



The Founder's Field Guide to Impostor Syndrome

Tools to overcome self-doubt and build resilience

October 2023

Is This Field Guide for You?

“I don't know how we managed to secure funding. There are so many better ideas out there.”

“Every other founder seems like they're crushing it.”

“I feel like I'm just pretending to be a CEO. I don't have all the answers.”

“Someone else would be better at leading this company.”

“Every success I achieve feels like it was by luck rather than skill.”

"When investors believe in my potential, I wonder if they truly understand my limitations."

"Even though I have a successful company, I worry I don't have what it takes to sustain it."

“Despite our growth, I can't shake the feeling that it's all a façade.”

Are any of these phrases familiar?

If so, you're not alone.

You're in the company of most founders—whether you're a first-time founder, serial entrepreneur, or post-exit.

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Impostor Thoughts are Normal... But They Don't Have to Consume You

Impostorism is sneaky.

It might be persistent in the day-to-day of building your startup, or it may arise in specific situations. It's like an autonomous driver that's not obvious (even to you!) until you bring awareness to it.

You've likely googled something about impostor syndrome. Maybe you landed on a cursory article, TED talk, or well-meaning advice: "Give up your perfectionism." "Focus on your strengths."

If you're lucky, you've been able to chat about it with other founders or mentors.

But do you feel equipped to overcome it?

My guess? Your answer is, "No."

And you aren't alone.

Without awareness of how impostor thoughts affect you, you'll act on those thoughts. And your actions aren't isolated to you. You can impact those around you—your partner, family, friends. And your cofounders, team, board and mentors.

That's where the tools in this guide come into play.

This field guide sits between too-shallow blog posts and too-dense books. It's straightforward and actionable. It will teach you practically and concretely how to shift your mindsets and self-belief.

You'll find the tools you need to unpack the persistent and damaging impostor mental chatter.

When you practice these tools, you can change the shape of your entrepreneurial journey.

You Can Change Your Mindset

No matter how many rounds you raise, next level of MRR you hit, or new clients you win, that impostor voice whispers lies. But here's the truth: you deserve to be where you are. Your vision, determination, talent, relationships and a bit of luck got you here.

This guide gives you tools to help build your self-confidence and develop mental resilience. With consistent practice, you can dismantle negative self-perceptions, become more self-aware, and lead with confidence.

Choosing to change your impostor feelings gets you...

From perfectionism → to confidently shipping your work

From self scrutiny → to internalizing your success

From mental doom loops → to quickly reframing your negative thoughts

From fear of judgment by others → to validating your own accomplishments

From fraught decision-making → to fluid decisions

From a fixed mindset → to a growth mindset

From fear → to confidence

Why a Field Guide?

“Identifying nature is fun, but what I love most about field guides is that **they change the way you see.**”

- Matthew L. Miller, *The Nature Conservancy*

Traditionally, a field guide is a book designed to be taken into the field to help the reader identify the natural world around them. It helps an explorer distinguish between similar objects, such as birds or trees, using illustrations, photographs, descriptions, and notes. It's compact. Easy to read. Practical.

This founder's field guide is an easy to read guide that empowers you to bring attention to your current world and make sense of the limiting mindsets that hamper your potential.

There are a lot of articles on impostor syndrome (often too shallow to be helpful) and there are a lot of books on the topic (and not everyone wants to read a book). This field guide sits squarely between a blog post and a book.

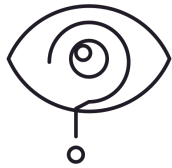
If you use the tools in this guide, you can replace limiting mindsets with growth mindsets to fuel your—and your startup's—success.

In my coaching, I refer to the work my clients do between our sessions as “fieldwork.” *You have to be out in the field to do the hard, but rewarding, work of growing yourself.* In fact, the fieldwork is often more important than the coaching sessions themselves. To that end, a field guide aids an explorer in their fieldwork.

My sincere hope is that this field guide changes the way you see—yourself and your leadership.



How to Use This Field Guide



Get Curious

There is no way to grow without getting curious: about your thoughts & your stories about your thoughts. This is your invitation to play with new perspectives and challenge your assumptions.



Commit

Commit to trying 1 or several of the 12 tools. Schedule time in your calendar, get accountability from a peer. You build internal resilience by proving to yourself that you can follow through on your practice.



Capture

Grab a notebook (paper or digital!). As you read, make note of any insight or tool that inspires the following: “I never thought of it that way...” or “I want to try that!”

Challenges to Anticipate

Knowing some of the tough stuff ahead will make it easier when you get there.

