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The Systemic Problem of Imposter Syndrome and Tips for Freelancers
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Podcast Transcript

Welcome to Brand + Design Scoop, where I share practical, relatable tips on branding, design, and building a business for do-it-yourselfers who want to stop doing everything themselves.

I'm Kelly, a brand strategist and Squarespace website designer and founder of AKS Design Studio.

Today I'm going to discuss imposter syndrome—what it is, its effects on the individual, whether it's actually a pathology, its systemic origins, and what we freelancers can do about it.

I'll tell you upfront that I don't have answers to this issue. But I will have suggestions for freelancers at the end.

The concept of imposter syndrome was originally developed by psychologists Pauline Rose Clance and Suzanne Imes in a 1978 study which focused on high-achieving women. They posited that "despite outstanding academic and professional accomplishments, women who experience the imposter phenomenon persist in believing that they are really not bright and have fooled anyone who thinks otherwise."

Here's the definition from Oxford Language: "The persistent inability to believe that one's success is deserved or has been legitimately achieved as a result of one's own efforts or skills"

Imposter syndrome is essentially second-guessing yourself to the point of suspecting that you are not as competent as others perceive you to be. It's thinking that people are lying when they tell you are awesome, shower you with accolades, or tell you that you deserve some promotion or success.

Men can certainly experience imposter syndrome, but it tends to be seen more in high-achieving women.

Most tips on overcoming imposter syndrome have to do with changing your mindset. They have to do with fixing the individual who is experiencing imposter syndrome. These tips include:

1. Talk about how you are feeling, as in, acknowledge that you feel like a fraud. This includes acknowledging it to yourself and talking about it with other people.
2. Accept that you're going to make mistakes. It's okay to be a perfectionist. But let go of the need to make everything perfect. And don't expect yourself to be perfect.
3. Recognize that you can find the answers to questions you currently don't know the answers to. No one knows the answers to everything. It's okay to say, "I don't have that answer right now, but I'll find it out."
4. Visualize success. Follow the example of athletes and imagine yourself succeeding.
5. Reward yourself. Congratulate yourself on your successes.
6. Fake it 'til you make it. Instead of viewing "winging it" as proof of being a fraud, view it as an asset, as proof that you can grow and learn.

When I was a life coach, I taught about what I call the "7 Primary Fears." Two of these are the fear of not being good enough and the fear of not being worthy. Both of these can show up as imposter syndrome in which we feel like people will discover we're a fraud.

For example, "If I get this promotion, people will say I'm not worthy of it." Or, "If I start this business, people will say I'm not good enough to do it."

I taught some mindset tips to help overcome these fears. But mostly I taught another route to overcoming these fears, one that I found to be more effective. And that is taking action. The mindset part is designed to help you take action. Mindset doesn't matter if you don't do anything with it.

I'm not saying that the tips I listed above don't help. But, if pure mindset tricks worked, why do so many women (and men) still experience imposter syndrome? Why do they have it in the place first place? And why is it still so prevalent?

Is it because so many experts on imposter syndrome don't teach taking action? Or it is something else?

In February 2021, authors Ruchika Tulshyan and Jodi-Ann Burey published an article in the Harvard Business Review called "Stop Telling Women They Have Imposter Syndrome" (link in the show notes) about how imposter syndrome is a problem within the system rather than within the individual. They note that systemic racism, classism, xenophobia, and other biases were left out of the original study and definition of the concept of imposter syndrome. They further note that our concept of imposter syndrome puts the blame on the individual rather than on the cultural and historical contexts in which imposter syndrome developed. Finally, they note that our concept puts the onus on individual women to fix imposter syndrome, rather than looking at society or, specifically, at the places where women work.

Tulshyan and Burey discuss how the aspects of what defines imposter syndrome are normal feelings that were turned into a pathology. They write that discomfort, second-guessing, and mild anxiety in the workplace are universal feelings that should not have been pathologized and made into something that individuals should fix. Rather, they are signals that the workplace has problems that need to be fixed.

They go on to discuss how bias and exclusion exacerbate feelings of doubt and cause women of color to leave their jobs. They write, "In truth, we don't belong because we were never supposed to belong."

They also write that "the answer to overcoming imposter syndrome is not to fix individuals, but to create an environment that fosters a number of different leadership styles and where diversity of racial, ethnic, and gender identities is viewed as just as professional as the current model."

Tulshyan and Burey wrote a follow-up article in July 2021 called "End Imposter Syndrome in Your Workplace." Link in the show notes.

They write that ending imposter syndrome in the workplace requires work at the interpersonal and organizational levels. They call on managers "to stop calling natural, human tendencies of self-doubt, hesitation, and lack of confidence 'imposter syndrome.'" Managers must question the culture at work, not women's confidence at work.

