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# Harper's BAZAAR INDIA

13<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Issue

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MRUNAL THAKUR   SOBHITA DHULIPALA   TANYA MANIKTALA

# Harpers BAZAAR INDIA

MARCH 2022

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**D**o you ever find yourself questioning your professional merit, despite having proved your capabilities time and again? Or wonder if you even deserve the promotion you've just received? If yes, (and statistics say there is a high chance it'll be a yes), you are hardly alone. Even the most phenomenal women among us have, at some point in their lives, struggled with low self-esteem and feelings of inadequacy.

Experts describe this phenomenon as Imposter Syndrome, first introduced in 1978. The syndrome, essentially, is one's inability to believe that they deserve the success they have achieved, or that their growth truly is because of their hard work and skills. Instead, the focus shifts to the idea that one's achievements are simply due to sheer luck, good timing, or a misplaced confidence of the boss—and that people will soon find out and unmask them for who they 'really' are. "Imposter Syndrome is the experience of feeling like a 'fraud'. And the fear that you'll be caught or exposed is so strong, one tends to be constantly under pressure," Trauma-Informed Somatic Therapy practitioner, Mahima Bhatnagar, tells *Bazaar India*. "This can eventually snowball into more overwhelming emotions, starting with intense guilt, anger, doubt, etc." she adds.

Mahima is the founder of Nandri Healing, a platform for holistic regeneration, and concentrates on



**ANINDITA GHOSE**  
*Journalist and Author*

# HOW TO DEAL WITH IMPOSTER SYNDROME

*Bazaar India speaks with four women on what gets them going in the face of doubt and low self-worth...*

*By Humra Afroz Khan*

## GAGAN JYOT

Senior Vice President, Human Resources, RMSI



issues of mental health and emotional dis-regulation. Many of her clients, she tells us, suffer from Imposter Syndrome. “A woman once told me, ‘Every morning when I wake up, the first thought that comes to my mind is: Did I do something wrong yesterday?’. That is the kind of anxiety the sufferer holds within—of being misaligned.”

In 2020,

professional services’ network KPMG polled 750 “high-performing” women executives, from a range of industries. 75 percent of them reported having faced Imposter Syndrome in their careers. And it’s not just in the corporate world. High-profile women like Charlize Theron, Kate Winslet, Emma Watson, and Michelle Obama have all publicly admitted experiencing it from time to time. “It doesn’t go away, that feeling that you shouldn’t take me that seriously,” Michelle had opened up during a speech in 2018.

“It happened about 12 years ago... I was 25, and the second-youngest student in my class at Columbia University’s Journalism School, when I first felt a sense of Imposter Syndrome. I kept feeling that I had got in because of sheer good luck—that I didn’t actually deserve it,” author Anindita Ghose tells *Bazaar* India. “But I didn’t quite understand that the awkwardness and anxiety was Imposter Syndrome, till I chanced upon the term later.”

Anindita has been a journalist for years, and her debut novel, *The Illuminated*, released to much critical acclaim last year. However, she admits to still dealing with lingering doubts over her accomplishments.

## SEEMA JINDAL

Founder, Nourish Organics

*“It is the experience of feeling like a ‘fraud’. And the fear that you’ll be caught or exposed is so strong, one tends to be constantly under pressure.”*

—Mahima Bhatnagar

“For me, the idea of Imposter Syndrome is: ‘I know I’m good, but do I really deserve this?’. For example, I was recently invited by a literature festival, as the only woman on a panel of ‘the world’s acclaimed novelists’. I mean, sure, I wrote a book that a lot of people seemed to have liked, but I know I’m not a ‘globally acclaimed novelist’ yet. I began wondering if it was just tokenism. But the interesting thing is, a man in my position would have never questioned his inclusion.”