- There are 12 tools, each with multiple steps and meaningful effort. If it feels overwhelming, take it **one tool at a time, one step at a time.**
- Not every tool will be compelling or useful to you. That’s okay!
- **This only works if you work.**



Hi, I'm Cali.

I've mentored, coached and worked with hundreds of startup founders.

I've learned that even—*especially*—**the most ambitious and successful founders grapple with a nagging sense of imposterism.**

You're not alone. Like you, I've had the impostor monster yell loudly into my brain. *A whopping 70% of people will experience the impostor phenomenon at some point in their lives.*

Through the lens of coaching and a 360-degree experience of the startup ecosystem, I've helped founders untangle the limiting mindsets that hold them back. I help them identify their north star and develop the clarity and conviction that leads to confident leadership.

This guide is built on the proven work of researchers, psychologists, social scientists, writers, founders, and others who have thoughtfully explored the impostor phenomenon. I note references throughout the guide and at the end.

I created this field guide for you.

Understanding the Impostor Experience

“

“We are all apprentices in a craft where no one ever becomes a master.”

Ernest Hemingway, *The Wild Years*

”

How Imposterism Shows Up for Founders

Have you had impostor thoughts in any of these situations?

Pitching to investors: Feeling the pressure to convince others of the value of your startup and fearing being seen as inexperienced or incapable.

Networking and conferences: Comparing your accomplishments and skills with other founders.

Scaling the business: Doubting your ability to handle increased responsibilities as your startup grows.

Receiving accolades and awards: Ironically, imposterism can flare up when you receive accolades, in which you attribute your success to luck & feel unworthy of recognition.

Impact on your leadership style: Exhibiting behaviors like micromanagement, perfectionism, or reluctance to delegate.

Decision-making: Amplifying self-doubt and fear of failure, leading to decision paralysis or excessive validation seeking.

Becoming risk-averse: Avoiding risks due to the fear of being exposed as a fraud. (Especially tough as an entrepreneur!)

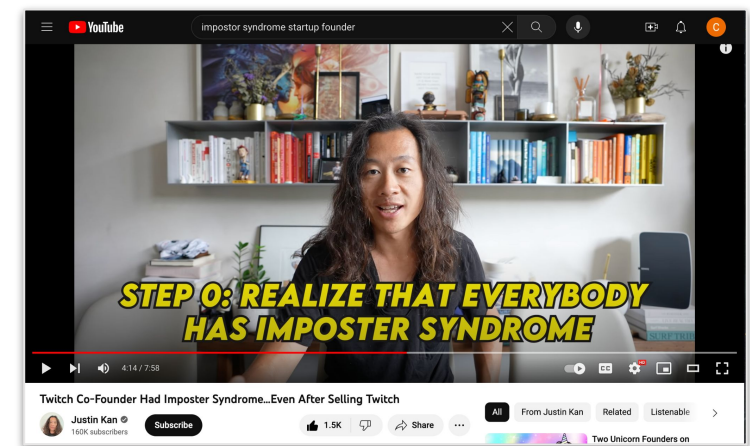
Take it from a founder


“At each of the step of the founder journey, you’re doing something new that you haven’t done before. So of course you’re going to feel like you’re failing, and that’s going to make you feel like an impostor.”

Twitch cofounder, Justin Kan




[Twitch Co-Founder Had Imposter Syndrome...Even After Selling Twitch](#)





“As a founder, you always feel like you’re failing. And the reason is this: either you actually are failing, in which case it feels like things are not going well: you’re struggling, the startup’s not working. Or, you’re succeeding and you feel like you’re failing... because you’re always forced to do something you’ve never done before.”



Justin Kan, Twitch Cofounder

What Is Impostor Syndrome, Actually?

Impostor syndrome has been inaccurately (but persistently) pathologized as a “syndrome”— a disease or psychological disorder.

This is inaccurate. In fact, it’s misleading. It is not a syndrome.

The impostor phenomenon was coined in 1978 by American psychologists Pauline Clance and Suzanne Imes, who identified the experience in high-achieving women in their seminal study.¹ Originating from this study, the phrase “impostor syndrome” entered the lexicon as a shorthand reference to feeling like a fraud.

Imposterism

I use the term “impostor syndrome” in the title of this field guide because it’s the most common phrase we associate with these feelings.

But throughout the guide, I’ll instead reference “**impostor phenomenon**” or “**impostorism**” as more accurate shorthand.

What Is imposterism?

When impostorism takes hold, you become fixated on the following constellation of beliefs:

- Your success is accidental—a result of oversight or sheer luck
- You fear being exposed as a fraud, regardless of how much success you achieve
- You don’t belong in the role you’re in

Who is impacted by imposterism?