Their suggestions for the workplace are:

1.   Pivot the language employees use to describe themselves
2.   Be honest about the impact of bias
3.   Reduce biases against women of color at work
4.   Be data-driven and rigorous
5.   Quit gaslighting and listen
6.   Sponsor and mentor women of color
7.   Set up accountability mechanisms for change

I find these two articles fascinating and enlightening. From my experiences in feeling like an imposter, coaching other women with imposter syndrome, and talking with yet other people who have experienced imposter syndrome, I agree that it is a systemic problem more than it is an individual problem. I find this to be the case particularly in light of the fact that all of the suggestions on how individuals can overcome imposter syndrome just don't seem to work.

So, I have some questions that I want to work through in this podcast. As I mentioned above, I don't have the answers, just some suggestions. But mostly things to think about.

I want to talk with my Millennial daughter about her experiences and those of her friends around imposter syndrome.

I'm going to chat with my podcasting buddies from the Geek Girl Soup Podcast, where we discuss pop culture, movies, and tv shows, as well as representation in the film and TV industry. They are two Black women, one of whom works in a full-time job, and the other of whom is a small-business owner who is making a career change.

I asked my Facebook connections what their experiences with imposter syndrome are.

I wonder about how Zoomers (that's Gen Z) experience imposter syndrome, particularly if they feel it less since workplaces are diversifying more now—with more women, people of color, people with disabilities, and trans people coming into leadership positions. I speculate that they may be or will be experiencing imposter syndrome less. I hope that's the case. Though I may be wrong.

Finally, I'm thinking about what we freelancers can do about imposter syndrome when we don't have a proper workplace. We can't wait on society to change, and we don't have a manager with whom to discuss bias or discrimination. So, what can we do when we feel like a fraud?

First, let's talk with my daughter about her experiences and those with her friends.

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[Kelly] So this is my daughter Camille. She's a freelance illustrator who lives in New York City. Thank you for being here, Camille. So what do you think about the definition of imposter syndrome that I discussed earlier?

[Camille] Yeah. So there was a, there are a couple things in the definition that resonate. I mean, personally, I don't think I have doubted myself as much as doubted why people were actually interested in me, or interested in my work. I think sometimes I will get praise for making something that other people like, or making something that is somehow successful in some way or another that I don't really agree with.

[K] Interesting. So do you mean that they may like something that you just didn't think is as high quality as they are praising it for?

[C] Well, that definitely happens. And I think it does contribute to the feeling of imposter syndrome sometimes. Because if, if I don't feel like my work is actually being seen the way I see it, I am not really sure how I'm being seen. What I can't be taken aback by people's interpretation of my work or impression on my work, whether I really like it or really don't like it.

[K] Do you think that's like a sign of perfectionism in you?

[C] I mean, I am a perfectionist. But, either way, I would like my work to be seen more personally. And maybe it's the less personal art that can be easily understood and easily be applied to commercial purposes is what other people will congratulate me for, praise me for. But I'm not interested in making commercial art. That stuff, and the the kind of style that is more successful in the commercial world, can be appealing to people. And they can tell you, "Wow, Camille, that's great, looks amazing." Just very confused.

[K] Just different tastes in some cases.

[C] But maybe what I'm kind of skirting around is my image of the visual design world. The commerciality, I mean. I, so I was in art school, and I never was employed by a firm or agency or

anything. But that's what our school was pushing us towards, of course, because they want their alumni to make money. So I had this idea that, at some point, during my college experience, it would click for me what exactly I would be doing, what role I'd be getting. I thought at some point of the four years of college, I would figure out what my commercial role was. And in the world system, I thought it would be working for a big company. I wanted to work for a big company, and maybe somewhere impressive, you know, somewhere that people had heard of, not just, not necessarily just making money somewhere, but making money for a well-known company. Because I do want to influence you know, on a greater scale.

[C] But so in college, it was a good thing to make work that was commercially appealing. Because it was a good sign. It was like, "Hey, this is gonna look right in portfolio. This will get you a job." And it was so confusing that the work I liked was not being encouraged by professors and students. And work I thought that was fine and that like sure I could do it….

[C] I can replicate flat 2d art that's so popular right now. And for a while, for at least a year or two in school, I definitely leaned into it and tried to make it more of my style, like just make it my own. It's yeah, it's confusing. I was like, I was trying to be whatever people wanted me to be, which made me feel like an imposter because I know I'm not. And on the other hand, I felt like an imposter anyway because I was not being appreciated for what I want to be appreciated for.

[K] That plays into this idea of imposter syndrome being a systemic issue, if you're not being appreciated for what you want to be appreciated for. And also the part of society pushing people into commercial success, like making that the end-all-be-all, and especially given that you are an artist and have a different view of what you want to do in the art world. Do you feel that? I mean, you essentially just said that yes, that was this pressure you were feeling from the school, from peers.

