

# Don't Let Impostor Syndrome Sabotage Your Career

By [Caroline Dowd-Higgins](#)

Have you ever experienced a moment of panic before you got ready to pitch a proposal, deliver a talk or convene a meeting? I'm not referring to butterflies in your stomach or simple stage fright. I'm talking about being stopped in your tracks with a feeling of such tremendous self-doubt that your confidence was shot. Welcome to the non-exclusive club of millions of professional women (and men) who experience the impostor syndrome.

Dr. Valerie Young is an internationally known speaker, author and expert on women and impostor syndrome. Her book — *The Secret Thoughts of Successful Women: Why Capable People Suffer From the Impostor Syndrome and How to Thrive In Spite of It* (Crown Business, Random House) is a fascinating look into how so many accomplished and capable people suffer from self doubt.

A self-described “recovering impostor,” Young remembers her own experience in graduate school, a time when she succumbed to feelings of self-doubt and failed to recognize and celebrate her accomplishments. Impostor syndrome is a major psychological phenomenon that is extremely prevalent in the career world.

There are high achieving celebrity impostor syndrome sufferers including Tina Fey, Maya Angelou and Sheryl Sandberg, who have all openly admitted to feeling like an impostor at some point during their careers. Young says, “When you feel yourself sliding into competence extremism, recognize it for what it is. Then make a conscious decision to stop and really savor those exhilarating mental high points and forgive yourself for the inevitable lulls.”

That's what Tina Fey does. As she says in Young's book, “The beauty of the impostor syndrome is you vacillate between extreme egomania and a complete feeling of: ‘I'm a fraud! Oh God, they're on to me! I'm a fraud!’ So you just try to ride the egomania when it comes and enjoy it, and then slide through the idea of fraud.”

Another type of impostor never achieves success, according to Young, because the impostor syndrome holds them back from moving forward with their goals:





The Impostor Syndrome can start at tender age, so Young encourages parents to be communicative with their kids and address adversity, resilience and self-confidence early on:

*Research shows that even as girls, women are more likely to blame ourselves when things go wrong. We're also more apt to give up following a set-back. Since failure and mistakes are inevitable, bar none the best thing parents can do is to help their daughters understand the learning value of failure and to gain confidence from overcoming adversity rather than running from it. It's okay to falter. The key is to get back in the game and try, try again.*

### **What's a Woman to Do?**

Self-confidence is attainable. Expand your comfort zone incrementally toward a stretch goal. Baby steps will allow you to truly own what you do well and learn to turn off the negative mental self talk that often surfaces. The impostor syndrome can emerge during performance evaluations or review time when you feel most vulnerable at work. By focusing on what you love to do, you can reprogram your brain to also believe that you do these things really well. Take time to enjoy your strengths and don't set unrealistic goals of perfection. Celebrate what you've already done well.

What is your negative internal script saying? What do you want the positive voices to say instead? Revel in your excitement, anticipation and successes and become OK with the fact that you can and will make mistakes. When professional athletes don't win the big game, they watch the playback tape, learn what they can do better next time, and get back into the game.

Pull up a chair — invite yourself to the table, and give yourself permission to own your strengths and your self-confidence. The impostor syndrome is very real but you also have the power to silence this negative self talk so you can enjoy your life and your career.

Be sure to check out Dr. Valerie Young's book *The Secret Thoughts of Successful Women* for great strategies on how to thrive in spite of the impostor syndrome.

**Caroline Dowd-Higgins** authored the book *This Is Not the Career I Ordered* and maintains the career reinvention blog of the same name ([www.carolinedowdhiggins.com](http://www.carolinedowdhiggins.com)) She is also the Director of Career & Professional Development and Adjunct Faculty at Indiana University Maurer School of Law. She hosts the national *CBS Radio Show Career Coach Caroline* on Tuesdays at 5pm ET