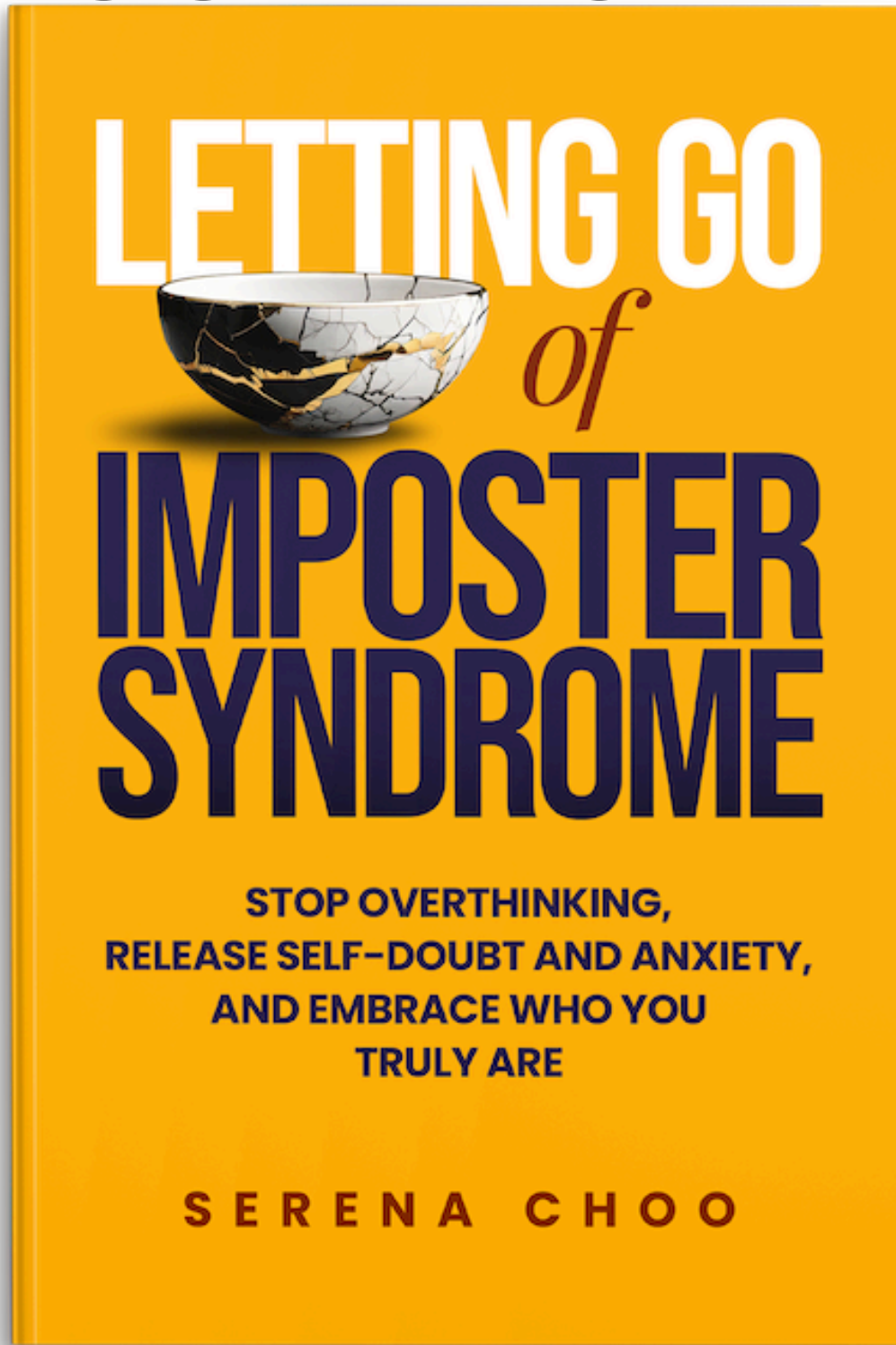


BOOK EXCERPT



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CHAPTER 1:

**IMPOSTER SYNDROME IS REAL BUT ISN'T THE REAL
ISSUE**

You Are Already Who You Need To Be

WHEN WE PLANT A rose seed in the earth, we notice that it is small, but we do not criticize it as “rootless and stemless.” We treat it as a seed, giving it the water and nourishment required of a seed. When it first shoots up out of the earth, we don’t condemn it as immature and underdeveloped, nor do we criticize the buds for not being open when they appear. We stand in wonder at the process taking place and give the plant the care it needs at each stage of its development. The rose is a rose from the time it is a seed to the time it dies. Within it, at all times, it contains its whole potential. It seems to be constantly in the process of change; yet at each state, at each moment, is as it is. –W. Timothy Gallwey

Spinning Thoughts

THE SAME THOUGHTS KEPT going around in my head:

I don't understand it. I'm bright, clever, competent, capable, intelligent, with straight As in everything—except for physics, and I hate that blight on my record—independent, good at everything I do, and yet I'm stuck. I keep questioning myself, second-guessing myself, and it never stops, this constant striving and never feeling good enough, I'm sick of it. How is it that I'm not as successful as everyone else assumes I am? And how is it that other people get success, but I don't, when I know I'm at least as good as them?

Every day, I'd put on a brave and confident face for the outside world, while my inside world was filled with doubt and shame.

Do you have thoughts that keep on repeating themselves in your head over and over again too? You know on an intellectual level that you're competent and intelligent, but you don't seem to believe it on an emotional level. You worry about being “found out” by others, that people overestimate you, and that your successes are not the result of your own hard work, but because of luck. Or maybe, you don't even feel as though you are successful, even though everyone else seems to think so.

These thoughts are typical of imposter syndrome, and imposter syndrome is real: but it isn't the real issue. Imposter syndrome is a cluster of symptoms that originates from conditioning, a process that is a natural part of life that happens from the moment we're born until the day we leave this planet. This conditioning is helpful in some respects, but unhelpful in others. And the real issue that underlies imposter syndrome is a mismatch between our true selves and our conditioned perception of self.

What's Imposter Syndrome Look Like (For You)?

Imposter Syndrome Questionnaire

TO HELP YOU DETERMINE whether you experience imposter syndrome, complete the following questionnaire. For each question, allocate the number that best indicates how true the statement is about you. Go with your first response, rather than dwelling on each statement and trying to think up the “right” answer.

1 = not at all true

2 = rarely

3 = sometimes

4 = often

5 = very true

1. I frequently obsess over my work, feeling that it must be 100% perfect all the time, to the extent that even one mistake can feel like failure.

2. I avoid working on tasks that I know need to be done or fail to complete important projects because I worry that I might be unsuccessful at it or receive poor feedback.

3. I secretly worry that others will find out how much knowledge I really lack or that I'm not as capable or as successful as they “think” I am.

4. I hesitate to take on new challenges or stop myself from putting myself forward for jobs, promotions, or awards because I haven't met every single job requirement, and/or I'm afraid I might not measure up.

5. I dread even the idea of being evaluated, and I avoid situations where I feel this may be the case, even though I know that I'll probably do okay.

6. I often lack confidence and/or doubt my own abilities, even when others have considerable confidence that I will do well.

7. I often feel anxious that I may not do as well at a new assignment or task, even though I generally do well at what I attempt.

8. I often feel that I'm not living up to expectations, even when I've achieved a lot, and worry that I'll be "found out."

9. I frequently need external validation to feel confident in my abilities, but find that even when validation is given, I doubt that it's true.

10. I often feel defensive or disappointed even when receiving constructive feedback, as if it is evidence of incompetence.

11. I can bluff my way through things and give others the impression that I know what I'm talking about and are more competent than I really am.

12. I find it difficult to accept compliments or positive feedback about my work or accomplishments.

13. I often feel insecure about the value of my work, even though I may have numerous degrees or certifications, and/or experience, so I discount my rates without being asked or don't ask for the pay rise I know I should deserve.

14. I often keep quiet or don't share my work or ideas with others, even when I have the answers, because I'm afraid of being judged.

15. If I receive praise or recognition for something I've done or accomplished, I tend to downplay, discount, or dismiss it as insignificant. For example, I might say it was only because it was a team effort, or that anyone could have done it, or that it was my client who did it and it had nothing to do with me.

16. I am highly critical of my mistakes and tend to dwell on these more than on incidents where I have done well.

17. I hesitate to tell others about an impending promotion, award, or recognition of some kind until it is already a “done deal.”

