


REACT to Imposter Syndrome

5 steps to help you banish imposter syndrome thoughts

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Hi, I'm Prakriti. I work at Culture Amp as a Director of Engineering. Today I will share some of my personal experiences with imposter syndrome in tech and then walk you through 5 steps I've prepared that might equip you with some strategies to combat imposter syndrome.

That was the introduction I had prepared for you today. That's the one that I have written in my speaker notes and the one I've been practicing.



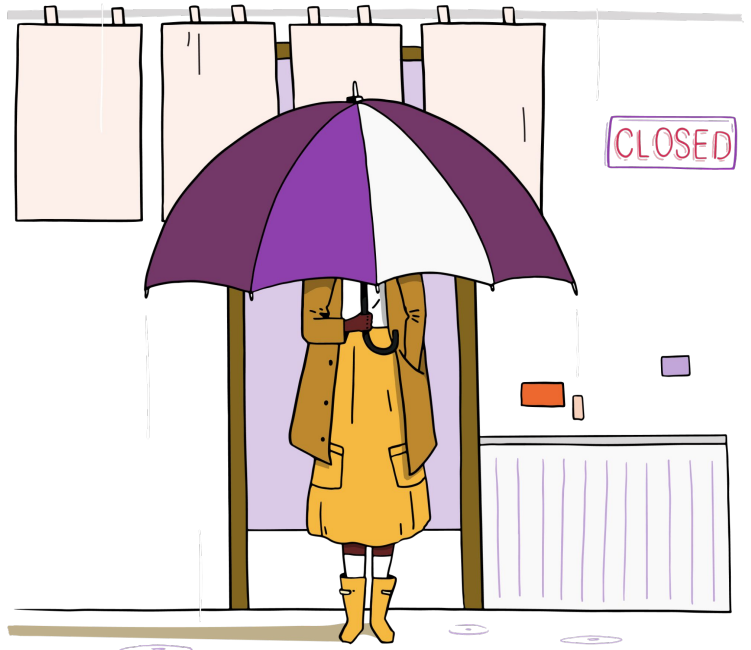
But as I was saying those prepared words a parallel intro was running through my head. It went something like this: Hi, I'm Prakriti. I don't know why I'm doing this. No one is interested in listening to my stupid stories. I'm not an expert on imposter syndrome, I'm just an engineering leader, as are some or many of you here. Who am I to suggest strategies to people? I'm wasting your time, you'll all think this talk is lame.

Does that resonate or feel familiar to anyone? Have you experienced this sort of internal self-talk or narrative?

Yesterday I told someone I finished my final run through to practice this talk and they said "are you experiencing a bout of ironic pre-talk imposter syndrome?"

Imposter Syndrome

Someone who feels like a fraud



Imposter syndrome describes someone who feels like a fraud. Even though they are successful at what they do, they believe that their success is undeserved and fear being exposed as an imposter, as someone who has convinced everyone or deceived them into believing that they are intelligent, or competent, or capable. They don't feel like they actually have those attributes. They diminish their achievements by attributing them to luck or being at the right place at the right time.

These are some essential traits of imposter syndrome that some people at this workshop might have felt before, I know that I've certainly felt some of these things.

“...someone with Imposter Syndrome has an all-encompassing fear of being found out to not have what it takes.”

— Carole Lieberman

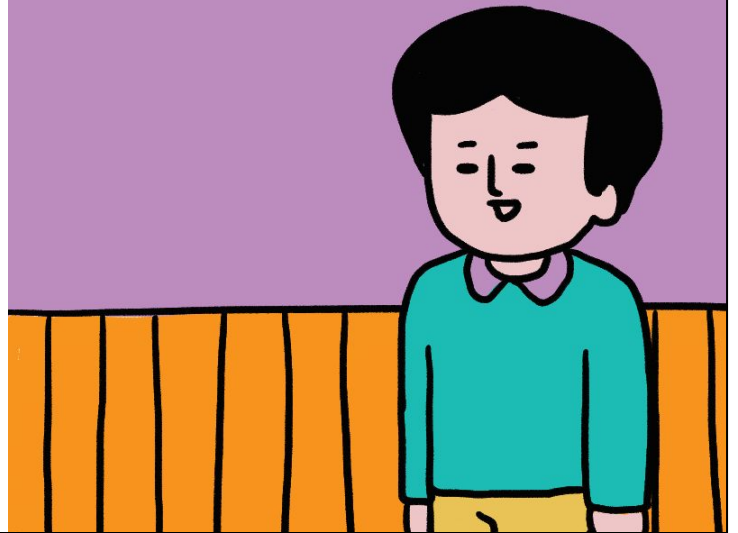
Carole Lieberman a psychiatrist and author says: Most people experience some self-doubt when facing new challenges. But someone with IS has an all-encompassing fear of being found out to not have what it takes.

People with impostor syndrome often bend over backwards looking for perfection. When they succeed at a project, they begin to believe all that anxiety and effort paid off - creating a cycle.

Imposter Syndrome

Am I an imposter?

Gift by Percolate Galactic <https://www.werepercolate.com/>

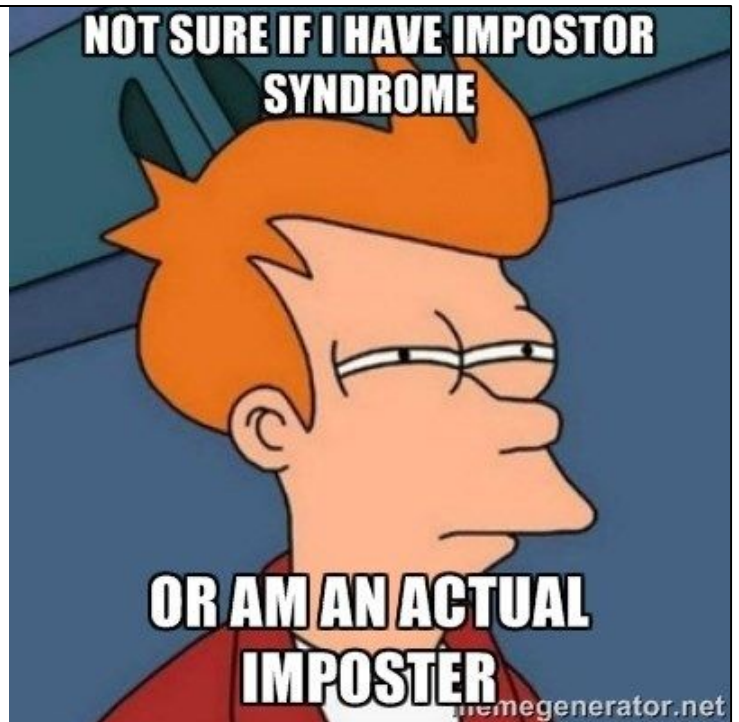


I don't know whether I have imposter syndrome or not.

