



## Imposter Syndrome Can Wreck Your Nonprofit Job Search, before it even starts

Season 3, Episode 4

*\*\*transcripts are for reference only and created with AI, no editing is done*

### Transcript

Speaker 1:

'Cause oftentimes when we have impost and we believe we only can take credit for things that we were a hundred percent responsible for, and that went perfectly. And look, nothing usually does.

Speaker 2:

Welcome to asking for Good a podcast for people who want to make a difference. Hear stories from seasoned nonprofit professionals and volunteers on how to begin or further a career in making the world a better place.

Speaker 3:

Hi, I'm Katie Pser, a career fundraiser dedicated to making not-for-profit sector. Better.

Speaker 4:

We are here with Dr. Lisa Orbe Austin. She's a licensed psychologist and executive coach with a focus on career advancement, leadership development, and job transitions. She is a co-founder and partner of Dynamic Transition Psychological Consulting, a career and executive coaching consultancy where she works mostly with high potential managers and executives. She earned her doctorate and counseling psychology from Columbia University. Her views about career advancement, job transitions, leadership and diversity and inclusion are regularly sought by the media. And she's appeared in several outlets such as the New York Times NBC News, Forbes, the Huff Post Refinery 29, good Morning America Business Insider and insight into diversity. She and her husband, Dr. Richard Orbe Austin have co-authored two books, own Your Greatness, overcome Imposter Syndrome, beat Self-Doubt, and Succeed in Life, as well as Your Unstoppable Greatness. Break free from Imposter syndrome, cultivate your agency and achieve your ultimate career goals. Welcome Dr. Orbe Austin. Thank

Speaker 1:

You so much for having me, Katie.

Speaker 4:

I'm so happy you're here. I have to, I have to put it together for our listeners really quick. And our last episode, Emily Christis was telling us about weak ties and her own personal journey with imposter syndrome. And she said the resource to get is Dr. Orbe Austin's book If you Wanna Overcome Your Imposter Syndrome. And she was actually one of your students. So her weak tie connection put us all together here today,

Speaker 1:

<Laugh>. Yes. Yeah. And you know, you know, I think that's an important thing to remember about how, like even people from your past who you haven't spoken to in years are definitely still a part of your contact circle. So, you know, it was a joy to hear from her and it was lovely. And I would do anything for my students. So it was, it was lovely to kind of be able to connect with her again.

Speaker 4:

Yeah. Awesome. So let's talk about, you know, what is imposter syndrome? People I think use the term often, so I think we should just, what is the actual definition? Yeah.

Speaker 1:

So imposter syndrome is when you are skilled, competent, capable, you know, have credentials, but yet haven't internalized them. And as a result of not internalizing them, you tend to fear that you don't deserve things or you're not sort of entitled to certain experiences. And so as a result of that, you tend to either overwork or self-sabotage when faced with any trigger that causes performance anxiety. And then as a result of that overworking, you tend to get burnt out as a result of that. Tend to have hard times taking in positive feedback can get very hyper-focused on negative feedback. Tend to get into these imposter syndrome cycles around how you deal with a trigger. And that sort of leads then to these constant feelings of imposter when you're raised with something that feels new unfamiliar you don't have mastery over and, you know, leads you to feel very nervous that you're gonna be exposed to a fraud.

Speaker 4:

It's called imposter syndrome, but it's not actually a syndrome. Is that true?

Speaker 1:

It's technically called imposter phenomenon. That's the academic term that we tend to use in the research literature, but it's become popularized in popular presses, imposter syndrome. So the reason why it is phenomenon is because it is, you know, not a diagnosable condition. You can't find it in the DSM or the ICD, so the diagnostic manuals. And it's just really a co it's something that commonly occurs, occurs in about 70% of people who experience it. It's more of a phenomenon than it is a syndrome. But that's how it's been popularized. So we often talk about the syndrome because that's how people recognize it.

