

THE ROLE OF IMPOSTER SYNDROME IN THE GENDER PAY GAP AND IT'S NOT WOMEN'S FAULT

Gender Pay Gap: Why What We're Doing Isn't Working

The UK's gender pay gap has widened in 2024, despite organisations' efforts to close it, according to the Fawcett Society's annual report.

New research reveals three hidden drivers blocking progress on pay equality and female talent retention.

This white paper offers practical solutions for HR and business leaders to achieve measurable results in 2025.



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About The Author

Clare Josa, Research Director for Soultuitive® Leadership, is a global authority on Imposter Syndrome, having specialised in researching solutions for it for 20+ years.

A former engineer and Head of Market Research for one of the world's most disruptive brands, she has authored two books and led three international studies in this field.

Her work is cited in the media and academic research, and is taught on MBA programs worldwide. This report draws from her 2024 quantitative & qualitative Imposter Syndrome & Burnout research study (5,000 UK respondents).



Executive Summary

Gender equity in pay and leadership roles requires us to proactively remove the barriers that disadvantage women in the workplace.

But progress on diversity initiatives has stalled, and companies are struggling to retain their top female talent. This research study shows that are three factors driving this, which most companies are not addressing.

Three hidden drivers of the Gender Pay Gap:

1

Senior leadership environments often value competition over collaboration. This **alpha-male culture** disproportionately excludes women, who are more likely to avoid leadership opportunities in such settings.

2

Senior roles often require significant **out-of-hours** working, clashing with caregiving duties that predominantly fall on women. Many of them are unable to get promoted from junior roles, because they will then **lose their flexible working arrangements**.

3

Imposter Syndrome's coping strategies disproportionately disadvantage women, as this report will cover in detail.

Most organisations are dealing with the symptoms of the Gender Pay Gap, rather than addressing the causes. And quotas or positive discrimination make it worse.

To close the gender pay gap, organisations must address these hidden drivers. This includes creating genuinely inclusive cultures, at all levels, revisiting flexible working practices, and proactively supporting employees to overcome Imposter Syndrome.

The solutions proposed in this report offer practical, scalable steps to achieve measurable results

Imposter Syndrome is the secret fear of being found out as a fraud or not good enough, despite external-world evidence that you're doing well.

It triggers anxiety, self-sabotage, holding back on ideas, and playing small. It is a causal factor in burnout.

People's Imposter Syndrome coping strategies impact performance, productivity, team dynamics, staff retention, creativity & company profit.

1 in 4 Considering Quitting

1 in 4 of your staff considers quitting due to Imposter Syndrome each week, and it's 1 in 10 each day, with women making up two thirds of them.

55% Not Going For Promotions

55% of women hesitate to pursue promotions they know they deserve, and 22% have declined opportunities they secretly wanted in the past year.

62% Feedback Process Makes It Worse

For the 62% who struggle with Imposter Syndrome daily or regularly, even positive feedback can trigger anxiety, with 44% volunteering public self-criticism in response to praise. Performance review systems are not Imposter Syndrome-informed.



Three Hidden Drivers Of The Gender Pay Gap

Find Out More About This 

In any organisation, there are many factors that will contribute towards the gender pay gap and lack of equity in leadership roles. But Clare Josa's 2019 and 2024 research studies both found three hidden drivers, which aren't being considered by most companies.

Without addressing these, they will continue to struggle to close the gap.

Over the five years between the two research studies, the data shows that the impact of these three hidden drivers has increased.

01. Alpha-Male Culture

Too many organisations have a layer of leadership at which they shift from a collaborative to competitive culture. It is usually widely known in the organisation, but never discussed.

This risks excluding women. It also causes them to leave the organisation, due to this destructive and unsupportive working environment.

02. Extended Working Hours

In the UK, promotion often comes with the expectation of extended working hours, including out-of-hours travel and client entertaining. Since most carer responsibilities still fall to women, this creates pressure to choose between their careers and caregiving.

Imposter Syndrome also contributes towards creating the highly competitive alpha-male culture at the most senior levels. Getting promoted can fire off coping strategies that make over-working inevitable, contributing to extended working hours.



03. Imposter Syndrome

Imposter Syndrome significantly contributes to the gender pay gap and leadership inequities, as many coping strategies disproportionately disadvantage women.

