Impostor Syndrome

Valerie Young presented the newest in “self-help” to hit bookstores to a packed auditorium of overachievers on Wednesday March 5, 2014. It seems that the more a person achieves the more the majority of achievers doubt themselves. The beginning of the workshop was interesting and then the lecture, to me, took a downward turn. Young started “selling” her ideas and pushing her book by playing to a group of stressed students looking to grab onto any idea that might ease the constant whirlwind that makes up the life of someone who is juggling school, teaching, research, family and sometimes a second job.

On one hand it is reassuring to understand, generally, only the smart, well educated, and compassionate suffer from Impostor Syndrome - true frauds and idiots rarely seem to experience it. On the other side, I think pushing a new syndrome on to the marketplace is not fair for a common experience among students and high-achievers, especially women. Although, giving the feeling a name can help some people as a way to explain their feeling and an easy way to group people together and talk a common language.

In many jobs and academia, there is a trend to create a more family-friendly place, to break the glass ceiling, and recognize either gender can be a caregiver and equally share creating a home. Living in a world that regarded women has second-class citizens for long time, and in places in the world that still considers them such, makes for the perfect setup for women to feel the need to prove themselves – repeatedly.

My question is are we feeding into a moneymaking self-help industry by labeling common insecurities a syndrome? Women have been have been trying for a very long time and have suffered trying to be perfect at everything – the perfect graduate student, the perfect mom, with the perfect home. Many men too, are trying to live up to expectations as first graduates or following a successful family member. This behavior is a heavy burden and adds to a feeling of “maybe I am fooling everyone” – now know as “Impostor Syndrome.” The only long term way to control these feelings are to continue to work on lessening gendered conceptions, reinforce self-esteem, and make sure no one feels they are alone in doubting their abilities at times while also not holding anyone up to perceived impossible standards.

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy has been shown to be effective in treating the feeling of “I’m not as good as they think I am.” In the end, though, acknowledging the feelings as genuine and realizing their potential deleterious effects can go a long way to making a difference. For people to respect struggling and have realistic opinions of their own work will go a long way to building positive role models and creating a healthy work and education environment. Much healthier, I think, than coming up with another reason to not relax or take time for yourself; learn to allow for imperfection, and be aware of the person next to you.