Speaker 4:

Right, right. But the, that idea that it's just, if a phenomenon makes me think I can overcome this  
<laugh>

Speaker 1:

Yes. <Laugh>. It's totally overcomeable.

Speaker 4:

Yeah. Yeah. And you said 70% of people are getting it. I have a couple of questions around that. Is it usually women who get it? And then how does it present itself? You kind of talked about it when you defined it, but are there some other ways that it might present itself?

Speaker 1:

Yeah, so there's a popular myth that mostly women experience imposter syndrome and that is not born out in the literature. So the research literature has not shown that women experience it more than men, although you hear that a lot. It's not true. It was initially, I think, kind of begun as a kind of mythology because it was initially in the 19, in late 1970s when the term was coined imposter phenomenon. It was initially studied with women and posited to just occur with women. Because the, the two women who actually coined the term were working largely with women in a counseling center. So they only really saw women experiencing it and only believe, right. But about 10 years later, the research, 10 or so years later, the research starts to happen with men and they start to realize that they experience it too.

Speaker 1:

And they experience it in the same numbers. And so since probably the eighties or nineties so decades, there hasn't been found to be a significant difference in the amount of men or women that experience imposter syndrome. And so in terms of how it can be exhibited, it can be exhibited in a number of ways. You can see it in perfectionistic behavior. So you can only accept an accomplishment or something that you do when it's a hundred percent perfect. And how many accomplishments are a hundred percent perfect, virtually none of them. So then we don't accept the, that we tend to overestimate others and underestimate ourselves. So we're like, wow, look what they can do. And we're like, oh, in comparison I'm so sad or so incapable. But it's often not accurate and not true. We tend to also seek mentorship for solely external validation. Am I doing the right thing? Am I on the right path? As opposed to all the various ways mentors can be helpful to us in terms of like understanding career ladders or exposing us to different people. So we tend to have very specific behaviors that really kind of all set up in a constellation to kind of be imposter syndrome. So it's, it's a variety of things that are going on for us. Not just self-doubt and not just feelings of inadequacy. It,

Speaker 4:

It is not just feelings of self-doubt and inadequacy. And in your book you talk about how there are actually two ways that it kind of cycles.

Speaker 1:

Yeah. And the two cycles are one, you have the perfor, you have get the trigger, you have the performance anxiety and you overwork or over-function to cover this idea that you are a fraud. So you have to work super hard or so much harder than other people in order to prove that you belong there. You then tend to, you know, get feedback. The feedback is, you know, 'cause you tend to be competent. It's usually positive. We ignore the positive feedback 'cause we're not good at taking in, in, in positive feedback about ourselves. And we get caught in the loop all over again. The second cycle is the performance. You get the trigger, the performance anxiety, and then you get into a self-sabotage experience where it's typically long periods of procrastination followed by short intense bursts of overwork. So we typically do get the thing done just in short intense bursts, which often can also lead to burnout.

Speaker 1:

Then we then we tend to get performance feedback that's either positive, we ignore it or it's negative because we took, we took such a short period of tense burst and there's some negative constructive feedback about what we didn't do. And then we hyper-focus on that negative feedback, trying never to make that mistake ever again. And then get caught in the loop all over again. 'cause We haven't

bothered to internalize any positive things that we did in this process. So these are the kind of loops that we tend to get caught in. And, you know, they are pretty common. You, you and people experience usually a little bit of both, like the overwork and the self-sabotage. Some people experience only, only one or the other. That's what

Speaker 4:

I'll pick that. Oh, I'm that one. Oh no, I'm that one <laugh>. Yeah. Like, no, I think I've done both <laugh>. Yeah,

Speaker 1:

Most people have done both. Some people are solely one or the other, but you know, generally it's both.

Speaker 4:

Nice. Well let's talk about why does this even happen? And then we can maybe talk a little bit more about what to do about it in your job search, how it impacts our job search and the interview process. But can you give us one more foundational answer here? You know, why does imposter syndrome happen to people?