[C] Oh, maybe this also goes, even calling myself an artist took me a long time to get to because of the imposter syndrome. I'd say, you know, and I wasn't recognizing it for a long time. I just would get defensive. When people called me an artist, I would say, "No, I'm a designer," you know, even a visual designer.

[K] And I'm sitting here smiling because, as your mom, for years your dad and I were calling you an artist. But, it sounds like, much to your chagrin, just because we saw it and you from the time you were a toddler.

[C] It didn't bother me hearing you guys.

[K] Because we're your parents.

[C] But you actually did make me feel good about whatever I made. I felt encouraged. Yeah, for sure.

[K] And then, as you and I discussed recently, you've actually been working as a professional for at least 11 years now.

[C] Yeah, but that still doesn't add, like contribute to my feelings about being an imposter.

[K] Yeah, no, that's understandable. But still you have the credentials.

[C] What it does is it does help a little bit of my old self. When I was only a year or two into being a professional and was doubting my, like, authority or my place, you know, can I even charge and like, of course that was the case. But, I mean, I think just again, possibly in spite of imposter syndrome, anyone with any talent of any kind should just do what they want.

[K] Is this something that you and your friends ever talk about? Or just maybe not using the term?

[C] Exactly, yeah. But yeah, I mean, I guess then, like bands were also in the art world, different ways. They similarly, they might be getting success or be putting on shows or displaying their work in some way and don't really believe that it's, it is success, because they don't feel it yet. Like, what is the line? Like I personally have been counting my dollars. Ever since graduating college, I haven't had a moment where I actually feel like, okay, I'm successful, because I don't have to worry about money or time that for some reason seems like the point where maybe I'll feel like I'm successful if I'm not worrying about money.

[C] I would like to try to change my attitude, mindset, where I feel successful or happy because I'm at least working towards that. But yeah, I don't know. I think that I'm trying to get over imposter syndrome by believing in myself. I'm really, I think that the easier way for me to get over imposter syndrome is to realize and recognize that there are people are going to judge each other, and people are going to push back on you even if you are totally capable. And it's

okay, like, you'll be able to deal with it. Like I think, you know, just like ignore the haters is really what I'm talking about.

[K[Now, that makes sense.

[C] Yeah. Like we had talked about some point before, was all the self help material, you know, articles and Instagram posts about being confident yourself, and, but that is not the....

[K] Yeah. It seems like women, at least, with imposter syndrome are really confident in themselves and are certainly really competent. So, it's not a lack of confidence that makes us have this fear of being perceived as a fraud or being called the fraud.

[C] I really think that the actual just like flat truth is that there are just haters, and you need friends and community to support you. Because you do your thing. If the haters, you have your friends around, because it's, you know, your community that is gonna tell you the same thing.

[K] Yeah.

[C] Ignore laters enough to keep doing what you're doing. And if your friends are telling you or not encouraging you, then they're not the right friends that's in there right now.

[K] So, that's really great advice for fellow freelancers. And then for people who have a full-time job, then it's up to the managers of the workplace, from what I'm reading in the Harvard Business Review articles, is the managers have to take care of the workplaces to make those more livable, workable.

[C] That makes sense.

[K] Now, yeah, and we don't have workplaces where we can talk to our managers. "Hey, Kelly, I'm not feeling comfortable here, there's a lot of bias going on." "Okay, Kelly, then...."

[C] Same way maybe improving your own business, and you can leave yourself notes or later.

[K] Right? I really like what you said about, they're always gonna be haters. F them. Surround yourself with supportive people.

[C] So since I've been self employed, since graduating, I've been working with a lot of clients who have overlapped as friends, who either started as friends or became friends. Then I was involved in, like, invested in the work more personally. Also, you know, I kind of cared about the people I was working for and might be more, might have been more prone to do whatever they wanted art-wise. It's been interesting.

[C] You know, I've just had an interesting experience, finding my own voice as an artist, while you know, trying to serve the clients that are hiring me and not be too swept away by their ideas. Because it can, it can literally influence your career for the rest of your life. You know, artists have often settled on their style while working for a client. And then there are famous artists who, whose styles were developed and stuck with, you know, pretty early on. And I'm, I'd be fine if I did that. But I don't think I'm, you know, I still have a voice to find.

[C] But one thing I, you know, one thing I want to say was that I didn't realize until, you know, it was happening, how much value there is in actual friends who care about you, you know, seeing your work, and telling you what they like. You know, there's, I've been negatively influenced by people telling me what they like. But there's something different that you can feel when someone who really cares about you is encouraging you. And it I think it's because they can see that you are enjoying what you're doing. And so it's more about like, "Wow, you're having fun doing this, like, keep doing it." Other than, "Oh, I really like what you did here. A great piece of work." You know?

