

Unpacking Imposter Syndrome Among Black Women

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The term imposter syndrome was originally conceptualized in 1978 by two psychologists, Dr. Pauline Rose Clance and Dr. Suzanne Imes. Their research was comprised of 150 successful women who were professionals and high achieving students within the academy. Regardless of their exceptional accomplishments, these women repeatedly questioned their level of intelligence. Additionally, thinking they had no seat at the proverbial table, they basically saw themselves as fraudulent, despite the fact they had degrees, honors, and achievements that validated they were more than qualified to be at the table. However, these women still did not visualize themselves as worthy of the positions and titles they held.

Examining the history of the United States, women's roles in society has often been relegated to being second-class citizens. For example, women were not allowed to own property. In some instances, women were considered to be the property of their husband. They were relegated to subservient roles in what was considered "a man's world". Many believed that women were to be seen and not heard. However, it was during the women rights movement that several strides were made that altered the course of history for women. These advancements entailed:

- The ramification of the 19th amendment that gave women the right to vote.
- President John F. Kennedy signing the Equal Pay Act on June 10, 1963. This act prohibited gender base discrimination among men and women who performed the same work with the exact company.
- President Lyndon B. Johnson signing the Civil Right Act into law on July 2, 1964. Title VII of this act prohibited employment discrimination on the basis of one's race, religion, national origin, political affiliation, sexual orientation, or biological sex.
- President Richard Nixon signing into law Title 1X of the Education Amendment on June 23, 1972. This law stated, "No person in the United States, on the basis of their sex, can be excluded, denied benefits, or discriminated against under any educational program or activity that is receiving federal financial assistance.
- Reconstructing the language within the workforce as it relates to women. Terms such as mailman, policemen, chairmen, and firemen were mere terms which suggested they were not employment opportunities where women could be employed.

It was these types of laws that made it possible to break they were down gender barriers and end discrimination against women.

Even though these were monumental strides for women in general, there were still gender role preferences. For example, the media and the workforce would only allow women to operate in spaces they considered to be gender specific for women, such as secretary work, teaching, nursing, librarian, maid and stewardess, to name a few.

Although movements, such as the women liberation movement, tried to advance the role of women in society, they mostly focused on the concerns and challenges that White women faced. Therefore, the role of Black women during this time period was often overlooked

by the larger society. Thus, when discussing gender equality of Black women within the United States, it is imperative to not only discuss the experiences as women but what life entails as Black women in America. Black women experienced extremely harsh discrimination. There were often stereotypical representations that were ingrained in society about Black women's attractiveness, level of education, and sexuality. These types of inadequate representations, along with experiencing racial injustice, left Black women feeling inadequate, intellectually inferior, and not capable of holding high level positions within an organization.

In today's time, Black women are not only battling with their own negative self-talk but also the messages that society has perpetuated about them and their capabilities. Ideally, when Black women are in high profile positions in companies and organizations, they can often be the only person of color or one in just a handful. Thus, Black women are often chartering uncharted territories and can feel they are not good enough to have the position. Although Black women can be well qualified to perform the job, they often think that the only reason they were given a job was because they are a Black woman and the organization had to hire a person of color to ensure they are adhering to diversity policies. Hence, Black women are filling two slots within an organization- being Black and a woman. This leads Black women to suffer from imposter syndrome, as well as experiencing sadness, anxiety, depression, inability to sleep, and either overeating or not eating at all. Imposter Syndrome is not a mental illness you will see in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM). However, as therapists, it is important to have an understanding of the impact imposter syndrome has on Black women's lives. By having some degree of knowledge, therapists can assist Black women in navigating through this self-debilitating syndrome.