While men and women experience it at similar rates, their responses and the effects differ.

It drives self-sabotage, silences opinions, dulls ideas, discourages visibility or promotion, and prompts people to leave roles they love. It can be triggered by promotions, leading to early resignations, and life changes like returning from maternity leave or perimenopause.

>> [Read More](#)

Imposter Syndrome Is Costing You Your Best Female Talent

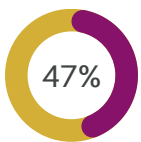


Women's coping mechanisms disadvantage them

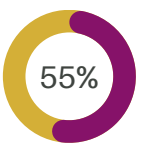
Men and women experience Imposter Syndrome at similar rates (about 62% daily or regularly, a rise of one fifth since pre-pandemic). However, their coping strategies differ significantly.

Men often push through the fear, risking mental health issues, while women tend to hold back and play smaller. These strategies disproportionately disadvantage women, underscoring the need to proactively address Imposter Syndrome, rather than ignoring it.

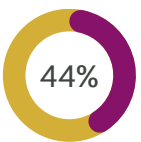
Women's Imposter Syndrome coping strategies mean they're not top-of-mind for promotions



47% of women avoid the spotlight, fearing criticism for mistakes, which means their potential often goes unseen.



55% hesitate to pursue promotions they know they deserve. 22% have turned down opportunities they wanted in the past year.



44% of women undermine positive feedback by adding a "but," publicly criticizing themselves and negating the praise.

They leave, to get promoted

Women are much more likely than men to apply externally for a senior-level promotion, even if they love their employer, out of the Imposter Syndrome-driven fear of public shame if they go for it internally and don't get it.

Life events trigger previously dormant Imposter Syndrome

Major life events, such as returning from maternity leave or going through perimenopause, can cause previously dormant Imposter Syndrome to resurface. This can cause women to quit, to go for a demotion, or to become a consultant, to escape from the stress and anxiety that Imposter Syndrome is causing them

Imposter Syndrome coping strategies mean they're not top-of-mind for promotions

Imposter Syndrome coping strategies hinder women from fulfilling their potential, costing companies valuable ideas. These behaviours also reduce their visibility for promotions and opportunities, which they may ultimately turn down.

[Click To Find Out More](#)



The Invisible Impact Of Men's Imposter Syndrome



Men's Imposter Syndrome impacts the Gender Pay Gap

In an organisation that is top-heavy with male leaders, masculine traits will dominate the culture.

Typically-male Imposter Syndrome coping strategies include pushing on through fear, micro-managing, being critical of others, over-working, and competitiveness, often turning them into toxic managers. This can create a culture that hinders women's performance.

Men's Coping Strategies Hinder Women's Performance

The research study found that when men who experience Imposter Syndrome are promoted into a senior role, they tend to see this as external validation of their abilities, and it generally reduces Imposter Syndrome.

Whereas, for women, they tend to see it as being a 'poster child', under the spotlight, with increased visibility of mistakes and imperfections. So it worsens Imposter Syndrome.

That said, Imposter Syndrome rates are still high for senior male leaders, and they bring with them into their leadership role the Imposter Syndrome coping strategies and habits that they relied on to succeed, previously.

Imposter Syndrome in men can lead to anxiety, chronic stress, relationship breakdown, addictions, and mental health issues.

Judging & criticising

Men were found to be more likely to project their inner anxiety outwards, causing them to publicly judge and criticise others. This contributes to the 29% of research respondents who said they feel judged and criticised, daily, at work.

Less likely to challenge bias

Only 11% of respondents felt fully comfortable in speaking up with their ideas. The data showed that male leaders who experience Imposter Syndrome are less likely to challenge bias against women, and less likely to take action to address the cultural and working environment issues that disadvantage women.

Likely to pick the 'fight' response

The chronic stress caused by Imposter Syndrome fires off the fight-flight-freeze-fawn response. The data showed that men were more likely to subconsciously choose the 'fight' response, whereas women were more likely to subconsciously pick 'fawn' (people-pleasing).

[Read More About This](#)



Mental Load And Burnout



Mental load + Imposter Syndrome = perfect storm

Mental load is about juggling household and caregiving responsibilities, and this predominantly falls on women. It places an overwhelming emotional and cognitive burden on them, causing chronic stress, leaving them with limited energy or time to focus on career growth.

