

Powering Up Your Potential

How to Make Imposter Syndrome Work for You

Imposter syndrome is a belief that you're not as competent as others perceive you to be, the fear that one day you're going to be found out and the feeling that you don't belong where you are.

Common symptoms include self-doubt, an inability to realistically assess your strengths, attributing your success to external factors or luck, berating your performance, fear that you won't live up to expectations, overachieving, sabotaging your own success and feeling disappointed when you fall short of extremely challenging goals.

Check out my top 24 tips on how to make friends with your imposter and utilise it for the greater good.

And if you want to find out more, take a look at my book, *Power Up: The Smart Woman's Guide to Unleashing Her Potential*, an empowering resource for all women who want to get their voice heard.



TIP 1:

Set Yourself SMART and BIG Goals

I was recently invited by a client to deliver a 90 minutes session on 'How to Make Imposter Syndrome Work For You'. The sad news was that out of the group of about 30 women, over half experienced it EVERY DAY, over a third said it affects their overall confidence and over a third said it stopped them from speaking up.

I believe that, rather than trying to run away from the imposter in our head, we need to embrace it as a sign that we're growing and progressing.

My first tip is to set yourself some SMART (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant and Time-bound) and BIG (Bold, Inspiring, Ground-breaking) goals. Because the clearer you are on where you're going, the less you'll allow imposter syndrome to get in your way!

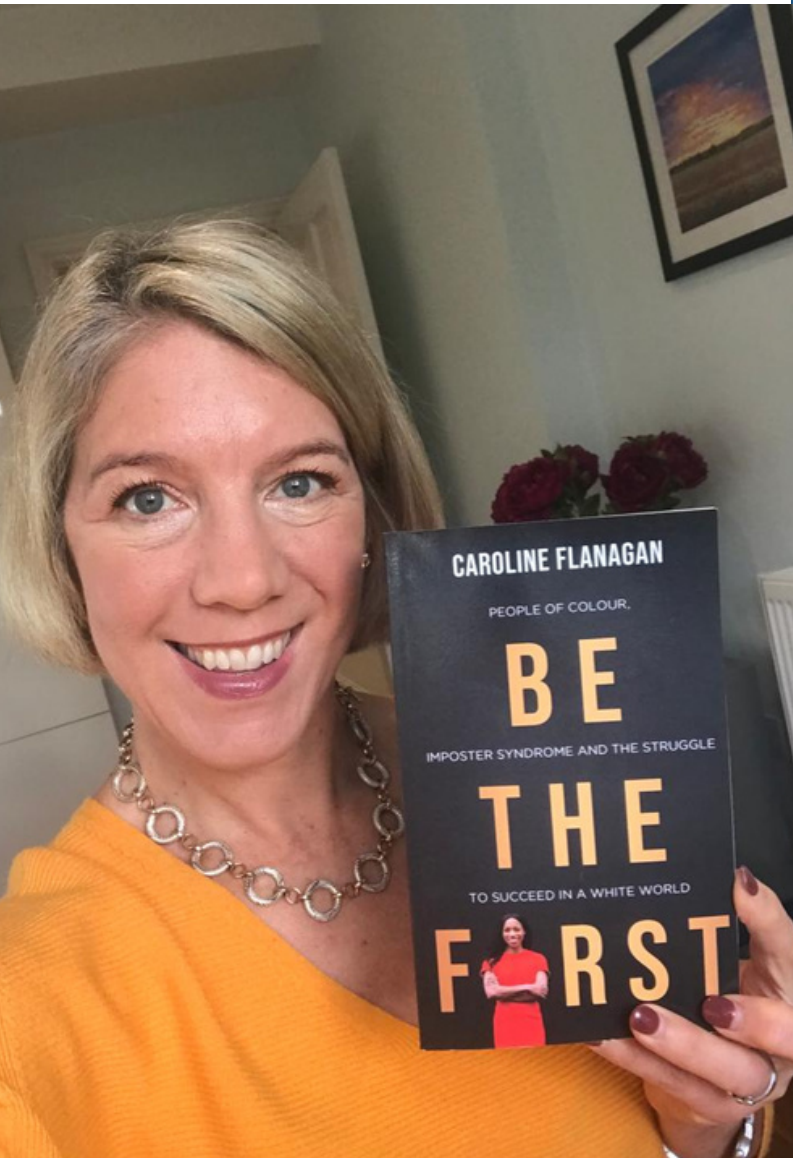
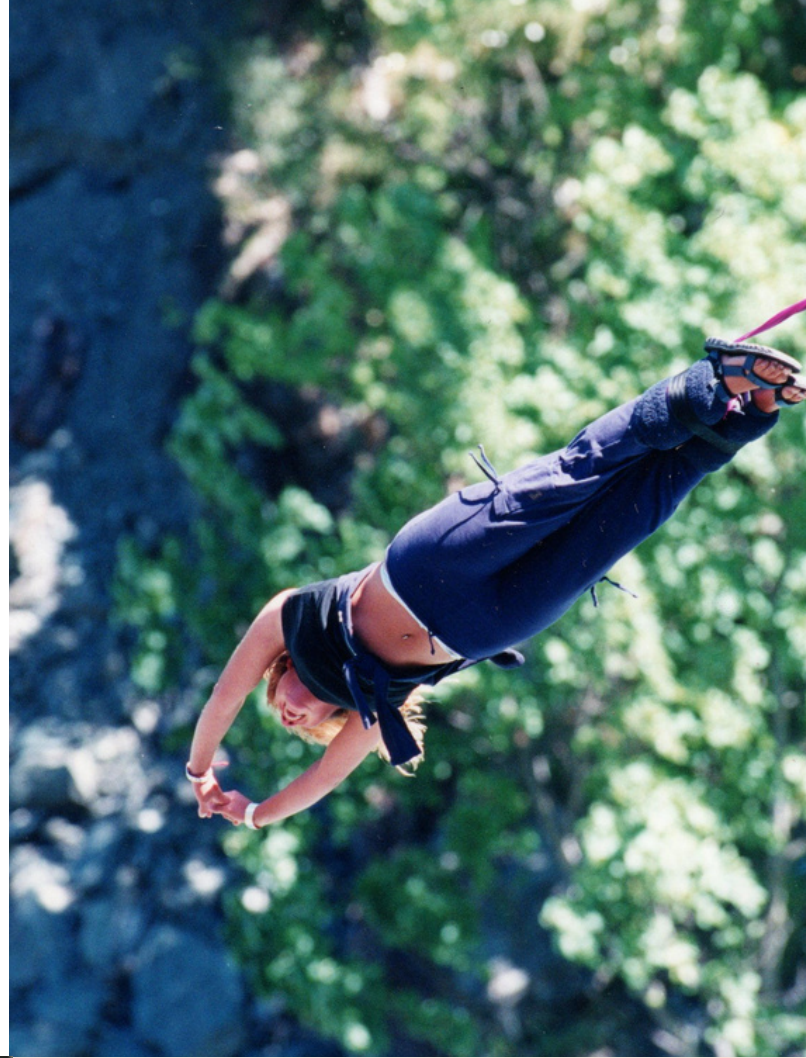
TIP 2:

