Chapter 5
Overcoming people-pleasing and perfectionism

When do you do your most creative work? Under what conditions do you work most effectively? I was forced to come up with answers to these questions a few years ago when colleagues started to become curious about how I seemed to consistently achieve so much in so little time. Driven partly by the embarrassment of being unable to mentor these colleagues who were asking me for help, and partly by my own curiosity, I embarked on a project to understand what was going on, which culminated in my last book, The Productive Researcher. What I discovered was a powerful positive feedback loop between my purpose and my motivation, which gave me an unusual level of concentrated focus. Working on average 37 hours per week, in the three years since publishing the book, I published more than 30 peer-reviewed papers (seven as first author), led four projects worth over £2M (and contributed to eight more), and trained over 5000 researchers from more than 200 organisations in 55 counties through my company, Fast Track Impact.

However, as I tried to mentor and train researchers in my approach, I discovered five barriers that consistently prevented people from making progress: people-pleasing, perfectionism, imposter syndrome, fear of failure and disciplinary labels. In the next three chapters, I want to show you how I have helped colleagues tackle each of these issues, empowering them to focus on the things that are most important to them, and enabling them fall in love again with what they do. However, to overcome these myself, I have found professional help to be invaluable, and regularly recommend that colleagues find themselves a coach who is also a trained counsellor, in case any of the barriers they identify have roots that are deeper than they expected.

The art of fitting in

If you've ever tried too hard to fit in with a group of people, you will be familiar with the unique sense of loneliness you feel when you are accepted by a group for a version of yourself that you thought they would like, and have to hide your true self to maintain their acceptance. People-pleasing is part of our evolutionary heritage; as a social species we need the security of being accepted as part of a tribe. Perhaps as a result, belonging to a group where you feel loved and accepted is a basic psychological need. When we have the courage to be ourselves and find people who appreciate us, there is little else that feels so liberating. However, when we think the people around us do not appreciate or approve of us, there is an overwhelming temptation to edit out the parts of ourselves that will drive people away and present an acceptable version of ourselves to the world. Over time, this creates dissonance at such a deep level that it eventually becomes impossible to be happy with the group you spent so long striving to be accepted by.

I have always struggled to fit in with stereotypically masculine men, and so felt particularly intimidated by the prospect of travelling for two months with four such men on a reconnaissance trip to prepare for my PhD research in the Kalahari Desert, Botswana. I visited more pubs in the days it took us to travel through South Africa to our study sites than I'd visited in my whole life until that point, sipping slowly and pretending to enjoy the beers they ordered me. I tried to laugh in the right places but had no idea how to enter into the banter.

When we got to the field, they explained that we would be taking samples along transects in a National Park that was famous for having the highest density of lions anywhere in Africa. When I asked what would happen if we met a lion, they laughed and suggested that I had nothing to worry about, as with my long legs, I'd get back to the Land Rover before anyone else. I felt uneasy about the plan but didn't have the confidence to counter the bravado of my colleagues. When we arrived at the park, my colleagues mocked a large sign forbidding anyone to get out of their vehicle on any account. It was only at this point that we began to seriously discuss how we would collect our data without being eaten by lions.

Luckily, I had visited a hardware store in the capital city the day before and had come prepared. Unluckily however, the knife I had bought turned out to be a carving knife which easily bent if I attempted to stab anything. Luckily, I had a Plan B. I knew animals were afraid of fire, so I had also bought a can of hairspray and a lighter in the hardware store that day. Unluckily however, the lighter took at least five attempts to light, and I would have been eaten before the hairspray ever turned into a flamethrower. I left my purchases in the Land Rover and we took it in turns to stand on the roof looking for lions while the others collected data.

As it happened, we didn't see a single lion in the whole time we were travelling through the park, and the only thing that was injured was my ego, as my colleagues laughed about my failed plans to protect myself from the imaginary lions. I have laughed at this story many times since, but at that moment, I wished I was anywhere but here with these men, drinking warm beer around a campfire. I missed my wife who loved me for who I was, and despite being in the company of these men every day for over a month, I felt more alone than I had felt since the church camps my parents used to send me on as a child.

It wasn't until near the end of the trip that I came to my senses. We were sitting in the sand around a campfire after having eaten yet another meal of baked beans and corned beef stew. That evening, after consuming more beer than usual, the conversation turned to sexual conquests. The stories disgusted me, and for the first time, as everyone else laughed together, I got up and told them I was going to bed. To laugh along with these stories required me to cross a line, and that line defined a part of who I was. It took seeing that very obvious line in the desert sand for me to realise that I had actually crossed it weeks before, the day I decided to try and be the kind of person they wanted me to be, so I could fit in. I decided that day that when I returned to the desert, I would do so alone. Over the following four years, by myself in the company of the plants and animals of the Kalahari, I never once felt the loneliness I experienced during those two long months of trying to fit in. And while there were no jokes to laugh at, I often found myself laughing spontaneously with joy as I walked home through the desert sunset after a day cataloguing plants.

Getting to the heart of people-pleasing

At the heart of people-pleasing is relational self-esteem: I have value because others value me. The evolutionary and psychological roots of this type of esteem run so deep in most of us that it is hard to see how much of ourselves we view through the eyes of those around us. The first time you are likely to realise how dependant you are on this form of self-esteem is when the people you love or respect turn against you. Your initial reaction to the disapproval of others may be a sense of loss or anger. However, over time, it is likely that you will start to hold yourself in contempt as you are held in contempt by significant others, no matter how hard you try to tell yourself that they have misunderstood you.

