

IMPOSTOR SYNDROME

When things are going well, every new success reinforces your belief in yourself. Success seems to validate your personal qualities, your decision-making, and the sweat, blood, and tears you have invested.

Failure unravels this newfound confidence. Every new setback seems to imply your own inadequacy. You failed to navigate these turbulent rapids. Now you are spinning out of control, where a better or stronger leader might have done better.

This can set off a self-destructive cycle.

Failure is usually a process, not an all-or-nothing event. You are still in the captain's seat, making crucial decisions. You might still save the effort if you play your cards right, but now your fallibility is obvious. You live in fear of making another mistake. You overanalyze. You hem and haw. You lose sleep, which leaves you exhausted and hyperemotional and impedes your judgment. You make decisions, then reverse them. You have always despised indecisiveness in leaders, so your own indecisiveness rattles you.

Doubt spreads outward from there. Team members, employees, and supporters look to you for leadership, but your self-doubt rapidly erodes their confidence. They watch with bated breath. Whispered conversations trail into silence when you walk by. At least, you think they do. Is it real, or are you paranoid now? Behind their thin smiles you imagine fear, mistrust, and a parade of silent

thoughts about how you have turned into a mental case.

We have a special phrase for this kind of self-doubt. *Impostor syndrome* is the fear of being exposed as a fraud. Even in the best of times, impostor syndrome can devastate us. It fuels chronic anxiety that we are not enough, robs us of joy, and propels us onto an endless quest to prove that we have what it takes.

Impostor syndrome plagues high-success cultures. Silicon Valley is a case in point. On the surface, everybody has it together. Every day you meet CEOs, venture capitalists, and lawyers for major financial firms. After work they cycle, train for marathons, and do CrossFit. They drive Teslas and BMWs. They volunteer for the school PTA and run nonprofits on the side. My immediate neighbors at Stanford wrote machine learning algorithms for MRI scanners, ran theater productions in foreign countries, built VR educational experiences, and led expeditions to Patagonia to reconstruct ancient climate history.

Live there long enough, though, and you see beneath the surface. Real life still happens. Marriages fray. Kids act out at school. Many of those brilliant graduate students wilt at their desks, trying to shape their messy research into something that will satisfy a dissertation committee. These exceptional individuals all look at each other and think, “I do not belong here. The admissions department made a terrible mistake.”

In 2017, Army Major General John Rossi took his own life two days before pinning on his third star and taking command of the U.S. Army Space and Missile Defense Command. Rossi was well-liked and had no notable failures in his commands. The U.S. Army gave him its full confidence.

Yet for years, Rossi had suffered in silence. He felt increasingly overwhelmed as he ascended the ranks. He believed he did not

deserve his many honors. He became a workaholic, hoping his relentless work ethic would mask his perceived deficiencies. He carried photos of soldiers who died under his command and felt he had not done enough to save them. According to a later investigation, Rossi had an “irrational belief that he was intellectually incapable of mastering the technical aspects of the SMDC, particularly those related to space defense.”⁹ His deep anxiety and relentless work ethic led to severe sleep deprivation. Ultimately, afraid of being exposed as a fraud and bringing shame on his family and the Army, he died by suicide.

John Rossi judged himself by a standard that no human being could possibly meet. He carried what the actor Andrew Garfield calls the “wound of not-enough-ness.”¹⁰ Many of us carry the same wound. We project confidence and competence to avoid being exposed.

When failure strikes, impostor syndrome gets even worse.

Failure rips away the mask, allowing the world to gawk at our limitations. We can no longer hide. Failure seems to confirm all that negative self-talk. Here, finally, is the proof that we are in over our heads.

We have been found out.

Some people seem immune to impostor syndrome.

They are brash. They swagger. They believe in their own superiority. When failure strikes, they do not look inward or question their decisions. Instead, they rage. They blame. They make excuses. They evade responsibility and throw others under the bus.

These people destroy lives. They destroy organizations. Even countries.

When you realize that this sociopathic excess is the polar opposite of impostor syndrome, a little self-doubt does not look

like such a bad thing.

Behind impostor syndrome lies genuine humility.

When we recognize our fallibility, we test our assumptions. We examine ourselves for deficiencies and strive for self-improvement. We seek counsel. We search for evidence to validate our decisions. We have the humility to pivot when necessary. We develop empathy for other fallible human beings.

The challenge, then, is to find that middle ground of quiet self-confidence that lies between debilitating impostor syndrome and reckless arrogance.

We know these men and women when we see them. They are grounded in values. They have a vision for themselves and the world around them. They project easy confidence within their domain of expertise while simultaneously showing curiosity, openness, and humility. They surround themselves with people who are more talented, more knowledgeable, and more capable, without a hint of insecurity. They make hard decisions in ambiguous circumstances, even knowing they will make mistakes.

This is what we should strive for.

How do we get there?

In the midst of failure, such measured self-confidence may be out of reach. You are simply trying to survive as your capsized raft careens wildly down the rapids.

Have grace on yourself. Today, survival is enough.

Take consolation in this: that when your bruised and battered body finally washes up on some rocky beach miles downriver, and you lie blinking up at the pines and the glaring sunlight, you will have learned more about yourself than many people ever do. You will have gleaned invaluable insights into your own judgment and decision-making when facing hard problems.

These lessons might take months to digest. Maybe years. But your experience with failure will have spared you the fate of becoming just another arrogant sociopath. You will be wiser, stronger, and more capable.

You are not an impostor. You never were.

The fact you made it this far is evidence enough.

You stood in the arena and took the punishing blows. You will find your strength again and fight another round. You will be one step closer to that quiet self-confidence that we should all aspire to.

EATING GLASS



*The Inner Journey
Through Failure and Renewal*

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