Speaker 1:

So I think one of the reasons why it can feel so intractable and so hard to get over is because it, it usually is set up from our early childhood experiences, our family dynamics, our early childhood experiences of being caught in families where conflict was really not dealt with properly. So we often felt like we had to be really kind of people pleasing and, and the good kid in, in environments in which we feel like we've gotten stuck in certain roles. And so, you know, you oftentimes see people who have imposter don't fit one of these three roles. They're either the smart one in the family where things came super easy to so anytime things came a little hard or required a little extra effort, you thought it was proof that you weren't as smart as everyone thought you were the hardworking one.

Speaker 1:

Oftentimes that's when there's already a smart one in the family. So you often get bestowed with a hardworking title or we often see a direct correlation to people who have learning, learning difficulties or learning differences. And they didn't get diagnosed early enough and so they often had to work super hard in order to keep up with their peers. Often for you, you never realize all what your natural strengths are, the things that do come easy to you because everything was posited to have to need hard work in order for you to do it. And the last one is survivor. So this is one where you're probably not labeled a survivor, but you probably weren't labeled, you know, smart or, or hardworking either because there was either neglect or abuse in the home. People weren't paying attention to you in that way. So in essence, your achievements are about escaping that environment and getting to another place. But often for you, any mistake, any issue, any any point of failure feels like you could lose everything and go back into those circumstances. So it feels very fragile. And so childhood experiences are what set up this idea around your success and how you can internalize it or you can't internalize it. And that's why it feels so hard to get over. It doesn't mean that it's impossible to get over. It just means that it's longstanding and well grooved, you know?

Speaker 4:

Right. Yeah. Your neural pathways are set. Yeah. And so to yeah. Recognize that there is another way to frame yes

Speaker 1:

And the brain very plastic and it can be changed <laugh>.

Speaker 4:

Good, good <laugh>. Well let's talk about

Speaker 1:

How, 'cause oftentimes when we have imposter, we believe we only can take credit for things that we were a hundred percent responsible for. And that went perfectly. And look, nothing usually does,

Speaker 4:

Imposter syndrome impacts us during our job search. And even in the interview process,

Speaker 1:

One of the ways that it tends to impact us in, in an interview process is that we tend to be super anxious about our accomplishments. I literally was having this conversation with someone like an hour ago about sort of like misrepresenting, you know, the things that they had done because oftentimes we have impost and we believe we only can take credit for things that we were a hundred percent responsible for. And that went perfectly. And look, nothing usually does. And so especially when you work on teams, you work with other people, you're not gonna be able to take a hundred percent credit for something, but it doesn't mean you can't represent it as having done the thing and represent it confidently is have done having done the thing even if the thing didn't go perfectly. And so I think it's really getting used to really being able to represent accomplishments that are human and flawed, but represent them in a way you're proud of and feel like a and feel like accomplishments.

Speaker 4:

I was once part of a billion dollar fundraising campaign and I had trouble putting that on my resume because I didn't quite know how to say it without, I didn't wanna misrepresent and say that I had raised a billion dollars. But, you know, the important part of it was that I was part of this team that did it. So I was in the environment and had the experience of being a part of that team. And so I really grappled with like, how do I write this without misrepresenting the success?

Speaker 1:

Yeah, exactly. And so I think it's really, you're never gonna be the one probably saying, I led the billion dollar by myself. You're not gonna be that person. I think we fear that we're going to, but I don't think it, it, I just never have seen it done. Typically we're underrepresenting ourselves and underplaying ourselves, which then hurts us because we tend to then not be at our full capacity. We then, we then tend to get roles that are a little bit junior than for what we should be actually doing. Or titles that are junior to us because we're not necessarily fighting for a more senior position. 'cause We're like, I barely deserve this one. And, and we're also not representing ourselves in the full capacity that we exist in. Oftentimes when people work with us, then they're like, whoa, like, you're capable of so much.