18. I feel shame when I haven't performed well and have difficulty forgiving myself for it.

19. I sometimes feel disappointed with my accomplishments or that I'm not living up to expectations and think I should have achieved more.

20. I often feel that my success is due to luck, external factors, or some kind of error, rather than my own efforts, skills, or abilities.

21. When I've accomplished something and am recognized for it, I feel anxious that I won't be able to live up to future expectations of me and doubt that I can repeat that success.

22. I often avoid trying something new unless I feel that I'll be good at it right away.

23. I feel that I should do everything on my own, and either hesitate to ask for help or feel that I don't need it.

24. I often compare myself to others and feel that I am less able than they are, in terms of intelligence, talent, or achievement.

25. I rarely do a project or task as well as I'd like and often ruminate over the smallest flaws in my work.

Your Score

Add the scores for your responses to each statement. The higher the total score, the more deeply imposter syndrome has an impact on your life.

If your total score is:

- 30 or less: You likely have **few** imposter characteristics and are not being held back or distressed because of it.
- between 31 and 65: You probably experience **moderate** imposter symptoms, and this may hold you back in certain situations and affect how you make decisions.

- between 66 and 100: You probably have **frequent** imposter feelings and notice how they regularly affect your decisions and restrict you from taking action.
- higher than 100: You likely have **intense** imposter experiences and may often feel stressed and paralyzed because of it.

Whatever your score on the questionnaire, it's okay. Here's why: Though imposter syndrome is real, in that you feel like an imposter, it's not the real issue. The real issue comes from your conditioning, which has its roots in your childhood, that can create inconsistencies between your authentic self and how you feel you should be.

Why Imposter Syndrome Is Not the Real Issue

IF I WERE TO ask you why you do what you do, why you believe what you believe, how you got the beliefs and opinions you have, where you got your sense of your own identity from—your self-perception—it’s likely you’d either say, “I don’t know,” or “I just did.” That’s the way that it is for most.

Most people aren’t consciously aware of how they came to believe the things they believe, or how they came to form the opinions they have. Most also don’t know whether they chose any of these opinions or beliefs for themselves but will often dig their heels in to defend their perspective.

This is “conditioning”—opinions, beliefs, and values that we are taught or ‘given’ to us.

When we are born, we are not conditioned, because we haven’t had any experiences to condition us. From that moment onward, we receive feedback from our external landscape, such as the people around us and our environment. And at an unconscious level, our mind begins to make associations between our actions and behaviors and the responses we receive.

Being completely reliant on our caregivers for our survival in our early years, we learn to associate love and approval with our basic needs being met and being cared for. In other words, we link love and approval with being able to stay safe and alive: “If I do this, then I am loved and approved of, and so I am safe, but if I do that, then I am not loved and disapproved of, and so I am not safe.”

So, we learn to adapt our behavior to stay loved and approved of, so we can continue to be cared for, ensuring our safety and survival. In other words, we learn how to fit in and conform.

Then when we encounter ‘disapproval’ and feel a withdrawal of love, it generates fear for our survival. We feel guilt when we think or believe that we have done something wrong—when we have gone against the values or norms to which we have learned to conform—“I’ve done something wrong“. And we feel shame when we think or believe that there is something wrong with ourselves—”There’s something wrong with me”.

Through this process of conditioning, we internalize the stories, values, and beliefs we encounter, and identify with those that we take on as being true. These then form the basis of constructs that shape our sense of self—our self-perception—who we think we are, what we believe to be true about ourselves, and how we need to be. And we can take on and form a negative perspective of ourselves, which can result in feeling unacceptable, defective, or not good enough. This self-perception then colors our patterns of thinking and feeling, and further influences our actions and behaviors.

Now we feel vulnerable about expressing our true authentic selves, because of the association of shame and guilt that led us to changing our self-perception in the first place.

By continually adapting our behavior to conform, and our sense of who we should be, to try to meet external expectations, we can end up repressing our own nature. We can lose sight of our own innate gifts and talents, and ultimately feel we’re not good enough. And then, over time, we feel vulnerable about expressing our true authentic selves.

It’s this misaligned self-perception—the mismatch between your conditioned self-perception and your authentic self—that is the real issue as shown in the diagram below. It drives self-critical thoughts, unhealthy coping behaviors, and unpleasant biochemistry and feelings: the symptoms and manifestation of imposter syndrome.