Dare Yourself To...

Imposter syndrome is experienced by up to 82% of us and is most prevalent when we're in a new situation, like starting a new job or returning to work post-baby.

So often we hold ourselves back by worrying about what would happen if we did this, what would people think if we did that... That kind of thinking traps us where we are and stops us from trying new things, whether that's big things like interviewing for a new position, medium things like joining a new gym or even small things like approaching someone you don't know that well for a chat.

My technique, when I'm hearing those 'what if...' voices in my head is to think: F**CK it, and do it anyway!



TIP 3:

Be The First

This tip comes from my darling friend and fellow speaker, author and coach Caroline Flanagan whose new book, *#bethefirst* is the bible for people of colour, imposter syndrome and the struggle to succeed in a white world.

Here's an extract from the blurb: 'You don't feel like an imposter, you are one. You're the only one in the room. There are no leaders who look like you. The system is broken and has to change. But in this book, Caroline Flanagan challenges you to step up and play your part too... After years of battling imposter syndrome, Caroline transformed it into a strength. She devised a powerful tool that gives her courage at the moment and builds lasting confidence.'

Bottom line is, if you want to stand out, you need to put yourself out there.

TIP 4:

Visualise Success

This is a major one because when you imagine yourself succeeding, it becomes far more of a possibility for you.

Let me give you an example. About four years ago, I decided I wanted to become a professional speaker, alongside my work as an executive coach and to complement my gravitas programmes. I had no real idea what that would entail, but I joined the Professional Speaking Association, got myself some coaching and started putting myself out there.

After a few emotional fails, the hard work paid off. Today, keynote speaking makes up a large part of what I do. And this is a pic of last week's keynote, which I delivered to the Senior Leadership Team at Sky. I can't tell you how good it felt to be there and look back at how far I'd come.

Four years ago, I visualised myself on a large stage, and this is a picture of a recent keynote, I walked into the venue and saw six screens, all with me on them. Once again, the imposter was having a heyday, but I took a big breath, visualised my audience being engaged in what I was saying, and cracked on.

So take a moment. Think about what success **looks** like to you. Make your vision technicolour, surround sound and truly feel what that success feels like. And then step forward in the direction of your dreams.