51%

of female employees are 'very concerned' about burning out.

This figure has increased by one fifth, since before the pandemic, and it is caused by chronic stress.

Fuelling The Gender Pay Gap

Imposter Syndrome exacerbates burnout by causing women to question their abilities, and to fear that they're not doing enough. This makes them overcompensate by working harder, often at the expense of their wellbeing.

This leads to chronic stress and anxiety, which further increase the risk of burnout.

As burnout sets in, women are less likely to take on high-profile projects or pursue leadership roles, and may even step back from their careers entirely. The result is a vicious cycle of reduced visibility, stunted career progression, and a widening gender pay gap.



31% are at 'severe' risk of burning out, soon.

Clare Josa's 4 Ps of Imposter Syndrome model shows that the most common coping strategies - Perfectionism, Procrastination, Project Paralysis and People-Pleasing - further drive burnout. And Clare's research shows a there is a causal link between burnout and Imposter Syndrome.

Addressing both mental load and Imposter Syndrome is crucial to combating burnout and closing the gender pay gap.

[Click For More Details](#)



How Else Is Imposter Syndrome Affecting Your Teams?

Imposter Syndrome isn't just playing a role in the Gender Pay Gap. It affects all areas of a business, from performance and productivity, through to people-dynamics and staff retention, and ultimately profits. Here are some impacts, on men and women, based on data from the 2024 research study:

Missed Opportunities

89%

89% don't feel fully confident speaking up with their ideas, leading to missed opportunities, mistakes, and groupthink.

Lost Potential

78%

78% actively hold back on stretching comfort zones, for fear of criticism if they fail or make mistakes.

Staff Retention Problems

1 in 4

1 in 4 will be considering quitting, due to Imposter Syndrome, this week. It's 1 in 10 today.

Workload Harms Performance

61%

61% say their meeting-load is too high, and Imposter Syndrome leads to over-working & over-thinking, outside of meetings.

The Financial Costs

Rehiring those who quit

Replacing a manager who quits due to Imposter Syndrome costs roughly a year's salary. 1 in 10 will consider quitting today.

£50,000 per person

Lost working hours

Imposter Syndrome's chronic stress and burnout cause significant annual lost hours due to illness and reduced productivity. Even with a low estimate of just 30 minutes lost per day for the 62% affected, the annual cost in lost hours is at least:

£4,020 per person

Calculate your costs

Clare Josa has used her research studies to create an online tool you can use to estimate the daily cost of Imposter Syndrome in your teams.

[Go To The Calculator](#)



Spot The Hidden Warning Signs

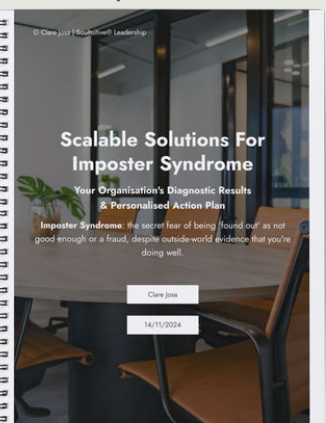
People put so much effort into masking Imposter Syndrome that it can be hard to spot. [This podcast episode guides you through how to spot 5 often-overlooked warning signs.](#)

Diagnostic Report & Action Plan

Clare Josa has used her research studies to create a diagnostic tool you can use to identify the real impact of Imposter Syndrome for your teams.

It gives you actionable insights and tailored next-step suggestions, based on your responses.

[Get Your Report](#)



Why We're Not Making Enough Progress On Imposter Syndrome & The Gender Pay Gap



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We're focusing on wellbeing - easing symptoms - rather than prevention & root causes

And we're asking people without the required specialist training to design and lead these initiatives, including ED&I volunteers and Mental Health First-Aiders.

Imposter Syndrome Is Not A Wellbeing Issue. And Line Managers & Mental Health First-Aiders Shouldn't Be Asked To Fix It.

Organisations often turn to wellbeing initiatives and ED&I sessions to address Imposter Syndrome, but these only provide temporary relief. The root causes are not addressed, and line managers lack the tools or training to properly identify and assist those in need.

Instead, they and in-house L&D teams are relying on generic, unproven online advice, passing on coping strategies without addressing the underlying issues.

