

On challenging your imposter syndrome



Writer Alexandra D'Amour discusses finding the root of your inner critic, balancing creativity with parenting, and how it just takes one person to believe in you.

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As told to Sophy Drouin, 2629 words.

Tags: [Writing](#), [Creative anxiety](#), [Family](#), [Identity](#), [Independence](#).

When do you create? Are you a rigid schedule kind of writer or do it when you can?

I have a toddler who is at home with me so it's very challenging to write. I have over the last few months made it more of a priority, so if I feel an idea or a burst of inspiration, I will prioritize that over my child sometimes which I didn't do before. Because she's a toddler now, I can communicate with her and I'm very lucky she's an independent player. I'll make my tea, she's playing in the living room, and I'll just write a couple of paragraphs. But most of the time I write at night or while she naps. When she's sleeping it's like my brain allows me to be creative because my mom brain is off.

Basically, I try to get it in whenever I can and I've really let go of the idea that it needs to happen all the time. I've learned that I can write a piece in twenty minutes if inspiration aligns. Writing in my Notes app helps a lot. I read a few years ago that Amy Poehler wrote a whole book in her Notes app. I always felt like it was a lazy way to be a writer, and it was how fake writers were writing. But when I heard that she wrote her entire book in there, it gave me permission to just write down thoughts when they came. When I'm not feeling inspired, I'll go back through my notes app and that usually brings something back up. If I die my app needs to be burnt right away.

I'm curious about your artistic journey: you had a blog a few years ago, can you tell me what made you start it, and what made you stop?

I started learning more about patriarchy and periods ten years ago. Obviously now—which is so great—most women know we have four phases in our cycle, things like that. But when I started, I would talk to my friends about it and they just thought I had completely lost it. I wanted to create a safe space online that tied my interest in spirituality and a woman's journey, and that was On Our Moon.

This was during the era of Girl Boss, Man Repeller and Refinery 29, and unfortunately at the time I was really stuck in comparing myself, and I also didn't realize how much money you need to pump out content. Those websites were producing seven to ten articles a day and I was competing with that. I wish I had more foresight to not compare myself to those sites and just stay in my own lane, because I think had I really focused on it and not been stuck in that cycle, it wouldn't have been so overwhelming. But then I got pregnant, and the pandemic hit, and I just honestly needed a break. I thought, I just can't be online anymore. I shared everything online, shared so much, and around that time I started questioning like, wait, does everything have to be on the internet? Does every thought and experience I've ever had need to live on the internet?

For a year and a half after [I stopped posting on the blog], I was still getting emails from people from certain stories we did. And so I always felt that there was still something there. So now with Substack, the hope is that it gets to a point where it makes sense to move it back over to a blog.

There is such great courage in pouring your heart into a creative project like that. How did you feel when it got to that point where, for your health, you needed to step away?

I did feel like a failure. I think now I have a much more forgiving approach to it because I realized it was just part of the path. But the biggest thing that's apparent to me when I look back is how I had zero confidence in me as a writer. I always felt like I needed to be an expert, like I needed a degree. So instead of writing a piece myself about all the stuff I know, I would pay another writer, who knew less than me, who I would then have to edit, you know? I just had this huge, crippling imposter syndrome and that is the biggest thing that has changed now: if I think about something and I think I know it, I will write it and I have the confidence now, whereas before it was non-existent, zero.

What would you tell a writer dealing with that imposter syndrome?

My husband is in a completely different line of work, he's in sales and started at a very small startup that has now kind of blown up. I've seen what he has had to put in to be able to get to this space in his career. And about six months ago, we got into this long chat and he said, "You just have to eat shit and grind for a long time, and you just have to put in the work. What no one wants to talk about when it comes to success is that a lot of days is no success and you just gotta keep pushing through that." And there was something in the way he said it, where I just saw how often I would feel the imposter syndrome or lack of confidence and I would just tap out. Close my laptop and just be like alright, this is not for me. I would indulge those feelings constantly. And I think I'm learning to push through [that].

It's like a snowplow, you just have to keep going. Keep going. It's like a practice now that I have where I just talk to myself in this very stern, hard voice. I tell myself to shut up, that [the negativity] is not real, it's all made up in my head because of past trauma and childhood. I ask myself questions like, what if what I'm telling myself is actually not true? What if I'm lying?

If you have imposter syndrome, sit with it and have a conversation with yourself about your belief system. Because then it will help you with the plowing through the snow. It will help you understand, "oh, that thought is coming through me but it's actually not mine. It was a comment my dad made when I was twelve, or my grandmother made about how writers can't make a living, and I've internalized that and taken it with me as if it was mine. Do I want to take a belief that is not mine to my grave?" Well, I don't, I don't want to take that to my grave. I want to leave something behind, something tangible outside of my children. I want my daughter to have a different experience in her female form than pretty much every other woman I know, and that helps me plow through. Truth is, I feel like the world is at a loss if you're not sharing your art. I feel this urgency because the state of the world needs it, we need art now more than ever, so that really helps me shut the [negative voice] up, too.

Would you say motherhood and pregnancy have been part of your creative process?