TIP 5:

Selective Perfectionism

I'm happy to call myself a perfectionist! It's fuelled my drive for excellence, my aim to do the very best I can, both at work and home. But perfectionism is a double-edged sword. It's meant I'm extremely hard on myself when things go pear-shaped and if I'm not careful, tip over into obsessiveness about unimportant things.

The thing is, perfectionism is an unachievable state. We'll never get there. And if unguarded, it can fuel the unhelpful side of imposter syndrome. When we think we're not good enough (not perfect enough) to be/do X, Y, Z, we hold ourselves back. We become imprisoned by our imposter.

But when push comes to shove and we're busy juggling work, family, exercise, friends, home not to mention a leaking roof into an already full day, sometimes we just have to be selective with our perfectionism!

What I've realised is that we warm to things that aren't perfect, we love a lack of symmetry. Because it gives us permission to be kinder to ourselves and show up as our quirky, imperfect selves.



TIP 6 & 7:

What's the worst and BEST thing that could happen?

Any personal development brings with it the feeling of moving into uncharted territory and because we've been programmed since cavemen times to stay safe, we can unconsciously sabotage our progress by avoiding what lies beyond our comfort zone.

Fear and worry can be very powerful blockers to taking action and because they reside in our subconscious, they may be exerting an effect without even realising it. This means that before you've decided to take action – for example, talking to your boss about a promotion or pay rise – your subconscious mind may be working overtime, conjuring up all the reasons why that's a bad idea: for example, they'll think you're being too demanding, they'll say 'no', they'll realise they've been paying you too much – all of which may overpower your resolve.

One of the strategies I use to counter this is to "Hope for the best, plan for the worst", as Lee Childs call it. Bring your subconscious fears into your conscious mind and look at them for what they are is a great way of mitigating negative thinking and countering the unhelpful side of your imposter.

Asking yourself 'What's the worst thing that could happen?' is a great way to put your fears into perspective. But a better question is 'What's the best thing that could happen?' as it moves your thinking into a more resourceful, energized and resilient place.

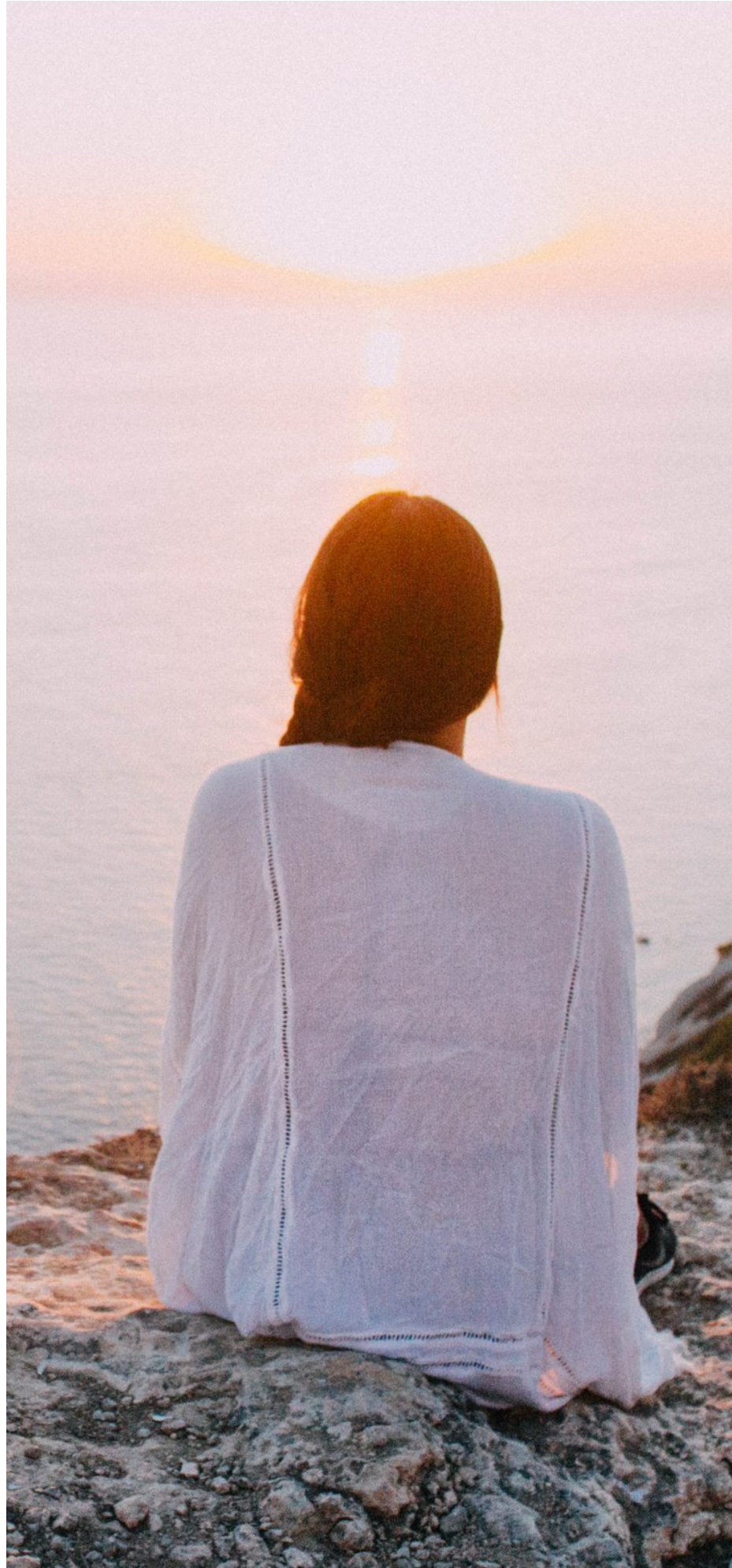
TIP 8:

