

COUNSELLING & CLINICAL SERVICES

## Overcoming Impostor Syndrome

When you are accomplished,  
successful, and feel like a fraud!

Presenter: Becky Ponting, M.Ed.  
Registered Psychologist



Workshop co-created by Richard Dietrich, R.Psych., Suman Varghese, R. Psych, & Becky Ponting, R.Psych.

## Land Acknowledgment

*As a commitment to Truth & Reconciliation, I gratefully acknowledge that I am located on Treaty 6 territory, which has sacred and eternal connections to the First Nations and Métis people.*

*I recognize and honour the Elders and Knowledge Keepers of the past and present, who carry the living traditions of their peoples forward through the ages.*

*I commit to the continual and ongoing work towards fostering true Reconciliation.*

## Agenda

Speaker introduction & statement of intent

What is impostor syndrome?

Elements and features

Self-assessment (Clance IP Scale)

How to address impostor syndrome

Discussion and questions

## Speaker Introduction: Becky Ponting

*I have practiced as a registered psychologist in Alberta for the past 17 years.*

*I previously worked at the Edmonton HIV Program, Edmonton's Operational Stress Injury Program, Red Deer College, and MacEwan University.*

*I now work at the University of Alberta in the office of Counselling & Clinical Services. I provide individual and group psychotherapy to postsecondary students.*

## About Becky

*I completed my undergraduate studies at the University of Calgary.*

*My honours research examined affective attunement and its effect on levels of satisfaction in romantic relationships.*

*My graduate research at the University of Alberta involved a content analysis of popular magazine articles on eating disorders.*

*That led to my interest working with those suffering from disordered eating.*

## About Becky

*My current areas of specialization include the treatment of posttraumatic stress disorder, obsessive compulsive disorder, and insomnia.*

*I am particular known for creating strong therapeutic relationships with my clients, and also for my fearless and creative methods when using exposure therapy for the treatment of specific phobias, OCD and PTSD.*

## About Becky

*Outside of work, I enjoy reading, watching movies, going to theatre and spending time with my family.*



## History of Workshop

The original *Overcoming Impostor Syndrome* workshop was created by University of Alberta psychologist Richard Dietrich, in 2015, after he noticed a need to address the issue in a postsecondary counselling setting

## History of Workshop

It is a psychoeducational workshop which has been delivered to diverse groups, such as medical residents, new faculty, and various undergraduate and graduate student groups at the University of Alberta.

## History of Workshop

I have been delivering this workshop since 2017. It has been updated and adapted by myself and further augmented and enhanced through the work of my colleague, Suman Varghese, R. Psych.

Although some research will be briefly referenced, the workshop's intent is to assist those who may be personally impacted by the phenomenon of impostor syndrome. I have not conducted any original research on the subject, and I approach this material as a practitioner and a clinician.

## Why are we here today?

Understand what characterizes impostor syndrome

Learn how to address it

## What is Impostor Syndrome?

Impostor syndrome is characterized by thoughts and feelings of inadequacy, incompetence, and fraudulence, even when there is clear evidence of one's abilities and accomplishments



## In essence...

Impostor syndrome is a mismatch between your actual abilities and accomplishments (high) and the way you view yourself (as inadequate).

Those with impostor syndrome may or may not have insight around the distorted way they are viewing themselves and their achievements.

## “They’re going to find out I don’t belong here...”

Feeling they “faked it” to get where they are

Fear of being a phony; may try to keep a low profile

Constant self-doubt

Inability to take credit for their accomplishments

Believe they will eventually be “found out” and exposed as a fraud or failure

Seeing everyone else as more accomplished or somehow “better”

Worry their awards or credentials could be taken away

## An Experience, Not an Illness

Impostor Syndrome is ***not*** a diagnosable condition or a mental health disorder.

It is a phenomenon that most people will experience on occasion.

However, some people are more affected than others.

## What does Impostor Syndrome sound like?



Dylan's Story



Suman's Story





## Grad School Confidential Podcast



A documentary style podcast dedicated to breaking the silence around the challenges of grad student life.



# Is it possible that impostor syndrome is more common than we realize?



*“It is estimated that at least 70% of the population will experience an episode of the impostor phenomenon at least once in their lives.”*

*Gravois, J. (2007). You're not fooling anyone. The Chronicle of Higher Education, 54(11), A1*

## Why is Impostor Syndrome a problem?

Can negatively influence sense of self, mood and relationships with others

Increases risk for workaholism and (paradoxically) underachievement.

