personal support team
- Communicating honestly in the work domain
- Tallying up the evidence, challenging the self talk
- Focusing on the big picture and my priorities
- Embracing the imposter and the discomfort as a pathway for growth
- Gathering information, prepare, and then prepare some more

Organizational Level

- Creating an inclusive environment
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