Honour your feelings

Alongside my encouragement to adopt a positive mental attitude when looking to overcome feelings of imposter syndrome, the reality is, there will be times when the struggle feels all too real and moments when we feel powerless in the face of external circumstances.

The past few years have been challenging for many people, but especially those whose careers have been directly affected by the pandemic. That being said, I cannot think of a single person who hasn't taken those challenges and turned them into a more enriching situation for themselves. And so when you're having a wobble, allow yourself to feel what you're feeling. You have a right to your own emotions. Let them out. Talk to people and encourage them to give you a good listening to, rather than tell you what they think you should do.

As Christopher Robin put it when talking to Winnie the Pooh: "You're braver than you believe and stronger than you seem, and smarter than you think." And remember that time passes, things change, that you have choices and you will be OK.



TIP 9:

Be Diamond Hard

Imposter syndrome often rears its ugly head when we're feeling weak. Maybe someone does or says something that knocks your confidence. Or something happens that makes you feel like you don't belong.

Resilience is about how you prepare and respond to knocks and this is a mixture of learning how to be hard, like a diamond, but also bouncy, like a ball and knowing that you're the one in charge of your own life.

Many of us focus on likeability at the expense of respect. For many, it's important to please people and make everything OK over their own needs and wants.

Being diamond-hard is setting boundaries, saying no, disagreeing when you need to, giving challenging feedback, and showing your grit and determination, even if that means displeasing some.

My Personal Trainer, Abbie Benjamins is a great example of diamond-hard. When we're working out together in the gym, people will often unintentionally encroach on our space, setting their mats ready for the next class, or ask her for advice. Instead of letting it go or pandering to their requests, she will state, in no uncertain terms, what needs to happen. People sometimes react in a shocked or annoyed way because they're just not used to a young woman being that way, but she is unapologetic and they just do what they're told!

So, if you want to move beyond those disempowering feelings associated with imposter syndrome, identify situations and people you usually find challenging, think carefully about boundaries – what you're prepared to let go of and where your line is. And imagine yourself stating your views in a clear and calm way.



TIP 10:

Use Advocating Language

Do you say “I feel” a lot?

Do you pre-empt your points with the words “I think....?” Do you find your voice going up at the end of sentences, even though you're not asking a question?

And do you end your sentences with: “Does that make sense?”

All of these phrases carry within them an element of doubt and reinforce the negative attributes of imposter syndrome because they imply you're not quite sure of yourself and invite people to disagree with you.

Part of the solution is preparing in advance. When you've thought through the points you want to make, there's no need for these qualifiers. You can also use advocating language. Words like: “I strongly believe...”. “In my opinion....”. “My recommendation is...”. These words not only make you sound stronger and more assertive, but they'll also make you feel that way too.

So rein in that doubt! Rephrase your language with confident, assertive phrases, and notice the change in your impact and how you feel about yourself.



TIP 11:

Bouncebackability

The imposter can be at its most shouty and destructive when we're at a low ebb and it can take a lot of emotional strength to pull ourselves out of that hole.

This starts with a decision to 'move beyond' the situation you're in and it can help to imagine yourself literally moving away from the challenging situation you're in, or physically 'putting down' the unhelpful remark, or painful situation and reaching for something more empowering instead.

Avoid putting yourself in the 'put upon' role, even in a jokey way as this will cast and contain you in a victim role. Instead, remind yourself of all the times when you've recovered after a fall and the factors that helped get you back on your feet.

