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June 9, 2009

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A High Achiever's Stumbling Block.

In my consulting and coaching career I've been fortunate to work with many highly talented individuals. A recent career coaching session with a world-renowned inventor who was working with me to think through the next phase of his career reminded me of an all-too-common obstacle that many successful individuals struggle with: the imposter syndrome.

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The word syndrome suggests a bona-fide psychological disorder although my research indicates that, as of now, it has not been designated as such. However, a number of serious books and papers have been written about this phenomenon so I am confident that this is not just something I, alone, have observed. Originally this syndrome was thought to be almost exclusively a women's issue but more recent research has shown that men are afflicted by it in equal numbers.

It is important to distinguish the imposter syndrome from what we typically think of as "low self-esteem". I mentioned above that my work with highly achieving, highly successful people is what brought this syndrome to my attention. Imposter feelings represent a disconnect between one's internalized reactions and objective measures of achievement and success that may not be present in cases of low self-esteem. (Or, as one gruff psych prof once said, "Often, low self-esteem is just accurate self-perception.") The imposter syndrome is *inaccurate* self-perception.

In the same way parents and significant others (e.g. teachers, clergy) can set the stage for our later success they can also directly or indirectly communicate messages that later convert to feelings of fraud. This is especially the case if your career choice (regardless of your success in it) is in conflict with what your family wanted or of what may have been expected for someone of your gender, race, age, or social strata. Growing up in a family with unremitting and ever-escalating standards or those characterized by criticism, conflict and anger can set the stage for later feelings of "Nothing I do is good enough."

Every family I've ever observed labels different children differently. There is often a "good kid", or an "instigator", a "plugger", "the lazy one", the "smart one" and a host of others both positive and negative. And those labels, given in childhood, are difficult to escape from within the family even in such instances where the instigator turns into the facilitator, the lazy one turns out to be an achiever or (what I find really interesting) is when the good kid becomes a not-so-good adult. It is because of this that I've run into the imposter syndrome in some of the family businesses in which I've consulted. Often a son or daughter or even an in-law in the business will end up with two titles: the one on their business card and the unofficial and unspoken one.

In my book *Love Your Job!* I wrote about fear of success and what to do about it. If this applies to you try to find *LYJ!* in your library or at [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com). There is a connection here because if you suffer from the imposter syndrome you may well avoid future success as it generates inner conflict between your feelings and outward reality. Some folks try so hard not to be "found out" that they actually avoid situations

where it is almost certain that they will succeed.

If that wasn't insidious enough I've seen situations where some of the very traits that contribute significantly to a person's success also contribute to the affect of the imposter syndrome. Three such examples are self-confidence, work ethic and skills of perception.

A person with excellent perceptive skills has an intuitive understanding of how to persuade and influence others as well as how to seek out and establish productive relationships. But if the imposter syndrome is at work he or she may feel that these success skills are merely due to friendliness, charm or "the gift of gab". An "imposter" is often working hard not to be "found out". But this solid work ethic usually leads to success, praise and reward that, paradoxically reinforces the discomfort of feeling like a fraud. Self-confidence is an attractive quality in any setting. But demonstrating the self-confidence that comes from achievement and reward can actually increase a person's discomfort if he or she feels like an imposter.

There are a few steps to take if any of the above applies to you or to someone you care about. Let's take a look.

Paths Forward

- **Identify What's Happening.** Do you have a hard time accepting compliments? When you've achieved something noteworthy have you ever heard yourself say "I was just in the right place at the right time", or "No big deal", or "I pulled it off this time"? If so, you may have a touch of the imposter syndrome. How much it affects you can be assessed by the frequency of these automatic thoughts.
- **Recognizing Automatic Thoughts.** Automatic thoughts surface in a fraction of a second when you react to a situation. These are really not so much thoughts as they are pre-programmed, unquestioned reactions. They may have been with you so long that they are habits or you no longer even hear them. If you typically react to praise by thinking something like "Whew, I was lucky on that one", "Anybody could have done it", or "I guess it was an easier project than we knew" you are discounting your success which is an almost certain indication of the imposter syndrome. Key to overcoming this is to start actively tuning in to hear these automatic thoughts. With practice you will get better at it.
- **Reality Check.** After you become more attuned to hearing these automatic thoughts you can start responding to them in the same way you would respond to another person who was unfairly criticizing you. It's even more effective if you do this aloud (obviously, best done alone). Stick up for yourself with

comments like "No, it wasn't mere luck. I worked those extra hours getting that project done ahead of time" or "If anybody could have earned that award I wonder why no else did?" or "If it was really not such a big deal they wouldn't have given me that plaque and the bonus would they." By sticking up for yourself you can start to enjoy the success you have earned but may have convinced yourself that you do not deserve.

• **Feelings Are Real Things.** Emotions are just not some frivolous, little vapors that float willy-nilly through space. They are ideas, they are the reflections of what is going on in your mind and they affect how you behave. One of the reasons our current social dialogue has become so coarse is that some folks believe that if they feel something strongly enough they are right! Yes, they are real things but they are not infallible. Sometimes just the support of a close friend or confidant can help you see or feel things more in line with reality. If your way of thinking really needs some adjustment you should enlist the services of a therapist skilled in cognitive therapy. You can email me for a referral or find one in your area via the Academy of Cognitive Therapy (academyofct.org), the National Association of Cognitive-Behavioral Therapists (nacbt.org).

LifeMap is about removing any obstacles to the rightful enjoyment of the success for which you have worked so hard.

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Sincerely,

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