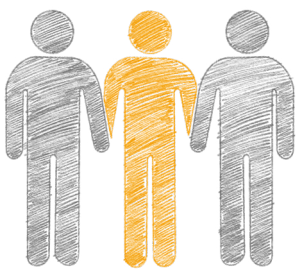
As a result, you may go to humiliating lengths to seek forgiveness and regain approval, or seek out two-dimensional new relationships with the kind of people who will look up to you and give you the external validation you need. Workaholism is not the answer either, although for researchers it is a tempting option, given the formula our work gives us to get external validation from the entire world when we get an important piece of writing published. Achievement-based self-esteem is just as brittle and liable to be shattered by circumstance as relational self-esteem (more on that in the next section).

Tackling the root cause

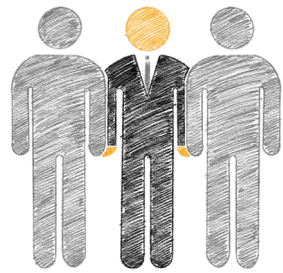
The only sustainable answer is to build intrinsic self-esteem: I have value because I am me. I was blown away recently to discover that my eight-year-old daughter already knew this. She was telling me how sad her brother and sister had made her feel and I told her that no matter what they might think of her or say to her, she didn't have to listen to them or believe them. But she didn't need my advice; she was already there. Her matter-of-fact response was beautiful: "Daddy, I know I'm good because I'm me and that's all I need to be." I hope she holds onto that for the rest of her life.

But if you, like me, grew up thinking that you were only good enough when you had done enough to please your parents, then you will know that such truths are hard-won. If I have done something that lets my wife

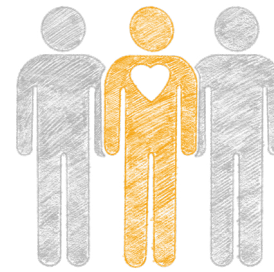
down badly, and she is upset with me, I psychologically crush myself. I do the same when I get into trouble for something at work. As I see the disappointment (or worse) on my wife or boss's face, I can't help feeling ashamed and hating myself. Then, once I finish punishing myself psychologically, I get angry with them because they made me feel so bad, when in fact it was me who was punishing myself the whole time. In reality, my misdeeds are typically minor, and usually involve losing or forgetting things at home and organisational mishaps at work. But my reaction is disproportionate, and people-pleasing is what I do to prevent these situations from occurring again in future. So how can we stop people-pleasing? For me, the only answer is to go deep and tackle the root of the issue.



Relational self-esteem:
I have value because others value me



Achievement-based self-esteem:
I have value because I achieve things of value



Intrinsic self-esteem:
I have value because I am me

When people are not pleased with me, I have found the most effective way to deal with the rising panic is to apply the principles of mindfulness and Transactional Analysis:

- First, I become mindful of that gnawing sense of unease and nervousness, and rather than pushing it back down and ignoring it, I make time in my day to look that unease in the face and listen to what it is telling me.
- When my fears speak, they do so in an exaggerated, child-like voice, catastrophising and generalising. But I ask what is there and allow the fearful child inside me to elaborate the sensationalist story of how this mistake will ultimately cost me my job, how I won't be able to pay my mortgage and somehow as a result, I'll lose my marriage, my children and my whole life.

- Now I've heard the whole story, I realise it is little wonder that I felt slightly uneasy earlier in the day. But now the story is told, I have the power to challenge it and explain to the frightened little boy inside why it is highly unlikely to be that bad. There might even be some silver linings.
- Even if it does look bad, I'll still be alright. I'll still be me and I'll still love me, and to prove it, I visualise giving the little boy a calming hug and hum a lullaby into his tousled hair, adult-me to boy-me.

Doing this takes practice, and you need to make space to reflect and identify the stories and characters that are playing out before your eyes. Like a muscle, I have found that I need to remind myself of these practices daily to build the kind of "muscle memory" that enables me to apply Transactional Analysis instinctively.

You can love parts of yourself that you never learned to love and build intrinsic self-esteem, one bruising situation after another, until eventually the frightened, shamed or angry little boy or girl inside knows that you're there for them no matter what they do, and you love them unconditionally. You are free to be the adult you are. You no longer need others to respect you before you can respect yourself. You no longer need to be loved, respected or even liked by the people around you to feel good about yourself. You can overcome people-pleasing.

The paralysis of perfectionism

Perfectionism is often held up as something to be admired in the academy, given the importance of rigour and attention to detail in good research. But while aspiring to perfect our work as far as possible is a mark of our passion and dedication, being driven to produce perfection can quickly and easily become pathological because perfection is by definition unattainable. If everything you publish has to be perfect, then you will never submit anything for review, and if you do publish something eventually, you may later want to retract it as you learn and develop further and realise how you should have written it.

I have worked with many researchers who are paralysed by perfectionism. First, you need a long enough block of time in which to write. This is typically measured in weeks by early career researchers

and consecutive days by most other researchers, but neither are realistic for most people. As a result, the perfect uninterrupted time never appears in your schedule. Even if you can get a couple of consecutive days blocked out for writing, you need the perfect writing environment and so you waste time tidying and cleaning, or travelling to a retreat that turns out to have more distractions than you expected. Even when you find the perfect place to write for the perfect amount of time, it still isn't good enough because you failed to create the psychological space you need to write. In my experience, this is far more important than any other factor. Researchers who are able to create psychological space find themselves able to write creatively in noisy and cramped snatches of time on their way somewhere or between appointments in a busy week.

The researcher who has not prepared a psychological space in which to write may be plagued by both people-pleasing and perfectionism. You will constrain and entirely crowd out your writing time with tasks for other people you want to please, and when you do sit down to write, you may get the sudden stabbing realisation that you've forgotten that you promised something for someone else. So, you prioritise that because you don't want it hanging over you as you try and write, and you never find time to write. All you wanted was two days in a month, or half a day at the end of the week, and you consistently allow other things to take over and you use that time to please others. A couple of days in a month or a couple of hours in a week is not selfish, so what does your inability to write say about how much you value yourself?

