

URL: <https://ecorner.stanford.edu/in-brief/beating-imposter-syndrome/>

When Pear VC managing partner Mar Hershenson started her electrical engineering PhD at Stanford, she immediately felt way out of her depth. At the time, she had never heard of "imposter syndrome," but she's since realized that it significantly impacted her early career. In tennis, she says, you only learn by "playing up," and competing against stronger players. In any endeavor, she's found, the way to beat imposter syndrome is to focus on the benefits of "playing up," and also to over-prepare.



Transcript

The second point that I get a lot is no, not everyone here is way smarter than you are, right? And I know that you may not believe it, 'cause everybody around you is really, really smart, right, but everybody here is smart in different ways.. And I think part of it is believing in yourself, everybody that I interact with during class, I know is capable of great stuff.. So I didn't always feel this way, in fact, when I first came here to Stanford, I thought I had gotten in because Bob wrote a recommendation letter, and I thought that Bob wrote the recommendation letter 'cause he just felt so bad for me that I had worked so hard at Linear.. But anyways, I got in and Bob said, "Go see Greg Kovacs, "Professor Greg Kovacs, he is my friend, "and see what you can do." So I went there, and Greg said, "Oh, why don't you come to my research group? "We'll just kind of like figure out "if there's something here for you." So I showed up to the research group meeting and they're tiny rooms, and everybody first looked really tall, but second, they were speaking a language that I could barely understand, and it got worse, at some point, this guy, he's my friend now, John Sir, he stood up and said, "I'm gonna demo what I've done." And he had this little chip that it was kind of the first autonomous micro robot, it would like move on the table and carry these paper clips.. I'm like, "Oh, my gosh, where am I? "This place is crazy that people have moving chips.. "What am I doing?" So I literally went home, and Matt was still my boyfriend at that point, he was a really smart person, and I said, "Okay, I quit.. "I'm gonna go in tomorrow, "maybe they'll give me my tuition back, if I'm lucky.. "We have to figure out the visa situation "because I can't stay here unless I have a visa." And my husband Matt said, I remember, he said, "Listen, do you wanna be the smartest person "on that research group, "or do you wanna be the dumbest person? "Cause if you are the dumbest person, "you're gonna learn something.. "It's like playing tennis, you always wanna play up, "you don't wanna have your tennis class "with somebody that is worse than you." And at least that was enough to get me through the next few days.. So I eventually did graduate, this is a picture of my graduation, but the time that I was here, I wanna tell for anybody in the audience, was actually really, really hard..

I was always feeling like I didn't belong.. I would go through this cycle, I actually, for those EEs in the audience, they know that if you wanna get a PhD, you have to take this exam, called the Quals, and it's very mystified 'cause it's part of the story, but I was completely convinced I would never pass the Quals, right, I was just convinced.. I was so scared that I wouldn't even look at the results.. So I had to actually send Matt, who I think, I don't know if he was my husband at the time, I was like, "Just go look at it, I can't even look at it." And then once I passed, I would tell everybody, "I was so lucky, I got the right professors "to ask me the questions that I knew, "and that's why I passed the Quals," and I was just convinced of that, right? So now obviously, I know that has a name.. At the time I didn't know that's called imposter syndrome.. Even my 10-year-old knows imposter syndrome, they teach it in school now, in elementary school, so that's good, but at the time, I didn't know.. I know now also that 70% of the population has it.. So the other 30% are very, very loud people.. And they're probably (audience laughing) they're on Twitter, they're on Twitter, tweeting about themselves, so.. But it does exist, right? And I think it was a big problem for me because in many occasions, I didn't raise my hand when I should have and I didn't say that I could do it, and I didn't take the opportunity to do something that felt hard..

So I don't want that to happen to anybody in this room.. Anybody can do anything they want, it's just a matter of wanting to do it.. So even sometimes I get this feeling of imposter syndrome coming.. And now I have two techniques, one, is whenever I go into a room, and I feel like everybody's really smart, I keep saying, "I'm playing up, and that's okay." And the second thing I do is I over-prepare.. So even this talk today, you may think it just comes naturally, but actually, I did prepare..

And I decided to scan a bunch of the papers that I did as I was preparing for the talk to give you a sense.. So if you do this, I think I scribbled around 50 pages, even before I figured out what I was gonna talk about.. So it's okay to prepare and admit that you actually work to get something done...