How Imposter Syndrome Grows, The Role of Shame and How to Mitigate

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Starting a new career or role can indeed feel like navigating in the dark, especially when the expectations are high and the path forward is uncertain. The initial phase often involves a steep learning curve, and without clear guidance or established processes, you may find yourself constantly searching for the "right" next step. In such situations, many people feel heightened pressure to avoid mistakes—especially if their role involves forging new pathways or making impactful decisions that could influence the company’s future.

This mindset of avoiding mistakes at all costs can create an intense fear of failure, which often fuels **imposter syndrome**. Studies indicate that when people lack a clear structure or are tasked with creating something new without sufficient support, feelings of inadequacy can quickly take hold. They may begin to attribute successes to luck rather than skill and to see failures as evidence of incompetence, rather than as natural steps in the learning process. This fear of “being found out” as an imposter is compounded by the emotional toll of each mistake, reinforcing the idea that they’re not truly qualified for the role​.

## Self-doubt and perfectionism

Imposter syndrome, especially in high-stakes or new roles, can lead to self-doubt and perfectionism. Research shows that new employees in leadership or entrepreneurial positions are particularly vulnerable to this. The ambiguity and lack of feedback in a new role can make it difficult to gauge progress, leading individuals to rely on internalized fears rather than evidence of their capabilities. In these moments, small mistakes might be blown out of proportion, increasing the sense of fraudulence and fear of judgment.​

## What you can do

To mitigate these feelings, adopting practices that encourage self-compassion and reframing mistakes as learning opportunities can help. Cognitive-behavioral approaches, mindfulness practices, and strategies like **Box Journaling** (which combines CBT, compassion, and creativity) allow individuals to explore and challenge their feelings of self-doubt. Creating a strong support network, setting realistic expectations, and celebrating small achievements can also provide much-needed reassurance during times of transition.

Starting a business or career while grappling with imposter syndrome can be incredibly challenging, especially when the fear of being “exposed” combines with a heavy sense of shame around specific perceived inadequacies. The feelings of self-doubt and vulnerability can be exacerbated when surrounded by peers who seem to be succeeding effortlessly. Imposter syndrome has a way of making us fixate on our perceived flaws—whether it's the fear of not having enough clients, doubts about financial management, or anxiety around networking skills.

## The Impact of Comparison

Comparison is a common trigger for imposter syndrome, and it can be particularly painful in the entrepreneurial or professional world, where benchmarks for success are often tied to tangible results like client numbers or revenue. Research shows that the brain processes social comparison as a threat to self-esteem, making us more likely to focus on where we "fall short" compared to others. This can lead to a distorted sense of failure, as we only see our struggles but assume others have it all together.

One aspect of managing imposter syndrome is understanding the reality that others make mistakes too—even costly ones. Hearing other professionals, especially those we admire, talk about their missteps can provide comfort and perspective. It breaks down the illusion of perfection that often fuels imposter syndrome and reassures us that learning and growing involve taking risks, failing, and trying again. When others share these experiences, it normalizes the challenges and mitigates the isolation that imposter syndrome can bring.

## Addressing Shame in Professional Identity

Shame can deeply influence how we see ourselves professionally, particularly if we feel inadequate in areas we consider essential for business success, such as organizational skills, networking, or financial management. Shame differs from guilt in that it involves a sense of self-judgment rather than a response to specific actions, making it harder to separate from our identity. When this shame combines with imposter syndrome, it adds another layer of emotional weight, increasing the likelihood of burnout and making it harder to seek help or guidance.

## Therapy vs. Business Coaching

While business coaching can be beneficial for practical skills, addressing the roots of imposter syndrome and shame often requires a deeper therapeutic approach. Therapy helps address core beliefs and cognitive distortions that may be rooted in early experiences or long-standing patterns. This self-reflective work can help unravel negative beliefs about one's worth or capabilities, freeing up mental energy that can then be directed toward growth in business or personal life.

The key to managing imposter syndrome and business-related shame lies in recognizing the value of both personal and professional development. Therapy provides the tools to work through self-doubt and feelings of inadequacy, while coaching can offer the skills and strategies for building and running a business. When both areas are nurtured, it becomes easier to move forward confidently, equipped to handle setbacks as part of the learning process.

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**Shorter more informal tone**

Starting a new role or career can feel like stumbling around in the dark. The steep learning curve, high expectations, and pressure to make good decisions without clear guidance can create a lot of stress. This is especially true when we’re expected to carve out new paths or establish new processes from scratch. We end up feeling like mistakes are the enemy, and the fear of messing up only fuels imposter syndrome.

Imposter syndrome creeps in when we start doubting our achievements and worry we’re just one slip-up away from being exposed as a fraud. We question our skills, dismiss successes as luck, and see failures as proof of inadequacy. This mindset is all too common in high-stakes jobs or new ventures, especially when we don’t have solid feedback or support to lean on.

**Self-Doubt and Perfectionism**

Imposter syndrome feeds on self-doubt and perfectionism. We set impossible standards for ourselves and then feel crushed when we inevitably fall short. Research shows this is particularly true for those in leadership roles or new business owners, where the pressure to "prove" oneself is intense. Even minor setbacks can feel monumental, making us wonder if we’re really up to the task.

**What Can Help**

One way to tackle imposter syndrome is by rethinking how we handle mistakes. Techniques like CBT, mindfulness, and methods such as Box Journaling, which combines creativity with therapeutic techniques, can help us process our feelings constructively. Building a supportive network is key too, but with a catch: it’s important to connect with people who share openly about their own struggles.

**Comparison and Shame**

Comparing ourselves to others can worsen imposter syndrome, especially if we’re surrounded by people who seem to be thriving effortlessly. Social comparisons can make us feel like we’re falling short, which just reinforces the sense of not being “good enough.” Hearing others’ stories about their mistakes, especially those in similar roles, can be reassuring. It reminds us that everyone makes errors—sometimes costly ones—and that these are often part of the path to growth.

**Therapy vs. Coaching**

If imposter syndrome also comes with feelings of shame around business identity—like doubts about our organizational skills or networking ability—therapy might be especially helpful. Business coaching can teach practical skills, but therapy can help tackle deeper-rooted insecurities and self-judgments that may be holding us back.

In the end, dealing with imposter syndrome often requires a blend of personal and professional development. Therapy helps us address self-doubt and shame, while coaching builds the concrete skills needed to succeed. With support in both areas, moving forward becomes less daunting, and we’re better equipped to handle challenges as part of the journey.