Many organisations were found to be using untrained Mental Health First Aiders (MHFAs) as de facto counsellors, despite MHFAs only being trained to "catch and pass" in crisis situations, not to provide therapy or preventative support.

This route shows a lack of understanding of the close link between Imposter Syndrome and trauma, risking harming both the employee and the person doing the helping.

Trying to help others, without clearing your own Imposter Syndrome first can cause your own to worsen. And this is work that requires specialist training, in order to be safe and effective.

Leadership programmes ignore Imposter Syndrome

Promotion into a leadership role is a common trigger for previously dormant Imposter Syndrome. Yet few leadership development programmes address this, let alone offer preventative solutions.

This is specialist work

The research study showed that classic coaching and pep talks can make Imposter Syndrome worse, because it's not a mindset-level issue. It's not something you can 'positive-think' your way out of. It needs strategies that work more deeply than traditional coaching.

But with the right strategies and training, you can help someone to set themselves free from it in just a few weeks.

You need scalable solutions

With 62% of your team members struggling with Imposter Syndrome daily or regularly, you need affordable, proven, scalable solutions that give high-impact, low-effort results.

How To Create Breakthroughs, Fast

It's important to start by measuring how Imposter Syndrome and burnout are affecting your team members, and identifying which hidden drivers to address, for the biggest impact.

As part of that research, you can identify those who would most benefit from proactive help, and also those who could be trained to offer it.

At £10,000+ per person for expert coaching with an external coach on this, that's not a scalable solution. So growing your own in-house specialists, who have been certified in methods proven to help clear Imposter Syndrome, is an investment that soon produces measurable returns.



Scalable Solutions

Combining research, in-house specialist Practitioner training, the world's first Imposter Syndrome app, and line manager training gives you a scalable solution that can create breakthroughs in just a few weeks. Here are the key stages to consider.



Measure The Problem

How is this affecting your teams? Identify those who need support, and those who want to be trained to offer it.



In-House Training

Line manager training and Practitioner certification, to fast-track results. All delivered online, with expert tutors.



Imposter Syndrome Hacks™ App

Teaches your team members how to crank up their confidence & shrink their stress levels in 5 minutes a day.



Address The Hidden Drivers

Use the research study data to identify which root causes to address, for maximum impact, and get buy-in from teams.

All of this is supported by Clare Josa's team, working with a core group from your organisation. A typical implementation timeline is on the next page.

And far from being expensive, you can implement a scalable solution like this for a team of 250 for less than the cost of replacing a single person who quits due to Imposter Syndrome. 20 of them will consider that today.

Scalable Solutions: Typical Timeline

How soon can you expect to see results?

Once the project starts, you will see results quickly. Clare's team can help you with building enthusiasm, and you can even kick things off with an inspirational keynote from Clare. Here's how a typical project would run.

4 weeks from project start

This work starts with a small research study to identify hidden drivers, who needs help, and who could train to offer that. This typically takes the first 4 weeks.

At the 6-week point

The research will have identified those who most need the Imposter Syndrome Hacks™ app and those who will get the Practitioner training, as well as those who want line manager training.

After 8 weeks

Your 12-week Practitioner training and the line manager Imposter Syndrome Toolkit™ training start, and app users are already starting to see results. Work has started on addressing the drivers of Imposter Syndrome & burnout.

After 4 months

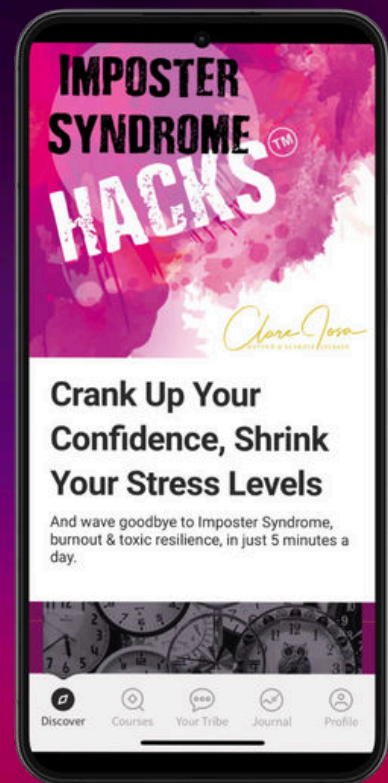
Your Practitioners are heading into case study phase. Line manager training is complete. And your teams are making great progress on the drivers identified by the research.