[K] Yeah, I hear that different tone. Well, this is fantastic. Thank you so much. I really appreciate it.

[C] Of course. Working on just doing my thing, going about my life without questioning if other people think I'm an imposter.

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[Kelly] These are my two buddies from the Geek Girl Soup Podcast, Susan and Cort.

[Susan] Hello, Kelly.

[K] Thank y'all for being here and discussing this with me. So, Susan is a small-business owner who's making a career change. And Cort has a full-time job. So, these are different experiences

that we'll get to hear about. Y'all obviously have experienced imposter syndrome, otherwise, we wouldn't be here talking about it.

[S] Obviously, wait, what?

[Cort] Yes. Never heard of it.

[K] Yeah. Yeah. And as black women, you have different experiences from what I've had. So I'd particularly love to hear about that in light of the Harvard Business Review articles that I told you about that discuss the systemic issues around imposter syndrome. So, would y'all just start out sharing some general experiences that you've had?

[S] Well, I mean, this is Susan. And, yeah, I mean, I don't know. It's like, where do I start? How many? When? You know, because of the school we went to, you know, I was like, the only black woman in my class.

[K] Yeah. And you and I went to the same school that goes from kindergarten through 12th grade.

[S] Right. And I started there in fifth grade. And when I started, that was like, a year or two, maybe two years after the first black student graduated from, from our high school. So these were the early days. It's funny, you know, looking at the class pictures, it's like, Oh, can you find me? Right?

[K] And there certainly weren't any black teachers. I, I don't even remember having any, in my 16 years at the school. Right. And I was there back when it started in nursery school. And I did kindergarten twice. That's how it was 16 years. Do you remember any? Am I just forgetting someone?

[S] Yeah, there was an art teacher. I think she started when I was, maybe in middle school or high school. I think middle school or? Oh, I think because I remember her classroom was, if I'm remembering correctly, by the what used to be the typing classroom.

[K] Okay.

[S] I think her art classroom was down there.

[K] Okay. And that sucks that I'm not remembering that. But still we're having to struggle to think.

[S] Yeah.

[K] And and you're coming up with one black teacher in the whole school?

[S] Yeah, during our time there and most of the black faces I saw were in the cafeteria or janitorial.

[K] Right. So how did you feel? I mean, am I using the right phrase in asking, how did you feel like an imposter or fraud or however imposter syndrome affected you while you were there?

[S] Well, I think, you know, I mean, as a kid, you want to fit in with your classmates and everything. I didn't look like any of them. I lived in a completely different part of town. I was a year younger than everybody else. So, you know, it's like, oh, well, I might as well just…. So I didn't even try to fit in just like, this is me. So, and so in a way, it was, that was kind of a freedom. But it was also like, no, like, okay, band and drama. Those were my two big extracurriculars.

[K] Yeah, if you're gonna stand out, you may as well have fun with it?

[S] Yeah. Go play with the people who, you know, treat me like a person when I'm not participating in the activity, you know. And I didn't find that in sports.

[K] Yeah. That makes sense. Cort, how about your early school experiences?

[C] Early school experiences? Now, I went to public school all through, you know, kindergarten through 12th grade. And like, I did have black teachers. I had black male teachers and black female teachers. So like, that was a good experience, but there wasn't a lot of them. But I did have that, um, and like, again, it was public school. So, you guys know the curriculum. But the public school is very, very different from what you'll get in other places. And straight out of high school, I went to community college just because, like, it was the best path forward with what I was working with. And like, two years after that, I got my, what was it, associates, and I figured out where I wanted to go. I transferred to this really small liberal arts college. And of course, it

was predominantly white. And it had previously even all girls. Oh, they had integrated boys maybe 20 years before. So, like, the female population was, yeah, more so.

[S] Okay, I have to jump in and say "women's college," because I went to a women's college.

[C] So what did I say?

[S] A "girl's school."

[C] Oh, yeah!

[K] And it also sounds weird to say, "Integrated boys," or even "integrated men." I mean, I know, interesting word choices.

[C] No, no, no, I know. It's funny. Now, when I did my tour of this college before, before I made a decision that this is where I wanted to be, like I did my tour, it was like the middle of it was like, before classes that started up, like the campus was deserted. And I had my stepfather with me. And like, we were just, you know, visiting the campus and I was in love. I immediately fell in love with that school.