When I was pregnant with my daughter, I didn't write the entire time. You need...not darkness in a dark way...but you need to shut yourself off to be able to receive, and then put it out. And I don't want to be all, "oh motherhood has made me super creative" because there was a long time when I was not creative at all, especially when she was a baby. Now I am really embracing this creativity that I have, knowing that when my next baby comes, it could all go away, not forever, but it could go away for a while, and I think it's important to be ok with that, too. Mothering is creative, right?

What do you think about the concept of "having it all?" Is it possible, or really necessary, to have it all? Is it asking too much of us?

"Having it all" is the biggest scam of all time. And when you say, "you can't have it all," women think you can't have a career and kids, and that is not what I'm saying. You can have all those things, but the concept itself, to me, is pure pressure. It just means women having to constantly sacrifice themselves at every single turn, in their work, their marriages, with their kids; it's constant sacrifice, constant give, give to your work, give to your children, give to your partner. And the reality is, when are women replenishing? When are women receiving? And so I feel like the "having it all" has nothing to do with the career and the children, it's really just this idea that women constantly have to give and it's never a reciprocal thing.

I believe we would make so much progress if women were able to rest. If women were able to live a life that wasn't trying to mirror the male experience. Because we have a completely different body-their bodies run on a twenty four hour cycle, ours run on twenty eight day cycles. And again, if we talked about this more, we could challenge work structures, so that it would be normal for a woman to take time off during her period, and to not expect to do it all, to do the laundry, cook, or have a really important meeting with her boss on day one of her period, you know?

Could you share your advice to artists who want to have a family but worry about how a more traditional family structure might impact their practice?

I think that is part of the way of thinking that could be challenged, because effectively what we're trying to ask is, hey, if I have a child in my life can I still give the same output? And the answer is no and yes. Like, no, in that your physical, emotional, financial resources are capped. But on the other hand, your creativity changes because you are with someone every day who is very tapped into the world, way more than you. When I go on walks with my daughter, the things she sees blow my mind. She's always helping me be present and that helps me tap into creativity way more than before I had her.

So what I would tell any creative worried about becoming a parent is you really start noticing life's ebbs and flows, and how creativity ebbs and flows, too. There are chapters for everything. And you learn to embrace that, whereas before kids I was always trying to do, do, do even if it was at my own expense.

What do you do when you feel creatively stuck?

I'm trying not to create a story around it. When I would get creatively stuck, I would make this grand story about, "there you go again, it's always something with you!" That was literally my internal dialogue like, "well, I guess we're not going to do that great idea." I was so negative. And so now I'm just allowing myself to be in a creative rut and not focus on it. Go live life, go for a walk, go hug a tree, be with your friends, go be inspired, do something else.

If I'm not writing, I'll go to photography or another medium, and then it will come. But when I create this massive story, then how is light and creativity supposed to come in when I've just put this giant cloud over my head? "You're not worthy, you suck, you're an idiot." Nothing's gonna come through that. And again, who is the cloud? Is it your dad, mom, teacher? When you go back and have that dialogue, who the cloud is becomes very clear, and it turns out it's not actually you.

Can you share the worst piece of advice and the one that's helped you most?

I've received so much bad advice so it's kind of hard to sift through. You have to be mindful of who you take advice from and I don't think we're critical enough about it. Like, I don't think Brad Pitt's [advice in a random interview] is going to help me, really.

I actually don't think we know how to ask for advice, and then we talk to our peers and they help but they are stuck under the same cloud most of the time - not cloud but weather system - and sometimes you have to look for inspiration to people who are a little farther along on the path. When I'm stuck in a negative cycle, I try to seek wisdom from my mentors, which is unfortunately more difficult in a patriarchy that has discouraged intergenerational connections amongst women and the looking to older women for advice.

What is the one thing that carried you through moments when you almost gave up?

Not to pull a Lady Gaga in *A Star is Born*, but there can be a hundred people in a room and you just need one person to believe in you [laughs]. And that, for me, has been my husband. Sometimes I look back on things I've written and I judge his judgment, because I'm like, how could you look me in the eye and say this was good? How could you do that? So I asked him that after I got published in the *New York Times*. He was like, "I just saw the vision of you and I held the highest vision of you and your creativity." I feel like it's not about being good, as though every piece needs to be a ten out of ten, but it's about having someone be a witness to your creativity and believing in it. The reality of it is, you're going to get stuck sometimes, and it's very helpful if you have one person in your life who can help you out.

The biggest compliment to me is if someone messages me and says this made it in the group chat. I never want to come across as like, "I have the answer." I want to spark dialogue more than anything else, because the answer is the conversation, it's us starting to think differently.

Also, if you want to be a writer, surround yourself with other writers. [My writing group] has been so monumental in my life. I was never with writers, ever, so it always felt like this very isolated experience. The gift we have given to each other is we are witness to our own creativity, but also to our own madness. We call each other out and, in a constructive way, check each other on our negative belief systems. There is something really powerful about surrounding yourself with whatever you want to be. And also, accept that this could take decades. I feel so proud seeing my name in print, but what brings tears to my eyes is that I really stuck with it.

Alexandra D'Amour recommends:

My bible: *Women Who Run With Wolves* by Clarissa Pinkola Estés

Compression socks, a must in the third trimester

Butter (when in doubt, add more)

My eternal compass, the moon

My daughter's cheeks filled with endless joy and butter

Name

Alexandra D'Amour

Vocation

writer

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