Impostorism can affect anyone. Initial research focused on how the phenomenon impacted women, and eventually the research lens turned to folks of color and other underrepresented backgrounds.

More recent research reveals that anyone can experience impostor thoughts. In fact, an estimated 70% of all people will experience it at some point in their life.²

Where Imposterism Shows Up (& Why That Matters)

So, is imposterism created by you...or your context? It's both. Although imposterism has historically been regarded as an individual phenomenon (such as a negative personality trait or critical self-concept), recent research indicates that something outside you contributes to it: social interactions and environmental contexts...a.k.a. organizations and relationships.³

“What if impostor syndrome is just a scheme?” The founder of Girls Who Code, Reshma Saujani, [shines a light](#) on the potentially sexist framing of imposterism that makes it an empty concept at best and a damaging, oppressive lie at worst.

“By treating imposter syndrome as if it blossoms only in the recesses of the mind, we absolve ourselves of addressing the sexism, racism, and culture of overwork that may be causing the imposter experience. Imposter syndrome is not necessarily a disease of the mind, but perhaps a disease of the system.”

- Christine Liu, neuroscientist, in [OZ](#)

No matter what, addressing your imposterism matters.

Your company's culture plays a role in either minimizing or intensifying imposterism. It's not only about you— it's about how you lead.

This work begins with you...and ends in your company culture. The more you work on your relationship with impostor thoughts, the more equipped you are to create a startup culture that offers safety and belonging.



Take it from them

If you want to understand the nuances of imposterism, read these articles:

- [“Imposter Syndrome” is Definitely Misnamed, Might Be a Condition of Privilege, & Has a Fascinating History](#) by Hunter Walk, VC at Homebrew
- [“Why Everyone Feels Like They're Faking It”](#) Leslie Jamison, The New Yorker

More FTQs (Frequently *Thought* Questions)

It's unlikely you're asking these questions out loud....but I bet you've thought about them.

Q: Is imposterism just a made-up pathology?

Some argue that it's another glammed up name for doubt and/or fear. And surely fear and doubt sit at the heart of impostor thoughts. But it's not *just* about fear... it's about, specifically, the fear that comes with feeling like a fraud or like you don't deserve to be where you are. And that's something that most of us have felt at some point.

Q: Will impostor thoughts ever go away? Can I “cure” this?

In short...no—because it's fueled by natural, common feelings. But can that voice be minimized and happen less frequently? *Absolutely*. Imposterism doesn't have to be your underlying operating system. As you develop more self awareness and confidence, these negative thoughts quiet.

Q: Are there positive aspects of the impostor phenomenon?

Maybe. One study found that those who are primed for imposterism are more likely to be “other-focused,” meaning they're more attuned to others' perceptions and feelings.⁴ But I wouldn't try to apply a positive facade onto this phenomenon that's created both by our own thoughts and the organizations we're in.

Q: Could impostorism give me an edge?

It may be true that the negative thoughts make you work harder, create high standards for yourself, or prevent you from becoming overconfident.⁵ But these positive qualities may come at a high cost: a faulty understanding of yourself and your strengths, and the opportunities you don't take because of self doubt.

Your Mindset Shift

Tell Yourself the Truth to Combat Imposterism

The strategy underlying impostorism is for your mind to whisper half truths and flat-out lies.

Your brain lies to you by exaggerating how bad your failures are and minimizing your strengths and successes. This is called negativity bias. The way we take in information about negative experiences shapes how we see ourselves.⁶

You've got to tell yourself the truth.

One of the keys in combating impostorism is truth-telling. The goal in many of the tools in this guide is to help you uncover evidence of the truth: The truth about your success. Mindset. How others perceive you. The outcomes of your work—both failures *and* successes.

The truth about your deservingness to be exactly where you are. Truth is evidence. Truth is accuracy. Truth is the antidote to impostorism.

These tools are proven.

The tools that follow are evidence-based and research-backed. That research is referenced in the text and appendix. It's important you know that these approaches work.

Through self reflection, journaling, having real conversations with peers and mentors, and the other tools in this guide, you're going to uncover evidence and facts.

Your success will depend on your willingness to accept the truth that you uncover. Will you accept these truths? Will you integrate what you learn into your thinking?

This will take time.

Impostor thoughts have crept into your thinking over time. Likewise, it will take time to gather evidence and learn how to unravel these thoughts. Please be patient with yourself. (It will be worth it.)

Tools

Using These 12 Tools

The following twelve practices will help build confidence and resilience. There is no specific order—you can pick and choose any of these tools.

