

SHUT THE DUCK UP

BY ELAINE KLEMMENSEN, DVM

She clasped her trembling hands together in an attempt to calm her nerves and quiet the quacking voice inside her head—the voice that kept resurfacing like an annoying jingle that couldn't be forgotten. “A few lucky breaks and a few hundred published articles don't make you a writer. Who are you to think you could write a novel?”

She had submitted the first chapter of her novel for review to a group of writers at Simon Fraser University. As she waited for the respected author to critique her work, that voice spoke up again. “You should just leave. Look at all the red marks on your manuscript. You might call yourself a journalist, but today the ruse is up. They're going to discover you're a fraud.”

At the last minute, she had almost backed out and begged her husband to go in her place. He refused, leaving her alone with the quacking in her head while she waited for the well-known novelist to provide feedback. After a few minutes of silence, he lifted his head from the pages that lay in front of him and said, “You are the one we have been waiting to meet, Corey.”

It turned out every red mark, without exception, was a note that something was great. Not one criticism.

I am grateful to our brave editor Corey Van't Haaff for sharing this story with me and bringing a personal lens to a feeling common among many high-achieving and highly deserving people: impostor syndrome. Identified in 1978 by psychologists Pauline Clance and Suzanne Imes, impostor syndrome is not a disease but rather an internal experience where people feel they do not deserve their accomplishments and have faked their way to success. While everyone has moments of professional insecurity, those who suffer from impostor syndrome have intense feelings of self-doubt and anticipated failure. Regardless of evidence to the contrary, they attribute their success to luck or help from others rather than their abilities and hard work. In the extreme, these feelings can lead to anxiety, intense fear of failure, a loss of confidence, and the inability to enjoy and embrace the opportunities they deserve.

Any of this sound familiar?

It may comfort you to know you are in good company. Many well-known public figures, including Maya Angelou, Sheryl Sandberg, Neil Gaiman, and Tom Hanks, have admitted to struggling with impostor syndrome. Comedian Mike Myers once said, “I still expect that the ‘no talent’ police will one day come and arrest me.”

It is important to recognize that impostor syndrome arises in spaces where judgments are made about merit. Professional accomplishments and advancement are a common arena where feelings of inadequacy, not belonging, and fraud arise. Equally important is the recognition that these feelings are just that, an internal dialogue that is not an accurate reflection of your external reality. By recognizing impostor syndrome for what it is, you can start to write a new story for yourself and take the first step to create alignment with how the world sees you and how you see yourself.

SHIFTING YOUR PERSPECTIVE

Just like Corey, you probably have your own duck quacking away inside your head; giving you daily reminders that you are not good enough and don't deserve your success. So how exactly do you “shut the duck up”? Shifting your perspective requires self-awareness and a willingness to be introspective. Career coaches recognize that people with impostor syndrome often have trouble seeing their strengths. It can be difficult to start seeing yourself how others see you.

Experts recommend starting a journal where you list at least three things you did successfully that day. Be sure to keep all the thank-you letters you receive and re-read them to remind yourself that you are appreciated and worthy. Finally, consider writing yourself a letter of recommendation so you can see your accomplishments through someone else's eyes.

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In addition to self-reflection, consider forming your own personal “board of advisers.” Enlist trusted and respected mentors who can provide honest feedback about your performance. Remember, if you respect them, respect their opinion about you. Embrace the insights they offer that illuminate your blind spots and commit to hearing their compliments without dismissing them. Over time, these practices will start to reframe how you see yourself and give the duck less power.

REFRAMING EXPECTATIONS

At graduation, I recall one of my classmates announcing he was going to give all his spay patients a 50-50 prognosis. This way, he reasoned, clients would not be disappointed. While this might be a bit extreme, the reality is many people with impostor syndrome have unrealistic expectations of what it means to do a good enough job. It is important to challenge your perceptions of what success looks like. What is a realistic expectation for surgical skills in a newly graduated veterinarian? Be sure to see yourself in context and compare like to like. It is unrealistic, for example, to expect to have the same level of expertise as a veterinarian who has been practicing for five years.

Perfectionism, along with flawed or limiting beliefs about success, failure, and self-worth, lies at the heart of impostor syndrome. These flawed beliefs drive people with impostor syndrome to procrastinate and avoid situations where they might not succeed. They may also strive to outperform others in a relentless search for external validation.

As you challenge these beliefs, start to focus on what you have accomplished in and of itself, rather than what you had hoped to accomplish. What you have, instead of what you had hoped to have. What you have learned, instead of what you still have to learn. Start to reframe failure as an opportunity to grow and improve rather than a reflection of your self-worth. Consider the fact that the most competent people are good at leveraging the strengths and expertise of others. Asking for help is not a sign of weakness but rather a sign of wisdom.

YOU ARE NOT ALONE

Mike Cannon-Brookes, CEO of the software company Atlassian, said it best in his TEDx talk titled “How you can use impostor syndrome to your benefit.” Like many of us, he assumed successful people do not feel like frauds. He goes on to describe his own lightbulb moment: “I realized that other people also feel this way, and it does not go away with any form of success.”

The realization that you are not alone and that impostor syndrome can be overcome is empowering. It is OK to feel as if you jumped into the deep end of the pool and don't know how to swim. As terrifying as it is, it is OK to be in over your head; just don't freeze. Start kicking your legs. Start moving your arms. Ask for advice on how to improve your stroke and apply that advice to move forward. When you finally grasp the pool edge, take a moment to celebrate your achievement. And if there happens to be a quacking duck in the pool with you, don't be afraid to tell it to shut the duck up! [WCV](#)

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