May not pursue opportunities (e.g., awards, jobs), due to feeling hopeless about the prospect of success

Or, aggressive striving for achievement and a competitive attitude which alienates peers and creates interpersonal conflicts.

## Elements/features of impostor syndrome

Attributing  
accomplishments  
to external  
factors

- “I was just lucky / it was a fluke / it was by chance”
- Minimizing the difficulty of the task: “It wasn’t that hard”
- Suggesting the people evaluating “must have been in a good mood” or otherwise downplaying awards or honours
- Attributing success to either luck or great effort, rather than their own ability and competence

Not internalizing  
successes

- Forgetting accomplishments and successes while obsessing over small mistakes
- Fearful that past successes cannot be replicated

Minimizing  
accomplishments

- Focusing on “failures,” weaknesses, or areas not yet developed
- Theme of focusing almost exclusively on the negative

## This is not impostor syndrome:

Actual cheating  
or committing  
fraud and  
feeling guilty  
about it (or  
worrying about  
getting caught)

An objectively  
poor  
performance  
due to clear  
inability

Sense of  
entitlement,  
where someone  
believes they  
deserve to  
achieve success  
despite a  
noticeable lack  
of effort

## What contributes to impostor syndrome?



## What contributes to impostor syndrome?

Original research (Clance & Imes, 1978) suggested that high-achieving women were the only ones affected.

Later studies indicated that this phenomenon cuts across genders.

Those who are different from their peers may be more vulnerable (e.g., when ethnicity, gender, age, socioeconomic status, academic background, etc. differs from what is “typical.”)



# Famous People with Impostor Syndrome

## **Meryl Streep**

*Oscar winning actress*

*“You think, ‘why would anyone want to see me again in a movie? And I don’t know how to act anyway, so why am I doing this?’”*



## Maya Angelou

*Pulitzer Prize winning writer*

*"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.'"*



## Neil Armstrong

*Astronaut | Aeronautical Engineer  
First man on the moon*

*"I look at all these people and I think, what the heck am I doing here? They've made amazing things. I just went where I was sent."*



Do YOU have  
impostor syndrome?

No single factor conclusively  
demonstrates impostor syndrome

Multiple  
impostor  
features



Objective  
evidence  
you are  
doing well

Impostor  
syndrome

## Self Assessment Tool – Clance IP Scale

Impostor Syndrome can be assessed with the Clance Impostor Phenomenon Scale (1985)

This test was developed to help individuals determine if they have IP characteristics and, if so, to what extent they are suffering.

20 item scale which takes 5 to 7 minutes to complete & score

Tally to obtain a total score

*If you are interested, please take a few minutes and complete the self-assessment scale.*

Clance IP Scale  
Self-Assessment Tool



<https://paulinroseclance.com/pdf/IPTestandscoreing.pdf>

## Scoring the IP Scale

40 or below: the respondent has few impostor characteristics

41 - 60: the respondent has moderate impostor experiences

61 - 80: the respondent frequently feels like an impostor

80+: the respondent often has intense impostor experiences

The higher the score, the more frequently and seriously the Impostor Phenomenon interferes in a person's life.

## Launch Poll

How did your score turn out? (Anonymous poll, only aggregate data will be shared.)

## Personal Reflection

Take a moment to reflect on some of your personal experiences with impostor syndrome

(i.e., times when you felt that you really didn't belong, despite your achievements).

**Note:** Impostor syndrome is common in graduate school & academia, but can also arise in other contexts, often when taking on a new role.

For example, becoming a parent, trying a new sport, starting a new job, or beginning retirement.

## When have **you** felt like an impostor?

In breakout rooms of 4-5 participants, take turns sharing a personal experience with the others (to your comfort level).



## Interactive Exercise Guidelines

If you know too many people in your group, feel free to leave the breakout room, rejoin the main meeting and you will be re-assigned to a different group.

Please keep other participants' disclosures confidential.

This is a voluntary part of the workshop, but one that previous participants found quite valuable.

If you prefer not to share your experience, or just wish to listen to others, that is fine! 😊

## Group Reflection

What was it like to discuss the impostor syndrome with other people?

Anyone willing to share their own personal experience with impostor syndrome?