GO INWARD

1. Self Reflection

2. Journaling

3. Write a Letter

4. Visualizations

5. Mastery

6. Wins File

GO OUTWARD

7. User Manual

8. Seek Feedback

9. Peers

10. Mentors

11. Outside Skills

12. Therapy /Coaching

KEY



READ

Further reading resource



WATCH

Further resource to watch



LISTEN

Further resource to listen to



PROMPT

Journaling prompt



MINDSET

Tools to reflect on or talk about

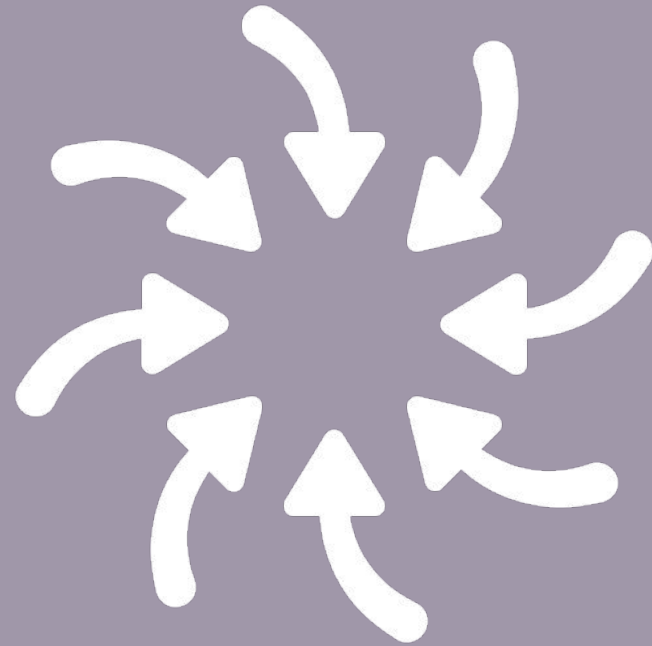


ACTIVITY

You'll need to take an action

Go Inward

Six tools for individual reflection



“

“Lack of vulnerability is the very thing that prevents you from winning. I learned over the years that the best, most successful founders do one thing better than those who don’t succeed: They identify their gaps and they seek help to fill them.”

Mandela S.H. Dixon, founder of Founder Gym

”

TOOL #1 - Self Reflection in the Right Direction

Your single best defense against impostor feelings is self reflection. It is the foundation of all the tools to follow.

No doubt you're already self-aware and highly analytical. (Traits that probably fuel your impostor feelings in the first place!)

Your self reflection must be in the *right direction*.

Researchers and psychologists refer to this important process as *cognitive restructuring*—a proven process by which we can change the way we think.⁷

In more conversational terms, we might call this *self-compassion*. If you cringe at reading that phrase, welcome to the sometimes-cringe world of self-development.

I'm confident that this process will help you.

For some of you, the following self-reflection process may seem tedious at first glance. If you feel this way, I *especially* encourage you to give the practice a try.

Take it from a founder



[The importance of self reflection and what it means for founders](#)

– DocSend's COO and cofounder

“With all this ‘doing,’ there remains precious little time in the day to reflect. What’s working? What isn’t? If you’re not careful, suddenly you’re a passenger in your own company, reacting instead of acting, playing defense instead of playing offense.”

- Dave Koslow, DocSend cofounder

Founder Advice

The importance of self reflection and what it means for founders

DocSend's COO and co-founder, Dave Koslow, on how ritual self-reflection can help startup leaders stay on track.

Dave Koslow

May 13, 2020



Self Reflection

1

Identify common impostor thoughts: Take a moment to reflect on situations or moments when you've felt like an impostor. These can be recent experiences or instances from the past. Identify specific thoughts or beliefs that emerged during those moments. Consider questions like:

- What words do you actually use when you're self-critical? Any key phrases come up over and over again?
- What is the tone of your voice – harsh, cold, upset, scolding?
- Does the voice remind you of any one in your past who was critical of you?
- What thoughts crossed your mind when you felt like an impostor?
- What self-critical statements or beliefs did you have about yourself?
- How did these thoughts make you feel?

2

Externalize the thoughts: Grab your pen & paper. Consider the specific thoughts that tend to arise when you feel like an impostor. These thoughts might sound like, "I'm not qualified enough," "I don't deserve this success," or "I'm just lucky." Write your thoughts without judgment or filtering. Note any negative beliefs, self-doubts, or critical statements that arise.

