

On getting over imposter syndrome



Writer Emma Warren discusses the ways in which imposter syndrome affected her work and self-image, and explores how people can let go of their own self-doubt and reclaim their power as creators.

March 11, 2020 -

As told to Emma Warren, 2554 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Art](#), [Creative anxiety](#), [Anxiety](#), [Mental health](#), [Identity](#).

Why We Need To Drop The Imposter Syndrome, Now

There's no time left for being polite or self-effacing. If you feel the call to make or reflect culture, you need to answer it. I'll explain why later. For now, just trust me. I'm talking about getting over "Imposter Syndrome," and I'm using that phrase as an umbrella term to capture all the self-doubt and anxiety that stops people from doing the work. It's the feeling that makes many of us feel like we're not truly capable, and that any minute you'll be called out—even though that's totally not the case.

Any creative work will inevitably involve revealing something of your true self and this is always difficult. To quote British author and thinker [André Anderson](#): "If it's not heartwork it's not artwork." But too much questioning, too much doubt, too much fear of being found out is at best a form of paralysis and at worst, a kind of hell. It doesn't help us, and it doesn't help a world that needs us to be creating more, not less.

I was recently in Berlin, standing in front of a room full of people who'd kindly come along to the workshop I was running. The subject was "Document Your Culture" and it was part of an ongoing mission I'm on to demystify how we tell our cultural stories, and to get more people doing the work of sharing and archiving creative culture from the inside. This is important, not least so that the story-tellers of the future have something accurate to go on. It's also fertile ground for feeling like an imposter, especially when you've taken it upon yourself to do the work, and haven't been given permission to do so.

I've been documenting music culture for decades and recently wrote [a book about an influential under-the-radar venue called Total Refreshment Centre](#). I used to call myself a music journalist and then eventually I moved on to simply calling myself a "writer." Now I can legitimately call myself an author. It's still hard to say, though, and I know I sometimes pull a face when I do. My friend described me as a "reformed music journalist turned social instigator" and this rang true even if the flattery makes me cringe a bit. But if I'm writing here about dropping the sometimes humblebrag of impostery then this is the place to do it, right? I've begun smiling purposefully when I say it.

"I published a book," I say. "I can call myself an author." It wasn't easy to start saying it, but I decided to stop evading reality and it felt good. I can report that it gets easier the more I say it, and that being

positive about my own work remains a work in progress. Saying it gives me a place from which I can continue to grow and evolve as a writer. So I'll keep saying it.

Musician Kelela made a similar point recently when talking about pop-mogul Rihanna. "Belief in yourself," she said, "instills belief in other people." This is essentially saying that your ability to get over Imposter Syndrome and to radiate your skill has a knock-on effect, creating a feedback loop of positivity.

"How many of you are actively engaged in telling cultural stories?" I asked the room in Berlin, requesting that the writers, photographers, videographers, and sound recordists raise their hands. About half of the people identified themselves as such, albeit nervously. It didn't take telepathy to recognize that many people weren't sure if their work counted. The facial expressions said it all: *Ummm, maybe?*

"Thank you," I said, scanning the room for the people who kept both hands on their phones or in their laps. "Now, the rest of you. Are you writing, even if it's not being published anywhere fancy? Are you filming events on your phone? Are you recording the culture you're involved with in any way at all? If so, raise your hand."

The rest of the hands went up.

I know, it's a cringey trick but I don't care. I knew that everyone there would be involved in the culture and I wanted everyone to own that. After all, this was a workshop on a Saturday afternoon at CTM, an annual festival that celebrates electronic music. Most of the people in the room will have been at Berghain or some Berlin backroom until a few hours before they rolled up to the workshop, so you could be sure that everyone in the room wanted to be there—and probably already had a pretty deep familiarity with electronic music culture and the documentation thereof. They just didn't want to own it.