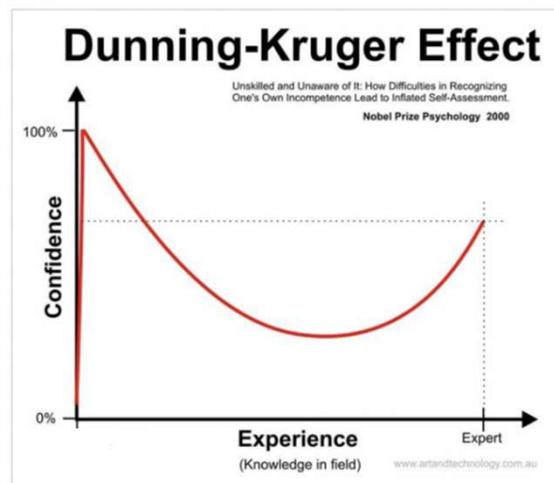
Did anything surprise you?

*“The whole problem with the world is that fools and fanatics are always so certain of themselves, and wiser people are so full of doubts.”*

**Bertrand Russell**

Philosopher, Historian, Nobel Laureate

The **least** competent people are the **most** confident



## Dunning-Kruger Effect

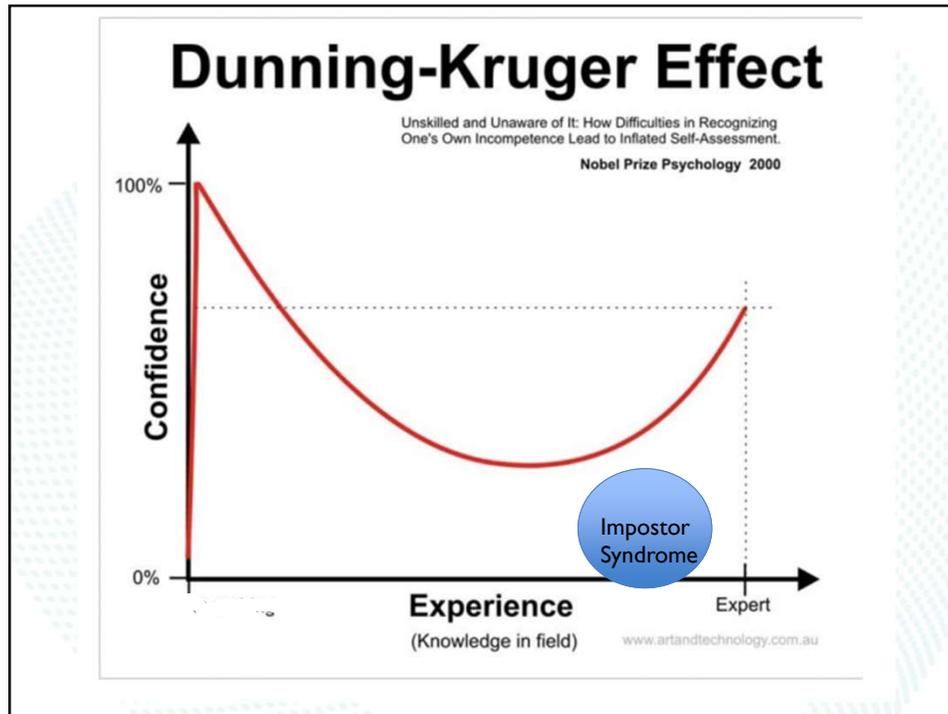
### Four Studies

Participants who scored in the bottom quartile on tests of their sense of humor, knowledge of grammar, and logical reasoning, overestimated their test performance and their abilities

Test scores placed them in the 12th percentile, but the participants estimated they ranked in the 62nd percentile.

## Dunning-Kruger Effect

Competent students tended to underestimate their own competence, because they erroneously presumed that tasks easy for them to perform were also easy for other people.



## Key Question

*If someone feels they don't belong in a program of study or workplace, is it **always** due to impostor syndrome?*

## A consideration...

*“Stop Telling Women They Have Impostor Syndrome”*

Tulshyan & Burey  
(2021)



Some individuals who feel they do not belong may be encountering systemic barriers, such as racism, classism, sexism & inequality.

## Moving Towards Change

*“Leaders must create a culture for women and people of color that addresses systemic bias and racism. Only by doing so can we reduce the experiences that culminate in so-called impostor syndrome among employees from marginalized communities — or at the very least, help those employees channel healthy self-doubt into positive motivation, which is best fostered within a supportive work culture.”*

Tulshyan & Burey (2021)

## Remember...

If an individual is being excluded or experiencing discrimination, we need to identify it, acknowledge it, and work to change it, rather than labelling the person as having impostor syndrome and viewing “the system” as irrelevant.