Also, think about how you hold yourself after a setback. The phrase 'you look like you're carrying the world on your shoulders' is telling and you can often spot people who are going through a hard time because their whole posture has collapsed in on itself, head bent, shoulders stooped and body closed in, as though reacting to physical pressure or blow.

For bounce-back-ability, identify your mood boosters and make sure you access them regularly. Hang out with a friend who makes you laugh. Listen to music, dance, go for a windswept walk, treat yourself to something new, eat something yummy or lie on the sofa watching reality TV - whatever. If it works for you and recharges and nourishes your soul - do it. Think about posture. Make the effort to stand up tall, shoulders back, head up. Look up and out at the world rather than down at your feet – you'll be amazed at what this fresh perspective brings.

TIP 12:

Feel the Fear and Do It Anyway

What would you do if you weren't afraid?
Whom would you be if you didn't think 'what if'?

What would be different if you chose to step fearlessly in the direction of your dreams?

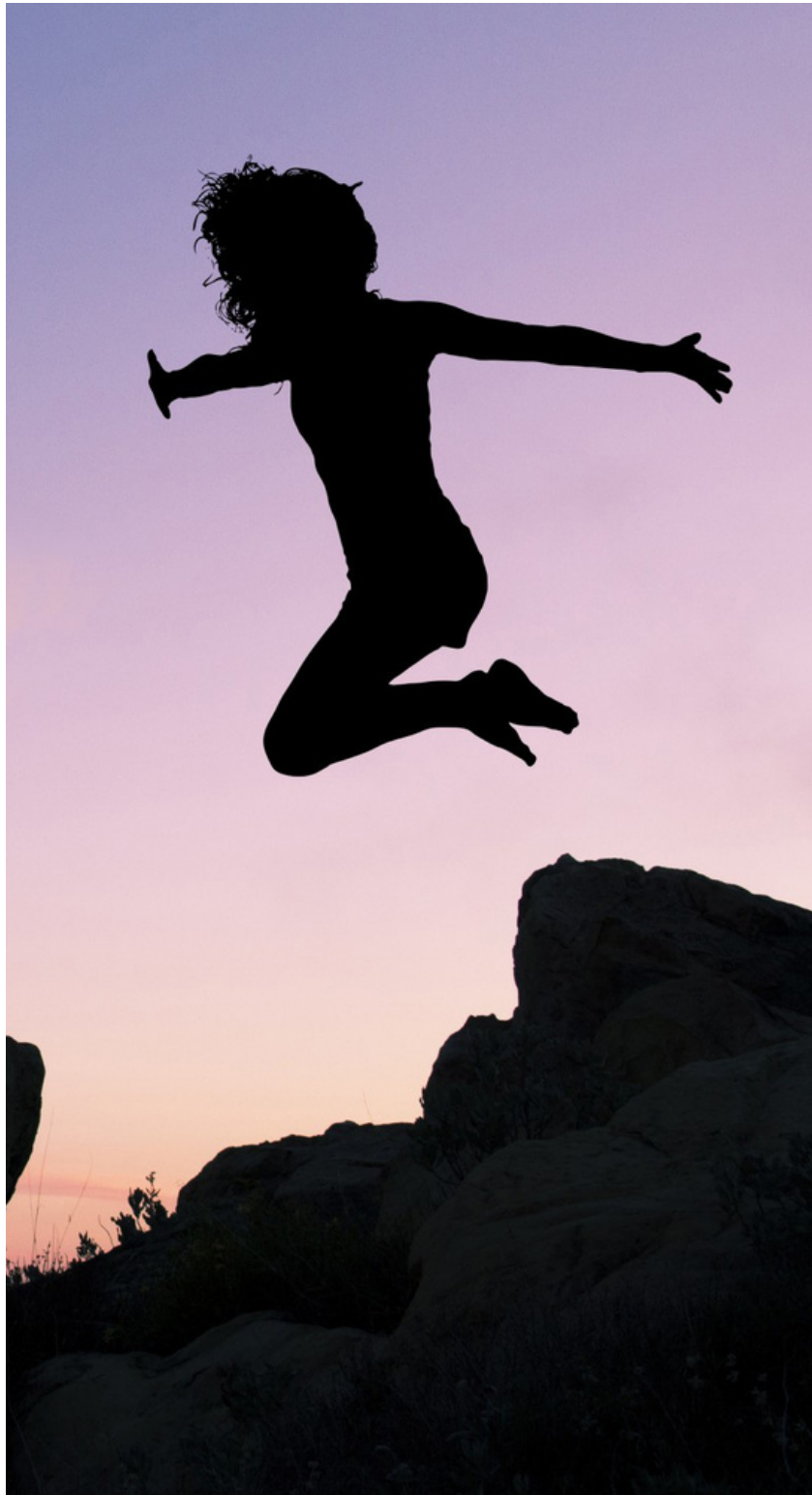
Feelings of imposter syndrome can be immensely crippling, fuelling our fear of doing/saying something which will expose us as the fraud we sometimes think we are.