[C] Now, me, I'm a book reader; I'm a bookworm. My head is in a book no matter, like, what, especially like back in school. Like that I would read maybe one or two books a day. Like, yeah, one or two books a day, maybe three, depending on what was going on. And like, I was really smart. I got straight A's in high school and at the community college, too. So, when I transferred, I felt like a fish out of water because I did not have the preparation that my peers had. Remember, I came from a public school curriculum. And all the things that they have read all the thing classes that they have taken, like in their own background, like I didn't have that benefit. So, I had to do some of that on my own. And in other ways, I just, I felt super out of place, I felt like I did not belong at all.

[C] And there's again, the fact that it was a small liberal arts college where I was a minority. Most of my classes, maybe there was another person like me, or there wasn't another person like me. And again, this is a small, so classes were maybe 13-15 people. And still, it's just me, just me in those classes. And like I said, I just did not feel prepared at all. And I told you, I was straight-A student. So I went from getting straight A's to getting C's.

[C] And like one of my favorite professors ever, like, he started sending my papers back to me and said, "You need to correct all this. And I'm going to keep sending it back to you until you get exactly how you need to get it." And he did that over and over and over again until I learned how to write for him. And like that's the thing, you learn how to write for whoever, like, is reading your papers. So he was my wonderful experience. He is still one of my favorite people. When I was on Facebook, I was still following him. And there were some other issues going on with him. But like he's still one of my favorite people.

[C] On the flip side, I had this other professor. I think I told you guys the story before. I didn't realize what was happening, like until years years later, but he was the professor , just 13-14 people. I'm failing how I'm feeling about being there. It's one of my first, it's the first semester of being there. And every class he would start the class by saying, "Well, discussion time. Let's see who looks the most uncomfortable." I always did my readings. I did my homework. I took notes and everything. But me feeling like I do not belong at all, like I you know. And anyway, I'm shy, I was always shy, like I hated speaking in front of other people. So, again, he would always pick on me and I would, that I learned to have something prepared just to be able to say. But still, like I felt stupid. And I'm not a stupid person. But I felt stupid. And again, just didn't feel like I belonged.

[C] And like over the years since then, one thing I had to learn for myself is that I deserve to be able to take up the space around me. Like, just as an example. Like just crossing the street. Like there would be people coming at me have a certain color. And they would expect me to move out of the way. And initially for years, I would skirt out of the way. I would make myself small. I had to learn not to make myself small, and to take up the space because like that. That is my space. That is my area. So like if I'm hitting shoulders like a quarterback, I don't care. That's what I'm doing now. Like that's where I am in life at this point in time. If I'm hitting shoulders, great. Yeah, so that's cool. We'll talk about work.

[K] That's great. So, you know what y'all both just said, I think really does point to this being a systemic issue. You know, those were environments that made y'all uncomfortable, because they weren't really welcoming. You know, it sounds like, you know, the schools didn't know what to do with y'all as black students. And, and the teachers, the professors didn't help. That one, Cort, hurt. You know.

[C] Oh, yeah. I still think about him. Yeah, it's been over 20 years, and I still think about that man. I stopped hating him. But I still think about him. So yeah.

[K]
Yeah. So in, in other experiences, you know, do y'all view this as a systemic issue?

[S] Absolutely.

[C] Yeah, it's just like systemic. It's how the systems were built. This is how they were meant to function, unfortunately. And as much as we want to change them as much as we try to change them. We're fighting against the patriarchy.

[S] You remember that that show? Gosh, I don't remember the name of the show now. But they were in law school. And, you know, we were when you were describing that teacher. It's like, oh, yeah, that's sounds like that. That law professor says that really old show....

[K] *Paper Chase*?

[S] I think so. Because it was in like this, the late '70s? Early '80s?

[K] Yeah. Yeah.

[S] You know, at home.

[S] It's one of our, you know, gather the family around and watch.

[K] Right. Right. Yeah, my dad. Right. My dad loved it, since he had always wanted to be a lawyer. And it's like, pushing me in that direction.

[S] And see, my dad was a college professor. So, but he was not. Yeah, he was not the type to do that.

[K] So publicly, forcibly embarrass and shame students? Yeah, not cool. So, have y'all done anything to try to overcome imposter syndrome?

[S] You know, you can find all of these articles and books about, you know, with all the steps to overcome it? Well, I guess, you know, I have been, I've been self employed for, like, the last 20 something years. And so just, I think, being successful in that, that helped, but then, you know, I look back and there was like, a setback with, like, a location or something. And, you know, just

dealing with that, that kind of, you know, the back in imposter syndrome or whatever. But I remember for a while there, yeah, I was really confident and everything and like, this is what I do. This is how I can help you. And, you know, oh, yeah,

[K] I should back up and first ask, so how did it manifest with you as a small business owner, and for you, Cort, in a full time job?

