

## Behind the Mask

Inside many high-achievers is a little voice saying, 'You are an impostor'

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By David Graham, Living Reporter

Canadian actor Mike Myers jokes that no matter how successful he becomes, he can't quiet the fear that the "talent police" are going to arrest him for impersonating a gifted comedian.

Despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary, he can't shake the demons that whisper in his ear, "You're a fraud."

He's not alone.

Some of the world's most admired celebrities refuse to take credit for their abilities. Even at the height of his career, Broadway choreographer Bob Fosse worried that each production would be his last, that audiences would eventually realize he was a no-talent phony.

Actors Michelle Pfeiffer and Kate Winslet have gone on record with their fears that they are fakes – that they can't, in fact, act.

And in both her roles, as a Yale student and as an academy award-winning actor, Jodi Foster says she has never been able to shake the feeling that she's an impostor.

People in all fields can be dogged by the irrational fear that they can't live up to their billing.

Many successful academics, doctors, business people and even entrepreneurs refuse to acknowledge it is their intelligence, creativity and skill that fuel their education and careers.

Rather, their minds spin with other possibilities. They cite luck as a prime factor. They were simply in the right place at the right time. Perhaps they smooth-talked their way through an interview.

Some credit their winning personality and attractive appearance for their success. These people simply cannot fathom the possibility that their intelligence and skill figured at all.

They are sufferers of Impostor Syndrome, says Valerie Young, who believes the source of these inner voices is psychological – that the root of these unique insecurities is in the sufferer's mind rather than imposed by the outside culture. She estimates 70 per cent of all people have felt like a fake at one time or another.

Young, who earned a EdD in education from the University of Massachusetts two decades ago, uses the example of a first generation professional from a working-class family, who feels like a foreigner in their new, swanky environment.

“They never quite feel like they belong no matter how successful they are,” she says. “I know a woman who has a PhD in business who is working as a bookkeeper because she is so afraid of being exposed as a fraud.”

People who worry that they are fakes can take opposite routes in response to their fears.

Some hold themselves back while others push themselves relentlessly forward. They become workaholics and perfectionists.

Academics, for example, either drop out or gather endless degrees. Professionals will settle for jobs beneath their qualifications or labour intensely to please their bosses and suppress the thoughts that they don't belong.

“Students have dropped out of school and committed suicide,” Young says. “People change careers constantly to avoid detection. Others don't go after promotions at all.”

Women are most at risk, Young says, but wonders if men are just as susceptible – but won't come forward – because it reveals them as vulnerable. Women, she suggests, “internalize failure” while men “blame the outside world.”

Young says the condition can lessen in time, but that it can be triggered by any new challenge, such as a promotion. “I don't think it ever goes away,” she says. “It's like a tape that plays in your head.”

Diane Zorn, a course director at York University, rejects the prevalent notion that it's a psychological syndrome and prefers to call it by its original designation – Impostor Phenomenon.

Zorn says the research she's been conducting since 1999 supports the claim that the issue is cultural, that it's the way life is structured in universities, for example, or the fiercely competitive nature of some workplaces that makes high performing people feel isolated and as if they don't belong. The higher people climb up the ladder, the more intense the feelings become, she says.

Zorn recognized the condition in herself when she discovered the work of Pauline Clance and Suzanne Imes, who first identified the Impostor Phenomenon in the 1970s. Clance and Imes had surveyed a group of high-achieving women who said that no matter how successful they were, they still felt like phonies. In her book *Impostor Phenomenon: When Success Makes You Feel Like a Fake*, Clance says the worry associated with this fear of exposure can result in fatigue, depression, substance abuse, problems with sleep and headaches.

Zorn recalls feeling the sting of Impostor Phenomenon in the teaching environment, where she would keep her contact with students to a minimum.

“I've completely overcome those feelings but I recall not having long office hours and not wanting too much interaction with the students.”

As a student, she remembers feeling that other students always seemed more prepared.

And as a professional, she was reluctant to apply for grants and was fearful of publishing.

That's changed, she says.

For Zorn's growth, it was important to identify the condition.

She kept a journal to document how often she deflected compliments and how she reacted to stressful situations.

Finally, she concludes, coaching and mentoring are key tools in both academic and work environments for overcoming feelings that you're an impostor.

Unfortunately, Young says, as far as she knows, most employers are not taking the condition seriously.

Zorn invites people who may recognize themselves as frauds to take the Impostor Phenomenon test as compiled by Clance.