3

Challenge the thoughts: Read through what you've written down and reflect on it objectively. Ask yourself:

- Are these thoughts based on facts or evidence?
- What evidence supports or contradicts these thoughts?
- Are these thoughts realistic and fair or distorted and exaggerated?
- How would I respond to a friend who expressed these thoughts about themselves?
- What might a very compassionate friend say to me in this situation?
- What achievements or skills do I possess that prove this thought wrong?

Self Reflection

4

Label the thoughts: After analyzing and challenging your thoughts, label them for what they really are—impostor thoughts. Acknowledge that these thoughts are not accurate representations of your capabilities and achievements. Give them a specific label that resonates with you, such as "impostor syndrome thoughts," "self-doubt distortions," or any other term that captures their nature.

5

Write counter statements: Identify any distortions or biases in your impostor thoughts. Look for patterns, exaggerations, or unrealistic expectations. Then, challenge these thoughts by providing alternative, more realistic perspectives or counterarguments.

- Look for evidence that supports your competence, skills, and achievements.
- Remind yourself of positive feedback or praise you have received from others.
- Consider the possibility that everyone experiences self-doubt and that it doesn't invalidate your abilities.
- For example, if your impostor thought is "I'm not qualified enough," your counter statement could be "I have achieved X, Y, and Z, which demonstrates my expertise in this field."

TOOL #2 - Journaling



A journaling practice empowers you to write your way through the mental muck. As you access your unique perspective and inner world through free-form writing, you develop deeper self-understanding—and more confidence.

Self-compassionate journaling reduces imposter feelings and increases self esteem.⁸

Just 5-10 minutes of journaling each day can make a big difference in your mindset. And more is even better.

Journaling prompts to start with:

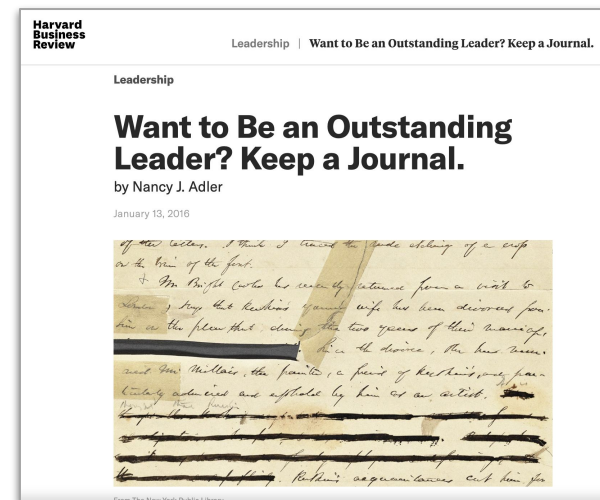
- If I didn't feel like an impostor, what might I accomplish?
- Identify a specific impostor thought. Ask yourself:
 - Does that thought help or hinder me?
 - How, specifically, does it help or hinder me?
- What thought patterns am I noticing in big or small decisions in my day-to-day work?
- What is worth celebrating?
- What does my business need from me right now?

Take it from them



[Want to Be An Outstanding Leader? Keep a Journal](#)

Harvard Business Review



 Want more prompts? Try Reboot's [365 Days of Journaling email course](#)

TOOL #3 - Write A Letter To Yourself



This tool asks you to write a compassionate letter to yourself. With time and practice, this can help you shift the way you talk to yourself. Research across several studies shows that this exercise can reduce impostor feelings and increase self-compassion.

Start it just like you would a letter: “Dear [your name]...”

Identify a negative self judgment or belief. Be specific. Describe what emotions or thoughts arise around that judgment. (e.g., “My self judgment is that I’m not qualified to lead this company. When I think about that, I feel ashamed that I’m not good enough, and really worried about whether we can pull this thing off.”)

Next, **respond to that judgment** in compassionate, generous, and true way. Express understanding, acknowledgment, and acceptance for that part of you.

Are there any circumstances or events in your life that may have contributed to you feeling this way? Write about those.

What could you convey to **remind yourself** that you’re human, with strengths and weaknesses?

Tips

- ✓ Remember: only *you* will ever see this!
- ✓ Imagine your most supportive friend. What would they say to you? Emulate their words and sentiments.
- ✓ Or, imagine a friend you care about. If they expressed this judgment about themselves, what kind and true things would you say to them?


📧 Bonus


Write your letter, then use FutureMe.org to send it back to yourself in 6 months, 1 year, or anytime in the future. When you receive it on that date, you can reflect on how far you’ve come!


TOOL #4 - Visualization Exercises




Visualization serves as a powerful tool to harness your mind's potential to shape thoughts, emotions, and behaviors—ultimately helping you to overcome impostor feelings and more effectively tackle your goals. Study after study reveal that visualization exercises increase self-confidence and self-efficacy.^{9,10}

 **Future Success Visualization:** Vividly imagine yourself achieving success in a specific goal or scenario. Close your eyes and visualize the desired outcome in detail, including the sights, sounds, and emotions associated with the potential achievement. This visualization helps create a positive mental image of success, boosting self-belief.