I remember I was pretty good at programming at uni. I'll admit I was good at the time. But then I spent my first 2 years working in tech being pretty bad at it. I'm not being an imposter or being self-effacing here like haha our presenter said she was bad at her job. I was actually not doing very well and my performance reviews reflected that too.

Imposter Syndrome

Am I an imposter?



Many years have passed and I'm a director of engineering now. I've had the opportunity to work at a few great companies where I've been surrounded by capable, intelligent, highly skilled, and motivated people. I sometimes feel like I don't belong in this group, like I'll never be as skilled or as motivated as they are. I'm not as driven and I don't achieve amazing results all the time.

I lead a few engineering teams at the moment. I'm not the best programmer on these teams right now and I will never be that person. Even back when I was a software engineer, I was never the best programmer on my team. I've had a few good opportunities but I think some of them have happened because I've been at the right place at the right time. Sometimes I question what I've done to deserve them. This sounds very similar to what I've read and heard about imposter syndrome. This is my version of the internet definitions I shared before.

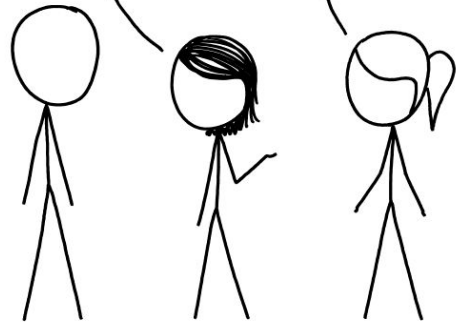
Imposter Syndrome

Am I an imposter?

THIS IS DR. ADAMS. SHE'S A SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGIST AND THE WORLD'S TOP EXPERT ON IMPOSTOR SYNDROME.

HAHA, DON'T BE SILLY! THERE ARE LOTS OF SCHOLARS WHO HAVE MADE MORE SIGNIFICANT...

...OH MY GOD.



<https://xkcd.com/1954>

I still feel self conscious sometimes of not being the best programmer or the most technical person around. I don't write code anymore, that's a side effect of my current role. I worry sometimes that people on my teams will think that their leader is not technical enough or not an active code contributor. I worry about losing respect and I think being a woman makes that worse because often women are defaulted to being seen as non-technical.

“...consistently has a solid grasp on the technical status of the project and offers good ideas and criticism in **technical design discussions.”**

— An engineer on my team

But, I recently received some feedback and here's some quotes from it: She consistently has a solid grasp on the technical status of the project and offers good ideas and criticism in technical design discussions.

“She is a very technical engineer so we get to benefit from her skills when it comes to **technical decision making.”**

— Another engineer on my team

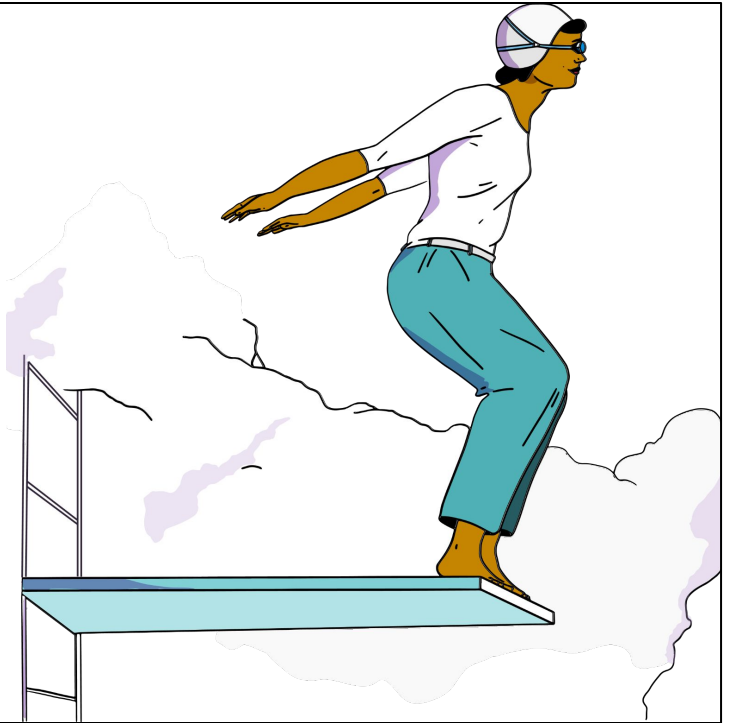
Another person said: She is a very technical engineer so we get to benefit from her skills when it comes to technical decision making. Yesterday someone said to me they are confident 2023 will be a good year for technical change in the Performance product. That's, in no small way, due to your leadership.

So maybe some of my fears are unfounded?

There's no test that I know of to diagnose imposter syndrome, so how do you know when you have it and when you just kinda suck at what you're doing in that moment? Like I did in my first 2 years working in tech. It's possible to just be performing poorly at some stage in your career, so how do you know which one it is? Well I won't tell you now because then you'll leave and I want you to stay until the end of the talk

Imposter Syndrome

Uncertainty and fear of failure



I didn't think I'd get this job at Culture Amp when I interviewed about a year ago. I was an Engineering Manager, looking after 3 teams, and this role was for a Director of a group of about 6 teams. As a manager or leader, it can be difficult to know what you're doing well and what you aren't.

I was hearing different conflicting feedback from different people. Some were telling me that I was ready to progress to the next stage in my career, some were shocked I wasn't there already, and some were telling me I had a lot to learn and I wasn't ready - but without articulating what it was that I had to learn and the reasons why I was not ready



When I joined the engineering leadership team here (*as you can see it's a very cool team with cool people*), I was in a group of intelligent, capable people, some of whom were way more experienced than me. I attended an onsite session with the leadership team in the office and got to know them a little better. I gotta say I was quite impressed by all that they had achieved in their careers and lives. I was also wondering whether I was in the right place.

