Y
YOU’VE BEEN SELECTED
To lead up a really big project
at work. Your colleagues all
pass on the back, knowing
that you’ll nail it like you do
everything else. What a career

coup! Who wouldn’t be on top
of the world right now? Except
you’re not. Inside, you’re afraid
– very afraid.
It’s not the nervous excite-
ment and healthy anticipation
of a challenge, either. It’s the
fear that it’s only a matter of
time before everyone finds out
what a big, fat fraud you are.
There’s no way you’re qualified
for this job. All of your
success up until now has been
down to dumb luck and simply
finding yourself in right-place-
right-time scenarios.
And, soon, everyone else is
going to know that too…

In good company
If you’re feeling this way, take
comfort that you are not the
only one. In fact, these feelings
are so common among high-
achieving women that, in 1978,
two US clinical psychologists,
Dr Suzanne Imes and Pauline
Clance, gave the phenomenon
a name: impostor syndrome.
They describe it as an inability
to recognise your own efforts,
and a constant fear of being
unmasked as a fraud.
The sufferers of impostor
syndrome are legion. It affects
everyone from that colleague
who you think sails through
life, to actress and writer Tina
Fey, Facebook COO Sheryl
Sandberg, and even poet and
activist Maya Angelou – the
women we all thought had
some sort of direct line to
the secrets of the universe.
I have written 11 books,’
she once said, ‘but each time
I think, “Uh-oh, they’re going
to find out now. I’ve run a
game on everybody, and they
are going to find me out”.

What causes it?
Impostor syndrome isn’t a
mental disorder. Rather, it’s
a reaction to circumstances.
Some researchers think that
it affects women more than
it does men, as women are
generally more likely to
undervalue themselves.
Certainly it seems to affect
a lot of women in traditionally
male-dominated professional
fields – particularly science,
technology, engineering and
medicine. And it goes right up
to the very top: ‘There are an
awful lot of people out there
who think I’m an expert. How
do these people believe all this
about me? I’m so aware of all
the things that I don’t know,’
confesses Dr Margaret Chan,
director general of the World
Health Organization.
‘The thing about “impostors”
is that they have unsustainably
high standards for everything
they do,’ says Dr Valerie Young
in her book The Secret Thoughts
of Successful Women: Why
capable people suffer from the
impostor syndrome and how
to thrive in spite of it. ‘The
thinking here is, “If I don’t
know everything, then I know
nothing. It’s not absolutely
perfect, it’s woefully deficient.
If I’m not operating at the top
of my game, I’m incompetent”.
Impostor syndrome is not
to be confused with a dose
of healthy humility, however,
and not only can it drain your
energy and self-confidence,
but Dr Young says impostor
syndrome can make you averse
to taking risks in your career,
which may negatively impact
your future success.

Stop impostor syndrome in
its tracks

1. TAKING AN HONEST LOOK
AT YOURSELF
Make a list of everything you
bring to the table, right down
to your ‘soft’ skills, such as
time management or your ability to
communicate well. Now take
stock of your successes and
assess how your skills helped
bring them to fruition. This
will help you realise that you
play an active role in your
own achievements.

2. WHEN IN DOUBT ASK
Personally, I usually
experience impostor syndrome
when I don’t know something.
Panics sets in immediately. But,
often, there’s no way I could be
in possession of this missing
information without having
asked someone first. Why do
we expect ourselves to know
everything about everything,
especially when nobody else
does either? Asking questions
if you’re unsure doesn’t make
you a fraud, it means you’re
taking the opportunity to
learn more.

3. STOP COMPARING
YOURSELF
Period. Little Miss
High-Flyer in the corner office
may feel like just as much of
an impostor as you do. You’ll
never know. Rather focus on
the task at hand.

4. BEWARE MISTAKES
This year, Cristiano
Ronaldo’s strike accuracy is
down to about 40% in La Liga.
That means his shots have been
off target for more than half of
the time. Has he been faking
being one of the world’s best
football players? Should Real
Madrid fire him? Of course not.
Messing up at work may be
your greatest fear (‘Everyone
will know I can’t do this job!’),
but it is time to re-examine
your feelings about mistakes.
‘Understand the learning value
to be found in failure, and gain
confidence from overcoming
adversity, rather than running
from it,’ says Dr Young. ‘It’s
okay to falter. The key is to
get back in the game and
try again.’

5. HAVE A CONFIDENCE
RITUAL
We’re not suggesting you
chant naked in the moonlight;
just that you have a plan when
your confidence starts to ebb.
Whether it’s mentally listing
your accomplishments, hitting
the yoga mat or chatting to a
friend, only you know how to
talk yourself off the ledge.