This is why imposter syndrome may feel real but is not the real issue.

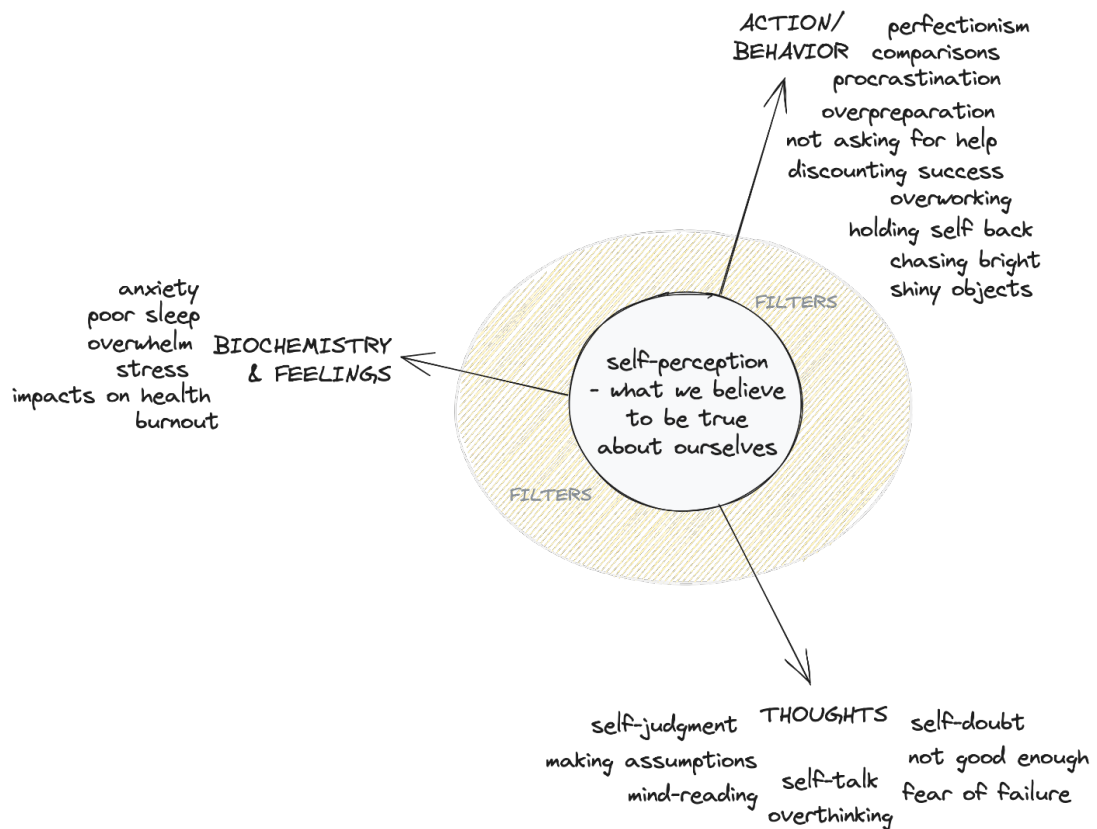


Figure 2: Self-perception and imposter syndrome

This is also why if you've been grappling with imposter syndrome for some time, and you've tried other approaches, you may have had little success with them.

You may have focused on developing a growth mindset, used positive affirmations, or resolved to "fake it until you make it." They may be useful in other circumstances, but they aren't especially useful for tackling imposter syndrome because they don't focus on the real issue. They don't address the underlying internal filters and programs that you took on through conditioning.

Remember, imposter syndrome is a label for a cluster of symptoms: opinions, emotions, and behaviors that commonly appear together. Focusing on the symptoms rather than the underlying cause may provide you with temporary relief; but it will distract you from reconnecting with your authentic self and potentially delay your letting go of imposter syndrome. It's the root cause that we need to address and when we do, then we

handle all the symptoms of imposter syndrome. If we don't—and try instead to tackle each of the symptoms on their own—it can be like playing whack-a-mole.

Put another way, what's needed is not more personal development or finding more ways to “fix” yourself, but to let go of that old conditioning that's been keeping the real you hidden.

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