

## **Women and Imposter Syndrome: Emotional Experience, Psychological Impact, Barriers and Overcoming**



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## Abstract

Imposter syndrome, characterized by ongoing self-doubt and fear of being exposed as a fraud despite objective success, is a common psychological experience among women in academic, professional, and leadership roles. This article explores current research on the emotional facets of imposter syndrome, its psychological and social effects, structural and internal barriers to acknowledgment and management, and various strategies for overcoming these feelings. Based on recent studies, systematic reviews, and meta-analyses, the article emphasizes how societal norms, gender expectations, and psychological stressors uniquely influence women's experiences of imposter feelings. Finally, it presents a comprehensive framework that combines psychological practices, wellness strategies, organizational change, and spiritual leadership to promote women's empowerment and resilience.

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## Introduction

Impostor syndrome, also known as the imposter phenomenon, is a psychological pattern where individuals doubt their accomplishments and fear being labeled as "frauds" despite evidence of their abilities. First identified in the 1970s, this concept has gained renewed scientific interest, especially concerning gender differences and the mental health impacts of ongoing self-doubt. Recent meta-analyses confirm that women, on average, experience higher levels of imposter feelings than men, though these findings vary depending on context and the measurement tools used (Price, Holcomb, & Payne, 2024).

Although imposter feelings are not classified as a formal mental health disorder, they present a significant psychological challenge with effects on women's well-being, career growth, and leadership roles. This article explores the emotional, psychological, and social experiences, impacts, obstacles to recognition and support, and evidence-based strategies that can help women overcome imposter syndrome.

## Emotional Experiences of Women with Imposter Syndrome

At the core of imposter syndrome is a widespread feeling of self-doubt. Women experiencing these feelings often attribute their successes to luck, timing, or external factors rather than their own abilities. They worry about being "found out" and judged as less competent than others see them. This subjective experience is marked by a tension between objective success and internal disbelief, a cognitive dissonance that deepens anxiety and impacts self-concept across personal and professional domains (Price et al., 2024).

Research consistently shows that imposter syndrome is linked to increased psychological distress, including depression, stress, and anxiety. Among employees in multinational business settings, impostorism was significantly associated with perfectionism and rumination, indicating that competitive work environments may heighten self-doubt and stress in professional roles (Jain & Singh, 2024). These findings emphasize how common self-doubt can become an emotional burden, affecting well-being and daily functioning.

Perfectionism is both a cause and a result of imposter syndrome. Women with imposter

tendencies often believe that only perfect performance can prove their worth, leading to self-critical behaviors that increase anxiety and harm self-esteem. This internal narrative can create a harmful feedback loop: the richer the person achieves, the more rigorous and unattainable their self-imposed standards become (Clarke & Hartley, 2025).

## Psychological and Social Impacts

The psychological effects of imposter syndrome impact various aspects of women's well-being. These aspects may overlap or stand alone. Women can experience effects across all these areas as well. It can depend on the relationships women have. Some areas might only be affected by specific parts of their lives.

- Anxiety and Depression: High imposter scores align with elevated anxiety and depressive symptoms, which can persist without intervention (El-Ashry et al., 2024; Clarke & Hartley, 2025).
- Burnout and emotional exhaustion: In workplace settings, employees with higher levels of impostor feelings reported significantly reduced well-being and negative job outcomes—consistent with burnout-related emotional exhaustion and job stress in professional environments (Swaidan & Al Maalouf, 2024).
- Self-Esteem and Identity Disruption: Imposter beliefs can erode self-esteem, altering how women view their competence and authority in roles ranging from student to professional leadership (Cokley,

Bernard, Stone-Sabali, & Awad, 2024).

These mental health outcomes ripple through all relationships, work satisfaction, and overall quality of life. Women experiencing imposter syndrome might shy away from advancement opportunities, withdraw from social support networks, or resort to perfectionism to cope, often at a significant psychological cost.

Imposter syndrome can significantly hinder career progress. Women who feel unworthy of recognition or advancement might decline leadership opportunities, hesitate to negotiate salaries or promotions, and avoid taking risks that could boost their skills and influence. These professional impacts not only affect individual trajectories but also contribute to persistent gender gaps in leadership and economic equity (Narayananamoorthy, McLaren, Pendam, & Minkoff, 2024).

Work environments that involve competition, a lack of psychological safety, or implicit bias can increase feelings of imposter syndrome. Competitive cultures that emphasize comparison over collaboration worsen self-doubt and hinder inclusive growth. Women working in male-dominated or hierarchical settings often feel additional pressure to outperform or to mask vulnerability, further deepens imposter experiences (Moassefi et al., 2025).