What can I do about impostor syndrome?

## Addressing Impostor Syndrome

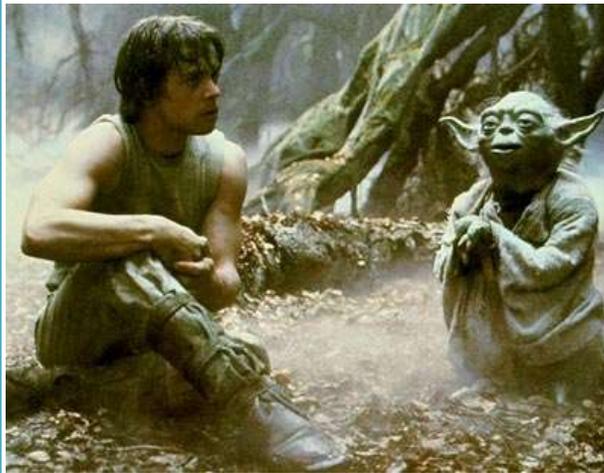
### Try

- Talking to others about your thoughts and feelings related to impostor syndrome – you're not alone!

### Avoid

- Minimizing your accomplishments or experiences
- Failing to recognize your expertise on a topic
- Denying the significance of an achievement, or discounting it for some reason (e.g. "yeah, but...")

Pass on your knowledge to others – it helps you realize how much you know



List your accomplishments and “own” them. You didn’t get to where you are by luck.

Keep a record of the positive feedback you receive.

- Ask yourself if you are you truly accepting this feedback?
- If you ignore positive comments you receive, ask yourself why? How does that affect you?
- How would it feel to truly believe a positive comment from someone you respect?



## Avoid comparing yourself to others

Each person has their own life to lead. It is not a race to the finish line.

Everyone is struggling in their own way (everyone has flaws and weaknesses).

Your comparison may be biased, subjective, and unhelpful. You likely don't have all the information about someone else's situation.

If comparison serves a useful purpose, get more information for comparison .

Compare yourself against the typical, not the exceptional.



## A word about comparison...

"If you compare yourself to others, you may become vain and bitter; for always there will be greater and lesser persons than yourself."

Maxx Ehrmann

**Paradoxical exercise:**  
Write out a list of all people you would have had to have tricked or fooled to get where you are (e.g., past employers, supervisors, classmates, friends, admissions committees, loved ones).

If you told them how you have conned them, how do you imagine they would respond?

Would they be in agreement with your assessment of yourself?



## Let go of perfectionism

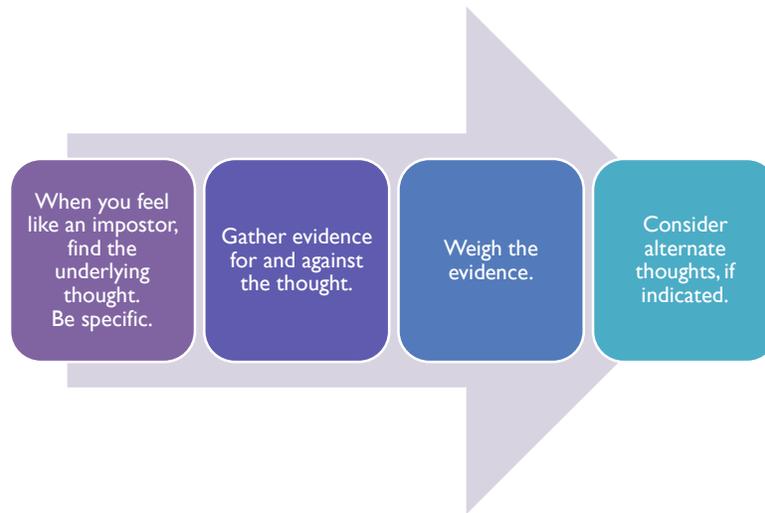
Perfectionism is associated with procrastination. Harsh self-criticism makes it very difficult to get started on a task.

You don't need to be perfect to be considered good at what you do. True perfection is an impossible standard.

Perfectionism leads many people to be fearful of taking risks. If you are afraid to fail while learning a new task, you may limit your own level of achievement.

If you are waiting to be perfect before you really belong, you will **never stop waiting.**

## Challenge Automatic Thoughts



## Thought Challenging Example:

Situation: Won an award for Master's research

Automatic thoughts: "I won this through sheer luck. Also, the awards committee was probably in a good mood that day and didn't notice all the errors in my thesis."