Moreover, creating a safe place for Black women to understand and name what is happening to them can be very therapeutic. The art of storytelling for Black women can be used as a sense of catharsis. Dr. Valrie Ashby, a Black woman who is the Dean of Arts and Sciences of Duke University, has openly shared her own challenges with coping with imposter syndrome. Although she was awarded various prestigious accolades from the National Science Foundation and Fortune 500 companies 3M and DuPont and recognized repeatedly as an outstanding professor, she still experienced feeling inadequate. As can be seen, Dr. Ashby is a rock star academician. Yet, she still felt she was undeserving of the many accomplishments she had obtained. It was not until Dr. Ashby was introduced to the term imposter syndrome she was able to put a name to what she had wrestled with the majority of her professional career. Upon recognizing the toll imposter syndrome had on her life, she made it her own personal mission to travel around the world educating others about how to cope with and manage imposter syndrome.

Dr. Ashby gathered many of her ideas from Dr. Young, a well renowned and internationally acclaimed imposter syndrome expert. Dr. Young is the author of the book entitled, *The Secret Thoughts of Successful Women: Why Capable People Suffer from Impostor Syndrome-How to Thrive in Spite*. This book has been published in five different languages and has been highly recommended across the years. Dr. Young subscribes to the belief, "The only way to stop feeling like an imposter, is to stop thinking like an imposter". Therefore, here is a list of coping strategies to combat the feelings and emotions that are associated with imposter syndrome:

Coping strategies for Black women with imposter syndrome:

- First, admit you are suffering from impostor syndrome. Do not feel ashamed and seek the necessary help to process the feelings and emotions that are being experienced.
- Separate feelings from facts. For example, if you feel intellectually inferior to your colleagues, it does not mean you are.
- Acknowledge when you are feeling fraudulent. It is okay to feel fraudulent especially if you are the first or the only Black woman to hold your current position. It is natural you might feel like you do not fit in. It is normal to have a bit of self-doubt because you are an outsider chartering uncharted territory.

- Capitalize on your strengths. Perfectionism and the drive to not make errors can be very unhealthy at times. Recognize when you do a good job and do not ruminate over mistakes. Learn to forgive yourself when you make a mistake because mistakes are inevitable. They are bound to happen. You are not perfect, but you are someone who wants to do an excellent job!
- Change how you respond to failure and making a mistake. Henry Ford is quoted as saying, “Failure is only an opportunity to begin again more intelligently”. Failures simply mean you know what not to do. Think about if Thomas Edison would have given up, then we would not have electricity today. Instead of beating yourself up, learn from your mistakes, grow, and move forward.
- Avoid operating from these premises: “I should have known the rules”; “I should have known the answer”; and “I will never ask for help”. Start today by giving yourself permission to recognize you have just as much right to be wrong as the next person. Give yourself a day off and ask for help that may be needed.
- Rewrite your own narrative. We all got our own internal dialogue we tell ourselves that can ignite the fire for imposter syndrome. Therefore, when you start your next employment refute the negative self-talk about feeling that you are incompetent or inadequate for the position. Rephrase your statement by telling yourself, “I might not know what I am doing now, but I am brilliant and smart enough to learn what I need to do. If I should fail, I will pick myself back up and keep moving”.
- Visualize your success. Instead of visualizing yourself making all the mistakes you possible can while conducting a workshop, do what athletes do and see yourself doing everything correctly. Do not focus your mind on doing it wrong but on doing it right. It has been said, “where energy goes it energy grows”.
- Learn to celebrate yourself. Instead of seeking validation from others learn to pat your own self on the back. Be willing to celebrate your small wins.
- Be willing to take risks. Avoid waiting to feel confident before you are willing to try something different. It is okay to take risks and move outside of your comfort zone. Allow your skills, abilities, and talents to be on display. Be willing to go against the norm by being bold and courageous. Although it may be uncomfortable at first, it can be beneficial in the long run. It will provide you with the ability to stop agonizing over thoughts of being inadequate.
- Let your voice be heard in meetings. Do not be afraid to speak up for what you believe in. Your voice deserves to be heard.
- Start overestimating your abilities instead of underestimating what you can do. Learn to be your own awesome sauce. Praise yourself for what you can do. Many Black women grew up in families where they were not praised for their abilities but were often scorned. Now, it is time to praise yourself, not necessarily in an arrogant way, but in a way that validates your accomplishments.
- Research and read books about the greatness of your culture. As a Black woman, the world might never tell you that you are great or even that you come from greatness. Therefore, it is essential to know your own worth, feel proud of your own cultural heritage, and know the obstacles Black women had to overcome. Cultural pride will motivate you to continue to push forward and never give up even when the odds are against you.
- Learn to own your accomplishments. Do not shy away from informing your organization about the amazing work you have been doing. Do not be afraid to use “I” statements. Get comfortable with saying, “I did this.” Shine your own light and do not wait for others to do it for you.