I wanted everyone in the room to own it. We throw this term around all the time, but what does it really mean to "own" something? To me, it means that you've found a deep familiarity with the lay of the land, the lay of your land, and that you can see what is good. It means that you have some perspective. It means that you can separate out what you're doing well enough without being totally paralyzed by what you might be fucking up. It also means appreciating that fucking up is part of the deal and that the only way to do something wrong is not to do it at all.

To repeat myself: We need to drop the idea of Imposter Syndrome, and we need to drop it now. There's no time left for being polite or self-effacing. If you feel the call to make or reflect culture, you need to answer it, not least because of the rise of nationalism and the way this inevitably exists in opposition to art, self-expression, dissenting voices, and cross-border collaboration. Believing in your own uselessness and your barely concealed Not Being Good Enough is just a product of society pointing the responsibility for structural failings back on us. Nothing to see here!

I'm certainly not the first person to see Imposter Syndrome as a kind of internalized divide and rule. The term emerged as an attempt to understand why successful women struggled with their success, and back in 1978, researchers located the problem within. Dr Pauline R Clance and Dr Suzanne A Imes of the University of Atlanta, Georgia interviewed 150 high-achieving women and described an interior state in which a person doubts their accomplishments and has a persistent fear of being exposed as a fraud.

It's a topic that people keep returning to. Nathalie Olah, the author of *Steal As Much As You Can* explained how the term encourages people to internalize structural unfairness. "The problem really lies," she wrote, "in a society with an entrenched system of bias and discrimination." I won't repeat her work, but you can read it here, whilst The Huffington Post and TED recently ran stories on how Imposter Syndrome hits people of color hardest. So if we know women and people of color are most likely to experience a crippling sense of fraudulence, and if we believe that those who are young, queer, or poor may have a higher risk of experiencing this, too, then perhaps we should flip it. Imposter Syndrome is in fact Excellence Against The Odds Syndrome. And for men who experience it, perhaps it's a sympathetic response to those of us who walk through the world a little differently. Rather than internalizing inequality, let's do what we can to change it. We should be looking outward for who is really being excluded.

In thinking about Imposter Syndrome, I recently messaged three female friends: a painter, a musician, and a festival promoter. They all replied quickly confirming they'd experienced it, and (unprompted) explained how they managed it. The musician said she didn't feel imposter-y about her work; she knew it was good. But she felt awkward and shy about promoting herself and questioned whether or not she deserved coverage. For the artist, it was important not to squash the feeling, recognizing the cultural or social reasons that might surround the feeling. "I still don't see myself as an 'artist' and I feel awkward referring to myself as that in my email address and on social media," she said. "But if I don't believe in myself, who will?" The festival promoter had felt it, cripplingly so when she first started out, and attributed this to lack of money and the ways in which young people often don't value their own experience. Recognizing herself as part of a community helped her accept that she did have plenty to offer. Dropping the fear felt like a strong move, and one she has now embraced.

Sensitive people who are also creators will naturally question themselves. It's partly what makes the work good. Questioning yourself means that you're digging deep, looking for what you believe to be true. This is the first step in creating art of any kind, and it requires revealing something of yourself. For most people, this is scary because we don't know how our true selves will be received, and we're scared because there's often a gap between what's inside and what we present outside. I'm reminded of something Björk said to me in an interview: that artistically she wanted as small a gap as possible between what she felt on the inside and that which she expressed externally.

I'm also reminded of a moment where I was talking to someone wise. I was struggling and wanted them to reassure me about something. They refused. "Why?" I bleated. "Don't be so brutal." She shook her head. "I'm not being brutal. Reassurance doesn't last. If I reassure you it'll wear off and you'll be back for more. You need to be able to reassure yourself."

She's right. Here are some ideas on how you might give yourself enough reassurance to keep going.

Find at least one person to collaborate with.

