

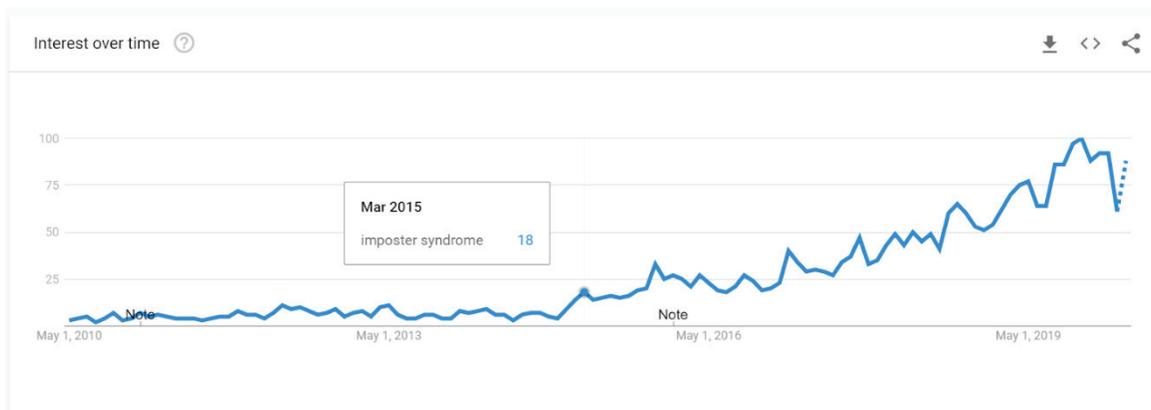
## 3 STRATEGIES TO OVERCOME IMPOSTER SYNDROME AND FEEL COMFORTABLE BEING ASSERTIVE

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Imposter syndrome. Imposter phenomenon. Imposter feelings.

You've probably come across at least one of those three phrases in the last few years. (*and don't feel like an imposter if you spell it impostor with an 'o' - both spellings are correct!*)

A quick search shows that although "impostor syndrome" has been around for awhile, it started growing in popularity as a Google search term around March 2015:



But what *is* it exactly?

And - more importantly - how do you get over it?

### ONCE MORE WITH (IMPOSTER) FEELING

Impostor syndrome is technically called **impostor phenomenon (IP)** by the cool-kid academics, and it occurs when you feel like it's only a matter of time before someone discovers that you're *actually* a fraud. IP raises its ugly head whenever you feel like you don't deserve the recognition, awards or position you've attained. And you know you're experiencing IP when you have secret thoughts that others are better than you, and you feel a strong fear of failure.

Here are a few interesting truths we know about people who suffer from IP:

- They're usually **highly competent** but feel an intense need to outperform others.
- They're often **women**, though IP can also affect men as well.
- They're not necessarily insecure. People **with high self-esteem** can easily experience IP.

Now with that last point about insecurity, you're probably asking, how is it possible that someone with high self-esteem can have IP?



The reason is simple: we can have core beliefs about who we are (*i.e.* “*I’m a successful professional*”) AND we can have fleeting thoughts about our circumstance (*i.e.* “*It’s only a matter of time before they realize I have no idea what I’m talking about*”).

Those fleeting thoughts are the real problem.

They’re what I call sneaky impostor messages.

Here are some sneaky impostor messages I’ve heard over the years:

- “It’s so hard to create influence when they only know me as kind.”
- “I’m having trouble presenting myself as a leader when I’m in the same room as a big personality.”
- “I need to be more assertive, I have a quiet personality.”

What I know from working with dozens of clients that none of these are objectively “true”.

They’re sneaky impostor messages that get lodged in your brain.

The real problem is that when you have too many of these messages, or if they start to form a core belief about yourself, you start holding back. You give in to the fear-based thought: “What if *<insert sneaky impostor thought>* is actually true.”

By far the most common way I see this show up is when women professionals hold back from speaking up in meetings. They silence themselves when they feel a knot in the pit of their stomachs at the tiniest *sliver* of a chance that they might say something wrong or look dumb when all eyes are on them.

Much of this self-silencing is born in the gender-based feedback that’s rampant in modern organizations. This is known as “second-generation gender bias”, because gone are the days of explicit gender discrimination - today’s bias is much more subversive. For example, a woman is much more likely than a man to receive feedback that she “should be more assertive.” And this kind of feedback often has the opposite impact; we feel *less* confident being assertive when we’re told that we’re not assertive enough.

So how do we get past these impostor messages to feel confident with being assertive?

### THREE WAYS TO BECOME COMFORTABLE BEING ASSERTIVE

I want to introduce you to Samantha (*not her real name*). She’s a lawyer at a boutique law firm in DC and here’s what she said when we had our initial consult:

A few years ago I had a review with the partners, and they think that I could stand to **be more assertive**. I know that this is sometimes a “personality thing” but the partners support me in getting a coach to work on it.