Agrees Gagan Jyot—the Senior Vice President of Human Resources at RMSI, a leading company in geospatial and engineering solutions, globally. In her line of work, Gagan comes across a number of women dealing with different levels of Imposter Syndrome. “Other than self-doubt about a promotion or new role, most women are never satisfied with their work, and feel they could have done better,” she says. “These unrealistic standards include giving themselves a much smaller margin for error than men in similar leadership positions, or setting excessively high goals and then feeling crushed if they don’t succeed. Not reaching out for help only adds to some of these problems.”

Research links Imposter Syndrome with impaired professional performance and burnout, as well as depression, anxiety, and stress. According to Mahima, in some cases it can also affect one’s physical and emotional health, and disrupt inter-/intrapersonal connections.

Here’s what is crucial to remember: even though feeling like an ‘imposter’ may not be entirely avoidable, it is crucial that you don’t let it cripple you or sabotage your growth. One of the most potent ways to do that is through therapy, especially if it feels debilitating or overpowering.

Along with this, there are many other steps that can be



# Bazaar ATWORK

taken to address the internal issue. These include looking inwards, and making some mental and behavioural changes.

Experts have found out that while there are a number of external factors (social biases, gender stereotypes, personal beliefs, trauma, etc.) that can cause this sense of 'phoniness', it is usually one's inner-self that feeds and abets it. "There is a common saying in therapy, 'Everything starts from within'. The seed of Imposter Syndrome is also sown within you. Hence, to get to the root of it, I'd suggest working on your idea of self-worth," Mahima emphasises. "Start with not fearing these negative thoughts. Instead, get curious about them: 'Why do I feel this way?', 'How did it start?', 'What about the situation makes me feel this way?', 'How can I support myself through this?', 'What patterns do I need to re-establish?'. These are some hard-hitting but effective questions that one needs to confront."

Looking up to successful women, and finding representation, can be beneficial as well. Anindita explains, "It's good to have role models. I think of icons like Jhumpa Lahiri, Ottessa Moshfegh, and Monica Ali, and tell myself that everything is alright." Gagan adds, "I take inspiration from global achievers like Indra Nooyi [former Chairperson and CEO of PepsiCo.], who've shared the fears and challenges of their professional journeys. It is a great reminder that, at the end of the day, we are all human and go through similar hiccups. It becomes easier to overcome the mental blocks when you know there are others in similar situations."

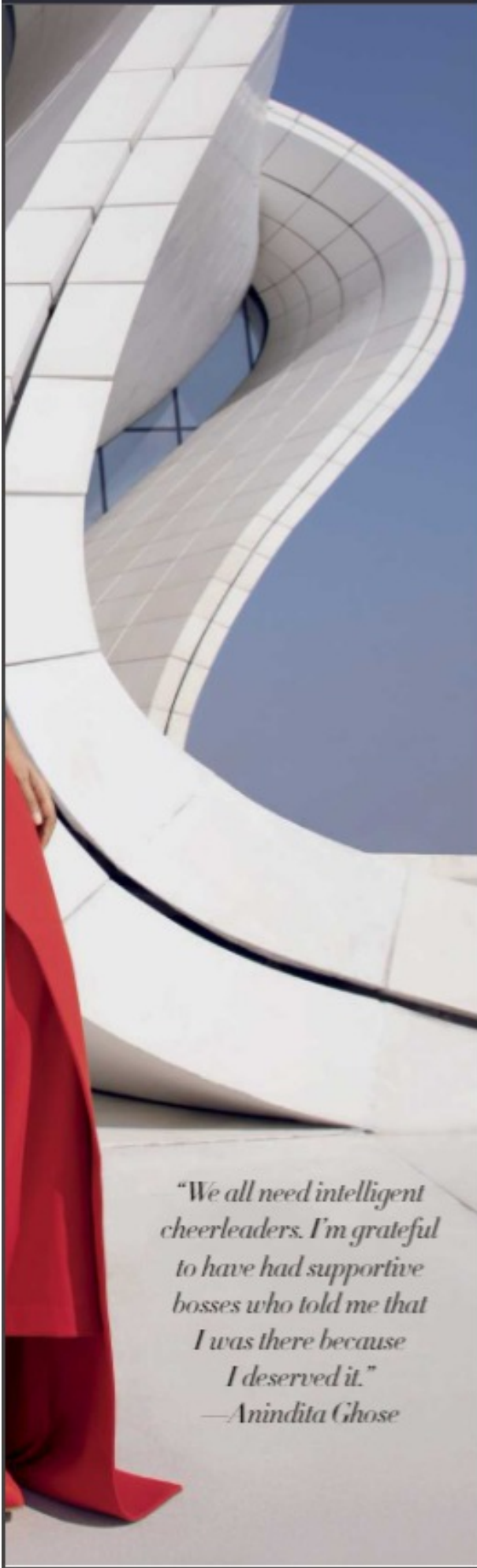
Having supportive friends or colleagues who you can turn to for a reaffirmation of faith works as well. In the KPMG survey, for instance, 72 percent of the women said they relied on a mentor or trusted advisor when uncertain about their abilities. "We all need intelligent cheerleaders," Anindita concurs. "I consider myself to be a confident person, but doubts can creep in when you find yourself in an environment that resents your success. I think women go through this a lot more—there's all this talk of raising successful women, but the truth is that