- Accept your accomplishments. You did not mistakenly get to where you are today; you earned it. You have done the work. You earned the degrees. You have just as much right as anybody else to be where you are. Stop dismissing your skills, abilities, and talents.
- Avoid comparing yourself to others. I know this can be extremely hard not to do especially if you are a high achiever. When you are trying to improve yourself it is perfectly normal to want to check out what others are doing. Just remember, you are on your own journey and writing your own narrative.
- Create your own personal timeline and take a look at where you were and how far you have come. List your goals and actions you took to achieve them.
- Be compassionate to yourself. You need to take care of your own mental wellness. Do what is best for you. Take breaks when needed. Be okay with the spaces you are occupying in your life. Treat and talk to yourself like you would do your best friend. Many times we are nicer to other people than we are to our own selves.

Black women tend to beat themselves up and shrink in places where they should be celebrated for being at the table. It is important that Black women learn to own and occupy the spaces and places they are in order to be successful. In turn, they can show younger Black girls they too can move up the ladder of success and not only shatter the glass ceiling but drill a hole through the cement ceiling that has been a barrier for Black women. Thus, ensuring Black women are unapologetic for sharing their imposter syndrome stories is the beginning of the healing process for a circle of women who have been suffering and smiling with imposter syndrome across the years.

Discussing this topic in the field of professional counseling is very much warranted. When therapists are counseling Black women, it is important they are not just treating the symptoms of anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem but that they actually are getting to the root causes of those presenting symptoms. This will allow Black women to learn effective coping strategies for imposter syndrome. Taken together, Black women need to continuously affirm who they are. The author recommends this can be done through music, poems, songs, and spoken words. Please see the spoken word the author uses for her own self-affirmation. There is power in our words, because what we say to ourselves can hurt or heal us. Therefore, we need to speak positively and let our light shine!

I Don't Apologize

By

Dr. Linda J. M. Holloway

Hello world, I do not apologize for the skin I am in

I am the blessed one that has been burnt by the sun.

I make no apology for my kinky, curly hair.

I know some folks look at me with that big ugly stare,

And ask, "Girl what's the matter with your hair?"

And I say, I make no apology for this kinky, curly, nappy head of hair.

You see, what Crown Royal grease did for me was set me free.

I make no apology for my full-blown lips. I say sweet, honey darling, these big lips are better so I can kiss my sugar brown man with.

I make no apology for the sway in my back. If you had chopped and picked a bale of cotton like I did, you would have one too!

I make no apology for my broad shoulders and broad hips and wide nose, and sometimes my crusty little toes.

Yes, I am one of a kind, supremely divine.

Why should I have to apologize to you, you, and you? For who I am, who's I am, and where I come from.

I will not apologize for the blackness of my skin, the kinky, curly, or nappy hair, and the sway in my back, wide nose, my thick lips, broad shoulders and my broad hips.

What you see is what you get!

World, I refuse to apologize for being young, gifted, Black, and fill with whole lot of pride. Now that is a fact!

Why should I have to apologize for the person God almighty has created me to be?

Now, before I let you go, I am going to set you free.

I will not apologize for being me!

Please click on link below: I don't apologize: <https://youtu.be/zaFijYnWESM>.

Disclosure

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