



THE SECRET THOUGHTS

Why Capable People Suffer
OF from the **IMPOSTOR SYNDROME**
and How to Thrive in Spite of It

SUCCESSFUL WOMEN

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The Secret Thoughts of Successful Women

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What Do Luck, Timing, Connections, and Personality Really Have to Do With Success?

I wasn't lucky. I deserved it
—Margaret Thatcher

What if you believed in no uncertain terms that the reason you got the degree, the job, the role, the deal, or the corner office was because you deserved to get it? In other words, what if you really and truly *owned* your accomplishments as your own and not some fluke? If that were the case, then there wouldn't be anything for you to feel fraudulent about, would there? Unfortunately, that's not the case.

Instead you've spent years essentially giving away your success. And the way you've done this is by crediting your accomplishments to anybody or anything—except yourself. You tell yourself, “*It was a dumb luck . . . The stars were aligned . . . My father got me in the door . . .*” You could win a Nobel Prize and you'd still brush it off with “*Oh, the judge just like me.*” The time has come to reveal the true reasons behind your success.

“All We Want Are the Facts, Ma'am”

Detective Joe Friday of the iconic 1950s television show *Dragnet* had a famous catchphrase. If a witness who was being questioned began to wander off track by offering extraneous information, Friday would redirect them with “All we want are the facts, ma'am.” We already know you've deemed yourself guilty of the charge of impersonating a competent person. So you probably won't believe me yet when I tell you that you and everyone else in the Impostor Club are a pretty competent bunch. How do I know? Evidence—hard evidence.

In the last chapter you learned that countless people have felt like they're waiting for, in Mike Myers's words, the No-Talent Police to come and arrest them. I want you to imagine that this competence-enforcement unit actually does exist and that they've just hauled you in for questioning. However, instead of trying to wrench from you a false confession that you've committed success fraud, this squad is out to prove your innocence. But in order to do that they need evidence—and that proof is going to come from you.

Evidence can take many forms, depending on the situation. Academic competence and success are measured by qualifying exam scores; getting into a top school; earning good grades, degrees, academic scholarships, internships, and awards; letters of recommendation from faculty; licensing, and the like. Employee success is typically viewed in terms of job titles, salaries, performance evaluations, promotions, raises, citations, or awards. In other cases it could mean being tapped for an appointment or winning an election.

In creative arenas, competence and success are gauged by things like getting a part, a grant, a contract, recognition, selection for a juried show. It could be winning a writing contest, receiving an award, or indeed being able to make a living as an artist, writer musician, poet, actor, or craftsperson. Of course, evidence of entrepreneurial competence and success varies widely depending on the business you're in, but essentially it comes down to your ability to make things happen in order to generate profit.

The problem isn't that you deny the existence of such evidence in your own life. The problem is your compulsion to explain your success away with qualifiers. But not this time. This time you're going to spill the beans about everything you've ever done, from passing a particularly hard class in school to being asked to chair an important committee—any shred of proof that you are, in fact, an intelligent, talented, resourceful, and otherwise fully capable human being.

And this time you're going to do it without explaining it away. If in the process of creating your achievements history you're tempted to stray from the what, when, and where, remember: "All we want are the facts, ma'am." Either you got good grades or you didn't. You wrote the thesis or you didn't. You got promoted or you didn't. You performed onstage or you didn't. You made the sale or you didn't. No qualifiers, no ifs, ands, or buts.

Take ten minutes to create your list now.

The Verdict Is In

When you leave out all the qualifiers and just stick to the proof at hand, you get a very different picture of who you are and what you've accomplished. Indeed, after thoroughly and dispassionately considering all of the evidence, the only conclusion any rational person could come to is that you are innocent on all counts. So innocent, in fact, that if it were up to our No-Talent Police, why, you'd be tossed out of the Impostor Club this very minute. Fortunately or unfortunately, you and I both know that ultimately the only one who can free you of the belief that you are a fraud is you. That's why you need *perspective*. And to get perspective it's essential to clear up some fundamental misconceptions you and most impostors have about how success happens. As you are about to learn, rather than diminishing or negating your achievements, factors like luck, timing, connections, and charm actually play a role—a *legitimate* role—in everyone's success—yours included. Just not in the dismissive ways you've been thinking.