But what if, rather than thinking of our imposter syndrome as an evil being that needs to be banished from our brains, we were able to see it as a friend who's there to help us?

What if, rather than running away from those situations where we feel like a conspicuous outsider, those fearful situations where we worry that someone's going to come up and ask us to leave because we're not XYZ enough, the imposter syndrome is the very sign that we're in the right place?

And that the fact that we don't exactly fit the mould is the exact reason why we should be there? What would be different then?

This tip is inspired by Susan Jeffers book, *Feel the Fear and Do It Anyway*, which I read about ten years ago and had a profound impact on some of the brave decisions I've taken over the years. By that time, I'd already done bonkers things like throwing myself off a bridge with nothing but an elastic band tied to my feet! But I'd not done some of the really brave things, like walking knowingly into conflict and choosing to be my most imperfect self on stage.



And so if you want to achieve incredible things this year – and why wouldn't you? I encourage you to say thank you to the fear, thank you to the imposter. And go ahead and do them anyway.



TIP 13:

Appreciate Your Worth

Today I was working with one of my coaches who's considering changing roles and moving outside their organisation. To position themselves in the best and most competitive light, they enlisted the support of a professional CV writer. When I asked them how they felt when looking at their accomplishments laid out on the CV's page, they said they felt fantastic and that it had given them a real boost to go out and find the role of their dreams.

The point is, we often hugely underestimate the value we bring. We take for granted what we do best, either because we find it easy or we enjoy it.

JUST BECAUSE WE FIND SOMETHING RELATIVELY EASY SHOULDN'T TAKE AWAY FROM HOW MUCH VALUE WE PLACE ON IT.

So get super clear on the value you bring. Note down, precisely, your skills and capabilities, your accomplishments, your expertise. And use this to reassure yourself when you feel the unhelpful side of the imposter syndrome raise its head.

And even if you're not looking for a new role, why not create your most up to date CV? And use this to remind yourself why you're in the role you're in – your experience, qualifications, your persona and personality traits – all the wonderful things that make you, YOU.

TIP 14: Act As If

We often hold ourselves back because we don't feel quite ready to put ourselves forward. This reticence tends to be more acute in women compared to men, as evidenced through research by Hewlett Packard, which found that men need to be 80% ready before they put themselves forward for a role, compared to women, who need to be *more than* certain before they put themselves out there.

This can be massively crippling and contribute to the uneven playing field that trips up many DE&I strategies.

So what to do? The starting point has to be organisations taking steps to acknowledge barriers to progression and creating practical strategies to overcome them. For example, leaders and managers need to proactively encourage all their people to put themselves forward, and actively support them when they do. And individuals need to find the inner strength to step out of their comfort zone and get their expertise noticed and rewarded.

One technique I've used each time I've experienced imposter syndrome is to Act As If.

This is different from the trite 'fake it til you make it' which I believe is detrimental to progress because it implies that you need to pretend to be someone else – or fake – to succeed.

Act As If is stepping into the new shoes that represent the next phase of your development. Like the best new shoes, they're your size, they fit you and look fabulous. But they may feel a bit unfamiliar and need a bit of breaking in before you can fully step out. This need not take long, but it will require a decision by you to fully step forward and stay there until you're ready to move on.



TIP 15:

Be Kind To Yourself

In our drive to achieve X, Y or Z, we can often be our own worst enemies. We beat ourselves up if something doesn't go our way and blame ourselves when something goes wrong. This fuels the unhelpful side of imposter syndrome – we don't feel like we belong, we think our failings will get found out and we even sabotage or undermine ourselves to prove that we were right all along and that we should get back in our box and go back to where we came from.

The antidote to this is to be kind to yourself. And so rather than looking for all the evidence of why you might fail, ask yourself why you're likely to succeed. And if something does go wrong, rather than berating yourself, ask yourself what did you learn and what will you do differently next time.

Practice talking to yourself as though you were speaking to your best friend and show yourself the love and compassion that you so rightly deserve.



TIP 16:

Tap into your power

When I was younger, I used to think things would get easier the older I got. And I'm still waiting! One of the messages that came through loud and clear with all the women I interviewed for 'Power Up', was that there will always be times when our resilience is challenged, and setbacks which cause doubts and fears. These experiences are extremely powerful and force us to ask: 'Dare I?'; 'Could I?'; 'What will happen?' and 'What will people think?'.