If you do manage to make the time to write, however, you may then be plagued by the ghosts of critical colleagues and reviewers who have criticised your work in the past. My second paper was dismissed by a journal editor in a one-line response I'll never forget: "This manuscript reads like a bad term paper." I laugh about it now, but reviews like that suck, and they can suck the confidence right out of you as you write. Now you can hear "Reviewer 2" whispering over your shoulder as you write and rewrite the same sentence over and over again, and far from perfecting your writing, you end up staring at a blank page. Moreover, to avoid criticism, you continue perfecting and never submitting your work for review because you know it isn't perfect.

It is this fundamental lack of confidence that ultimately drives every

perfectionist I've met. But far from protecting you, perfectionism leads to paralysis, which further fuels your lack of confidence, which in turn fuels your perfectionism in a downward spiral. Even worse than this, perfectionism in teams leads to unrealistic expectations and criticism. Now, despite knowing that you are your own harshest critic, you can't help finding fault with everyone around you, especially if they are overtaking you with their slap-dash approach. Finally, for those who actually manage to achieve something close to perfection, there is the danger that perfectionism transforms into pride. Now you believe that your work is indeed the best and nobody else can come anywhere near the levels of rigour and insight you are capable of. You become unbearable to work with and a target for people who want to take you down a peg or two. So, when you do eventually make a mistake, nobody has any pity for you, and you come crashing down from such a great height that you do yourself a psychological injury from which you may never recover.

Getting to the heart of perfectionism

At the heart of perfectionism is achievement-based self-esteem: I have value because I achieve things of value. The paralysed perfectionist never submits anything for review and so they never achieve anything, further reinforcing their lack of self-esteem.

The narcissistic perfectionist builds their whole self-image on their achievements, so when they fail, as will inevitably happen at some point, they don't just fail, they are a failure. The whole façade they built comes crashing down and they discover that there is nothing of value left if their achievements mean nothing. It is this subconscious knowledge that drives the narcissist to cling to their achievements in the face of overwhelming evidence that they are wrong, because to be wrong is to lose their very sense of self.

Tackling the root causes

If you want to tackle perfectionism you need to learn how to embrace imperfection, and to do that, you first need to have compassion on your imperfect human nature, with all its flaws, weaknesses and vulnerabilities. You are not perfect and so your work will never be

perfect, but in your imperfection there is character, experience, laughter, gratitude and meaning. You have embraced imperfection when you have learned to love (or at least accept) the parts of yourself that you used to hate. Instead of hating your lack of organisation and direction, you now accept that you'll never be particularly organised and embrace the random opportunities and ideas you stumble across that others, who work in straight lines, miss. Instead of hating the fact that you never seem to be able to finish anything, you embrace the fact that you are an ideas person and start working in teams with people who help you bring your ideas to fruition. Or maybe you are always the finisher of other people's ideas, and now you value the fact that you got to put the idea into practice without worrying about when you're going to have your own eureka moment.

There is one last thing you need to do if you want to become aware of the power of perfectionism, and loosen your grip on control. Perfectionism demands that things are done "right", which typically translates to "my way", and the reality of most decisions and actions in life is that there are many ways of seeing and doing that could be right, depending on your perspective. Someone joked during the recent Coronavirus outbreak that "Since lockdown began, my husband and I have been playing 'my way is best'. There are no winners". Whether it is the right way to peel carrots or the right way to write a paper or solve a problem in a project, the perfectionist finds it hard to see alternative visions of perfection because none of these visions are as good as their solution. The perfectionist needs control, and when you give people the freedom to do things their own way, you lose control over the outcome you are seeking. It feels like these people with alternative ideas are stealing the perfectionist's freedom to pursue their perfect vision, when in fact the opposite is true. When perfectionists join (and especially lead) teams, they have to loosen their grip on control in order to give creative freedom to their colleagues.

This of course means trusting others, and an inability to trust is another key driver of perfectionism. But how do you trust when your trust has been broken badly in the past? There are no easy answers here, but one thing I have noticed in common with all the perfectionists I have worked with is that when you really get beneath the surface, they don't trust themselves. People who trust others typically have a healthy degree of

trust in themselves to start with, and so I am going to suggest that the first step towards trusting others is to understand why you don't trust yourself, and work on that. When you do this, you are likely to discover your own failures and shortcomings that secretly haunt you, and that are driving your inability to trust others who may fail in similar ways to you. This in turn drives your need for control, and this in turn drives your perfectionism. How do you start trusting yourself? Again, the answer is to focus on building your intrinsic value.

There are no exercises or practices I can teach you to loosen your grip on perfectionism. Your trainer will be the circumstances of your own life, if you can become more aware of the times when you fall prey to perfectionistic, "all or nothing" thinking. The key is to let this trainer teach you, day by day, and be dogged in your determination to embrace imperfection and lose some control. As an imperfect researcher like every other, you will leave behind the air-brushed version of yourself that you needed to feel secure. As a result, you are a more authentic researcher with your own unique voice that includes all the beauty of your blemishes. You can empathise with others in their imperfections and give them the same compassion you give yourself when mistakes happen. As a researcher who is no longer in control of every aspect of your life, things can feel uncertain and scary at times, but also exhilarating, creative and together, as you build increasing trust with those around you, and learn to learn from them. You are able to accept that the outcome of a team or participatory process might be different to the one you had envisioned, and even if it isn't as good, it might still be good enough. While you may have had to constrain your own freedom of action to let this happen, you have given the gift of creative freedom to your team. And as you give up some individual control to embrace the uncertain and messy reality of a team solution, you may be surprised at how enjoyable the process is and how creative the outcomes are. It is possible to overcome perfectionism.