I know what you're thinking, with photoshop skills like these I obviously chose the wrong career path

Imposter Syndrome

Uncertainty and fear of failure



In my time in this role I've made improvements but there have also been setbacks. Some days I feel like I can achieve anything I set my mind to (just invincible) and other days I wonder just how much real tangible measurable impact I've had. *We're actually in performance review season right now so I'm going to find out in a couple of weeks.*

There are plenty more stories and anecdotes like this I can share but I don't want to bore you with all of them. I think you know what I'm talking about and where I'm going with this.

These experiences can result in an amount of uncertainty and over time in people they can lead to a fear of failure

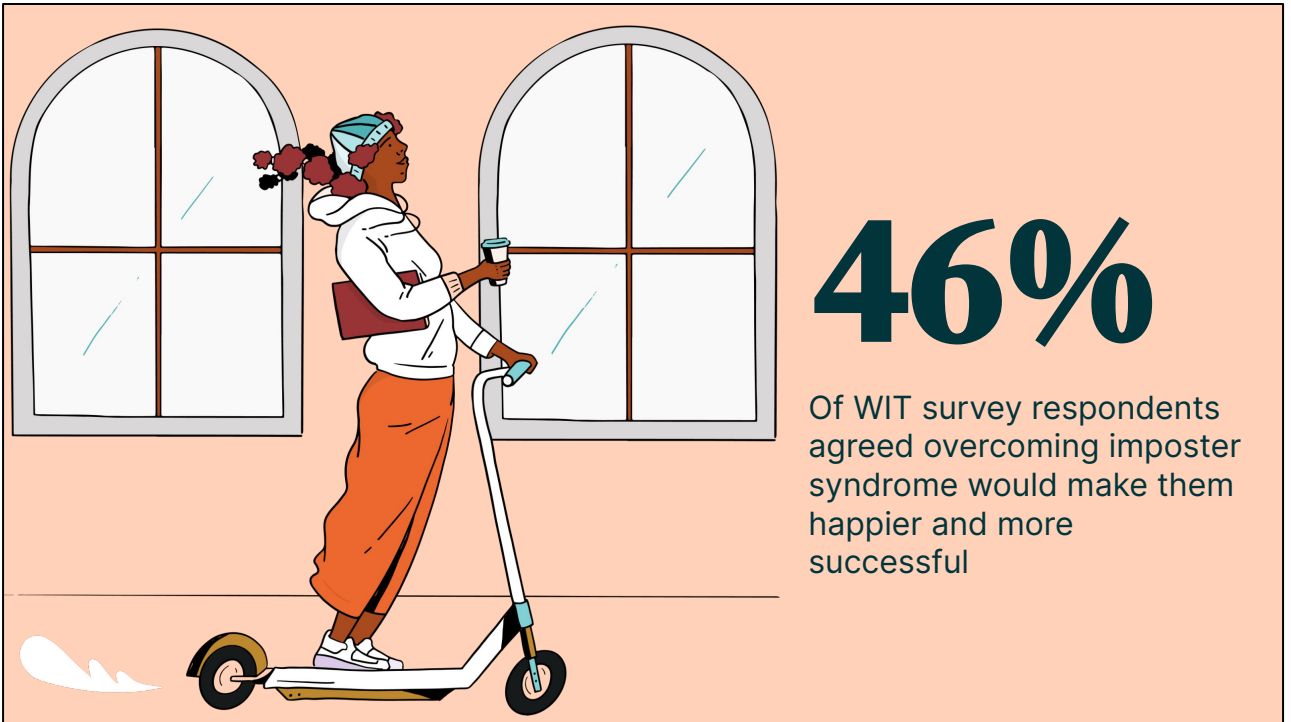
70%

of people worldwide (not just in tech) have felt like an imposter



The good news is that I get some comfort from is that it's not just me. It's ok to feel like an imposter sometimes. 70% of people worldwide have felt like an imposter at some point in their careers. This is not just people working in tech, it's not a problem only with the tech industry, this is worldwide. Studies suggest that impostor syndrome is particularly common among high-achieving women.

Joke about apple and pear



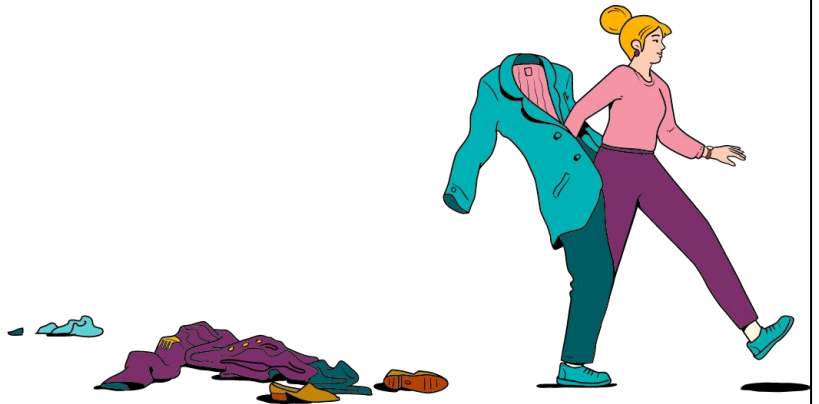
Read stat on slide first

Studies have demonstrated that impostor syndrome is common among African American, Asian American, and Latino/a American college students and that impostor feelings are significantly negatively correlated with psychological well-being and positively correlated with depression and anxiety

One study found that impostor feelings were stronger predictors of mental health than stress caused by minority status

Imposter Syndrome

**It's ok to
feel like an
imposter
sometimes**



I feel like it's not all terrible to doubt myself occasionally. I may have gotten lucky getting this job but I'm going to work my butt off to be good at it. Believing I am not as good as I should be can sometimes give me the push I need to work harder and go the extra mile.

If I feel like I don't belong, I can dig deeper. Why do I feel that way? What makes me different from the people around me? I can figure out how I am different, and learn to leverage it, use that to my advantage. I often have to remind myself that I deserve to be here. We've all had moments of luck and privilege in our lives.