What's Luck Got to Do, Got to Do with It?

To a certain degree your success—and everyone else's—is a result of some kind of luck.

- It was writer Ray Bradbury's chance encounter in a bookstore with the British expatriate writer Christopher Isherwood that gave him the opportunity to share his first book with a respected critic.
- Award-winning correspondent and anchor Christiane Amanpour found her way into journalism because her younger sister had dropped out of a small journalism college in London. When the headmaster refused to refund the tuition, Christiane replied, "Then I'll take her place."¹
- In what is perhaps the flightiest example of all, mixed-media artist Hope Sandrow made quite a name for herself in the art world doing poultry portraiture. It all began when she went looking for her cat in the woods near her house and happened to find a lost Paduan rooster, the colorful exotic fowl prized by sixteenth-century European painters.

When you hear these stories, do you think these individuals are any less capable? Do you now perceive them as less deserving of their success? As frauds? Of course not. Then why would you think this when serendipity plays a role in your own success?

Not only is luck an element in individual success, it factors into organizational success as well. So much so that accounting giant Deloitte insists that when it comes to business success, luck is not one factor, it's the *central* factor. In a 2009 company white paper titled "A Random Search for Excellence," Deloitte states that the overwhelming majority of studies claiming to study unexpectedly successful companies "may very well be studying merely lucky companies."²

Looked at more broadly, if you are lucky enough to have grown up in an industrialized nation, then you had a better chance of not being born into severe poverty and hence a better shot at achieving financial success as an adult. Similarly, if you had the good fortune to attend a decent school, or to catch the attention of a great mentor, or to work in an organization that appreciates the benefits of a diverse workplace or of advancing people from within—then lucky you, because your prospects for success just went up considerably.

Indeed, the major premise of Malcolm Gladwell's *Outliers: The Story of Success* is that many of the world's most successful people rose on a tide of advantages, "some deserved, some not, some earned, some just plain lucky." When Bill Gates was about to enter seventh grade his parents sent him to an elite private school. Luckily, for him the Mothers Club used proceeds from a school rummage sale to buy the students a newfangled thing known as a computer terminal. By the time the first PC came along a few years later, Gates was way ahead of the geek pack, with thousands of hours of programming experience under his belt.

Anyone can be lucky. It's what you *do* with luck that makes the difference. Keep in mind that Gates's classmates also had access to this early computer. Notice, however, that

Microsoft Corporation was not started by the Lakeside class of 1973. It was co-conceived and built in part by the person who had the wisdom to work with the advantages presented to him, the initiative to take action, and the perseverance to see it through. As the American business tycoon Armand Hammer once said, “When I work fourteen hours a day, seven days a week, I get lucky.”

For years I’ve preached that successful people really are “luckier”—however, not totally due to serendipity. Rather, successful people routinely put themselves in situations where good things are likely to happen. They show up in places where they’re apt to meet interesting people. They are lifelong learners who frequently attend classes, symposiums, and conferences. They set goals and follow through with deliberate action.

Successful people are also intensely curious. They talk to strangers seated next to them on airplanes, at their kid’s sporting event, standing in line for tickets, or working behind the counter of their local café. And because learning is so important to them, they ask lots of questions. These are all things that less successful people rarely do. But because successful people do them, it effectively positions them to attract good fortune in the way of contacts, advice, assistance, and collaborators. Of her own rise to fame, *Good Morning America* anchor Robin Roberts writes, “I learned how to put myself in a position for good things to happen to me. Even when I felt outnumbered or afraid, I made sure I was ready to grab the ball when it came my way.”³

On the flip side, there’s a danger in viewing success *solely* in terms of luck. You see someone who is living your dream of writing children’s books, being a motivational speaker, or hosting her own radio show, and you think, *She’s so lucky*. But what you really mean is, *Sure, that happened for her, but it will never happen for me*. And in this case you’re probably right. Not because you are inherently unlucky but because when you frame success as totally the luck of the draw, like the lottery, your chances of achieving it are one in millions. As famed success mindset expert Earl Nightingale said, “Success is simply a matter of luck. Ask any failure.”