 **Mastery Visualization:** This exercise involves visualizing the process of mastering specific skills or tasks relevant to your founder journey. Imagine yourself engaging in the activities, overcoming challenges, and experiencing progress and success. By visualizing yourself mastering the necessary skills, you can build confidence and belief in your abilities.

 **Positive Feedback Visualization:** Visualize receiving positive feedback and recognition for your achievements and contributions. Imagine hearing praise, receiving an award, or being acknowledged by other founders, your board, or mentors. What words will they say? In what tone? This visualization exercise helps counteract self-doubt by focusing on positive external validation.

 **Role Model Visualization:** Who do you admire in the startup ecosystem? Imagine stepping into their shoes, experiencing their confidence, resilience, and accomplishments. Visualize yourself embodying their qualities and characteristics. This exercise will help you internalize and emulate the mindset and behaviors of someone you admire, fostering your self-belief.

TOOL #5 - Hone in on Your Mastery



You're in the position to build a company for a reason: you have skills, experience, and expertise that the world needs.

If you were to grab a pen and paper right now, how would you complete this prompt? **“I am really good at _____.”**

Maybe this is tough, especially if impostor thoughts are ringing in your mind.

How about this one: **“I am currently moving the needle in my business in the following ways: _____.”**

You *do* have mastery. There are things that you understand differently and more competently than other people.

Several of the tools in this guide will help you to get clear on your areas of strength (such as *Seeking Positive Feedback*, *Maintaining a Wins File*, *Building a Support System*). **Use those tools to get clear on your unique areas of mastery.**

The more you reflect on and practice your areas of mastery, the less likely you are to believe the impostor voice.

Take it from founders

“You have to retreat to a place where you feel real mastery.”
- Sriram Krishnan



[Hot Takes and Optimism from Tech's Top Power Couple](#)

Lenny's Podcast, Aarthi Ramamurthy and Sriram Krishnan



TOOL #6 - Maintain a Wins File



When impostor thoughts trick you into thinking you're a fraud, your wins file has the evidence to prove otherwise.

Create a folder on your computer, and add the following:

Screenshots:

- Emails with positive feedback (from mentors, customers, peers)
- Positive social media interactions (such as a comment from a colleague on a LinkedIn post)
- Text or slack conversations

Your own notes about:

- A great meeting with a mentor or peer
- Hitting milestones (fundraising, shipping an MVP, your first paying customer)
- Learnings you realize about yourself (perhaps as a result of your journaling and self reflection habits!)

Save anything that strikes you as a win, big or small.

Refer to this folder anytime you need a boost. Or schedule 10 minutes/week to add to & review it.

This is one way to “prove” to yourself that you’re not an impostor.

Take it from a founder



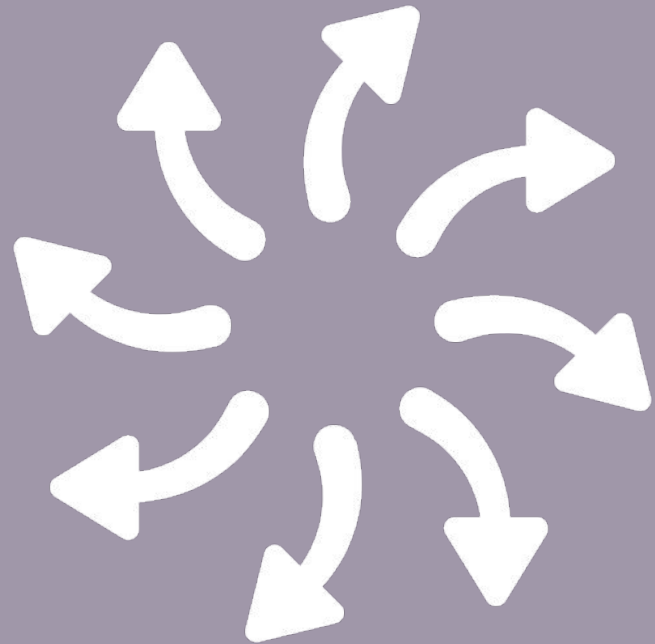
[How to Build Your Self-Confidence by Memorializing Praise & Rejection](#)

Notejoy's CEO, founder, Sachin Rekhi



Go Outward

Six tools for external work, with others



TOOL #7 - Create Your User Manual



A user manual is a personalized instruction manual about you—your working style, preferences, quirks, and desires. It can help you create strong relationships with your cofounders and team.