Speaker 1:

But we don't do a good job of representing that. So I think that's one of the ways we, we kind of don't do well on the job search or a need to work on those skills. But also too, I think, you know, we tend not to salary negotiate. We tend not to also kind of advocate for ourselves because we're just lucky to be there, lucky to get the offer, and we're afraid they're gonna rescind it or take it away from us, which is largely a lot of our fears. So that, you know, people are gonna find a sound and they're gonna take things away from us. And so it's important to recognize that advocating for yourself and learning to get engaged in these processes are normal and human. And likely no one is gonna take it away. And if they're going to take it away, 'cause they're gonna negotiate, you should be happy they're taking it away.

Speaker 1:

Because this also suggests they don't want you being an equal partner in a lot of what you do. So, you know, it's really a different way of interacting with the job search process that has a lot more authority in it and a lot less like, oh, just thank you for the opportunity. And I think that's the piece we call it, you know, we call it agency a psychologist. We want you to have agency to feel like you can control the process and you can have choices in the process. And I, I'll say one last thing too. We also tend to apply for positions where we have only a hundred percent of the qualifications as opposed to you need about 60%, so you should be applying when you have about 60% of the qualification. Not a hundred percent. Because we're so afraid of not having something and then being shown at the job. Oh my god, you misrepresented yourself and it's just not, it's rarely it's ever going to gonna happen.

Speaker 4:

Interesting. And so one thing that people listening will be doing is transitioning from one sector into the nonprofit sector. And we've talked before about how a toxic work environment may not create imposter syndrome for you, but it it may trigger it or it may kind of keep feeding it. Yeah.

Speaker 1:

Yeah. And I think that's an important thing to, to recognize. And in our second book here, unstoppable Great. Is we really talk a lot about toxic work environments and the things you need to be aware of and looking out for regarding one. 'cause I think oftentimes we're like, oh, I, I didn't know it beforehand, but sometimes there are red flags that are, or orange flags that are being sent up and you have to be paying attention to them. And that's often too, where the performance anxiety can get in the way you're so used to proving yourself that you're not paying attention to the cues in the environment about what they're like, you're worried about how you're coming off. And so I do think it's a really important thing to pay attention to in the job search process about the questions that you'll ask them to, to attempt to kind of get a greater sense of what they're like and what the environment's like. So you don't end up in an environment where you feel not good enough, like you feel like, you know, we don't belong there. This is not something that you want no matter how wonderful the organization purports to be, if that's what you feel like inside, it's going to be terrible.

Speaker 4:

Yeah. I think that's really an important note for people looking at the nonprofit sector because there are so many extraordinary missions and you kind of have to separate the mission from the actual organizational behaviors. Yeah.

Speaker 1:

Yes. Yeah, because I've heard tons of stories of people at amazing, you know, well renowned organizations and the the culture is incredibly toxic and it's covered. And so nobody really knows that's what's happening inside, but you have to go live with that 40 hours a week minimum. So, you know, I think it can be important to really be able to suss that out and you can suss that out not only from like the questions that you ask, but you should also be doing something that also people with a imposter syndrome struggle to do, which is reaching out to other people and talking to people who've worked in these organizations before or who work in them currently, and trying to get a sense of what the real life day to day feels like and is like. We tend to wanna be lone wolves when we're in, when we have imposter syndrome and wanna do things on our own and not wanna bother people.

Speaker 1:

But they're used to being bothered and they tend to not mind because they know eventually they're gonna have to go quote unquote bother somebody. And so really do your due diligence because this is your life, this is your career, this is the decisions that you're making. Have strong repercussions because, you know, I see it all the time as a psychologist. People end up in my office all the time because they're dealing with the trauma of, of dealing with toxic work environments. You know, the rest of their life might be awesome, but the work is making the rest of their life feel terrible.