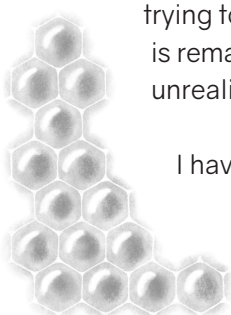
Chapter 6

Making friends with your imposter

I can count on one hand the number of researchers I have met who have never suffered from imposter syndrome (and I have spoken to hundreds of researchers about this issue). Almost all of us experience a feeling of inadequacy from time-to-time, where we doubt our abilities and accomplishments and feel like a fraud. The experience is typically driven by a gap between how you see yourself and how others see you, and so bouts of imposter syndrome often seem to occur at professional milestones where you would expect to feel secure, such as your first academic position, or when you become a professor. Yes, professors suffer from imposter syndrome too. In fact, in my experience this group actually suffers more acutely than any other because they are now lauded as international experts, and yet they know enough by this point in their career to know how much they do not know.

Getting to the heart of imposter syndrome

If imposter syndrome is created by a gap between how you see yourself and how the world sees you, then to tackle imposter syndrome you have to narrow this gap. You can start from either end. It is tempting to try and start at the "other" end of the gap, to try and change how others see you. You might try and manage expectations and push back on the whole "expert" thing, but in my experience, people just think you're trying to be humble or think you can't take a compliment. It is remarkably difficult to get people to actually change their unrealistic views of you.



I have found starting at "your" end of the gap to be much more effective: raising your own self-confidence to narrow the gap. To eliminate the gap altogether would require a narcissistic leap of faith in your

own abilities, as the whole problem with imposter syndrome is the unrealistic nature of people's expectations and belief in you. The task instead is to narrow the gap enough so that you can live with it. When you start at your end of the gap, you discover that your critics' negative views of you are just as important a driver of imposter syndrome as the unrealistic positive views of those who love what you do. Criticism is baked into academic life, and most of us have had more than our fair share of bruising reviews and "robust" debates. However, it is when we give undue weight to the voices of our critics that the greatest gulf appears between our view of ourselves and the world's view. All those people in your audience who are about to listen to your presentation might think you're the authority on this subject, but if they had read your last review or seen you being shot down in flames at that last conference, they wouldn't bother turning up, let alone listen to a word you have to say.

At the root of imposter syndrome is relational esteem gone wrong. On one hand we bask in the glory of the positive regard we are held in by those who love our work uncritically, while on the other hand, we feel crippled by the knowledge that others have "seen through" us and devalue us and our work through their criticism. Of course, neither view is accurate – they are just the views of outsiders who do not really know our full strengths or weaknesses. But when we value ourselves on the basis of the regard in which we are held by others, imposter syndrome is the inevitable outcome of the conflicting messages we all receive about our work.

Achievement-based esteem is not the answer to this problem. The more accolades you collect, the wider the gap will grow between your view of yourself and the world's view. The cure for imposter syndrome is the same as the cure for people-pleasing and perfectionism: you need to build your intrinsic sense of worth.

Tackling the root causes

When you experience imposter syndrome and let it dominate your actions and your decisions, you're not just being shy. You are actually taking something from the world. There are people out there who need your work. There are problems that your discipline or the wider world

needs to solve, and you have something to give. But imposter syndrome holds you back and so you withhold your gifts to the world. Overcoming imposter syndrome is not just for you, it is for everyone who needs what you have to give. Overcoming imposter syndrome is about making the world a better place.

However, there are few of us who defeat this condition once and for all. It will resurface the next time you fail or are asked to do something beyond what you feel capable of. In theory, when we have a strong enough sense of our intrinsic worth, we will be immune to imposter syndrome. But until we reach that point, the best most of us can hope for is to keep it in check. Personally I am still on that journey, and my biggest failures and challenges can still trigger an attack.

A recent bout of imposter syndrome occurred when I realised that my youngest daughter (who was six at the time) knew more about the fundamentals of a research project I was leading than I did. I study environmental governance and have worked in many systems around the world, from deserts to peat bogs, and from arable to livestock farms. I had just brought in the largest research project of my career, and for the first time we would be working with dairy farmers. We needed to introduce ourselves to farmers and thought that a project flyer would be useful, so I drafted something and mocked up a design with some black and white cows on the front page. My colleagues instantly pointed out that there was one major flaw in my flyer. Bulls don't produce milk. The clue, they explained, was that cows have udders. I couldn't believe I had been so stupid, and quickly found some images of cattle with prominent udders, only to be told that I had chosen a beef breed that is never used in dairy farms. I asked my colleagues to suggest some photos at this point. When I told my family over dinner that evening, my daughter gave me a despairing look as she slowly and carefully explained where milk comes from. As I listened, I realised that I couldn't convince my six year old that I knew anything about dairy farming, so how on earth would I ever be able to stand up in front of an actual dairy farmer, let alone a policy maker and have any shred of credibility? The weight of the £1.5M investment in my project suddenly began to feel stifling. How had I managed to con my way into leading a project about something I knew so little about? My colleagues knew plenty, and it was probably their expertise that got us the money, but I was the Principal Investigator and

it would be me who would have to stand up at the end of the project and talk about our findings.

As I grated cheese onto my pasta, I saw myself standing on stage at the Oxford Farming Conference, having made a gaff that had left my fellow panellists and audience speechless. The facilitator had lowered their mic and was just staring at me in silence, amazed that I could say something so naive. I would never be trusted with a project of this scale ever again. There would be some kind of enquiry at work and I would be found out for the fraud that I was. I would lose my job, and that would mean I would lose my house. I would have let my family down so badly that they would never forgive me – I would lose everything. Do you remember that I said earlier I have a habit of catastrophising?

Luckily my two older children's wonder quickly turned into laughter at my naivety, and we all had a good joke about my ability to blag. Of course, I know where milk comes from and you don't have to be a dairy expert to lead a project about environmental governance in dairy production systems if you've got dairy experts on your team. I have teetered on the brink of imposter syndrome regularly over the last three years of running this project. But I have been able to keep it in check so that we are able to do our research and use it to help others.

