

# Imposter Syndrome

*Associate Professor Eva Cheng*

*University of Technology Sydney*

<https://www.linkedin.com/in/evacheng/>

A few of you mentioned that the notes from our three roundtable sessions last Wednesday would be helpful. The diversity of our Table 7 participants highlighted the pervasive and persistent nature of “imposter syndrome”, from a recent graduates to mid-career managers, and well-established industry executives. This is now an intergenerational issue, and begs the question of why does imposter syndrome still persist?

Imposter syndrome keeps featuring in women’s workplace discussions because we keep focusing on “fixing women at work, instead of fixing the workplaces where women work” (Tulshyan and Burey, 2021). If you only read or listen to one quick article about imposter syndrome, please consider Ruchika Tulshyan, Jodi-Ann Burey, or Shari Dunn:

- Harvard Business Review:
  - <https://hbr.org/2021/02/stop-telling-women-they-have-imposter-syndrome>
  - <https://hbr.org/2021/07/end-imposter-syndrome-in-your-workplace> (send this one to your managers!)
- TIME magazine: <https://time.com/7261073/imposter-syndrome-systemic-issue-essay/>
- Podcast with Brene Brown: <https://brenebrown.com/podcast/imposter-syndrome/>

Recent research unpacks why imposter syndrome persists, and why it predominantly affects high-achieving people who are disproportionately women<sup>1</sup>. In short, the original concept of imposter syndrome didn’t account for the role and impact of combined systemic (sociocultural) biases - such as sexism, racism, classism, xenophobia, islamophobia, and more. Stereotypes and biases then shape expectations and assumptions about who can/should do what/when/how, how we should behave etc. In this way, imposter syndrome is actually a form of (unchecked) internalised misogyny<sup>2</sup>.

We often feel like we don’t belong in our engineering workplaces, because these workplaces were setup in times where we weren’t there and weren’t meant to be. But times have changed (thankfully), the issue is that workplace cultures and structures still haven’t yet caught up. But workplace structural and culture change is a longer-term challenge, and the responsibility for this change cannot just sit with an underrepresented group. We have to deal with the workplace policies, processes and behaviours that are the outdated outputs from outdated cultures, and we do not (yet!) hold the power and privileges to sustain widespread change.

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<sup>1</sup> Paul C. Price, Brandi Holcomb, Makayla B. Payne, Gender differences in impostor phenomenon: A meta-analytic review, *Current Research in Behavioral Sciences*, Volume 7, 2024.

<sup>2</sup> Kevin L. Nadal, Rukiya King, D.R. Gina Sissoko, Nadia Floyd, DeCarlos Hines, The legacies of systemic and internalized oppression: Experiences of microaggressions, imposter phenomenon, and stereotype threat on historically marginalized groups, *New Ideas in Psychology*, Volume 63, 2021.

Plus, workplace culture change towards support and inclusion benefits everyone, not just women and underrepresented groups.

Within this spectrum of change needed, in the shorter-term we do still need to look after ourselves whilst we collectively champion for this longer-term culture shift. We all want to stop doubting ourselves as we start our careers, make career pivots, move into new roles and industries etc. For these “coping mechanisms”, through tips, advice and building a community of support and validation - the three roundtable sessions showed how much insight and experience there was amongst us all:

- “Fake it to you make it” – though, a few women were sick of being told to do this! You are good enough, you do deserve this, and you can do this.
- Focus on the skills, capabilities and expertise that you *do* have, not what you *don’t* have
- Check-in and ask others for feedback from peers, clients, managers etc. – reflect, and learn
- Build a community of support – this could be with peers, managers or otherwise
- Recognise the impact of different cultural backgrounds – we all bring something different to the table
- Reframe success – what is stereotypically considered to be successful may not be what success means to you
- Keep a track of what you have achieved
  - Regularly record, could be a journal, career spreadsheet or something else – make it a habit, rather than leaving it for too long (months), where it gets harder to remember what you achieved, and easier to dismiss/minimise significant work
  - Update your CV regularly!
- Balancing negative thoughts
  - Name your “inner voice” and call them out
  - Give yourself the advice that you would give a friend – we can be our own worst critic
- Be honest with yourself
  - Ask yourself “why am I thinking that”? Write it down if it helps to get the thoughts out of your mind and onto the page for reflection
- Give credit to yourself: Celebrate wins for yourself, your team, and others around you
- Use micro-affirmations for yourself, your team, and others around you
- Have honest chats with managers
  - If you feel safe and comfortable to, tell them how you feel – most of the time, they are not aware of it, and might even feel the same way themselves. As a manager, they have an ethical and legal responsibilities to ensure a (psychosocially) safe workplace for everyone.
  - Vulnerability opens up constructive dialogue between people, and build trust – which is fundamental to effective workplace teams

- Brene Brown is the absolute guru on the need for vulnerability in building genuine human connections, see her TED talk here: [https://www.ted.com/talks/brene\\_brown\\_the\\_power\\_of\\_vulnerability](https://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_the_power_of_vulnerability)
- Mentor younger people: two-way mentoring helps to affirm and share your experience and expertise to help guide our future workforce, and be part of the longer-term culture change so they don't carry forward the internalised expectations and assumptions that stem from societal biases. Consider bringing a colleague to co-mentor, so that the mentoring load doesn't again sit solely with women!

What about addressing the difference between imposter syndrome and skills gaps? As with learning anything new throughout life, a growth mindset matters. We don't (and won't!) know everything, we don't need to, and we don't need to be perfect at anything either.

What's the role of perfection in all of this? If we consider how far back systemic sociocultural bias and exclusion go, imposter syndrome is a symptom of systemic sociocultural gender inequalities and exclusion in society. These inequalities can begin from early childhood, where the feelings of lack of confidence and self-efficacy don't just suddenly appear at university or in the workplace. It can start from as early as how we bring up our children, where Reshma Saujani charges us to "teach girls to be brave, not perfect" - watch her TED talk here: [https://www.ted.com/talks/reshma\\_saujani\\_teach\\_girls\\_bravery\\_not\\_perfection](https://www.ted.com/talks/reshma_saujani_teach_girls_bravery_not_perfection)

The links between perfectionism and imposter syndrome are still being researched<sup>3</sup> – if you have young women in your circles of influence at home or work, please do share these insights so that our culture change starts as early as possible.

Whilst the discussions last Wednesday were much needed and brought to light how much has, and yet hasn't changed in engineering workplace culture, focusing on what women need to do to cope or what they need to change about themselves doesn't address the root causes of the problem - so imposter syndrome continues to persist as a symptom of these problems. It's not women and underrepresented groups who need to change – we are not the problem - workplaces need to shift their deep-set beliefs, cultures, structures, and practices. Diverse identities must be welcomed, respected, included, seen and celebrated to be just as capable and competent as the current status quo – otherwise we will never see the end of imposter syndrome.

Let's stop keep talking about what women need to do (like we don't already have enough to do!), and reshape this topic to focus on how we build allies, champions and communities of support, two-way mentorship, sponsorship, and advocacy for workplace culture change. One person can start a movement, but it really does take a village to sustain this change, and that means workplace culture change is everyone's responsibility as everyone benefits – not just women and underrepresented groups.

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<sup>3</sup> Andrew P. Hill, John K. Gotwals, A meta-analysis of multidimensional perfectionism and impostor phenomenon, Journal of Research in Personality, Volume 118, 2025.