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## How to overcome imposter syndrome

If you have ever been plagued by self-doubt and feelings of incompetency, then you are probably one of the many people experiencing imposter syndrome. You can learn to overcome imposter syndrome by retraining your inner voice to be less critical.

### What is imposter syndrome?

Imposter syndrome is **defined** as: "A psychological pattern which causes chronic self-doubt and overwhelming feelings of inadequacy, often despite repeated success and accomplishments."

As the name suggests, this self-doubt makes us feel like we're imposters when we find ourselves in professional positions that require experience, skill and competency.

"What goes hand in hand with self-doubt and imposter syndrome is **low self-esteem** and a critical and judgemental inner voice," explains senior therapist **Sally Baker**. This inner voice is like a "drip, drip of toxic put-downs and unkindness".

We often discuss imposter syndrome in the workplace, but in truth a negative inner voice can accompany and impact us in all areas of our lives. It does, however, tend to affect our professional lives greatly because of the pressure to be competent at our jobs.

In fact, according to a UK **survey** of 1,000 adults who have been employed for at least three years, 85% of us feel incompetent at work. This may be a large majority, but of this group only 25% are aware that we are experiencing imposter syndrome.

It's important to emphasise that imposter syndrome has no correlation with our abilities or achievements. The causes are completely psychological and related to poor [mental health](#) and low self-esteem.

## How can I tell if I have imposter syndrome?

The survey also highlighted some of the main beliefs held by people with imposter syndrome. You may have imposter syndrome if you find yourself agreeing with the statements below.

- 25% feel that their success is down to luck.
- 19% worry that one day their superior or colleagues will realise that they are under-qualified.
- 15% believe that they only got their job/promotion due to a shortage of candidates.
- 11% don't think that they deserve the praise they receive at work.

Although having no belief in your own abilities bears no relation to your ability to do a job well, imposter syndrome can start to affect your job performance negatively if your inner critical thoughts become too intrusive.

Signs that imposter syndrome may be having a negative impact:

- Ignoring or trying to avoid positive feedback for work you have done.
- Overworking because you are concerned you need to spend more time on it than required.
- Not volunteering for projects because of the fear of failure.

According to [research](#), imposter syndrome can also exist alongside mental health issues like [depression](#) and [anxiety](#). If you have any of the symptoms of depression or anxiety and are worried that you have either or both conditions, your GP will be able to find you the appropriate support. Alternatively, you can [refer yourself for NHS talking therapy](#) in England.

# Your inner voice

"Psychologists have worked out that a person's self-esteem is roughly based on the thoughts and feelings they've had about themselves in the previous two weeks," says Baker.

These thoughts can also be referred to as your inner monologue or inner voice. Baker explains: "Each one of us has a unique inner voice that speaks to us inside our minds, providing us with a running commentary on everything we say and everything we do."

"We have all had an inner voice since childhood. We have become so accustomed to it chatting away in our mind, that what it says usually happens just below our conscious awareness, and we barely pay it any notice."

## Is your inner voice more negative or positive?

It's when our inner voice becomes overly negative and self-critical that our self-esteem can be lowered. On the flipside, having a positive inner voice is reflective of [good mental health](#).

### **Baker's examples of a positive inner voice reaction to potentially negative events**

**Reaction:** "It doesn't matter that I didn't get that promotion I went for."

**Reasoning:** "Oh well, I'm still a fabulous person."

**Or**

**Reaction:** "Oh shucks, I just pranged the car bumper on that post."

**Reasoning:** "Amazing, my reactions were so fast I've only caused minimal damage to my car!"

It's important to note that no one's inner voice is 100% positive all the time, nor does it need to be. While our inner positive cheerleader provides encouragement and self-compassion, our inner critic helps us to recognise when we've gone wrong. However, too often our inner critic goes over the top and we find ourselves shamed and scolded more often than supported and comforted.

Baker has a therapy technique to help determine how negative versus positive your inner voice is: "On my desk I have a large, glass, round fishbowl half filled with gold and blue marbles. The fishbowl represents your mind, and the marbles represent the kind and unkind thoughts you have about yourself. I ask my clients to imagine I sent them their own large, glass fish bowl a couple of weeks previously.

"I instruct them to start with the fishbowl empty, and every time they have a life-affirming, generous or kind thought about themselves they drop in a gold marble and every time they have a negative, self-deprecating or unkind thought about themselves they drop in a blue marble.

"I then ask them to imagine that today, some two weeks later, we have the fishbowl in front of us. Studying the fishbowl, I ask them to imagine there is a mix of one hundred gold and blue marbles inside.

"Now I ask them to take an intuitive guess to ascertain what percentage of marbles are gold versus what percentage of marbles are blue."

You are prone to imposter syndrome if the percentage of blue marbles (negative thoughts) is around 70% or higher. In fact, anything over a small percentage of blue indicates that your inner voice is quite harsh.

## **How to overcome imposter syndrome**

To overcome imposter syndrome, you must retrain your brain so that your self-talk is more positive. Only then will you be able to stop feeling like an imposter and start believing in your own abilities.

Baker takes the following treatment steps with her clients:

1. Note-taking - clients note down every critical thought they have about themselves for five days. This means these thoughts no longer have free reign in their subconscious mind, as each becomes a conscious note.
2. Looking for thought patterns - as they make notes, clients look for any patterns that tie these thoughts together. This can help them to notice where the critical voice originates from. It also helps them to start spotting any common uses of language, such as slang words or a particular accent (often the voice is not even their own, but that of a parent, grandparent, or teacher).
3. Acknowledging critical thoughts - next time a critical thought occurs, clients are encouraged to acknowledge it and to remind themselves that it's not true.
4. Contesting critical thoughts - they should then aim to contest the thought by actively dismissing it. Some do this by making a buzzer noise in their mind (similar to one in a game show when a wrong answer is given).

The underlying principles - identifying unhelpful thought patterns and challenging them, replacing them with more objective thoughts - is similar to those used in [cognitive behavioural therapy \(CBT\)](#).

"It is possible to discover the power of making thoughts work for you instead of against you," Baker adds. "The changes people make to their negative versus positive thinking can be powerful and long-lasting. It's worth making an effort for a few days to check in with your inner voice until dismissing old negative ways of talking to yourself becomes second nature."

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