**MAHIMA  
BHATNAGAR**

*Trauma-Informed Somatic  
Therapy Practitioner*





*“We all need intelligent cheerleaders. I’m grateful to have had supportive bosses who told me that I was there because I deserved it.”*  
—Anindita Ghose

most people resent them. India is both ageist and sexist, so if you’re a young female boss, the resistance you feel is very real. I’m grateful to have had supportive bosses who sat me down and told me that I was there because I deserved it. Reassurance from those you trust can go a long way.”

Secma Jindal Jajodia, founder of Nourish Organics [a well-known one-stop shop for healthy eatables] agrees, and shares advice from her own experiences. The entrepreneur strongly advocates professional coaching, and has a personal life coach who guides her and helps her build a strong self-image. But along with this, Secma highly recommends imbibing an attitude of gratitude to shift your perspective towards a more positive one. “I maintain a Gratitude Diary, where I write three things I am grateful for every day. You can also consider contributing to a bigger cause—like volunteering at a special-needs school or an old-age home. These actions can help you shake off any momentary feelings of weakness and move forward.” And Secma has a point: multiple studies prove that people who are grateful have higher self-esteem and a stronger sense of their own value, because they intentionally see the good around.

Gagan keeps a journal, too—of her key feats. “Those are your ‘Aha’ moments and career milestones. When in doubt, go through them. They’ll help you visualise all the hard work and dedication you’ve poured into your profession, and illustrate why you deserve every bit of your success.” To that journal, you can add situation-specific pointers—Mahima suggests answering questions such as, ‘Why do I deserve to be here?’, or ‘In what ways have I contributed to this current achievement?’. These are good ways to tell yourself you do belong where you are.

Self-image improving exercises can help, too. For instance, focus on what you are good at, rather than on your shortcomings; and look at past achievements to reinstate confidence. “Engage in positive self-talk. Become aware of your internal dialogue, and when you catch yourself entering a self-critical space, call it out. Consciously change the script,” Mahima advises. “You can consider creating a worksheet, too. I often use this with my clients—the worksheet has columns, and you have to, very specifically, write down what incident triggered the syndrome, what was your immediate thought, what could have been a changed-thought, etc. Another way is to use positive affirmations. Tell yourself, ‘I am good enough’, ‘I deserve to be here’, ‘I am of value’...” Mahima also recommends watching Amy Cuddy’s Ted Talk, *Fake It Till You Make It*.

Finally and most importantly, invest in your mental and emotional well-being. For Secma, it is by way of taking a break from social media. “A digital detox resets my state of mind.” Gagan adds, “Try to attend workshops and seminars on mindfulness, the art of living, and stress management; practice meditation and yoga. And most importantly, be happy...don’t be too harsh on yourself, learn to forgive yourself, and keep in mind that no-one is perfect.” ■