For example, I'm sure there was some luck in getting my current job at Culture Amp. Being able to attend university and get a professional degree was a privilege. I didn't do much to earn that privilege. But that doesn't detract from the work that I'm putting in here and now. We have all overcome some invisible or visible barriers to be sitting in this workshop room today.

So I think it's okay to have imposter syndrome, I mean, it seems like almost everyone has it anyway. But I don't want those thoughts around all the time. That's why I designed this talk.

Imposter Syndrome VS Systemic Bias

Before I launch into the 5 steps etc etc, the reason you chose to attend this talk, I want to highlight a quick but very important note. If you feel like an imposter sometimes or you think you have imposter syndrome and these steps seem helpful to you then please use them and I'd love to hear if they truly help you. But if you belong to an underrepresented minority group, I think it's worth asking - is it imposter syndrome that I'm feeling or is it systemic bias like racism, sexism, homophobia, classism, or any of the other isms that plague our society and our industry.

There's a lot of reading out there about imposter syndrome and there's also plenty suggesting that rather than helping individuals overcome imposter syndrome we should strive to fix systemic biases in our environment that foster or exacerbate imposter syndrome

So I'd recommend use these steps if you feel they can help you, or use them to help your friends and colleagues but also continue to question your environment and think about where your feelings of unsurety, not belonging, or lack of confidence might be coming from - in case it's rooted in systemic bias.

Or you know do what you think is best, what do I know, I just work here.

R

E

A

C

T



Record successful
outcomes and
feedback



Evaluate negative
imposter thoughts



Ask trusted
people for their
opinion



Challenge
assumptions with
data



Transform the
imposter thought

This is what you do when imposter syndrome strikes. You react. REACT is an easy acronym to help you remember the 5 steps so you can do them anywhere anytime.



Me motivating others to
combat imposter
syndrome

Me to myself

I'm going to take you through these 5 steps for the rest of this talk
Don't do as I do, do as I say

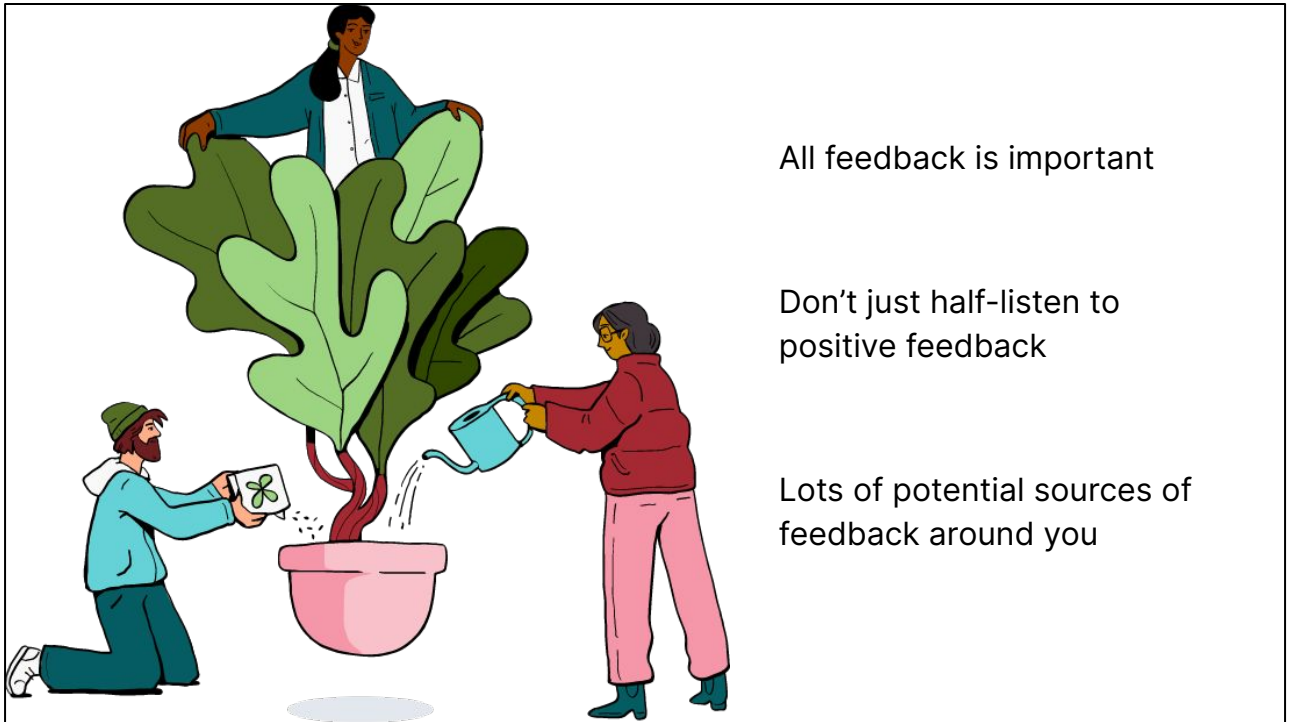


1

Record successful outcomes and feedback

Let's break it down and look at each step. Step 1

The R in React is to record successful outcomes and feedback



All feedback is important

Don't just half-listen to
positive feedback

Lots of potential sources of
feedback around you

Does anyone do that thing in performance reviews where you're half-listening to your manager talking about your accomplishments and the other half of your brain is in panic mode trying to remember all the ways in which you fucked up over the last 6 months. That's what I do. I wait for my manager to get through the good stuff quickly because I'm dreading the bad stuff that will inevitably follow.

Show of hands?

Well, stop doing that in your performance reviews.

All feedback is important. All feedback deserves to be treated well and given time, even positive feedback. This first step is about recording successful outcomes and positive feedback when it is received. I find that I receive many forms of qualitative and quantitative feedback outside of 1:1s and performance reviews. Sometimes I didn't recognise that it was feedback because it wasn't delivered in a specific way. I expect to get feedback from my manager in 1:1s. I expect to get feedback from my peers in 360 reviews. But those don't have to be my only source of positive feedback. Feedback has become a loaded term, any comment on your output or behaviour at work can potentially be a great source of information.