There have been many times in my life when people have said no to the dreams I've ambitiously shared. Times when I've thought that something was too hard, too much or too big. Times when I felt it would be far easier to give it all up for an easier life. I'm sure you've thought something similar too and in the end, each time someone has said no; that has been the impetus I've needed to just do it. If I think back on all those big goals, nine times out of ten, I've accomplished them and those that I haven't, I've forgotten about anyway.

When it comes to achieving your goals, if you want it enough, everything is possible if you put the work in. So, when it comes to overcoming the imposter, with each accomplishment, take the time to acknowledge your success. Although each achievement might feel like a small step, collectively, it will be a giant leap forward towards your goals. And when your power dips, you can take courage from the fact that you will find the strength to power up again.

And remember, you are powerful, not because of what you've done. You're powerful because of who you are and the potential you hold within.

TIP 17:

Ask For Help

Imposter syndrome can often be at its most acute when we're going through a challenging time – perhaps we've had a knockback which has sent a powerful message that we're not X, Y or Z enough – and so we retreat into our shell, believing that we just need to get through it before we can carry on. Choosing to battle alone is one strategy, but it's not the most empowering. As my friend, Andy Lopata, puts it in his latest book *Just Ask*:

“As a society, I believe that we are too slow to ask for help. The vast majority of us are brought up to believe that we need to know all of the answers, find solutions independently and look good. The rise of social media... has compounded that belief, driving an obsession with creating the perfect look and the perfect life for our online followers...”

“I want you to feel that it's OK to share. To recognise that constantly being independent and self-sufficient is counterproductive. Pretending that you know all the answers doesn't serve anyone. It damages your morale and confidence; it means you repeat mistakes that others have already made and learned from, and it leads to inefficiency that costs you and the people around you.”

Andy and I have helped one another in brilliant ways. He supported me in my speaking career when I was going through a tough time, and I was honoured to be asked to help edit *Just Ask* in its early stages. I also know that if I'm struggling, Andy will be one of the people who will be there to listen and support.

And so if you're experiencing any of the unhelpful sides of imposter syndrome, or if you're having a wobble of any kind, I strongly encourage you to think for a moment before responding to the “How are you?” question. Respond honestly. And if you need help, just ask.

TIP 18:

Celebrate Your Uniqueness

Strictly Come Dancing? I absolutely loved the most recent series because of the quality of the dancing, as well as the show's clear commitment to diversity and inclusion.

I was thrilled to see the final was between two incredible couples: John & Johannes and Rose & Giovanni. John and Rose have talked openly about their experiences of prejudice – John having been bullied as a child for being gay and Rose battling through society's perceptions of how deaf people ‘should’ be: as she put it in a Telegraph interview: “Me being deaf isn't the problem. Society is”.

Both have transformed their experiences of imposter syndrome into a strength. Both have talked about how much growing up would have been easier if people had been more open and understanding. Both have passionately shared their commitment to doing all they can to make a difference to people suffering because of close-minded discrimination.

It doesn't matter who won, what's important is that these four people have been brave enough to celebrate their uniqueness. And that the voting British public has supported them through it.

TIP 19:

Smile

OK so this one isn't directly connected to imposter syndrome, but it's a brilliant, quick and easy strategy that you can access whenever you want to live your mood.

A few years ago, a good friend of mine was having a pretty hard time. As a final resort before making an appointment with his GP, he decided to try a simple experiment: every morning, he made a commitment to smile. Even when he was feeling at his lowest, when he didn't feel like there was anything to smile about, he would smile. And over time, he found that this simple practice was little by little, having a positive impact on his mood.

So how come? Smiling activates tiny molecules, called neuropeptides, in your brain which are there to fend off stress and facilitate communication between neurons in your brain. Smiling also releases dopamine, endorphins and serotonin, which are associated with lowering anxiety and increasing feelings of happiness. Serotonin is one of the chemicals that anti-depressant medications attempt to regulate. This natural, feel-good chemical cocktail that your brain creates helps you feel happier and more relaxed, and it can even lower your heart rate and blood pressure.



TIP 20:

Walk Away

There will be times when imposter syndrome is a positive sign that you're in the right place, that you've stepped out of your comfort zone, and whilst there, you're growing and progressing.

On the other hand, there are times when imposter syndrome is so intense, so painful, that the best course of action is to walk away. There are two ways you can do this.

Firstly, you can literally walk out. Change roles, change teams, leave the organisation altogether. If your values don't chime with your employers', if you've felt unhappy over an extended period of time and if you don't see anything changing any time soon, then walk away. The great resignation is a testament to people rising up and getting out because they're no longer prepared to compromise.