## Thought Challenging Example

Automatic thought: *“The awards committee was in a good mood and didn’t notice all my errors.”*

### Evidence For

- My research doesn’t seem very original, in my opinion
- I know I had to do a lot of revisions

### Evidence Against

- I don’t know what the mood was of the committee members
- The committee probably reviewed many submissions before choosing mine
- Those submissions also might have had errors

## More adaptive/balanced thoughts

Although I don’t know what the mood of the awards committee was, I do know that an attempt was probably made to evaluate the submissions in a systematic and fair way

Luck may have played a role in winning the award, but it was not completely random – my work has at least some amount of value which is being recognized

I don’t think that I deserved the award, but maybe the committee has seen something that I couldn’t see, since they are more objective than I am

Check your self-perceptions with a trusted source.

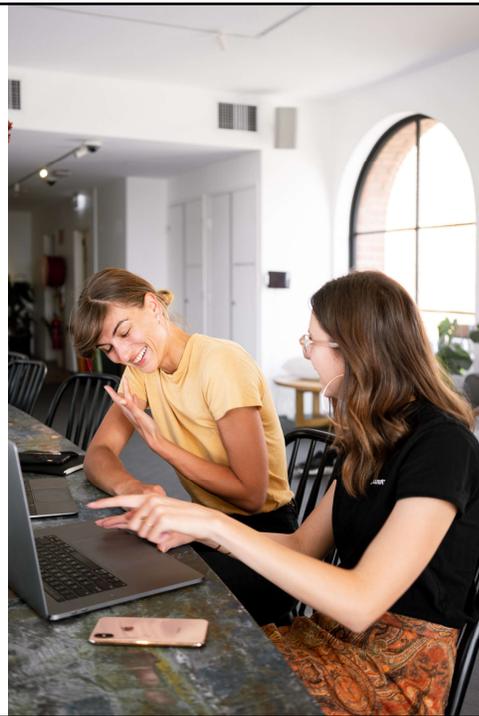


Worried you're falling short or not meeting expectations? Try asking directly instead of making assumptions



Practice accepting compliments. Avoid pointing out your shortcomings after a compliment and just say "thanks!"

Ask questions – get clarity and reduce uncertainty to increase confidence.  
Don't be afraid to seek out more information!





Take critical feedback in stride...

BUT HOW?!?

## When you receive criticism, reflect on the following questions

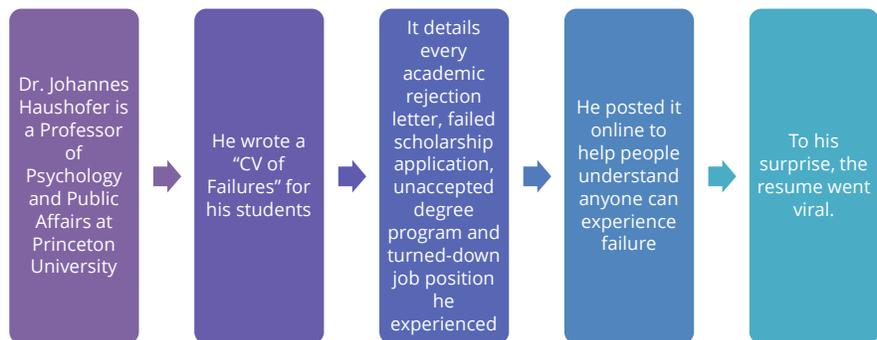
Is the criticism about a small part of the project and not taking into account the whole picture?

Were there also positive comments?  
Remember the good things at least as much as you focus on the criticism.

Consider the source.  
Is this person well-informed about your work?  
Are they someone you respect?

How can this feedback help you move forward?  
Is there a useful course of action you can identify?

## Still feeling bad? Check out the “CV of Failures”



### Dr. Johannes Haushofer's CV of Failures

This CV is unlikely to be complete – it was written from memory and probably omits a lot of stuff. So if it's shorter than yours, it's likely because you have better memory, or because you're better at trying things than me.

