

## ||| CONFIDENCE FACTOR

# Think you're not the real thing?

## It could be all in your head



**SUSAN PINKER**  
PROBLEM SOLVING

### Dear Susan:

I am an assistant professor at a university, now teaching in the same college -- in fact, the very same department -- from which I received my undergraduate degree before going abroad for graduate work. Consequently, my current colleagues are my former teachers, and I am finding this problematic. The department is quite small; all are my former professors and it is impossible for me to forget this fact. I feel diffident when voicing my opinions at faculty meetings and, in general, holding my weight in discussions. Will I ever get over feeling like an imposter? How can my colleagues grow to respect me as one of them if I can't convince myself that I truly am?

--Personally Having Doubts (PhD)

### Dear PhD,

The wonderful thing about being an imposter is that, like Avis the car rental firm, you try harder. The more you try and the harder you work, the better you are at your job. You read more. You publish more. You supervise more students, take on more committee work, all to prove you're worthy. Meanwhile, a lack of confidence prevents you from puffing out vacuous clouds of air at meetings, so everyone thinks you're silent but brilliant. Everyone, that is, except you.

Unless your colleagues can read your mind -- which they can't, least of all in psychology departments -- your secret is as tight as that strong box in Spike Lee's summer thriller, *Inside Man*. It took six truth crusaders posing as roustabouts to blast a philanthropist's shameful past into the open. But these guys were hell-bent on showing he was a fake.

Your colleagues already like you and respect you. They hired you, remember?

Imposter feelings strike those who are a little wet behind the ears, and especially pioneers: the only native woman to work in the nuclear physics department, for example. These self-doubts will not last. You can take comfort in the fact that your lack of confidence may be eroding your happiness, but research shows it's not likely to be affecting your performance.

In 2003, David Dunning and Joyce Ehrlinger, psychology professors at Cornell University, published an experiment in which they manipulated people's perceptions of themselves and thus their expectations of how they would do on an abstract reasoning or computer programming task. Whether subjects were convinced they would tank or ace that test had nothing to do with how they actually performed. The study confirmed what many others on self-esteem have already shown -- that the connection between self-assessments and actual skill and performance is "modest to meagre, and sometimes it is null," according to Prof. Dunning. "Complete strangers armed with only scant information can predict that person's skill and abilities almost as well as he or she can," he wrote, "despite the fact that the individual has a lifetime of self-information to draw upon."

Even if their perfectionism boosts their successes, people who feel like imposters usually dismiss these as flukes, telling themselves "I was just lucky this time," or "I just worked hard" -- a phenomenon called defensive pessimism. Only when they have objective feedback from an expert do they start to believe -- one reason you need a mentor who is well-respected in your department, along with some periodic, objective evaluation. With a few years of experience and independent confirmation of your skills you will start to relax.

That was Robin Pollock Daniel's experience. A Torontonian who is the highest ranked female Scrabble player in the world, she has been featured in the press as an all-star player and competed in the World Scrabble Championship in Phoenix this month.

To prepare for the event, she had memorized nonsense alphagrams six hours a day and played games on-line with other champions until the wee hours. Yet, two days before she left for the event she told me: "I go into every game and there's a small female voice that says: 'You don't belong here -- you're fraudulent. I'm happy to be corroborated by a Scrabble writer as one of the top players, because I need that corroboration.'"

She overcame any jitters and was ranked first after two days of play, but ended up 21st out of 635 players. Still, only after this tournament did she start to feel like the real thing. "I have no doubt that I am now among the best in the game," she wrote in an e-mail.

What did it take? A lot of hard work memorizing jumbled up versions of words like guaiac, pleather and aguacate. But also some outside proof. It's great to know thyself. But affirmation is better.

**Dear Susan:**

Since I started my job six months ago, the colleague who shares an office with me has not only been complaining about our boss -- we are only a team of three -- but is trying to dump her work on me. Even though we're at the same organizational level, she finds herself too good to work for this boss and treats me like an intern. She expected me to answer her phone while she was away, then when she returned, said: "Thank you for being my secretary. I am so busy and have so many calls." Lately, I have been standing my ground so she started going to the boss so he would ask me to "help" with her work, often at the last minute. Just because I don't run around the office shouting that I am very busy does not mean I

have no work of my own. I do not want to be perceived as a non-team-player, but I really have a problem "helping" under these conditions.

--I've Had It

**Dear Had It:**

You were just a teensie bit late teaching your office-mate-from-hell how to use the voice mail system. Ditto for the dumping. The best way to deal with people who stride past others' boundaries is to draw a line in the sand right at the beginning, just like you did with your siblings in the back seat on long, boring car trips. "This is my side. This is yours," or alternately, "I think it's best if we answer our own phones and take our own messages." Not that it's too late. It's just harder to retrench

once you've allowed yourself to be seconded. At this point, try to stick to your own assignments unless it's an emergency. If your colleague asks for a favour, make sure you negotiate a quid pro quo before you say yes. Does she want help with today's project? Ask her to do your tabulations when you have a dentist appointment next Wednesday. And if your boss continues to reassign her work to you, it's time to review your workload with him. Teamwork is when different players pool their efforts to solve a joint project. It's called something else when you do the work no one else will.

*Susan Pinker is a psychologist and writer.*  
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