

Feel like a Fraud? 5 Tips to Vanquish the ABD Imposter Syndrome | Issue 205

Reading time this issue: Under 10 minutes

- **Why You Must Dare to Fail**
- **Words from the Wise on Self-Doubt and Vulnerability**
- **Stop Feeling like a Fraud: Five Expert Tips to Conquer Your ABD Impostor Syndrome Registration for Free Teleworkshop, Overcome the Impostor Syndrome**

FREE ABDSG Teleworkshop March 14: OVERCOME THE IMPOSTOR SYNDROME

Feel like a fraud? Worry if you are smart enough to finish a doctorate?
Master proven concrete tips to overcome or prevent the impostor syndrome while you finish your dissertation

DETAILS & REGISTRATION FOR THIS FREE CALL BELOW.



Editor's Note: WHY YOU MUST DARE TO FAIL

When did you last dare to try something you might fail at?

For me it was late January—when I joined our local CrossFit gym.

CrossFit seemed like a big stretch for someone used to mere walking, but when my daughter Sara "incentivized" it, I took the bait.

A rowing machine won't get anyone trembling. But when was the last time you hoisted a barbell? How about planks and pushups? As Cross Fit regulars swung themselves up on overhead bars, I watched in awe, unsure of what I had just signed up for.

Watching the more fit folks streak past me at first could have led me to quit. But my trainer scaled things down for me, while everyone encouraged me to just keep at it. No smugness. No comparisons.

What a valuable lesson they offered me—one seldom offered in school and work environments. All too often we judge ourselves and get judged on how well we perform before we've had a chance to develop our potential.

What about you? Do you tend to set the bar too high, literally and figuratively, with new challenges? Do you place it at the expert level (often the most salient)? Then when you don't clear it, do you give up? Or worse, do you let fear of failure keep you from taking a shot in the first place? Fear of failure provokes self-limiting doubts—the kind that define impostor syndrome. This pernicious condition hits doctoral students especially hard, with drastic impacts on academic progress and career choices.

When was the last time you felt like giving up on your dissertation? Doubted your ability to finish? Felt like a fraud around other students and faculty?

If you find yourself struggling with negative feedback on your latest draft while congratulating your peers who just defended

their dissertations, it's easy to forget your own strengths. You start wondering if you really have what it takes to finish.

Impostorism can affect post-graduation goals as well. Collet and Avelis found it outranked all other factors in explaining why women downshifted goals away from research institutions and toward teaching institutions—especially in the humanities and social sciences.

What makes us so vulnerable to the impostor syndrome?

Who gets to witness the inner doubts or years of struggle others undergo on their way up the ladder? Without that awareness, you feel like a fraud next to established folks who now make it look easy. You wonder when you'll be found out as an inadequate, inferior being let in by mistake.

Sure, your first draft might look dismal next to the published articles and dissertations you have read. But it would likely hold up well next to first drafts by other ABDs.

Think the impostor syndrome only hits the untalented or uninitiated? Nope. High achievers are the most likely to succumb to it, as illustrated by this remark by celebrated novelist and poet Maya Angelou:

"I have written eleven books, but each time I think, 'uh oh, they're going to find out now. I've run a game on everybody, and they're going to find me out.'"

If you've ever felt any of the symptoms of the impostor syndrome, don't miss our expert strategies for overcoming it below. It's time for you to enjoy your learning and celebrate your successes! Here's to your path and your success!

Here's to your path and your success!

Gayle

Gayle Scroggs, PhD, PCC
Editor, ABD Survival Guide

P.S. I can now hold a plank for over 60 seconds. :)

WORDS FROM THE WISE: ON SELF-DOUBT AND VULNERABILITY

"The trouble with the world is that the stupid are cocksure and the intelligent are full of doubt." ~ Bertrand Russell

"Our doubts are traitors, and make us lose the good we oft might win, by fearing to attempt." ~ William Shakespeare, Measure for Measure

"If you hear a voice within you say 'you cannot paint,' then by all means paint and that voice will be silenced." ~ Vincent Van Gogh

"I don't believe anyone ever suspects how completely unsure I am of my work and myself and what tortures of self-doubting the doubt of others has always given me." ~ Tennessee Williams

"Every album, I'm worried that I'm a dork and a fraud--'What if I can't sing anymore?' then I stop thinking and start playing guitar, and I realize that it's okay to suck, and move forward." ~ Pink

Video pick: "The Power of Vulnerability," by Brené Brown, [TED Talk](#), December 2010.