Creating your user manual is useful for a number of reasons, especially in a startup environment. But how can it help your impostor thoughts?

The better your team/cofounders understand you (and the better you understand them), the more likely you are to get rich, useful feedback.

The more clearly you understand your behaviors and habits, the more confident you can become in expressing those to others.

The more you create understanding with your team, the more confident and secure you'll feel in how you're leading (how you're perceived, how you're understood, how people work with you and offer feedback).

The key to a great user manual: make explicit how you like to receive feedback. Explain how you give feedback.

This feedback loop will help you to receive—and believe—the positive feedback shared with you.

Take it from a founder



Examples of founder user manuals:

[Gitlab CEO, Sid Sijbrandij](#)

[Stripe's COO, Claire Hughes Johnson](#)

[PatientLab's CEO, Jay Desai](#)

Templates

 [The Ready User Manual Template](#)

 [NOBL User Manual Template](#)

TOOL #8 - Seek Positive Feedback



As a founder, you're getting feedback all the time—from cofounders, board members, customers. And thanks to imposterism, there's a good chance you fixate on the critical, negative feedback while minimizing or ignoring the positive feedback.

When you pair positive feedback with self reflection, you create a more balanced, truthful view of yourself.¹¹

Ask a *trusted* and *supportive* person for feedback. Ask open-ended questions:

- What do you view as my strengths?
- If you were advising me on how to take my leadership from good to great, what would you suggest?
- If my skills and traits each had a volume knob, what would you suggest turning the volume UP on?
- What actions or efforts would you like to see from me in the next three months?
- Where are you noticing progress at the company?

When you receive specific feedback, it's easier to believe it—instead of deflect it.

Really *listen*. Receive what they're saying. Take notes. And thank them.

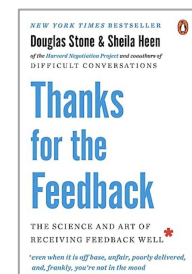
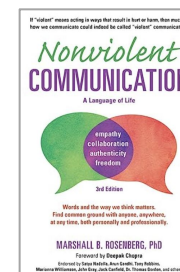
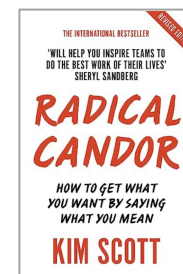
Get savvy with feedback



[Radical Candor](#): How to Get What You Want by Saying What You Mean

[Nonviolent Communication](#): Life-Changing Tools for Healthy Relationships

[Thanks for the Feedback](#): The Science and Art of Receiving Feedback Well



“As founders, we’re pretty good at convincing ourselves that we’re the only ones having this much trouble. Building a community of other founders was a major unlock for me. It was a big relief to find other founders who also felt like they didn’t have any idea what they were doing. Phew, none of us have it all figured out and we’re all making it up as we go. People who can say, ‘No, I’m with you. And here’s what I do about that problem.’ Founders need other founders.”

Emily Anhalt, Cofounder of Coa
[First Round Review](#)

TOOL #9 - Build a Support System



PEERS

There are countless communities for founders. From industry-specific masterminds to CEO dinners organized by local ecosystem leaders, to broad Slack channels—there’s likely a group for you.

As you develop relationships in a group of peers, you’ll naturally experience belonging and trust. This counteracts the loneliness of being a founder. Research emphasizes the role of social support in mitigating the negative impact of impostor feelings.¹²

Of the many types of peer group design, forums & masterminds create a potent way to reduce imposterism. In these facilitated conversations, peers can share the highs, lows, and everything in-between. Amongst the many benefits of participating in forums, the feeling of “I’m not alone” is one of the most commonly cited benefits.

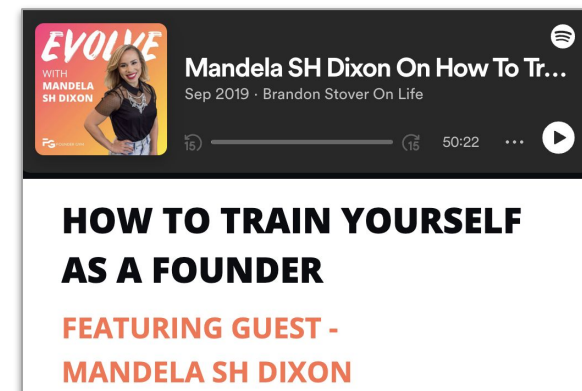
The following page features a sampling of founder peer communities.