[s] So I think as a small business owner, it's like, should I be doing this? Should I get a real job, quote, real job, you know, after you know, having a real job and be like, "Okay, I want to do more, I want to do something that I, you know, find a little bit more interesting." And so, you know, and so I opened my business, and I was, you did it anyway. Yeah. So I think, you know, it's good out there to take risks like that, and start your business and do it. And so, and now, when you're talking about a career change, I'm thinking of going back the other way, because it's like, well, health insurance is expensive. Expenses and that, you know, you know, doing okay, but I'm gonna run out at some point. And for you court.

[C] So where I am, like, there is there's really great diversity among the employees, especially with a lot of the people that we just hired. Like, I look at the names and I smile, just because like we have, like a different, complete different culture with all the employees that were just hired. Now granted, there are are a lot of older folks who are in charge. And like they're not aging out like, they're starting to retire. And so you're starting to see some of that diversity climb up into the ranks of where they weren't before, because previously years and years ago, it was, it was all white. Yeah. And so that is starting to change. So like, as I work as an acting manager, and start to climb up, like further, like that lead or that wonderful ladder in my career. Like, I work extra extra hard. Like, I thank everyone for opportunities, even though I've worked so hard, I find myself continually thanking people. Because one, I'm grateful whenever they give me a chance, but I keep forgetting, I don't have to keep thanking them. I don't have to keep doing that, or being so grateful. Because I worked for this, like, I worked so hard for this.

[C] And, can't say too too much about something that's gonna happen soon, but I worked for it. Like, I know I deserve it. And like, like my sisters and my mom, like the thing that I just interviewed for I told you guys about it. And like, they're like, "Well, if they don't take you, you're going somewhere else." Like you've put too much you put too many hours too many more not blood and actual blood, although I did sprained my ankle that one time. But like, and there's, again, giving myself the permission to be big again. If you guys like to take up that space again. Like, it's that, like, I don't like stop thanking people for everything like that. I apologize even

when I shouldn't be the one to apologize. Like, and I don't know that it's imposter syndrome. Right? That that's just me in my head.

[S] It's just being a woman in you know? Yeah. Yeah. We're trained to. Yep. And so that's why I think a lot of us now it's like, okay, well, tell yourself that you have the confidence of a mediocre white male.

[C] Right there. Right there. And, like, I wonder if it's relevant for us to talk about what's happening now with the Supreme Court? Like, yeah, like, like, how there's a black woman who is going to be one of the justices. And they're already saying things like, well, like, wow, what how she, how do you know she's gonna be qualified?

[K] As if there are no black women judges out there who are qualified. Oh, my God.

[C] Okay. Can you imagine the imposter syndrome that some of them must feel? Oh, insane. Yeah. I mean, this woman has not even been named yet. And she's no question. No, we don't have a woman looking like that. Or, you know, in that. You said it right.

[K] And Republicans already saying that they're gonna block all of his nominees. And I think someone even said since an election year.

[S] Mitch McConnell said it out loud. He said, "Well, African Americans, then you know."

[K] Oh, that's right. "Americans."

[S] Hello, yeah.

[K] Like somebody I mean. I laugh, but it's horrifying.

[C] No, it's horrifying. But somebody else brought it up that if they if he gives them trouble, just bring up that is the McConnell rule. He pushed through Amy Coney Barrett.

[K] Yes. in record time in a month, in a month, when they had blocked Merrick Garland for Obama's Obama's choice?

[C] Yes. I remember. whole year.

[K] Yeah. Well, eight or nine months, but still.

[C] Well, yeah. Still. Yeah. Barrett was one month. And we're still at the beginning. Like, it's only been a year since Joe came to us. But it's, it's still the beginning.

[K] Yeah, ah, yeah. And you and you have to wonder if he not said he would nominate a black woman? Would people be having this kind of cow? Show I down to prepare?

[C] He had to say that because that was one of his pet promises he had.

[s] Yeah. Yes. For sure. So, CT, I have another question for you. What do you see things change? Are things changing now? Or is it because of the type of environment where you work? I know it takes time for you know, systemic changes to be made. But do you see like little things changing as people move up in management?

[C] Like I said, you see little things changing, like just by like the number of people that we've hired recently.I told you, I see the list of names of people we've hired and like the diversity in those names. Like that means everything to me, because that means that they're a part of our workforce. They're going to be interpreting, we get their experience. And like, you know, we're going, we go out to the people we meet with people. So like that exposure helps open some minds maybe. As for like the organization, like I said, like, these are the same people that if they stay, they're going to be moving up in the ranks to and like providing their own experience in their own background to like, like the agency. So yeah, I see it slowly, it becomes very slow. Yeah. Because, yeah, they have a different experience than, you know, these white males who were, you know, and he's differently and don't know anything about any other people.