Feature Article

STOP FEELING LIKE A FRAUD: FIVE EXPERT TIPS TO CONQUER YOUR ABD IMPOSTER SYNDROME

By Eva Ross, Ed.D., and Gayle Scroggs, Ph.D.

Ever feel like a fraud while working on your doctorate? Do thoughts like these nag you when you try to work on your dissertation?

- "I am too tired to work on the lit review—I'll wait until a more ideal time."
- "My chair tore my chapter apart; I must not be as good at writing as I thought."
- "I just need to read a few more books before I get started."
- "I am determined to do this on my own—I will not lower myself to ask for help."
- "I should be able to juggle it all—work, family, and school—and not drop a ball."
- "I don't need to know everything, I just need to find it when I need it." ~ Albert Einstein

If any of these sound familiar, chances are you have developed a good case of the impostor syndrome. Let's look at

how to cure it—or at least tame it into submission.

THE IMPOSTOR SYNDROME: COMMON COLD OF THE ABD?

Statistics and experience show that you have considerable company, including ours.

Eva's experience: When I received the acceptance letter from my chosen doctoral program, I worried that it might just be a clerical error. I called a colleague to make sure it was for real. As time went on, I learned that I was in fact "good enough," although there were moments of "impostorism."

Gayle's experience: While finishing my dissertation as a full-time instructor, I suddenly became haunted by a crippling fear of not having created a doctorate-worthy masterpiece. At a faculty meeting one wintry afternoon, I gazed around the table at some of my less-than-amazing Ph.D. colleagues and realized, "If they merit a doctorate, surely I do too!" I defended in March.

The fear of not being good enough, of being an intellectual phony, is pervasive among doctoral candidates. This damaging yet pervasive fear leads to a perpetual anxiety about being unmasked as unworthy of the degree—even after earning it.

In *The Secret Thoughts of Successful Women*, Valerie Young, Ed.D., develops the impostor syndrome concept originated years earlier by Pauline Rose Clance, Ph.D., and Suzanne Imes, Ph.D. She reports that a surprising 70 percent of people studied suffered from impostor syndrome symptoms at one time or another, especially high achieving individuals. Graduate students and women appear to be especially susceptible.

Drawing on the work of Clance and Imes, Young and others, we will explain what makes you vulnerable and how you can banish the impostor syndrome so you can finish your dissertation and move on with confidence.

WHY YOU THINK "I'M JUST NOT GOOD ENOUGH"

A healthy sense of competence develops in parallel with your actual mastery. Explaining away your successes as to luck, favoritism, or other circumstance leaves you vulnerable to the twin arrows of anxiety and doubt when new challenges arise, providing fertile ground for the impostor syndrome.

When you caught in its grip, you are more likely to describe your competence in self-sabotaging ways that are inherently unsustainable. Young describes five such types: the Perfectionist, the Natural Genius, the Expert, the Rugged Individualist, and the Superwoman/Superman/Super-Student, each with unrealistic, self-imposed rules about competence.

WHAT IS YOUR COMPETENCE TYPE?

Read Young's classifications below and highlight any that resonate strongly with you. Then read on to learn how to overcome these handicapping thoughts so you can finish your dissertation and future projects with confidence. The Perfectionist: "my work must be not just good or great, but flawless." The best way to describe the perfectionist may be "Everything I do must be 100% perfect, 100% of the time." Do you put off writing until the time is just right, when you feel inspired, rested, etc.? Do you keep revising the same section to get just the right word—thus getting far behind schedule?

The Natural Genius: "It should always come easily for me." If you are "a natural genius," you judge success based on ability, rather than effort, in working on the task. For you, having to work hard implies incompetence. For example, "If I were really good at writing, I would not have to rewrite anything."

The Expert: "um, am I qualified to speak on this yet?" Do you create self-imposed hurdles by imagining that you need more studying, more certificates, or another diploma before you can put yourself out there? The fear of not knowing enough easily paralyzes you. The expert is always in rehearsal, never quite getting to the accomplishment stage.

The Rugged Individualist: "I don't need anyone's help." Do you stand on your firm principle that you need to accomplish this all on your own—and that this will establish your competence? Do you refuse to ask for legitimate help—and thereby add unnecessary obstacles and delays to finishing your dissertation?