Alone-ness can amplify the feeling of Imposter Syndrome, so counter it with connectedness. One thing I learned by writing about Total Refreshment Centre was that DIY culture is never singular, it's always plural: Do It Yourself. Someone at the brilliantly citizen-generated Brainchild Festival shouted this out at me when I was doing a Document Your Culture workshop over the summer and I wish I knew who it was, because it's a genius observation. Imposter Syndrome slices us away from our community and makes us feel like it's our responsibility, alone. It's not. It's always collective.

Learn from the bolshy women of punk

The women who came of age in the late 1970s and early 1980s in the UK have a lot to teach us, as do all the bolshy women that followed in Riot Grrl and other similar movements. To me, these women show that it's possible to relocate discomfort, and that discomfort doesn't have to be internalized. It can be moved firmly and powerfully outside, where it belongs. And to me, this is symbolized by the image of a woman purposefully raising her middle finger. Society doesn't want strong women. So why not go strong?

Recognize the value in *not* knowing what you're doing.

No one knows what they're doing, and if they do, they're not evolving (or they are lying).

Don't wait for permission.

There will be musicians or artists who can articulate what you need. I'm part of a community centered around Total Refreshment Centre. So is a musician called Alabaster dePlume. He has a bunch of phrases that he throws out to everyone he meets. I heard him say this recently, on stage: "No one is going to give you permission to do your amazing shit. Not because they don't want you to do your amazing shit, but because they have no idea what your amazing shit is." Don't wait for permission. You'll be waiting forever if you do.

"Look after the music and it will look after you"

I defer here to the musician Angel Bat Dawid. She used the above phrase, which is a phrase she got from Muhal Richard Abrams, a founder of Chicago's heavily influential Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians aka AACM. You can switch "music" for art, food, design, writing, or creativity of any kind. It's a phrase that has permanently changed my attitude towards my work, because it made me realize that my work is in service of the music. And because it's in service of the music, it's fine to shout about it. If you're struggling to own your excellence, or to simply shout about your work, maybe try rethinking it. Who or what is it in service of? How can switching from Imposter Syndrome into its antonym (authority) help what you care about?

We've covered what it is and how people experience it, and how we might drop it, but why is it so important that we try and move beyond crippling self-doubt? Culture is under attack worldwide, whether that's authoritarian governments jailing activists and journalists or the downward pressure that government austerity (see this report on the UK and this on the US) and late-capitalist life puts on people who already experience pressure. We need our collective re-imagining of life even more when the remaining resources are being moved out of reach of most people.

Art created under these kinds of societal pressures is almost always especially valuable, just as precious gems are built under the downward pressure of collapsed rock, sediment, and carbonized forest. The most meaningful scenes and cultural movements are also forged in some way, shape, or form by oppression.

Making creative work, especially creative work that involves bringing people together, is an act of hope and an act of resistance. It's an act of hope because it imagines that there will still be people in the future, and it imagines people who care like we care. It's planting a seed. It's an act of resistance because culture is formed when people get together. The groups we describe as "the authorities" repeatedly view gatherings of people as a potential threat. The authorities present differently in different locations across time and space but they're usually the same thing: a combination of vested financial, governmental, and religious interests, most of whom are in the business of shoring up power and money through the privatization of profit and the socialization of costs. Culture is formed when people get together, and resistance can also be formed here, too.

The Romans understood this, and that's why they banned gatherings of more than 150 people, as Barbara Ehrenreich wrote in her sublime book Dancing In The Streets: A History Of Collective Joy. She notes a letter from one regional governor to a central one, asking permission to recruit volunteer firefighters. Permission was declined. Keeping people safe was less important than making sure people did not, under any circumstances, gather together to do human things like make music, dance, make art, or protect fellow citizens from fire. They needed to keep us apart. Why? There is no greater threat to authoritarianism than groups of like-minded people hungry for change, people who have come to realize their own power and self-worth.

There's no shame in experiencing Imposter Syndrome, but there's real power in overcoming it.

Name

Emma Warren

Vocation

Writer, Broadcaster

□