After 9 months

Your Practitioners have successfully passed certification and are making a huge difference. You're already seeing great progress with app users and the hidden drivers work.

After 12 months

Resurvey those who have been involved in the project, to measure the impact it has had, and identify any next steps.



Getting Started:

01. Take the free assessment

Complete Clare Josa's research-backed diagnostic tool to identify the potential impact of Imposter Syndrome in your organisation. This takes about 10 minutes and gets you a personalised, 30-page report, based on your responses.

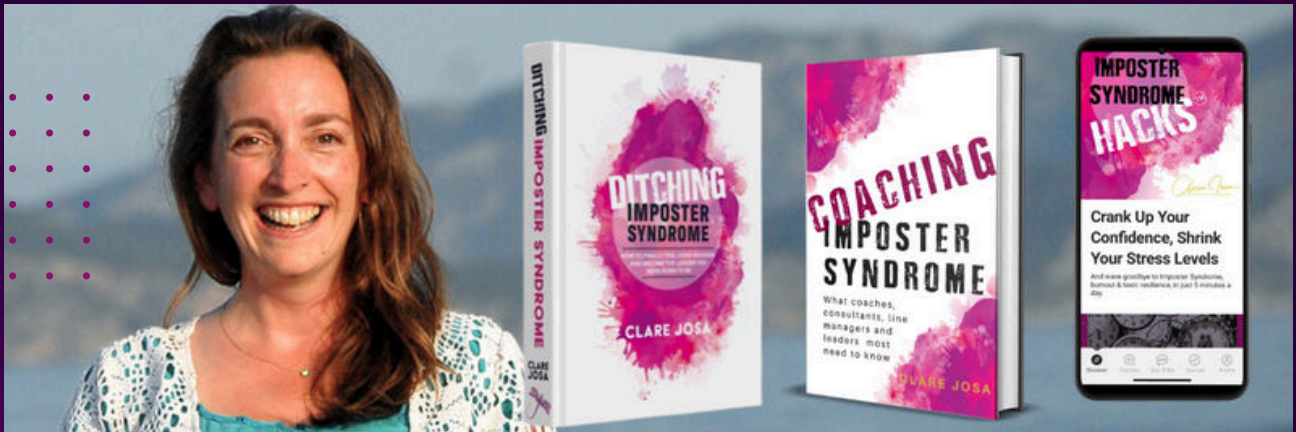
[Take the assessment here.](#)

02. Book a call with Clare Josa

After the assessment, you'll be taken to a page from which you can book a strategy call with Clare, to discuss your results and to tailor a solution to your needs.

Booking this call is no-obligation and it holds your place in Clare's queue for 4 weeks.

Why Work With Clare Josa?

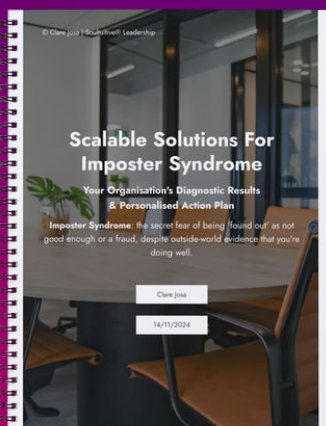


When it comes to Imposter Syndrome, Clare literally wrote the books.

She has specialised in Imposter Syndrome and burnout since 2003 and is considered a global authority on it, having led 3 landmark research studies and published two books, as well as creating the world's first ever app to clear Imposter Syndrome.

Her original career as a Mechanical Engineer, followed by being Head of Market Research for one of the world's most disruptive brands, means her inspirational work is grounded in science and practical common sense.

She doesn't just research Imposter Syndrome: she has pioneered strategies and tools that are proven to support people in setting themselves free from it, once and for all. And she now teaches these internationally in her Imposter Syndrome Practitioner™ and Imposter Syndrome Master Coach™ certification programmes.



How is Imposter Syndrome affecting your organisation?

Clare Josa's research-backed diagnostic tool helps you to identify the real impact of Imposter Syndrome for your teams. It gives you actionable insights and tailored next-step suggestions.



Take the free Imposter Syndrome assessment:
<https://scalable.scoreapp.com/>

Contact Clare Josa:



Contact Clare & her team
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