My approach involves three ways of building intrinsic esteem in the face of imposter syndrome:

1. Recalibrate how you judge yourself to reframe your worth based on your identity and values rather than the views of others;
2. Rebalance your internal, invisible power with the external, visible power that is given to you by the world; and
3. Draw on the previous two approaches to create equally credible, evidence-based alternative narratives to your imposter syndrome narrative.

Reframe yourself

Reframing enables you to view yourself in a new way, from a different perspective, or to use the metaphor, through a different picture frame. From this new angle, you see the same things that were depicted in the original picture, but you notice new things about them and draw new

conclusions about what you are seeing. When you reframe yourself, you are not changing anything about you; rather you are looking at yourself from a new perspective. For example, I recently cycled 10 km in a remarkably slow time. I had pushed hard as I was training for an event, and I was exhausted despite my poor time. I concluded that I was losing rather than gaining fitness, and felt like pulling out of the event. Then I realised that I had confused kilometers for miles, and I had actually cycled 10 miles in a very respectable time. I had still cycled the same distance and felt just as tired, but in that moment, I suddenly felt fit and capable again. As the old Jewish proverb puts it, "As a man thinks, so is he."

What yardsticks are you measuring yourself against? How often do you use these measuring sticks to beat yourself? Who do they even belong to? If you suffer from imposter syndrome then I suspect that a few of the measuring sticks you are using to beat yourself belong to other people who believe you are falling short. To reframe your view of yourself, you need to abandon these measuring sticks and take an alternative perspective – from the inside out, rather than through the eyes of your greatest critics (or fans).

To do this, you need to take time to look inside deeply enough to get a proper inside-out perspective. Specifically, you need to have a fine-grained understanding of the different facets of your identity and the values that underpin or animate these parts of yourself. Now you can ask yourself whether you acted in line with your values and whether you were authentically yourself, despite the failure that triggered your imposter syndrome. Alternatively, you might consider how proud you are of the way you dealt with the failure, or what you have learned from the mistakes you have made that will strengthen who you are and enable you to enact your values more effectively in future. If your imposter syndrome has been triggered by a challenge that feels beyond you, you can ask if acting in line with your identity and values calls for the courage to try even if you might fail. Alternatively, you can retreat from the challenge with no shame, knowing you are being authentic and enacting your values.

In each case, you narrow the gap between your view of yourself and the world's view of you. In the first case, you accept that you failed but also

see how you succeeded; the kinds of success you typically identify when you know you acted authentically and in line with your values are often worth more to you than the thing you failed at. There might be a gaping chasm between the expectations of your colleagues that you will get the grant or paper and the embarrassment of the resounding rejections. But when I see how I led the bid or paper writing process, the relationships and ideas that were formed, the skills that were developed in the team, or how I helped us all come to terms with the rejection and find a way forward, I know that I know "I'm good because I'm me and that's all I need to be", as my daughter put it.

You'll have an opportunity to explore your identity and values in greater depth in the exercise at the end of this chapter, but at this point, I suggest you identify a few core elements and see if you can reframe a recent situation that left you feeling like an imposter. For example, empathy and participation are values that inform a lot of who I am and what I do day-to-day, so I reframed my cow flyer experience as evidence that I was enacting my participation principle. I have a longstanding habit of passing anything that will go to stakeholders through my team for comment first, even if I think it is far from controversial, and if I had not enacted that principle, I may be feeling much more embarrassed right now. Because I was able to laugh at myself, the experience opened a channel of empathy with a number of team members, particularly more junior colleagues who hadn't worked in dairy systems before, and they shared their own doubts and fears with me over subsequent meetings. I might not be proud of my original mistake, but I was proud with how I dealt with it, and I ultimately used the experience to build my confidence on a project that still regularly scares me to this day.

Rebalance your power

The second of my three approaches to tackling imposter syndrome is to rebalance your internal invisible power with the visible power that is given to you by the world. Again, the goal is to narrow the gap between your view of yourself and the world's view of you. In this case, you do so by empowering yourself, either to counter the disempowering narratives of your critics or to feel and be closer to the levels of power others assume you have. You are given hierarchical power as you get promoted

or chosen for prestigious roles, and you are given social power when you get a title like Dr or Prof that others in society recognise and respect. Equally, you may be disempowered by your lack of status in the academic hierarchy or the social standing of your gender, skin colour or sexual orientation in any given context.

Hierarchical and social power is easy to see but hard to change, at least in the short-term, and its effects can be deeply corrosive. The longer you look at yourself through the eyes of others based on their opinion of your position in hierarchies or your social standing, the wider the gap will grow between how you see yourself and how others see you. On one hand, your lack of hierarchical power or social standing can disempower "your" side of the gap, lowering your self-esteem. On the other hand, the hierarchical power or social standing others imbue you with can empower the "other" side of the gap, creating even higher expectations that are even further from reality than before. It was for this reason that I made my acceptance of my previous job conditional on them not making me a professor. There was already too big a gap between how I viewed myself and how the world viewed me, and I didn't want to make it any wider at that point by creating the expectations that go with a Prof title. In the end, they offered me the job on the condition that I went through the process of becoming a professor, but it took me a whole year after getting the promotion to actually tell people, or put it on my email signature or social media profiles.

Rather than running from hierarchical or social power as I did when I tried to avoid promotion, there is another path, where you narrow the gap by increasing two types of less visible power. Like hierarchical and social power, these alternative power bases only change slowly and with great effort, but they are much more within our control, if we choose to nurture them.

The first is personal power. This is the power of self-awareness and strength of character. It is a quiet confidence, often born of overcoming adversity. It is a reputation for integrity and honesty. It is building others up, and equipping and inspiring them to be their best, rather than gossiping or criticising. It is the creative power to see things differently combined with the courage to do things differently. This type of power is characterised by humility. When I say this, I do not mean

submissiveness; rather I mean an honest estimation of your own worth and abilities as well as your weaknesses and failings. True humility is secure in the knowledge that your worth and abilities are good enough, rather than better than other people's, and your weaknesses and failings are an equally valuable part of you that keeps you grounded and enables you to give more to the world than would otherwise be possible.