## Barriers to Recognition and Support

One of the major barriers to overcoming imposter syndrome is stigma. Women might see self-doubt as a personal failure rather than recognizing it as a common psychological experience. The label "syndrome" itself has been critiqued as pathologizing, potentially

deterring individuals from seeking support (Cokley et al., 2024). Cultural norms and gendered social expectations also play a significant role. From early socialization that emphasizes modesty and relational harmony over assertiveness to workplace biases that question women's competence, women encounter structural and social cues that reinforce self-undervaluation (Price et al., 2024).

Despite growing scholarly focus, many organizations still lack formal mental health supports or training that explicitly address imposter syndrome in the workplace (Gullifor et al., 2023). There are many workplace programs that support other areas within employees' lives. Without clear pathways for recognition and intervention, women are left to navigate these experiences alone, often relying solely on personal coping strategies rather than systemic support (Hsu et al., 2024).

## Strategies for Addressing Imposter Syndrome

Addressing imposter syndrome requires combining psychological, wellness, organizational, and leadership strategies. Using multiple strategies supports a comprehensive approach to overcoming imposter syndrome. Psychological interventions can include cognitive behavioral techniques. Cognitive reframing and self-talk strategies help individuals challenge unhelpful thoughts and develop more realistic self-assessments. Online educational interventions incorporating coaching have demonstrated reductions in imposter symptoms for learners and trainees (Hsu et al., 2024). Mirror exposure can change how individuals evaluate themselves and decrease self-critical thinking in clinical settings, suggesting that intentional mirror

engagement may help shift negative self-perceptions. Think Wonder Woman pose.

Another way to fight imposter syndrome is through group support and coaching. Professional coaching, peer support groups, and mentorship programs create safe spaces for sharing experiences and normalizing imposter feelings, thereby reducing isolation and shame (Narayananamoorthy et al., 2024). Conferences offer chances to connect with like-minded women. Reaching out to other women in similar life stages can help build a strong support system.

Wellness and self-compassion practices offer another approach to tackling imposter syndrome. Being aware of our physical and emotional states and recognizing that we are not alone can be beneficial. Focusing on present-moment awareness and self-kindness may lessen self-criticism that fuels impostor experiences. Integrating regular mindfulness routines can strengthen resilience (Clarke & Hartley, 2025). Building wellness habits can also be beneficial. Encouraging restorative sleep, physical activity, and work-life balance helps mitigate the psychological stress that amplifies imposter feelings (El-Ashry et al., 2024). Activities like yoga, running, cycling, or hiking—all of which can ground and support wellness—are worth trying.

If feelings of imposter syndrome arise in the workplace, there are several options. Seek out an inclusive environment and a company that offers support programs. Encouraging open discussion about self-doubt and creating supportive feedback cultures minimizes feelings of personal inadequacy (Moassefi et al., 2025). If a company has policies or advocacy programs. Organizations should implement policies that provide access to mental health resources, leadership development programs, and coaching

opportunities tailored to women's needs (Cokley et al., 2024).

The final recommendation is to seek spiritual leadership and empowerment. Authentic Leadership where Women can draw on principles of spiritual leadership—such as purpose, connectedness, and ethical engagement—to build confidence and align actions with values rather than self-criticism (Moassefi et al., 2025). Community engagement can be found in many areas. Faith communities, women's circles, and spiritual mentorship offer platforms for mutual affirmation, narrative reframing, and collective empowerment (Narayananamoorthy et al., 2024).

## Conclusion:

Imposter syndrome continues to be a significant psychological and sociocultural challenge for women, affecting emotional well-being, career development, and leadership opportunities. Empirical evidence highlights its prevalence, links to stress and mental health outcomes, and gendered patterns of experience (Price et al., 2024; El-Ashry et al., 2024; Clarke & Hartley, 2025). Overcoming imposter syndrome requires a comprehensive, multi-layered approach that combines individual psychological strategies with organizational change, wellness practices, and spiritual empowerment. By recognizing and addressing both internal emotional experiences and external structural factors, researchers, practitioners, and leaders can help women rebuild confidence, advance their careers, and fully participate in community and workplace life.

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## Biography:

Dr. Tanya M. Williams is an executive leader, entrepreneur, and community advocate with over 20 years of experience in defense, aerospace, and federal contracting. An Acquisition Program Manager and Earned Value Professional, she specializes in strategic execution, financial leadership, and enterprise transformation. As Founder of Bottoms Up Budgeting with Dr. T and Swirl Travelers, she champions financial empowerment and global engagement. A dedicated mentor and international speaker, Dr. Williams actively supports veterans, women, and at-risk youth. Raised on a farm in Idaho, she leads with resilience, service, and purpose.