[K] And so I was speculating about Zoomers, and how much they, the older ones might experience imposter syndrome and how the younger generation might experience it moving forward. And my speculation is that maybe they'll experience at less since the system is changing since they have, not all of them of course, but so many of them have a more diverse group of friends. And since the workplace is becoming more diverse,

[C] There's that, and like Zoomers have this competence about them. Like they quit, they are not happy somewhere they're quitting and they're looking to the next thing. So I, Zoomers like they they are the hope.

[S] Yeah. Very true. Yeah, given up on the millennials.

[C] I mean, I am a millennial. So I'm not giving up hope on us. But like, we all go work together to push forward.

[K] Yes, yeah. "Te children are the future" and the Zoomers are coming up next.

[C] Zoomers are the ones who are doing things like creating programs that are like, like, breaking down websites or sad like I love them.

[K] They're the ones who, no, it was young millennials. Sorry, it was the young millennials who trolled the Trump rallies that quote sold.... Oh, they were free. But all those tickets to the rally.

[C] Yeah, yes, yes. Oh, my God.

[K] They were young millennials, weren't they?

[C] yeah. Millennials. Oh, that Kpop fan. So it was we worked.

[K] Oh, cool. That's true. Nice for generations working together.

[C] Despite these magazine articles that try to pit us against each other. Like, that's not us.

[S] We won't forget about Gen X. We don't care. Yeah, no, whatever.

[K] It's not that we don't care. We do. It's that everyone leaves us out. Yeah. It goes. It goes for Boomers to Millennials to Gen Z. And I think the babies are alpha. They can never come up with something more original. Anyway. Yeah. They just forget about us. So what else would y'all say? Or do you have any suggestions for anyone?

[C] Keep pushing. You belong here.

[K] Take up space. I really like that. You commented on that a couple times. That's a big one.

[C] I had. It was a big thing. Yeah.

[K] Well, thank you so much. I really appreciate your perspectives and insight. Thank you.

[C[Yeah, absolutely.

[S] It's interesting. Yeah. And see y'all next time at Geek Girl soup. Geek on!

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Here's what some of my Facebook connections have to say about their experiences with imposter syndrome.

One woman called it a learned behavior that we can unlearn. I think this supports the idea that imposter syndrome originates at the systemic level—that we learned it from society—but that it requires the individual to do something about it within themselves—that is, the unlearning.

A woman who teaches other women to overcome imposter syndrome said that the solution is never more confidence. I totally agree. In fact, women who experience imposter syndrome tend to have lots of confidence. And, as Tulshyan and Burey point out, confident women tend to get penalized for their confidence, especially women of color.

One woman commented on how having mentors can help. She also noted how there is a distinct form of imposter syndrome that happens when you have a chronic illness in which other people question the reality or validity of the ongoing illness. They question whether the person is actually sick, especially if they can't see the illness. She notes that this happens to both men and women, though it tends to happen more often in women.

I think that both of her comments are astute. Having mentors is important in dealing with imposter syndrome, as Tulshyan and Burey point out. This is something that workplaces can do to help their employees.

While I have not had a full-time job—I've always worked for myself—I have chronic migraine and have dealt with people questioning my illness since I have sucked it up through migraines in public over the years. Most days I have had to force myself to move through them to carry on with daily life. As a mother, I've had to drive my kids to school and provide dinner. And yet many

other times, I've had to cancel social engagements and reschedule meetings when the pain has just been too overwhelming.

Another woman commented on how she has found that "no one knows what the hell they are doing," how so many things are "just pull it out of yer ass," and how "some of us are better at keeping our head about ourselves and remaining honest than others." I think this points to the advice of "fake it 'til you make it."

Another woman commented that she's been "scared to death" in her new job that she'll fail. She writes, "All I could do is recognize it and force myself to keep going in spite of it." This really points to the idea of taking action in spite of your fear—what I taught around the 7 Primary Fears.

A gender-non-binary author commented that it's been society that has had the biggest impact on them. In spite of their advanced degrees and deep experience, they have questioned themselves because of other people's questioning and mocking. They stopped writing for a while. But, after some spiritual guidance, they have come to a place of ignoring other people's opinions and have started writing again—the best work they've ever done.

Finally, a man gave me his experience with imposter syndrome. He said that part of it has to do with being the primary breadwinner of the family. He feels the extra pressure to perform. He noted that men are traditionally not supposed to express or discuss their feelings. So, this makes it even more difficult to acknowledge imposter syndrome when you're a man. He also noted how he has rejected compliments when people have congratulated him on his successes. Imposter syndrome has made him not believe the accolades.