If you are listening to this list of personal attributes with incredulity, you are not alone. I am regularly met with disbelief during trainings, when researchers ask how such powers can be cultivated. Surely these are things you are born with. They are parts of your personality. Either you've got them or you haven't. Well, perhaps depending on your life experience, some of these characteristics may come more easily to some than to others. But I believe that personal power is a skill that can be practised, if you are willing to invest the emotional energy and commitment in doing so.

You can cultivate self-awareness through the practice of mindfulness, or you can get help via a coach and/or counsellor, coming to understand your character and building a resilient self-image by facing the demons of your past. You can decide and draw red lines on key issues ahead of time, so when you find yourself faced with important or controversial decisions in the heat of the moment, you stay on the right side of the line. You can choose to build others up in every interaction you have, by making a practice of appreciating and voicing the good you see in those around you. It feels awkward to start with, but even if you have to apologise in advance for embarrassing someone, the embarrassment of a compliment fades fast but the positive effect of your words can linger for years, providing comfort and sustenance in dark times. You can foster creative practice, making creative spaces and collisions happen on purpose. And when you know who you are and the values that drive you, doing the right thing despite the fear becomes the only possible course of action. Humility is founded on self-knowledge, and exercises like the one in Chapter 13 can provide you with that foundation.

The second power that can help you close the gap between how you view yourself and how the world sees you is transpersonal power. This is the power that comes from being connected to some greater cause than your own career or personal goals. This power is based on the

deeply important purpose that emerges at the intersection between your identity and your values, giving you a clear, value-based sense of direction, even if that directly challenges the status quo. It is these values that imbue transpersonal power with a sense of something deeper, larger, more significant and beyond the sphere of your own life and influence.

You can cultivate a connection to a broader and deeper cause by understanding the purpose that emerges from your unique sense of self and the values that underpin and animate you, as you'll explore in Chapter 13. Once you understand your purpose, you can hold it in your mind at all times, and make a practice of filtering your decisions through this purpose. In my case, all professional decisions get passed through the question, "will this enable me to help make the world a better place?". You can keep asking "why" in your teams and meetings. Now instead of diving straight into the agenda or the most pressing issues, you stand back and remind the group of your joint purpose, inviting that purpose to pervade your meeting, subtly influencing your decisions to keep them in line with the big picture, and keeping your team motivated on a deeper level.

Create equally credible, evidence-based alternative narratives

Finally, my third approach to overcoming imposter syndrome is to draw on what you have learned from the first two approaches as you reframe and empower yourself, and start replacing your imposter narrative with an increasingly evidence-based alternative, more helpful and empowering narrative. The first step is to become more mindful of the initial stages of imposter syndrome so you can spot the imposter narrative before it has grown arms and legs. Once you have done that, you can interrogate the veracity of the doubts it is casting over your abilities, and the source of those doubts. Whether or not you are able to dismiss these doubts, you start looking on purpose for the alternative narrative, and shift your attention to it instead. Over time, with practice, you can learn to spot the warning signs early and move quickly into an alternative, more helpful narrative, and avoid being paralysed by imposter syndrome.

It might sound crazy, but I regularly have an internal dialogue with my imposter. I am not denying his existence. There are good reasons why he starts talking to me, usually about my failures and shortcomings, and it is clearly pointless trying to deny that I make mistakes. I don't like the things he tells me, his defeatist tone of voice, or the way he makes me feel, but instead of getting angry with him, I have compassion. And from that place of empathy, I start telling him a different story that is equally true, based on the evidence that I have achieved things of worth despite my limitations, that people find value in what I do despite my mistakes, and that even when it feels like my failure dwarfs anything I've ever done of worth, I am still me, and I still have value. I have made friends with my imposter. I listen to him, he listens to me, and together we're good enough to keep moving forwards.

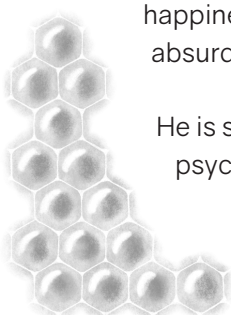
Chapter 7
Transcending failure and labels

You may have noticed a theme running through each of the challenges in the last two chapters: they can all be triggered by failure. If you have ever submitted a journal article, book proposal or grant application, you will know that failure is an integral part of academic life. It is therefore important to consider how you will deal with your next inevitable failure, if you want to avoid it triggering people-pleasing, perfectionism or imposter syndrome.

I want to suggest that you can do much better than simply coping with failure. You can embrace and thrive in failure, feeling more fully alive than ever before. I want you to stop running from failure (it will always catch up with you anyway), and instead, I invite you to make friends with it and start listening to what it has to say to you. If you can hear what it has to say, you will learn something of vital importance to your resilience as a researcher.

How pessimism can teach us to value failure

I'd like to start in an unusual place; a school of thought known as "philosophical pessimism". In his 2009 book, *Pessimism: Philosophy, Ethic, Spirit*, Joshua Foa Dienstag said, "that time is a burden; that the course of history is in some sense ironic; that freedom and happiness are incompatible; and that human existence is absurd".



He is suggesting that time is the primary cause of psychological pain. There are two reasons for this. First, we suffer as human beings because we have the ability to look forward, and this ability means that we worry. There is an existential dread built into

us from the moment we become conscious of the inevitability of our own death. Second, we have the ability to look backwards, to remember. We can get caught up in our own history and the mistakes we have made. As human beings we have a unique ability to both worry and regret.

