

To Stop Feeling Like an Imposter, Stop Thinking Like an Imposter

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Winston's Diversity & Inclusion Committee and Women's Leadership Initiative (WLI) affinity group hosted a professional development program open to all firm members titled "Why Capable People Feel Like Impostors and How to Thrive in Spite of It" on June 11 featuring Dr. Valerie Young.

Dr. Young shared some "a-ha" moments on her way to becoming an internationally known expert and award-winning author on an issue that challenges 70 percent of high-achievers: Imposter Syndrome. She earned her doctoral degree from the University of Massachusetts in Amherst and is the author of *The Secret Thoughts of Successful Women: Why Capable People Suffer from the Impostor Syndrome and How to Thrive in Spite of It*.

Dr. Young began with the definition of imposter syndrome, which, she explained, is not a fancy term for low self-esteem, but rather a person's secret belief that they are not as talented as others think they are despite tangible evidence of their accomplishments. She told attendees that her first aha moment came at age 21 when she and her grad school classmates read the Clance and Imes study that found many bright, accomplished people feel like they are frauds and fear being found out. "We formed a support group, but I soon had this nagging sense that everyone else was saying they were an imposter, but I knew I was the only real imposter."



An examination of the sources of imposter feelings – from the lack (or overabundance) of praise a person receives as a child to the culture and expectations in fields of work such as medicine, law, technology, and creative – was the second part of Dr. Young’s Formula for Change. Imposter syndrome also intersects with diversity and inclusion, she explained. “A sense of belonging fosters confidence.” When you’re the first person in your group to do something, you have that overwhelming pressure to represent. And if you’re in a group where there are stereotypes about competence, you’re going to be more susceptible to imposter feelings.

In the third part of the program, Dr. Young outlined the five competence types and the coping behaviors each employs to guard against the shame they experience when they fail to live up to their unsustainable, unrealistic rules of success. “They work,” she said of behaviors like procrastinating or flying under the radar, but it’s important to consider the cost to you and your organization if you don’t change them.

So what’s the magic answer to make all the pain go away? Talking about it is only the first step, Dr. Young said, but the big aha is this: “The only way to stop feeling like an imposter is to stop thinking like an imposter.” Her tools for doing this are to normalize imposter feelings from shameful to matter of fact, to reframe thinking around self-compassion when faced with setbacks, and to keep going regardless of how you feel. “Everyone loses when bright people play small, so show up and play big.”



[This recent article](#) from *The New York Times* provides additional strategies for overcoming Imposter Syndrome, which disproportionately affects women and minority groups.

Winston's Women's Leadership Initiative is the cornerstone of the firm's programs aimed at increasing hiring, retention, and promotion of women lawyers at the firm. Visit our [Diversity & Inclusion](#) page for more information.

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