The Superwoman/Superman/Super-Student: "Watch my juggling act!" Are you convinced you have to juggle multiple roles and do them all well at the same time? Are you plagued by beliefs like this one: "I can be an ace employee, a wonderful mother, and a stellar dissertation student all at the same time."

STRATEGIES TO PREVENT AND RECOVER FROM THE IMPOSTOR SYNDROME

Highly successful people who fall prey to the impostor syndrome see the proverbial glass as more than half empty. They find it hard to appreciate their own inherent worth, personal strengths and talents, and demonstrated accomplishments, as they focus heavily on real or imagined deficiencies.

When feelings of vulnerability then arise, they attempt to combat it by overusing their strengths in ways that ultimately backfire: a commitment to excellence morphs into perfectionism, independence into rugged individualism, and so on.

Self-acceptance is thus sabotaged not only by feeling "not enough," (Brown,



2010, 2013) but also by a "fixed mindset" that equates self-worth with performance, with no allowance for mistakes, a doomed perspective (Dweck, 2010).

What can you do?

Adopting a "growth mindset," one which makes room for learning from mistakes, can help you overcome imposter syndrome thoughts. Also, learning to "dial back" strengths appropriately while developing an appreciation for the power of vulnerability can move you forward. Let's see how to do that for each of Young's types.

1. THE PERFECTIONIST: GO FOR EXCELLENCE, NOT PERFECTION

If you are dogged by impossible standards, it's time to shoot for merely "excellent," and at times, just "good enough." "Research shows that perfectionism hampers success," writes Brene Brown, Ph.D. "In fact, it's often the path to depression, anxiety, addiction, and life paralysis." Give yourself permission to write a lousy draft that you can edit later—you'll finish sooner if you do.

Your new motto: "Giving 100% is not required in all situations."

2. THE NATURAL GENIUS: ACKNOWLEDGE THAT MASTERY TAKES EFFORT

Instead of focusing on proving your ability in everything you do, focus on improving it through practice, urges Stanford professor Carol Dweck. Neural plasticity research shows that most capacities, even intelligence, can increase over time with effort. When struggling to master coding or to revise difficult sections, try this reframing: "Mastery is a good thing; I just need to recognize the time and effort I will need to get there."

Your new motto: "Success does not happen overnight; it takes time and effort."

3. THE EXPERT: EMBRACE LIFE-LONG LEARNING

Do you feel in constant need of rehearsal, yet never ready to go on stage? Are you putting off finishing your lit review until you have read everything under the sun on your topic? Consider this reframe: "A good knowledge base is important, but it is unrealistic for me to try to learn everything about the subject." After all, your dissertation is your first book—not your life's masterpiece. Keep a growth mindset here.

Your new motto: "The learning journey never ends."

4. THE RUGGED INDIVIDUALIST: LEVERAGE RESOURCES

Successful scholars regularly enlist aid from others, from colleagues and family to stats consultants and coaches. Try this reframe: "It is great that I can be self-sufficient if I need to be, but I need to be thoughtful about it. There are times when it's better to draw on other resources." Brown also challenges the myth of going it alone, noting that it hampers the cultivation of connection and authenticity which we need in order to thrive.

Your new motto: "Part of being competent is asking for what you need."

5. THE SUPERWOMAN/SUPERMAN/SUPER-STUDENT: BE REAL, LET GO



We see this as the perfectionist on steroids. Before you drop from overwhelm, see how these reframes work for you:

"I can honor my desire to do many things well, but I do not need to do it all simultaneously."

"Just because a person can do it does not mean that she must do it."

We get sucked into perfection because we imagine that it will protect us from feelings of vulnerability, notes Brene Brown. "Perfectionism is the belief that if we live perfect, look perfect, and act perfect, we can minimize or avoid the pain of blame, judgment, and shame," she asserts. Authenticity is messier, but it's a lot more sustainable.

Your new motto: "Letting go is liberating."

From ABD Impostor to Dr. You

As you replace dysfunctional beliefs with healthy ones, the old ones may surface occasionally as critical voices from the past that can still provoke anxiety if you grab on to them. A good strategy here is to simply acknowledge them and tell them to "go to the back of the bus" because you intend to hang on to the wheel.

Then step on the gas: Write that next paragraph or analyze that next set of data. And keep going even if those bullies holler,

because you are driving this bus to your defense and beyond.