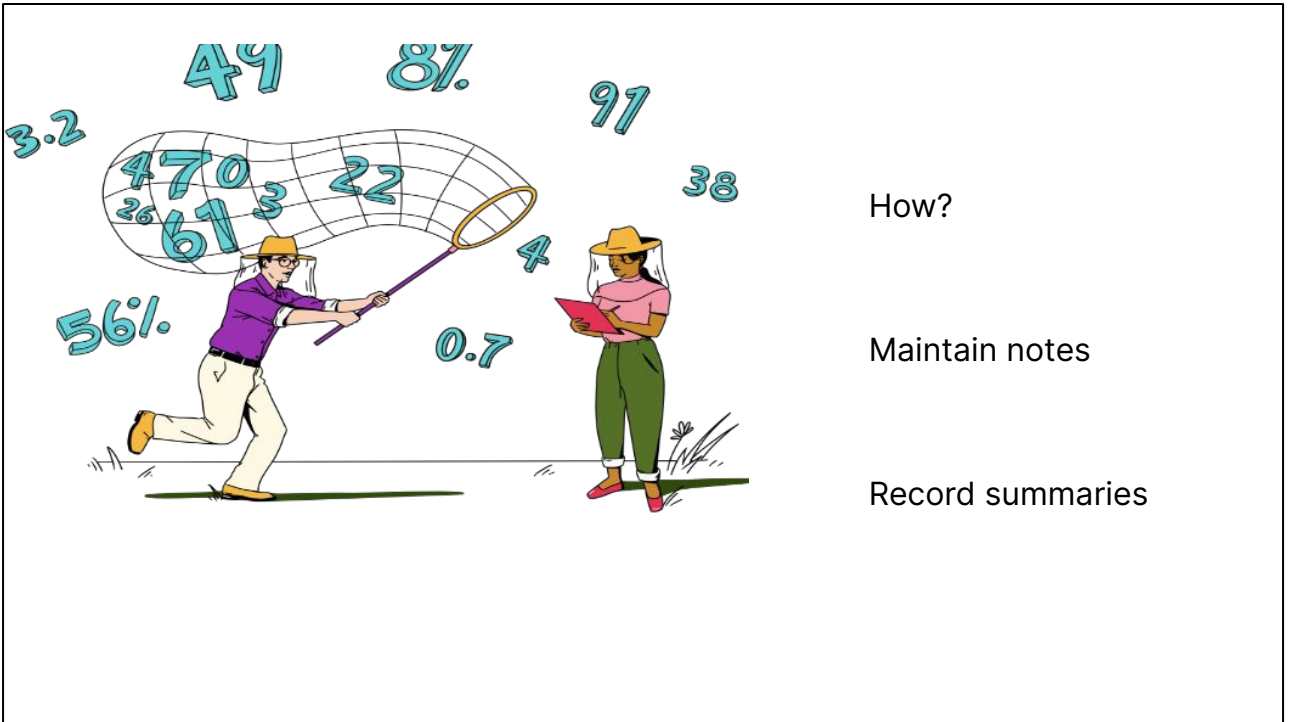
Record things as they happen

Don't listen and forget

Observe for yourself successful outcomes

Instead of listening and forgetting immediately (that's what I do), you could try recording things as they happen. Don't just record verbal or written positive feedback people give you, because we don't all always work in wonderful environments where we receive lots of positive reinforcement. Observe for yourself successful outcomes.

They could be a piece of code well written, a positive customer experience or comment where you were able to resolve a problem for someone, a sales deal, a marketing launch. Could be presenting at rubyconf. You may not get official feedback on these outcomes. Note these outcomes down, they were only possible because you worked hard for them.



How?

Maintain notes

Record summaries

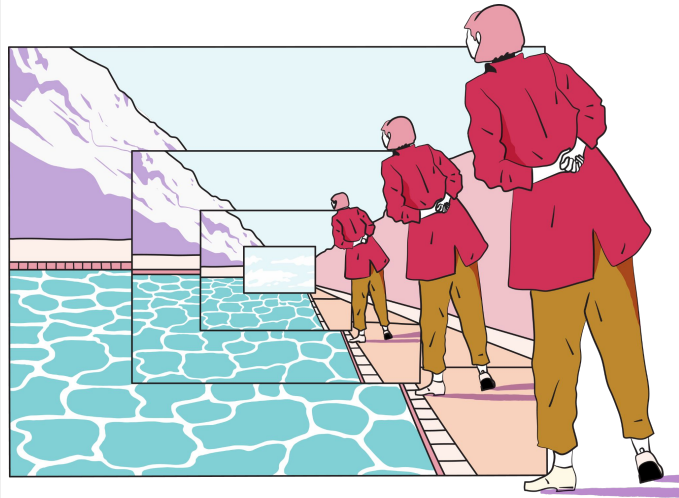
How? I will often maintain notes on my phone which I have on me most of the time. After a quick conversation when I get a second I might edit the note with a short summary. In 1:1s and longer conversations I know that I might forget some of the points discussed. So I usually say something upfront like I'm not great at remembering and your feedback is really important to me so do you mind if I take notes as we chat. No one has ever declined this request or been taken aback by it.

Some examples of things I recorded recently: improving the clarity, priority, and visibility of tech debt in our product - which I plan to turn into a conference talk when the initiative is over, an operational update process I introduced for the teams I work with that is now being used by many other teams too, and delivering my first fully virtual workshop at 2am in the middle of the night because it was for a conference thousands of kilometers away

These examples are obviously very specific to engineering management type roles which is what I do, but your notes would look completely different based on your role.

**Evaluate imposter
thoughts. Question
implicit assumptions.**

Step 2



Feeling like an imposter?

Immediate negative thought + the **chain** of thoughts that led to the imposter thought.

How did this chain of thoughts make you **feel**?

When a thought arises that leads you to feeling like an imposter, write it down. Write the immediate negative thought you had and the chain of thoughts that you followed that led to you feeling like an imposter. You'll notice a common theme here - I like writing things down it clarifies ideas in my head.

For example, a recent imposter thought that I had was that I'm letting my team and everyone else down. I would start by writing that down and then thinking what led me down this path? What was the incident that happened? What immediate negative thoughts did my brain react with during the incident? What chain of thoughts followed that initial reaction? How did I conclude at the end that I was letting my team down?



Feeling like an imposter?