Speaker 4:

Right, right. And so, yeah. Yeah. And the not asking people about what the work experience is really like is a real miss. Yeah. And the people that are working there now may be great to ask. And I also like your idea of people who just left Mm-Hmm. <Affirmative>. So, you know, they, they're, it's probably fresh on their mind as to, you know, yeah. What was good and what was bad about that

Speaker 1:

Environ Yeah. They may give you more honest experience because they're not currently there. <Laugh>.

Speaker 4:

Right, right. <Laugh>. So especially with, you know, mission driven purpose minded people, do you see a higher sense of loyalty or any kind of characteristics that you would wanna make sure they're kind of aware of, especially if they're feeling imposter syndrome?

Speaker 1:

I think, you know, what we see with imposter syndrome is that people with imposter syndrome have a greater organizational loyalty as a whole. And so they tend to stay at jobs longer than they should because they're often, you know, worried about leaving people in the lurch or what will they do without them? Like, you know, how are they gonna recover? They're very much worried about others and they, they worry about themselves less. And I do think it's really important, like, you know, in this market, in this, in this job market that we work in, you know, going from job to job between two and four years is normal. And so I think it's really important to, you know, if you're in this experience of, of job searching in the moment to learn these skills are lifelong skills. These are not skills just for this moment. These are skills you're gonna need so many different times in your career. And getting comfortable with them as a lifelong learning skill, the things you should be doing consistently is a part of, of having a good, healthy work life. And so even though we don't like search search is a skill that you really do have to take very

seriously and honing and understanding that it is gonna be a part of your regular every two to four year work life, you know?

Speaker 4:

Yeah. Yeah. The, the age of the golden watch is gone and Yes. Gone. You know, we're all, we're all in some part of a job search process almost all the time. And I think that speaks to the idea of, you know, really having a process for your search. Yes. So when you're experiencing imposter syndrome and you're feeling burnt out at your job, I know it's really easy to hop onto LinkedIn and quickly apply to 15 jobs. Yeah.

Speaker 1:

We call, call it rage applying.

Speaker 4:

Rage applying, okay. <Laugh>. So yeah, instead of rage applying, what can we be doing that's a little more productive?

Speaker 1:

Yeah. So instead of rage applying, it's better to maybe take care of the burnout. Right. So really, really kind of deal with some kind of self-care soothing thing so that you can actually be strategic about your job search. It's better to be strategic than 15 cold applications, and it feels so good to be like, I applied to 15 jobs, but if those resumes aren't tailored, if the cover letters aren't tailored, you're not likely to hear from anyone. And so, like, it's just to make yourself feel a little bit better, but you're better off actually doing something that's gonna fill your cup, like some self-care activity, meditation exercise, like doing something that actually is going to fill your cup so that you have the energy to do the more longer term valuable job search stuff like networking, like finding referrals, like, like actually tailoring your resume, doing the things that are harder work, but actually have better success rates than just cold applying and setting a resume everywhere. And so the rage applying does feel good, but it typically doesn't work, you know?

Speaker 4:

Yeah, yeah. Well, I wanna talk quickly about the interview process and automatic negative thoughts and how it's, you know, if, if your imposter syndrome is to over prepare and be perfectionistic, you're probably preparing for interviews. All right. But then what happens after an interview?

Speaker 1:

Yeah. What's kind of funny is I don't often think people do prepare very well because oftentimes they have like performance anxiety and the performance anxiety is so paralyzing, they will think about preparing and beat themselves up about not preparing, but the preparation often is quite fragile <laugh> because it causes so much anxiety to prepare because you're gonna be talking about yourself representing yourself, it feels really anxiety driven. So I do think it's really important, the self-care component, I can't even highlight that enough around the job search process that you really need to be, in some ways managing the performance anxiety, either through meditation, through exercise, through other ways. And I would say especially for people with imposter syndrome, is to use a task management technique. I always encourage like the Pomodoro technique where you kind of like take 25 minutes, you



set a timer and you do one task because the idea is that the anxiety is gonna be so overwhelming, it's gonna be really hard for you to prepare.