#### Degree programs I did not get into

- 2008 PhD Program in Economics, Stockholm School of Economics
- 2003 Graduate Course in Medicine, Cambridge University  
Graduate Course in Medicine, UCL  
PhD Program in Psychology, Harvard University  
PhD Program in Neuroscience and Psychology, Stanford University
- 1999 BA in International Relations, London School of Economics

#### Academic positions and fellowships I did not get

- 2014 Harvard Kennedy School Assistant Professorship  
UC Berkeley Agricultural and Resource Economics Assistant Professorship  
MIT Brain & Cognitive Sciences Assistant Professorship  
This list is restricted to institutions where I had campus visits; the list of places where I had first-round interviews but wasn't invited for a campus visit, and where I wasn't invited to interview in the first place, is much longer and I will write it up when I get a chance. The list also shrouds the fact that I didn't apply to most of the top economics departments (Harvard, MIT, Yale, Stanford, Princeton, Chicago, Berkeley, LSE) because one of my advisors felt they could not write a strong letter for them.

#### Awards and scholarships I did not get

- 2011 Swiss Network for International Studies PhD Award
- 2010 Society of Fellows, Harvard University  
Society in Science Scholarship  
University of Zurich Research Scholarship

## Dr. Johannes Haushofer's CV of Failures

### Paper rejections from academic journals

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2016 QJE, Experimental Economics  
 2015 AER x 2  
 2013 PNAS, Experimental Economics, Science, Neuron  
 2009 AER  
 2008 Science, Neuron, Nature Neuroscience, Journal of Neuroscience, Journal of Vision

### Research funding I did not get

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2016 MQ Mental Health Research Grant  
 2015 Russell Sage Research Grant (two separate ones)  
 2013 National Science Foundation Research Grant  
 2010 University of Zurich Research Grant  
 Swiss National Science Foundation Research Grant  
 2009 Financial Innovation Grant  
 International Labor Organization Research Grant  
 3ie Research Grant

### Meta-Failures

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2016 This darn CV of Failures has received way more attention than my entire body of academic work



**TRY.  
FAIL.  
LEARN.  
REPEAT.**

What can we  
learn from this?



Even very  
successful people  
have failed many  
times – most of  
them just don't  
mention it!

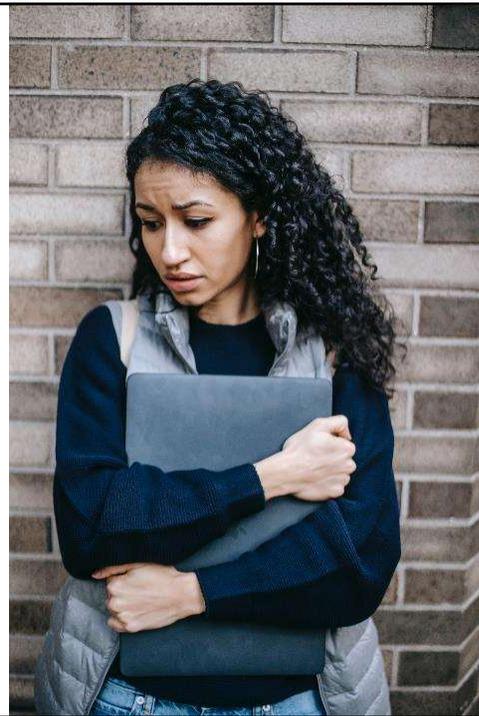
Be willing to ask for help.  
Great accomplishments  
come from people  
working together.



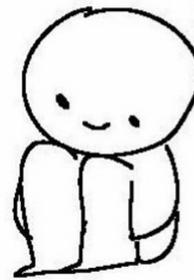
*E.g. One person could not  
have created and launched  
the Mars Rover on their  
own!*



Challenge emotional  
reasoning.  
Just because you *feel* a  
certain way doesn't  
mean that is a fact (e.g.,  
feeling stupid doesn't  
mean that you are  
unintelligent; feeling  
afraid doesn't mean  
there is really danger;  
feeling inadequate is  
not proof that you *are*  
inadequate).



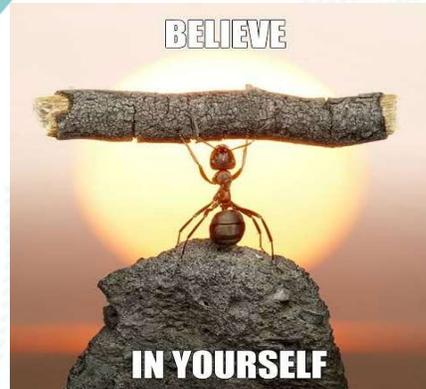
Be willing to  
laugh at yourself  
to help maintain  
perspective.



i know im a disaster  
but i swear im doing  
my best



**QUESTIONS?**  
Thank You!



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