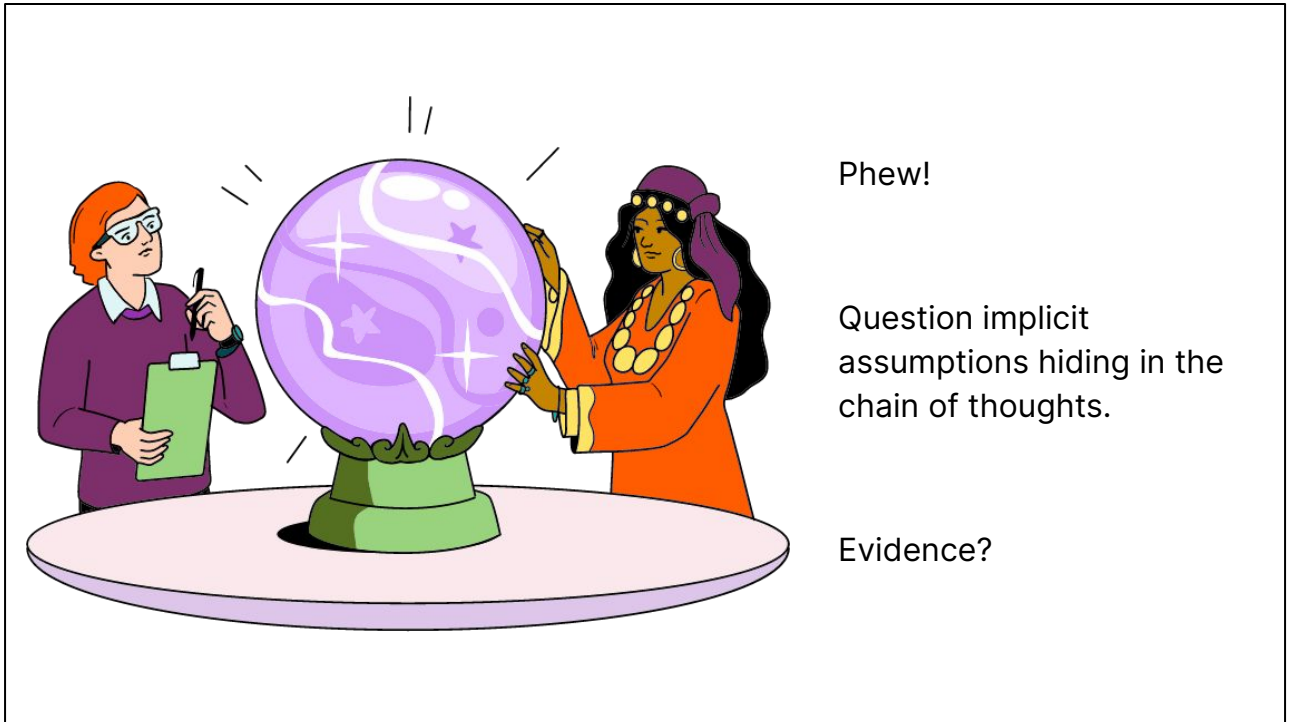
Immediate negative thought + the **chain** of thoughts that led to the imposter thought.

How did this chain of thoughts make you **feel**?

So let's do that. I was in a 1:1 with my manager. He shared some feedback with me around an area that I should improve on. I agreed with him, I said yes I'm not doing this thing super well, I need to improve and get better. I decided that I would work on it but it was still an emotional conversation that left me feeling a bit vulnerable.

After that I went straight into another meeting where I had to explain a project to someone. I felt like they were behaving immaturely, not hearing me, not listening to what I was trying to convey. That led to me thinking that I wasn't doing a good job representing the project I was trying to campaign for. I followed that path down and concluded that I was letting my team down.

Once you have the negative thoughts captured, write down how they make you feel. In this case, I had feelings of reduced worth. I also felt frustrated. I felt like no one was listening to me and no one understood me. I felt unheard.



Phew. If this sounds tough, it is. It's difficult to examine your negative thoughts and examine how they are making you feel. But it's an essential part of this step.

So that was the tough part. You've successfully evaluated your negative thoughts. It's time to question the implicit assumptions hiding in those thoughts. For each thought that you had leading down the chain to the imposter thought, ask yourself what assumptions are you making here? What evidence are these assumptions based on? Are you observing behaviour and reaching logical conclusions, or engaging in hyperbole and making things worse in your head?

In my example, I would question what indication has my team given me that I'm letting them down? Was the person really behaving immaturally or was I just feeling emotional from my difficult 1:1 right before? Maybe I wasn't doing a good job of representing that project, perhaps this wasn't the best time to have that meeting

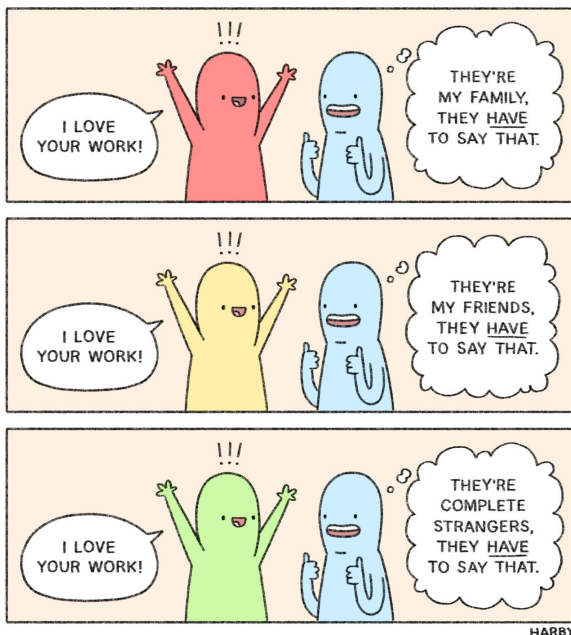
Highlight in your notes the assumptions you have made along the journey to your imposter thought.

Another example of an imposter thought right now: I'm saying all this but inside my head I'm thinking oh god they're not buying this, these steps don't make sense, they think I'm stupid, and no one in the audience is actually listening to me. But look at all the assumptions here. You might not like this talk at the end, but right now, I'm sure at least some of you are listening, maybe even more than one

**Ask trusted people for
opinions.**

Step 3 - optional

IMPOSTER SYNDROME



<https://ryanharby.com/new-stuff/2019/6/27/imposter-syndrome>

Optional step!