Sometimes Timing Really Is Everything

Timing is the twin sister of luck. People who feel like frauds sometimes believe that they are where they are because they happened to be in the right place at the right time. If you’ve been dismissing your own achievements in this way, I’ve got more news for you: Sometimes timing really *is* everything.

In certain situations, Gladwell discovered, success can come down to the year or even the month in which you were born. For instance, in youth sports like Pee-Wee baseball and hockey there’s always a cutoff date based on age. The reason there’s a preponderance of future sports stars born in the months just after the cutoff date is that as kids they enjoyed a physical advantage over other young players. Yet you’re never going to hear these adult athletes discount their accomplishments as merely a matter of being in the right womb at the right time. Instead they know they did what all successful people do—they took advantage of the timing edge life gave them and got up every day and worked their tails off to make it into the major leagues. And that’s what you need to do. If timing has

worked in your favor, be grateful. Then put in the effort it takes to make sure your great timing pays off.

The key is to learn how to use timing to your advantage. Successful people understand that a timely follow-up with a valuable networking contact or hot sales lead can mean the difference between seizing the moment and blowing it. And when things do pan out, they give themselves full credit because they recognize that having a knack for knowing when to act—and then doing it—is a skill in itself.

About Connections

From legacy admissions to college to nepotism in job hiring, the well connected do have a better chance of getting ahead, especially at high levels. It's perfectly all right to acknowledge your good fortune in being given a leg up. Just as long as you don't dismiss the role ability plays. Maybe your mother did graduate from Spellman or Vassar or an insider did vouch for you with an agent. But no institution, reference, or employer is going to risk its reputation or the bottom line if it doesn't think you're up to the task. Someone may have opened the door, but once you're inside you were the one who delivered the goods.

Besides, connections are only as good as the people who use them. Flip through a high school yearbook from any affluent community, and I guarantee you will find people who, despite having every advantage including phenomenal connections, failed to rise to their potential. In certain situations, being *too* well connected can actually hurt a person's credibility. Being related to the rich or famous means you face a certain amount of skepticism as to whether you could make it on your own merits—which is precisely why Ivanka Trump doesn't take her position in her famous father's company for granted, once telling an audience, "There may be more intelligent people, there may be people who are more experienced . . . but I'll work harder."⁴

Personality Rules

The term "winning personality" exists for a reason. Just as luck, timing, and connections play a legitimate role in success, so does likeability. Women especially tend to underrate its importance. It's rare to hear a man talk in the same dismissive "Oh, they just like me" way women do. Rather than consider personality to be an excuse for their success, men tend to see it for what it is—a form of competence.

If you've ever been on the hiring side of a job interview, you probably know that all things being equal, the more likeable candidate will almost always get the job. It may not be fair, but the reality is that in most situations, a great personality trumps even supposedly nonnegotiable qualifications such as training or experience. When you understand this, you can stop being so consumed with proving how smart you are and put equal effort into demonstrating that you're the kind of person these future coworkers would want to spend forty- plus hours a week with.

Even in fields often thought of as less people-oriented, it's understood that personality is a legitimate element of competence. In fact, when electrical engineers at the famous Bell Labs think tank were asked to name the most valued and productive engineers on the teams, they didn't name the people with the best academic credentials or the highest IQs. Instead, they chose those with the highest levels of social intelligence. If you happen to be blessed with a great sense of humor, it's all the more likely that you falsely believe that the *only* reason you got where you are, is that "they just like me." The fact is, it's been found that the people who rise to the top of organizations not only possess social intelligence but are also considered funny by others.⁵

Of course, some people initially skate through on charisma alone, but ultimately those around them catch on. Charm and personality are the frosting on the performance cake, but it's your underlying ability to do the job that is the cake itself. Being the kind of person others want on their team is on a par with any other skill. So if you've got it, work it!

Learning to Own Your Success

Now that you see how luck, timing, connections, and personality are part and parcel of the success equation, your old excuses are gone. As you review the list you created earlier, look in particular for instances where any of these factors really did play a role. Next to these write down actions you took that built on them and ultimately led to this success. This is where you want to make sure to give yourself well-deserved credit for things like persistence, initiative, going the extra mile, making use of breaks or contacts, or that winning personality.