The solution, at the heart of philosophical pessimism, is to simply step out of time, and practice "the power of now", as secular Buddhist, Eckhart Tolle, put it in his 2001 bestseller named after this phrase. From my own tradition, I love how Jesus poetically suggests we model ourselves on the behaviour of animals or "the flowers of the field" that live in the moment. I believe that this is the mechanism that explains the now well-evidenced link between mindfulness and meditation practice and positive mental health outcomes.

But there is a still deeper philosophical insight that lies beneath this process. The German pessimist philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860) described life as a pendulum that constantly swings between depression and disappointment. Depressing as this outlook might appear at first glance, it is a worldview that offers a surprisingly positive approach to dealing with failure.

This view of life suggests that we all have an in-built drive to find our "object of desire". This drive is of course regularly exploited by marketers who will try and make their next product the object of our desire. For researchers this might be getting your PhD, getting tenure or becoming a professor. In your personal life it might be finding a partner or moving into your dream house. The problem, however, as you will no doubt have discovered already, is that you are rarely satisfied when you reach your goal. The new job comes with unexpected new pressures and the new house comes with unexpected new bills. Behavioural psychology has shown that people who become paraplegic are just as happy as people who win the lottery, a month or so after their life-changing experiences. This is the concept of "hedonic adaptation" where people typically return to a previous "set point" of happiness after either positive or negative experiences. Achieving the object of our desire does nothing to alter that "set point" and make us any happier in the long run, and so we experience disappointment. This turns to depression ("if that wasn't the point, then what is?"), until we find a new object of desire. Maybe it wasn't just about becoming a professor; I need

to apply for a Chair position at a more prestigious institution. Perhaps the problem wasn't where I was living, but who I was living with? So we live for another future until it in turn disappoints us, and in our depression we find a new object of desire.

Stepping outside the pendulum swing

The way out of this trap is obvious: we need to realise that the search for a new object of desire is futile and stop looking or striving. What are your objects of desire? To what extent does your current happiness depend on how far away you are from those things? What if your ultimate goal, to reach a place where there is no suffering and you are completely happy, is unattainable? What if the journey is all there is, and the point is simply to experience that journey fully, with all its mingled suffering, boredom and cruelty, shot through with laughter, joy and moments of peace? Might you experience life more fully each day and remember that it is in your darkest times, often as a result of failure, that you gain your deepest insights and can feel most fully alive?

You can validate this easily with your own experience. When you look back on your life, what are the experiences that have shaped you most deeply, for the better? While some of these will be positive experiences, I expect that many of the parts of your identity you treasure most have been born of suffering in some shape or form, and many of the values you hold most dear have been discovered or become clear in adversity. To have a life with no suffering or challenge means that you would not be the person that you are today. When you see the value of failure and challenge like this, you will stop running from it and realise that your failure is inviting you to stop and listen to what it has to say, because it has lessons for you.

Embracing failure is an essential step towards authenticity, which Brené Brown defines as "the daily practice of letting go of who we think we're supposed to be, and embracing who we are". If you want to be part of a new, more compassionate culture in institutions that actually change the world, you have to start by being fully human and fully yourself.

At the start of Part 2, you will explore the purpose that emerges from your unique identities and values as a researcher, but at this point, I

invite you to become aware of identities and values that you may have previously disowned because of the suffering they remind you of. In the final part of this chapter, I want to look at the opposite problem: parading professional identities that your real self can hide behind. People have a way of detecting inauthenticity instinctively in the people around them, but while we can detect this easily in others, it is much harder to detect our own inauthenticities.

Transcending disciplinary labels to express your authentic self

This is uniquely challenging for academics, who are paid to become known internationally as "the expert" in what they do. "Expert" and "international leader" are comfortable labels to inhabit, and they are given freely to us by the world when we reach certain milestones in our careers. However, without realising it, we can inadvertently become our labels, and lose touch with our authentic selves.

According to Google the most popular search term that accompanies my name is "impact" (if you want to try this for yourself, just put your name into a Google search and press the down arrow, rather than hitting return, and skipping over the terms associated with famous actors and the like). This is a relatively new label for me. Had you asked me what I did twenty years ago, I would have told you I studied deserts. Ten years later, I would have told you I studied peat bogs. More recently, I might have told you I was a conservationist. Throughout this period, I would have valiantly defended myself against any attempt to pigeonhole me in any single discipline, and told you I was an interdisciplinary researcher. Of course, I would have said something subtly different depending on who was asking. To the parent at the school gate, I'm "a researcher" and when asked what I research, I will usually just say "environmental stuff". To the natural scientist, I will explain that I do interdisciplinary environmental science, and to the social scientist, I'm an environmental social scientist.

Am I being misleading or manipulative in presenting myself in these different ways? No, they are all authentic descriptions of what I do. We are all multifaceted, with multiple different parts to our identities

and roles, and whether we realise it consciously or not, we are likely to emphasise the parts of ourselves that are most similar to the person we are talking to. We create labels for ourselves that help others quickly understand what we do or who we are, and we adapt how we label ourselves to our circumstances to create connection.

This is all normal and healthy, but at what point do these labels become too important to us? Do you sometimes find yourself hiding behind your labels, puffing them up like a protective shield, as if to say, "I'm important, so don't mess with me"? Do you find yourself digging out your CV or rereading your publications when you feel like you're not good enough, so you can re-inhabit a label that makes you feel good enough? Do the labels you hide behind reveal something about your dependence on achievement-based esteem, and do the ways those around you respond to your work identity give you relational esteem? Is there any intrinsic esteem underneath the labels? Sadly, most people don't find out until the labels are peeled off for them, when things go wrong in their career or personal lives, or they retire and discover their achievements and networks don't move with them into retirement. I don't want you to have to experience what I went through to learn this lesson, but I want you to be able to transcend the labels you currently inhabit.