She shared that it was hard to take advice from most mentors because they come across as so domineering. As she put it “*They wouldn’t understand where I’m coming from, and it’s hard to take advice from someone who’s going to tell me to become a different person.*”

She was frustrated with getting feedback that she was “too quiet,” because she didn’t want to change who she was.

In fact, she didn’t actually have a problem with being assertive. Samantha is a lawyer -- it’s literally her job to be assertive. And with her track record she’s pretty amazing at it!

Samantha simply wanted to feel more comfortable being assertive when all eyes were on her outside of the courtroom. She wanted to feel comfortable in a *leadership* role in her organization, and especially when she



was (a) the main point of contact with clients and (b) in the company of highly qualified, credentialed and experienced senior partners.

We worked together to identify her unique strengths and how she wanted to show up. And she worked on improving her confidence in being assertive and asking for feedback on how she was showing up.

So, to help YOU overcome IP, I'm sharing three activities that worked for Samantha to feel more comfortable being assertive.

1) Identify your strengths, recognizing that everyone has a different approach to the world, and that's ok.

One of my top tips for clients is to take the Gallup Strengthsfinder, an assessment that's designed to help you understand the unique way you approach the world and achieve success. It's one of the most empowering assessments I've come across. *(And as a bonus, it gives you excellent lines that you can use in cover letters, resumes and interviews ;)*

Spend time thinking about how you show up at your *best*, this will help you shift your focus from what you might do 'wrong' to what you're doing well.

2) Practice being curious.

When IP strikes, it tricks you into using your "lizard brain", meaning that you are hyper-focused on identifying and protecting yourself from threats. This is opposed to when you operate from your higher-level "executive" brain. And this is a problem because the executive brain is way better at making both logical and intuitive decisions. When you're in a meeting and your lizard brain kicks in, it's hard to show up assertively to solve problems or have honest conversations.

One way to snap yourself out of "threat" mode and move your brain into executive mode is to get curious.

Curiosity can *only* happen from your executive brain, so if you can ask questions, you know you're operating from the executive mode.

For example, let's say you're in a meeting with your boss, presenting an idea you've worked so hard to put together, and she says "Wait, I'm confused, I don't understand what you're trying to do here."

The IP-fueled lizard brain might react by going into a panic, terrified you screwed up. You might respond either defensively, getting tongue-tied trying to explain how you came up with the idea, or aggressively, by forcefully advocating for your idea.

What I recommend instead is to take a breath, pause, and in your brain ask yourself, "I wonder what she's confused about?". This will help you move your brain out of IP mode into curiosity mode, and you can then calmly (and from a place of genuine curiosity) ask her, "Ok, can you tell me what aspect is confusing?". What you'll notice is that this curiosity reaction leads to a more interesting and helpful conversation. *(If it doesn't, we can start having a conversation about how to handle a bad boss ;)*

3) Write a message to yourself on an index card and tape it to the wall above your laptop.

There is a reason that the 'positive affirmation' movement is so strong. It may seem extremely cheesy to tell yourself things like "I believe in, trust and have confidence in myself" or "I forgive myself for not being perfect because I know I'm human.". But there is solid evidence in the scholarly world that self-affirmations help reduce the threat response.

That said... According to an article in Personality and Social Science Bulletin, timing is key. Affirmations work best when they happen BEFORE you feel threatened.

So I want you to come up with an affirmation that resonates with you, and write it down. If you're on virtual calls, write it on an index card and tape it over your laptop. If you're meeting in person, write the message on a corner of your notepad before the meeting starts. Make sure to glance at the note before and during your next meeting - the message will remind you of your strengths and help you feel confident to keep IP from flaring up.

*(Having a hard time coming up with an affirmation? Here's a list from the HuffPost.)*

## PARTING THOUGHTS

I know that IP can be challenging and oh-so-frustrating, but I also know you can overcome it with deliberate and intentional practice.

The fact that you read this article speaks volumes about your determination and I have complete belief that you can banish IP and feel confident showing up assertively when all eyes are on you.

If you're ready to go even further in banishing imposter syndrome, head on over to <https://themintambition.com/cleanse> to take my FREE 5 Day Impostor Syndrome Cleanse. .

For more information and further reading on Leadership, visit our online library.



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Liz St. Jean is a Career and Leadership Coach at the Mint Ambition, an online space devoted to helping women rise in the workplace. She works with professional women with their personal & professional growth, helping guide them on a self-discovery journey. Liz also runs an online Facebook community for like-minded women to connect over monthly Book discussions, virtual Saturday morning brunches and fun comment threads where we answer questions like “What “world” did you fall in love with from reading books as a child?” Liz started her business while she was 3 months pregnant with her first child, so she's intimately familiar with balancing work and family life and believes passionately that women CAN have it all.