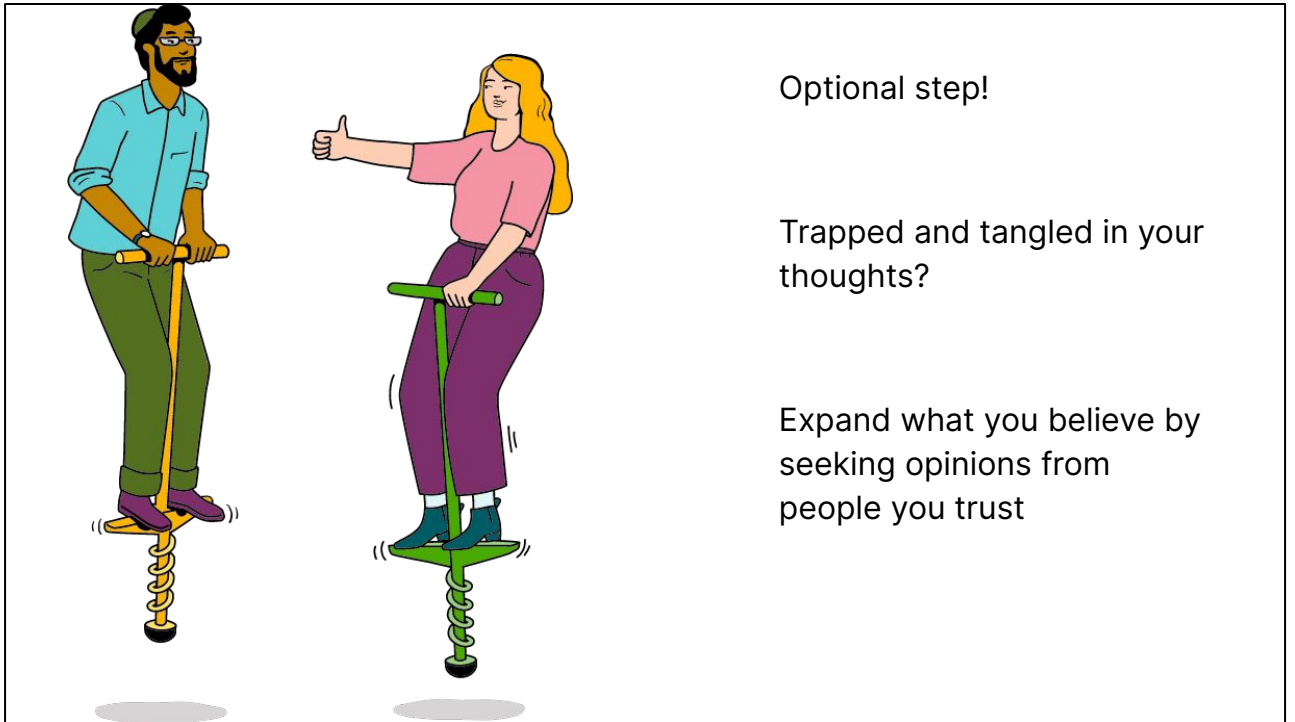
Trapped and tangled in your thoughts?

Expand what you believe by seeking opinions from people you trust

This is an optional step which might be more suitable to some situations than others. Use it if you feel it will help. I sometimes feel like I'm trapped and tangled up in my negative thoughts. Do you feel that way? Sometimes it's useful to expand what we believe to be true about ourselves by seeking opinions from people we trust. The key word here is trust. People who you know will be honest with you. People who have enough context about you to be able to form informed opinions. You can look outside yourself and ask your trusted family, friends, or colleagues for their opinions on the negative thoughts that you identified in the previous step.

Sometimes we just need someone we trust to tell us the things we already know so that we can believe them. It feels like sometimes I need to hear an opinion from someone else to help it sink in.

Once you've collected this information, add it into your notes along with all the other data that you collected in step 1. It's one more data point.



Optional step!

Trapped and tangled in your thoughts?

Expand what you believe by seeking opinions from people you trust

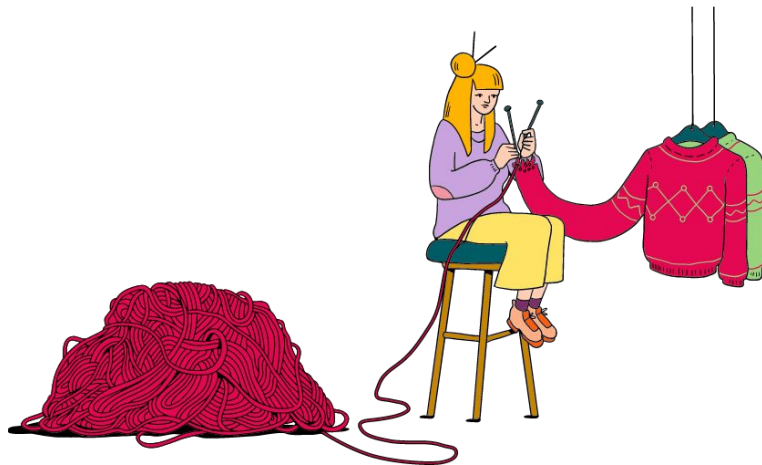
To continue the previous example where I felt like I was letting everyone down, I confided in a colleague, told him the whole story and like I felt as though I was not doing a good job here. He said “You're able to have off days and even days where you'd rather not be here. But remember that every other day you do a really stellar job. You haven't gotten to where you are now because you're lazy, you got here because you deserve it and you worked really hard.” That's so nice. That's a good point to add into my notes because it's coming from a work colleague and friend who knows me, has context on my job, and who I could trust to be honest with me, keep it real.

Challenge assumptions with data from your notes.