Hopefully now you see that there really are times when external factors enter into your success equation—and everybody else's. What the impostor in you truly needs to get is that luck, timing, and all the rest may have helped success along, but *you* were the one who made it happen. Once you really understand that outside factors take nothing away from you or your achievements, it will forever change how you frame your past accomplishments as well as your future performance.

For starters, now when you look the achievement history you created earlier, hopefully you will see it for what it is—unqualified evidence that you are indeed the bright, capable person everyone thinks you are. Viewed with a fresh eye, all those successes you'd previously given away can now be put back into the *I did it* column, where they rightfully belong. From here on you'll want to practice doing things to strengthen the mental link between you and your accomplishments. For starters, pay more attention to when and how you minimize your accomplishments. Maybe you don't run around telling everybody you lucked out in getting the big promotion, but you may notice that you wave off compliments more often than you think.

If so, instead of pushing the compliment away, practice responding with something more appropriate, like *Thank you*. Once that becomes second nature, step it up a bit with statements like "*I really appreciate you saying that,*" or "*Thank you—it makes me feel good that all my hard work paid off.*" Simply hearing yourself say these words in

reference to something you did can help you internalize your accomplishment more fully. You probably think that you're just being modest. But did you ever consider how constantly pointing out why you don't deserve praise may feel insulting to the person giving it? When you think about it, there's an element of arrogance involved in the impostor syndrome. After all, what you're really saying is, *You people are so stupid you don't even realize I'm inept!* Imagine that you and I met and you told me that you enjoyed my book and I responded with something outrageous like "*Really?* Then I guess you don't read many books, do you? I mean, do you even get out of the house much *or what?*" Pretty arrogant, right?

All of us like to our work noticed and appreciated. But remember, you've got that impostor thing going, which means that the person who most needs to recognize your achievements is *you*. One way you can do this is by giving yourself some kind of reward following the completion of a big project or a win. In addition to being fun, learning to appreciate yourself helps break your old pattern of seeking and then dismissing approval from others. The simple act of rewarding yourself is a concrete way to serve our goal of making that stronger mental connection between you and your achievement.

How you reward yourself it is not important. You could treat yourself to a massage, a fancy dinner, even a simple walk in your favorite park. When I finished this book, I bought a piece of art for my home. Every time I look at it, I'm reminded of all the time and effort I put in. When I told this to a friend, she worried that if the book flopped, the painting would wind up serving as a painful reminder. To the contrary, rewards are not reserved only for the victories. If you gave something your best shot, you still deserve kudos for effort.

Another way you can cement your accomplishments in your mind is to make them visual. Just because you're not a kid anymore doesn't mean you can't proudly adorn a wall with letters of recommendation, certificates, and other tangible evidence of success. If you don't feel comfortable with such public displays of self-appreciation, take a more private approach and create a success folder you can refer to when impostor feelings creep in.

Key Lessons

People who identify with the impostor syndrome externalize their success by attributing it to factors outside of themselves. In reality, evidence that you are bright and capable is all around you. In order to feel fully deserving of your success you must learn to claim your accomplishments on a gut, visceral level. This begins with understanding that external factors such as luck, timing, connections, and personality play a valid role everyone's success—including yours.

Action Steps

- Create a list of all your achievement.
- Next to each achievement note the role luck, timing, connections, or your own personality may have played in your ultimate success.

- Then write down the specific actions you took to take full advantage of these contributors.
- Make an agreement with yourself that the next time someone compliments your work you will say, “Thank you.” Then zip it.

What’s Ahead

Hopefully now you see that you really are responsible for your achievements. With that reality check out of the way, it’s time to take stock of what is very likely *the* core of your impostor feelings—your personal competence rule book.

You can learn more about impostor syndrome, receive free weekly Wise Words, or order a copy of *The Secret Thoughts of Successful Women: Why Capable People Suffer From the Impostor Syndrome and How to Thrive In Spite of It* visit ImpostorSyndrome.com