I think this is another example of a systemic problem. Men traditionally aren't supposed to express feelings. Men traditionally are supposed to be the primary breadwinners of the family. These are difficult burdens to bear. When a man is feeling that pressure and yet doubts himself, how is he supposed to talk about that doubt when he isn't supposed to discuss—or even have —those feelings?

So, how about Zoomers and imposter syndrome? I googled Gen Z and imposter syndrome. I didn't find much. I found a blog post on the GenZInsight blog called "Gen Z and Imposter Syndrome." Author not listed. Link in the show notes. There is a bit in the post in which the

author defines imposter syndrome to their 18yo son. The son replies, "Why do they call it a syndrome? It's just part of being human."

This goes exactly to what Tulshyan and Burey write about imposter syndrome, that it is not a pathology, rather just a collection of universal feelings.

I found an article on the British website ITV dot com called "Generation Anxious: The rise of Imposter Syndrome amongst young people." Author not listed. Link in the show notes. In this article, they note that nearly half of people between the ages of 9 and 21 say that they are always anxious. And a third say that they have imposter syndrome. The article does not go into why or into further details.

My 15yo son is a Zoomer. He had never heard of imposter syndrome before I asked him about it for this podcast. He said that it sounds "silly" and asked why anyone would feel that way. I discussed the original psychology behind it and the Tulshyan and Burey articles on the systemic origins of imposter syndrome. At his young age and with his limited understanding and experience, he thought that the systemic origins made sense. Like most Zoomers, he's used to a more diverse world. He has friends who are trans, gender non-conforming, and people of color. And he has sisters from whom he hears about sexism and ethnic biases.

I think that we older generations should not force the concept of imposter syndrome on Zoomers. We should let these universal feelings be just that, as what that 18yo son of the GenZInsight blog author said, "It's just part of being human." Then we should work on the system to help Zoomers feel less anxious in the workplace, to help them feel like they belong.

Finally, what can we do when we are freelancers who feel like a fraud?

For me, my primary fear is the fear of vulnerability, and I have had those feelings of being worried that someone would think I'm a fraud. This has manifested in me as worrying that if I start my website design business, for example, would someone think I can't do it, that I'm not good enough, that I don't have enough experience? To try to overcome that worry, I've tried to create more connection and trust on my website by listing my credentials, by listing my education (several advanced degrees), and by writing frequent blog posts and publishing this regular podcast. All of this is to show that I know what I'm doing, to eliminate doubt in the minds of potential clients, and to eliminate my own worry.

I think that similar actions can be taken by other freelancers. And that's the key: Action. Remember, mindset means little without action.

As a freelancer, you shouldn't hesitate to toot your horn. Here's what you can do.

1. List your degrees on your website.
2. Highlight testimonials.
3. Show your portfolio.
4. Create content in the form of a blog and/or a podcast.

People who experience imposter syndrome tend to worry that expressing confidence will come across as arrogance. But this rarely happens, especially with women.

What about women being punished for expressing confidence?

In my years of working for myself and coaching and consulting other small-business owners and freelancers, I've found that expressing confidence helps attract your ideal client. Holding back confidence attracts no one. Holding back confidence does not build trust between you and potential clients. It creates doubt in the mind of a potential client.

Not listing your credentials creates doubt in the mind of a potential client. Not creating content can create doubt in the mind of a potential client.

Clients want to know that you feel confident about the work you do. They want to see that your credentials back up what you say you can do. And they want to get free, helpful information from you as proof that you can do what you say you can do.

So, for freelancers to deal with imposter syndrome, it's all about taking these actions. And if you don't see progress right away in the form of new clients, give it time! Remember that search engine optimization takes time—months or a year to get real results. So, if you're waiting on Google to bring you clients, keep creating content to increase your chances of being found.

In the meantime, use word of mouth. Network in person—when it's safe, concerning Covid. Use online freelancing platforms to look for clients.

The important thing is to take action.

I'd love to read your thoughts and experiences on imposter syndrome. You can leave comments on this episode's post on my website. Link in the show notes.

I hope these suggestions I gave help you fellow freelancers.

I'll be back next week with more branding, design, and business tips.

See you next time on Brand + Design Scoop!

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Links mentioned in the episode:

"Stop Telling Women They Have Imposter Syndrome"
by Ruchika Tulshyan and Jodi-Ann Burey
Feb 11, 2021

"End Imposter Syndrome in Your Workplace"
By Ruchika Tulshyan and Jodi-Ann Burey
July 14, 2021

"Gen Z and Imposter Syndrome"
GenZInsight

"Generation Anxious: The rise of Imposter Syndrome amongst young people"
ITV

Link to episode

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Angela Kelly Smith provides custom Squarespace websites, branding strategy, and marketing instruction so freelancers and entrepreneurs can run a successful business while spending more time focusing on the work they really love doing. Check out her website design + marketing strategy services.