Step 4

This one really is the crux of these steps

~~Before we launch into step 4, I'd like to ask you all, was it difficult to recall something positive someone shared with you? Was it easier to recall something negative compared to something positive? That's just for you to reflect on—why do you think it was easier to recall negative opinions? How do you think these steps can help change that?~~



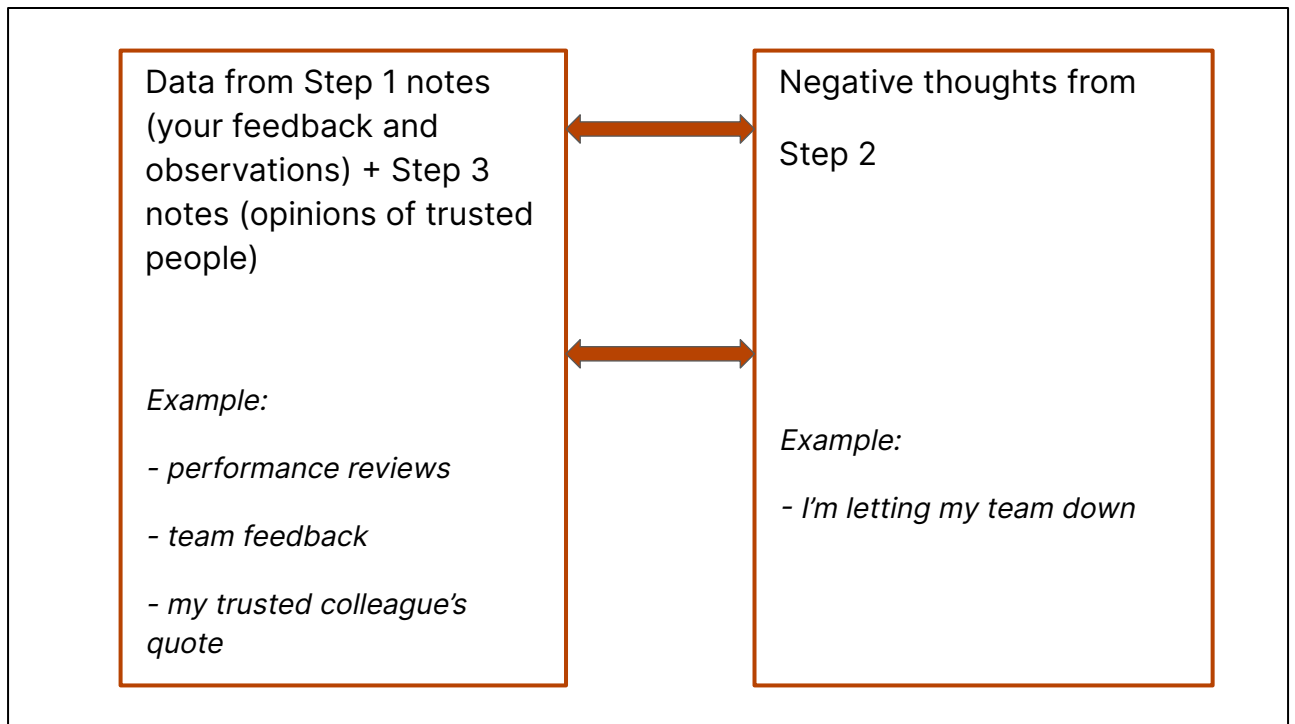
Separate imposter syndrome thoughts from legitimate feedback or concerns.

Categorise.

So far we've been collecting information - about outcomes, feedback, negative thoughts, assumptions, opinions from trusted people.

This step is where we look at all our notes and separate the imposter syndrome thoughts from legitimate feedback and concerns. I try to be wary of swinging too hard towards either extreme - I don't want to think that all my negative thoughts are accurate (because.. no) but I also don't want to dismiss all of them as imposter syndrome. There might be excellent pieces of actionable feedback hiding in there that can make me better at my job and a better person.

It can be hard to tell which is which though.



In this step you reflect on the notes you have been collecting so far <describe the slide>

What does this data suggest when you put it next to the negative thoughts you have written? Does the data support or contradict the thought?

If you can find data here that supports the thought, then the thought could be a valid concern or a piece of actionable feedback. However, if you can't find any data that supports it, or if you find data that negates it, then the thought is not accurate. The thought is probably a symptom of imposter syndrome.

For example if I put the data I have (recent performance reviews, team feedback, the opinion of that trusted colleague etc, comments from 1:1s, my own observations of outcomes I've delivered) next to the thoughts I shared in the previous steps, I'd have to categorise "I'm letting my team down" as an imposter thought. Sure I have plenty of areas that I need to work on, I'm not a perfect leader. But the feedback just doesn't add up to such a severe evaluation. The data that I have collected just doesn't add up to that.

Joke about slides behind me being opposite sides



**Transform the
imposter thought.
Save it.**

Step 5



The last step - this is where we transform our imposter thoughts. In the previous step you identified some thoughts that were imposter thoughts - they had no data to back them up. For each of those, think about what a revised version of that thought could look like. A version that would accurately reflect the data that you've collected. It could be a small modification of the thought to make it more accurate. In some cases, you might even find that the revision is completely opposite to the original negative imposter thought.

For example, what do people think my revised thought could be instead of "I'm letting everyone down"? I shared with you some of the data that I collected. What do you think would be a good revision? I'm going to pause for a second to give you a moment to think about that and then I'll share how I revised it

Joke about water sip

(My team is delivering ok but I have received some good feedback on how I can help them be more productive)

Isn't that such a departure from the original severe thought of "I'm letting everyone down"

Remember that your revised thought should match with the data that you have collected. If you don't have enough information yet to accurately revise it, then just remove it for now. You can come back to it later once you've had the opportunity to collect some relevant data

R



Record successful outcomes and feedback

E



Evaluate negative imposter thoughts

A



Ask trusted people for their opinion

C



Challenge assumptions with data

T



Transform the imposter thought

Recap the acronym

This might seem like a lot to take in at the moment because we went through it slowly with lots of rambling from me. When you're doing this as an exercise for yourself though, it hopefully won't take more than 5 minutes. The more frequently you do it, the more of your common repeating imposter thoughts get revised into a version that reflect reality better. The more you do it, the less you have to do it going forward.

That's the kind of homework that I like to do.

Thank you

Remember to REACT!

Prakriti Mateti
Director of Engineering

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**FEEL LIKE
AN IMPOSTER**

**COMBAT
IMPOSTER SYNDROME
AND HELP OTHERS
TO DO THE SAME**

**REALISE
THAT YOU
ARE COMPETENT**

**CHALLENGE
SYSTEMIC BIASES
THAT FOSTER
IMPOSTER SYNDROME**



So the next time imposter syndrome strikes, remember to react!

If you'd like to chat later please come find me in the breaks or you can reach out on Twitter or LinkedIn