My most recent reminder of this lesson was when I attempted to introduce myself as an interdisciplinary researcher to an Australian professor last year. He had looked me up before our dinner engagement and concluded that I was a "fucking social scientist". It wasn't a great start to the evening, and he added insult to injury after we swapped business cards, when he told me that if he had a Chair title like mine, he certainly wouldn't put it on a business card. While we were waiting for our food, I challenged him to explain his objection to social scientists, and he told me that "they let the side down with their weak CVs", by which he meant citations (as it happened my H index was higher than his, though I didn't know at the time).

I tell you this story because experiences like this make you interrogate the labels you use and think more critically about how others perceive them. The experience also made me realise how I depended on certain labels to get respect from others. If I was genuinely secure in my identity as a social scientist, which is a big part of what I do, then I would have

been happy to have owned the label he gave me, and might have been able to laugh at him. But I was offended. Really offended. It didn't help that he told me he had tried to watch one of my videos and had been so bored he turned it off. My pride was hurt, and so I reacted. The week before I left for Australia, my 12-year-old daughter had been teaching me how to do a teenage death stare. She claimed that I was terrible at it, but I wasn't really trying. That evening I tried. I gave him my most withering stare as I sat in silence, watching him dig his hole as we waited for our food. I admit that it was childish, but it felt good at the time. As I reflected over the following days, I remembered other similar experiences where my professional pride had been wounded. The most common was being introduced to fellow academics at the start of a training day as a "consultant". Why could I not just let it go? No, every time it happened, I started with my own introduction, making it clear that I was a professor. Had my professional pride really become that important to me? I was cringing at myself. The labels I gave myself had become a crutch for my self-esteem, and I needed to do something about it.

The real reason the Australian professor had offended me so deeply was that it felt like he was reading a label my mother had stuck to my forehead as a child, which read "stupid little boy". I was just as clumsy and forgetful then as I am now, and I regularly felt humiliated by her reactions to my mistakes. Effectively, I had stuck a "professor" label over the "stupid little boy" label, to tell myself and the world that I wasn't a little boy anymore, and I wasn't stupid. But the old label was still there, underneath the new one. In fact, there were multiple labels stuck over the original "stupid" one. "University student" and "youth group leader" covered it up first, and then it was "PhD student", "lecturer" and "research centre director".

Done adaptively, with emotional intelligence, relabelling yourself in different contexts can create connections with others. Done pathologically, to cover something up, relabelling was driving my imposter syndrome, because no matter what position I acquired, I still felt like the same stupid little boy underneath it all. Ultimately, I was my labels rather than myself, and I was unable to be authentic. I didn't realise this, however, until I was pushed over the edge into depression by workplace bullying and a failed police investigation into the person

who had sexually abused me throughout my childhood. I deconstructed who I was during that time, and was disgusted by what I found beneath the labels. I realised then how dependent I had become on achievement-based esteem, and how meaningless all my achievements were. Any vestige of relational esteem I had used to build my self image was in tatters too, as I realised that those who were supposed to love and protect me had damaged me or turned a blind eye. Without any sense of love or respect from family or colleagues, I felt psychologically naked, with no intrinsic esteem or sense of self. Beneath all the affirmations I had clothed myself in, I discovered a hollow skeleton.

In the months that followed, I slowly began to build a sense of my intrinsic worth by giving, rather than seeking love, starting with compassion for the hurting boy that will always be part of me. I will always be grateful for those dark years, for peeling off the labels I had stuck over my wounds, enabling me to become aware that they were still hurting. I don't think people ever truly heal from wounds like that, but by accepting and living with my vulnerability, I am able to be authentic. Now, remaining authentic is a daily process of being myself, and being aware when I use labels to hide my vulnerabilities. My car crash dinner engagement reminded me that labels shouldn't matter. My goal, which is a work in progress, is to transcend all of the labels I have chosen for myself or been given by others, to have a daily experience of simply being me, and being okay with that.

By holding the labels loosely, it is possible to connect more deeply with people because they are connecting with you, not your label. You are able to open a channel of empathy with another person because it comes from you, not your label, and while you might come from different disciplines and backgrounds, when you are authentically yourself, you are being fully human and so there is always common ground with the fellow human you are connecting with. As a result, I might now connect with someone as a fellow parent, as someone who loves nature or the same music, or someone who is deeply creative or inventive. I'm not hiding behind labels and I'm not forcing my labels on someone else who doesn't understand what that label even means.

By holding the labels loosely, it is also possible to be more resilient when you are disrespected or misunderstood. If calling me a "fucking

social scientist" helps you feel good about yourself, then I'm not going to pick a fight with you or let you get to me – it just isn't relevant. If you want to call me an impact consultant and that works for you, then that works for me too. Whatever. It's really not a big deal. If the labels help you understand me in your own way, even if that's a bit of a misunderstanding in my opinion, then great, but I'm not going to hold my own view of myself so tightly that I need to correct you. Increasingly now, I no longer see myself as one label or even as multiple different labels I can pick and choose from. I'm trying to go to a place in my mind where the labels are just not necessary, because I see myself in my internal world as an integrated and mysterious whole person.

Can you embrace the unknown depths of who you are and be content being who you are without the need for any labels? I would argue that transcending labels requires a deep level of inner confidence and security. Typically, you need to inhabit a label fully before you can transcend it. Only after understanding fully what it is to be a person like that, or gaining a high level of expertise under a particular kind of label, are you able to walk away from that identity. When you are at the top of your game, you don't need to prove yourself any more or stick a label on yourself to advertise your expertise. And that means you can step out beyond what everyone expects of someone in your position or role and do things differently without fear of ridicule. So I'm not saying you shouldn't be proud of your PhD and everything you've worked for. Own that, but don't let it own you. If you allow yourself to be defined by your labels, you'll be trapped by the tyranny of everyone else's expectations and the weight of your own ego's demands.

What would it take for you to transcend your labels and be more authentically you? After all, the first step towards transforming the world is transforming your own world.