Speaker 1:

Just be like, I need to prepare and I'm gonna spend four hours preparing. You're not gonna do it. You're better off sort of taking a 25 minute timer and spending 25 minutes on one task, like working on a resume or, or reaching out to a number of people. And then taking a break and then figuring out when you can do the next 25 minutes. That way it really helps modulate the anxiety because the anxiety can feel like so overwhelming that you just, even if you have a ton of free time in front of you, you can't do anything with it. And so I do think it's so important to use a task management technique and just have a set of lists things on the list you need to do, take one of them off during that time, 25 minutes, and then you're done. Then that one thing is checked off and you've moved on. And so I think it's really important to really think about how the performance anxiety is impacting preparation.

Speaker 4:

Okay. And so we've, we've now properly prepared because we've got enough self-care and we're, we're taking the four hours worth of work into to smaller increments and actually just focusing and doing them well, we go to the interview and then after the interview, are we if we're, if we're experiencing imposter syndrome, will that creep up again? And, you know, how does that impact us during the rest of that job search when we're supposed to be writing a thank you note or reinforcing the messaging that we said in the job interview?

Speaker 1:

Yeah. Oftentimes we're ruminating about the little mistakes we made or the things that we, you know, have said that we're wrong or that we, you know, and once nice about it is in, if something you really wanna reemphasize comes up, you can actually do it in a thank you, but don't go, don't go nuts and like, you know, make it a super long thank you note, but if you wanna kind of like revisit something and, and kind of add something to it, do that. But I think it's really important. Oftentimes the thank you note part is delayed because you feel so terrible about how the interview went, even if it went spectacular, you're focused on things that people probably didn't even notice. So really working on combating those automatic negative thoughts after the interview becomes so important. And I often suggest to my clients that they do some kind of celebratory thing, you know, after the interview and then, you know, as a, you know, a bit of a honoring of the things that they did do and then to then structure some time to like do the thank you notes, like again, Pomodoro in it.

Speaker 1:

And then really working on trying to, to re-channel the automatic negative thoughts and rethink about them in different ways. Like, you know, is it really that you were so terrible or did you just feel really anxious? You know, and we talk about this in book number one on your greatness of real, a real strong methodology about how to deal with automatic negative thoughts. And there's really, really, really common easy ways you can do that, you know, by, by addressing them and kind of really reframing them. So really getting skilled at that practice because for auto, for people with imposter, automatic negative thoughts are like just so common. And I just think that, you know, because they're thinking the thought is true, and oftentimes it's the thought is actually wrong.

Speaker 4:

Awesome. Well, thank you, Dr. Orbe Austin. You've got these great books. You've got an incredible Instagram account and great presence on YouTube. You also do individual coaching. You have an online course people can do. Yeah. So I, I feel like you've got so many fantastic resources that are so accessible. Do you have any other, and we'll share all those resources in our show notes on the website, but do you have any favorite resources that you wanna share with the audience? Yeah

Speaker 1:

I love Valerie, Valerie Young's work on imposter syndrome. She did a book about I think 20 years ago that's still very relevant. The American Psychological Association just came out with a new book that I have a chapter in called imposter Phenomenon with all the research, all the, all the newest research on imposter syndrome, which is fantastic. So there are a lot of really great resources out there nowadays, but what I would say is go for the research backed resources. Do not the stuff on Instagram and other places, <laugh>.

Speaker 4:

Yeah,

Speaker 1:

That's be good. I see it myself. So like, really look, look at the sources that you're getting your information from. 'cause There's a lot of really negative and, and crappy sources out there about imposter syndrome lately that are not helpful. So.

Speaker 4:

Wonderful. Well, thank you so much for your time. You're welcome.

Speaker 1:

You're welcome.

Speaker 3:

Thanks for listening in today. Up next, we have Emily Laia, a career development coach who will teach us how to create the job we want and get it clear up some misconceptions about the nonprofit sector and teach us how to assess an organization before and during the interview process. Until next time, take care.