Secondly, you can use detachment. This is the ability to remove yourself from what's happening as a coping mechanism, choosing when to get involved and when to steer clear. This can be really useful if you're in a stressful situation. When challenges arise, you think 'I don't need to hear/see this' and then imagine literally rising above it: a very effective strategy to give you distance and the power to choose.

TIP 21:

Be An Ally!

For this imposter syndrome tip, I'd like to take you back to the book I featured in Tip #3: Be The First, by Caroline Flanagan

Caroline's book is a tour de force: a powerful guide on how to succeed in a white world. It's full of stories about what it feels like to be the only person of colour in the room, and how this experience shapes your experience of the world.

When I first heard Caroline speak about how this felt at school and when she began her law career, I was moved to tears. In reading her book, I realised that these weren't one-off experiences, they were a regular part of life – in restaurants, at award ceremonies, walking down the street.

As a woman, I've had my fair share of imposter experiences, but none that made me feel so much like the conspicuous outsider described in Caroline's book.

As Caroline puts it: "When you walk away from racism, you walk away from the opportunity to change it".

And so this tip is an invitation to take a moment to reflect on what it must feel like to be the only non-white person in a room. The courage must take to notice, and keep your head up high. The battles you must need to fight to overcome conscious and unconscious bias on a daily basis.

Whatever colour you are, I strongly recommend you read Caroline's book. And take the steps to be an ally. This starts with education, fuelled by compassion and curiosity, and enhanced by action: speaking out, challenging assumptions, attitudes, and beliefs, and bringing unconscious biases to light.



TIP 22:

We can use up so much valuable energy trying to conform, worrying about what people will think if we dare to be different.

Accept Yourself

Society has so many boxes it wants to fit us into. Many people find it hard to wrap their heads around the fact that there are some people who don't want to fit into those safe, yet confining, neatly labelled little boxes.

When it comes to diversity, equity and inclusion, there are the protected characteristics that we're all aware of, but there's a whole spectrum of other facets that make up who we are.

So my tip for today is to accept and love yourself unconditionally. Especially the parts that make you different. Because it's those parts that give you your edge, those parts that power you forward, those parts that give you empathy and those parts that make you, YOU!



TIP 23:

Reframing

For this tip, I'm going to share an extremely powerful technique for managing your mindset which is called reframing, where you recognise that you may not be experiencing a situation in the most productive way and choose to look at it in a different way.

Let me give you an example. I was running a Gravitas Masterclass the other day and one of the participants – let's call her Anni – talked about having joined a very traditional and conservative organisation, bearing in mind when she walked in you could see she was the opposite of traditional and conservative, wearing a jumper with peacock feathers and sequinned green, silver and purple trainers.

The trouble was, Anni was trying really hard to fit the mould. Her lightbulb moment came when she realised that she'd been brought in to shake things up and that what the traditional and conservative organisation wanted was for her to be a peacock shaped peg in a round hole.

To apply reframing to your imposter, think about how your imposter 'used to' get in your way, eg: didn't ask a question, didn't go to that function, didn't volunteer for that initiative, didn't choose that course at uni.

Now, think about what could be the positive traits associated with your imposter. Eg: warning you that you're in a new situation and to be prepared; stopping your confidence from tipping into arrogance, increasing your empathy for others.

TIP 24:

Support One Another and Celebrate Success!

These tips were inspired by an event that I was asked to run by Siemens Healthineers in November on How to Make Imposter Syndrome Work for You.

As part of my preparation, I ran an informal poll and was shocked to hear that over half of the 30 women who took part experience it EVERY DAY, over a third said it affects their overall confidence and over a third said it stopped them from speaking up.

One of the benefits of that session was that it meant that everyone had the opportunity to talk about their experiences in a safe and supportive environment and agree on how they would support one another.

Towards the end of the session, I shared some ideas of the roles you can play to do this. These include:

- **Amplifier:** when someone makes a great point, proactively agree with them! This will boost their confidence and create a supportive environment for new ideas

- **Cheerleader:** we all need encouragement and people who are pleased for us when we succeed! Even in a competitive environment, it's still possible to celebrate others' wins, because if one person can do it, it paves the way for others to do the same!

- **Critical friend:** life isn't always plain sailing and sometimes people mess up. If a colleague is undermining or sabotaging their success, they will thank you for sensitively sharing your views, as long as they are backed by evidence and supported with next steps

- **Confidante:** the higher up you go, the harder it can be to find colleagues you trust. One of the most effective ways of getting your imposter syndrome to work for you is to talk about it with a friend. So my final point for this series is to share your experiences and invite others to do the same. A whole world of possibilities will open up when you do.

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