

“Do I Worry They’ll Find Out I’m a Failure?”: Continuous Worry, Impostorism, and the Hidden Toll on Women’s Productivity



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Abstract

For many professional women, continuous worry is not just about deadlines or performance—it’s about being “found out.” This persistent fear of inadequacy, often tied to impostor syndrome, leads to chronic worry, mental fatigue, and diminished productivity. This article examines the psychological roots of continuous worry among women, how it manifests in self-doubt and workplace performance, and what can be done—at both the individual and organizational levels—to disrupt this cycle. Through a gender-informed lens, we explore how societal expectations, identity conflict,

and perfectionism contribute to the feeling: *“I worry they’ll find out I’m a failure.”*

Introduction

Despite strides in gender equity, women in the workplace continue to battle an internalized narrative: that they are not enough. This narrative breeds continuous worry—an unrelenting fear that one mistake or oversight will expose them as frauds, undeserving of their role, title, or success. Unlike general anxiety, this form of worry is often rooted in *impostorism*, a psychological pattern where individuals doubt their accomplishments and fear being unmasked (Clance C Imes, 1978).

For high-achieving women, this emotional burden is especially profound. It not only drains energy and focus but also erodes long-term productivity and confidence. Left unaddressed, it leads to burnout, disengagement, and even exit from the workforce (LeanIn.org C McKinsey, 2023).

The Unique Nature of Women's Worry

1. The Impostor Experience

Coined by psychologists Pauline Clance and Suzanne Imes in 1978, *Impostor Phenomenon* disproportionately affects high-achieving women. These individuals, despite objective success, feel they have deceived others into believing in their competence (Clance C Imes, 1978). Their worry stems from thoughts like:

- “I don’t belong in this role.”
- “I was just lucky.”
- “If they look too closely, they’ll see I’m not good enough.”

This chronic self-doubt can evolve into a loop of over-preparing, second-guessing, and emotional exhaustion (Young, 2011).

2. Perfectionism and Gendered Expectations

Women are often socialized to seek perfection, avoid risk, and not disappoint others (Kay C Shipman, 2014). When perfection is the goal, failure becomes catastrophic—not just a learning experience. This mindset drives excessive worry, particularly around performance

reviews, presentations, or any situation where visibility and evaluation are high.

3. Intersectionality and Cultural Pressures

Women of color, LGBTQ+ individuals, and those from underrepresented backgrounds often face compounded pressures. Their worry includes concerns about representation, tokenism, and societal bias—making the fear of being “found out” even more layered and intense (LeanIn.org C McKinsey, 2023).

The Impact on Productivity and Professional Growth

1. Mental Bandwidth Drain

Worry diverts cognitive energy from productive tasks. Women who constantly replay conversations or anticipate criticism are less present, creative, and strategic (Eysenck C Calvo, 1992).

2. Reluctance to Take Risks

Fear of exposure or failure may cause women to avoid new projects, leadership roles, or promotions—opting for safety over growth (Kay C Shipman, 2014). Productivity stalls not from lack of skill, but from hesitation.

3. Delayed Decision-Making and Overcompensation

Continuous worry leads to “analysis paralysis.” Women may spend hours perfecting reports, double-checking emails, or reworking slides, not because

they aren't ready—but because they fear being judged (Young, 2011).

4. Burnout and Emotional Exhaustion

A 2023 LeanIn.org study found that women are significantly more likely than men to report being burned out. Chronic worry is a quiet contributor—depleting emotional reserves day by day (LeanIn.org C McKinsey, 2023).

What Can Be Done?

Individual Strategies

1. Reframing Internal Dialogue

Women must be equipped to challenge thoughts like “I’ll be exposed” with facts about their performance and success. Cognitive restructuring—used in cognitive behavioral therapy—can help reframe worry into more constructive thoughts (Young, 2011).

2. Sharing the Fear

Talking about impostor feelings with trusted colleagues, mentors, or coaches reduces shame. The realization that others feel the same way lessens isolation and normalizes the experience (Clance C Imes, 1978).

3. Embracing “Good Enough”

Perfection is the enemy of progress. Practicing self-compassion and setting realistic standards allows for growth without fear (Brown, 2018).

Organizational Strategies

1. Cultivating Psychological Safety

Create environments where women feel safe to speak up, make mistakes, and grow. Team norms should reward learning over perfection (Brown, 2018).

2. Sponsorship Over Mentorship

Sponsorship—where leaders actively advocate for women—helps counteract the internal narrative of unworthiness. Visible support boosts confidence and visibility (LeanIn.org C McKinsey, 2023).

3. Normalize Vulnerability at the Top

When leaders share their own moments of doubt or failure, it sends a powerful message: *success doesn’t require perfection* (Brown, 2018).

Conclusion

For many women, success comes with a whisper: “What if they find out I’m not who they think I am?” This quiet, persistent worry can chip away at productivity, confidence, and well-being. But this cycle can be broken. By naming it, normalizing it, and creating systemic and personal supports, we can transform worry from a paralyzing force into a stepping stone toward resilience, leadership, and authentic success.

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Biography:

Dr. Ewa J. Kleczyk is a healthcare executive with extensive experience in healthcare research, analytics, and operations. She is a nationally recognized leader, published scholar, and Editor-in-Chief of the Universal Journal of 21st Century Women's Entrepreneurship, Leadership, Technology & Publishing (UJWEL). In addition, she is pursuing a Business Excellence Graduate Certificate at Columbia University, expanding her expertise in organizational leadership and innovation.

Dr. Kleczyk is a frequent speaker at premier academic and industry forums, including the Pharmaceutical Marketing Sciences Association (PMSA), Intellus Worldwide, the WomenTech Global Conference, and Harvard's Conference on Business and Economics. Widely published in peer-reviewed journals and academic volumes, she also serves on multiple editorial boards across healthcare, economics, and leadership disciplines.

Committed to advancing education and equitable healthcare access, she co-founded the Kleczyk-Strout Foundation, which supports community initiatives through advocacy, mentorship, and outreach. She also contributes her leadership through service on nonprofit boards and community councils, and by engaging audiences via podcasts and public forums.

Her contributions have earned her numerous honors, including the Presidential Lifetime Achievement Award by President Joe Biden, the WomenTech Data Science Award, and recognition among the Top 50 Women Leaders in Healthcare Technology. Originally from Wroclaw, Poland, Dr. Kleczyk earned her Ph.D. in Agricultural and Applied Economics from Virginia Tech and both her M.S. and B.A. degrees in Economics from the University of Maine.