When you at last reach the end of your dissertation journey, go right ahead and savor being called "Doctor"—without the shadow of an impostor's doubt. You will have earned it.

Recommended Resources

Brown, Brené. *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead*

Brown, Brené. *The Gifts of Imperfection: Let Go of Who You Think You're Supposed to Be and Embrace Who You Are*

Clance, Pauline Rose, and Imes, Suzanne. "The Imposter Phenomenon in High Achieving Women: Dynamics and Therapeutic Intervention," *Psychotherapy Theory, Research and Practice*, Fall 1978. [pdf available [here](#)]

Dweck, Carol. S. *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*

Young, Valerie. *The Secret Thoughts of Successful Women: Why Capable People Suffer from the Impostor Syndrome and How to Thrive in Spite of It*

About the Authors



Eva Ross, Ed.D., C.M.C.

An academic and life coach who resides in the Great Lakes area, Dr. Ross devotes herself to helping graduate students (especially doctoral candidates) conquer the inner and outer obstacles to their degree. Her coaching invites clients to clear their emotional static, allowing them to move toward greater clarity and purpose in achieving important goals and a greater sense of well-being. Contact her at eva@dr-evaross.com.



Gayle Scroggs, Ph.D., P.C.C., C.M.C.

Dr. Scroggs, a positivity and productivity coach, speaker, and ABD Survival Guide Editor, makes her home near Maryland's Chesapeake Bay. A former college professor, she has helped countless students and clients finish and flourish through proven positive psychology strategies. If you are ready to conquer self-doubts and procrastination, harness strengths and motivation, and develop clarity and focus to propel you to your goals, contact her at gayle@essencecoaching.com. Enjoy free resources at www.EssenceCoaching.com.

Free ABD Survival Guide Teleworkshop FEEL LIKE A FRAUD? OVERCOME YOUR IMPOSTER SYNDROME

with Drs. Gayle Scroggs, Eva Ross, and Nora Misiolek

Join three experienced dissertation coaches for a free one-hour call to master the five strategies and banish the impostor syndrome forever. Get back to your dissertation with renewed confidence and self-compassion.

WHEN: Monday, March 14, 2016

TIME: 7 - 8 PM Eastern Time USA

Receive the call-in number when you register.

REGISTER BY SATURDAY, MARCH 12: Email gayle@essencecoaching.com

In the subject line in all caps, put ABDSG TELEWORKSHOP and your name.

In the body of the email, tell us a little about yourself:

- a. What is your field or dissertation topic?
- b. Where are you in your doctoral studies?
- c. What are your biggest challenges to finishing your dissertation?
- d. What would you find most helpful for your situation?
- e. Anything else you'd like to ask or tell us?

We'll send you back a welcome letter with the call-in number.

YOUR OWN COACH

If you are considering whether to get your own coach to help you reach your academic goals, fill out this brief [application](#) for a free consultation with a dissertation coach.

GAYLE SCROGGS, Ph.D., P.C.C., Editor, ABDSG.

An accomplished coach, workshop leader, keynote speaker, and educator, Gayle earned her doctorate in social psychology from the University of New Hampshire. Her deep expertise in positive psychology allows her to help clients build their personal strengths, positive habits, and confidence to overcome procrastination, self-doubts and other blocks in order to reach vital academic and personal goals. In addition to editing the ABD Survival Guide, she contributed two chapters to the positive psychology anthology, [Women's Paths to Happiness](#). Contact her at gayle@essencecoaching.com for coaching, presentations, and workshops on thriving in graduate school and beyond, and find free resource www.essencecoaching.com. She also speaks fluent Spanish and delights in new exotic Scrabble words as she savors life in the Chesapeake Bay area, California, and Argentina.

BEN DEAN, Publisher, ABDSG

Ben holds a Ph.D. in psychology from the University of Texas at Austin. He began writing the ABDSG in 1997. Over the years, the ABDSG has published hundreds of articles and provided thousands of hours of pro bono coaching and teleworkshops to ABDs all over the world. Ben is also the founder of MentorCoach (www.MentorCoach.com), a virtual university focused on training accomplished professionals to become part-time or full-time coaches. You may wish to subscribe to the Coaching Toward Happiness eNewsletter! It's on applying the science of Positive Psychology to your work and life (131,000 readers). Ben lives in suburban Maryland with his wife, Janice, their two children, and Dusty, their Norwegian dwarf bunny.

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