Take it from a founder



[Evolve Podcast: How to Train Yourself as a Founder](#) - Mandela SH Dixon, CEO of Founder Gym

“You have to couple humility with ambition. It’s a weird balance. You have to believe in yourself, in your vision, in a world that does not yet exist. But the other part is humility. You have to have that self awareness to recognize where are you strong, where you need to get better. And you must surround yourself with people to help fill in those gaps and strengthen those weaknesses.”
- Mandela SH Dixon, Founder of Founder Gym



Where to Build a Support System



Peer forums and communities are offered by investors, accelerators, organizations in your local community, formal independent organizations, and informal groups. (Or, start one yourself!) Here are some peer experiences to explore:

[Entrepreneurs Organization](#)

A support network of more than 17,500 business founders and owners in 220 chapters and 70+ countries worldwide

[YPO](#)

The global leadership community of chief executives

[Reboot Bootcamps](#)

Weekend-long, in-person, small group boot camps for startup leaders

[Hustlers' Retreat](#)

A 4-day facilitated offsite retreat for startups

[Hampton](#)

A private, invitation-only network for entrepreneurs

[Chief](#)

Private membership network for women executive leaders

[Venwise](#)

For founders and senior executives in post series A venture-backed startups through post IPO companies

[Practical Founders](#)

A confidential group of 6-8 founders/CEOs who are creating SaaS companies without big funding

[Long Angle](#)

A global community for high net worth investors, including post-exit founders

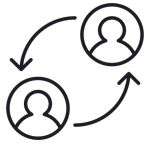
[Startups.com](#)

A community of thousands of founders, advisors, and experts to take your startup to the next level

[Startup Slack Communities](#)

400+ slack communities

TOOL #10 - Build a Support System



MENTORS

An effective mentor will offer you emotional support, guidance, and validation, helping you to develop confidence and navigate the challenges of startup life.¹³

- **Normalize imposter feelings:** Good mentors will normalize your impostor feelings, because they've fought the impostor monster, too.
- **Encouragement:** Mentors provide validation and reassurance, helping you recognize that self-doubt is not reflective of your true capabilities.
- **Feedback and Perspective:** Mentors offer constructive feedback and guidance, helping you gain an objective perspective on your accomplishments and areas for improvement. This feedback can counteract distorted self-perceptions associated with impostor syndrome.
- **Role Modeling:** Mentors serve as role models, demonstrating resilience, perseverance, and the ability to overcome challenges.
- **Accountability:** Mentors create a sense of accountability and provide a safe space for you to discuss your impostor feelings.

Take it from a founder

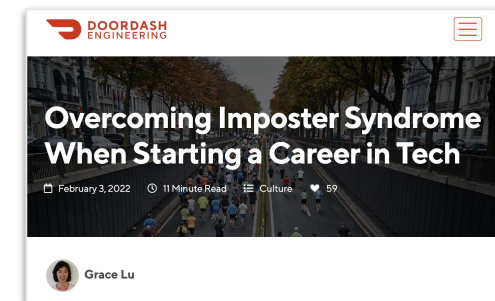
“I believe overcoming imposter syndrome is easier with the help of a mentor who has had similar experiences and seen comparable situations. ... My own mentors articulated for me what a new engineer typically experiences, pointing out universal situations versus those that were unique to me; this process allowed me to understand whether what I was experiencing was normal.”

Grace Lu, Engineer at DoorDash



[Overcoming Imposter Syndrome When Starting a Career in Tech,](#)

by Grace Lu



TOOL #11 - Develop Skills Outside Your Startup



Non-work skill development is a super-power of confident founders—and something that many founders neglect in the name of “I’m too busy.”

One of the harmful expectations in startup culture demands that founders de-prioritize life outside of the business—their relationships, health, friends, hobbies—to prove their hustle. But ignoring these foundational parts of your life won’t make you a better leader.

Developing work-life integration as you build your company is an iterative effort across many parts of your life. It’s challenging, but worth it.

Behavioral activation is a therapeutic framework that shows that by taking action first, emotions will follow. For example, engaging in a favorite hobby can change your brain state.¹⁴

What are your current hobbies? Keep ‘em up. Been curious about improv? Sign up for a class. Want move your body? Plan a regular workout with your cofounder. The creative muse striking you? Pick up a paintbrush.

Building new skills develops your emotional resilience and confidence across all other areas of your life.

And? *It’s fun.* You have permission to have fun!

Take it from a founder

One of my coaching clients, Andy Keil, is a founder. I noticed how his mood shifted during a coaching session anytime he talked about playing pickleball. So I asked how the game has impacted his self-confidence:



“Starting a hobby and building a community around a new sport has been super invigorating.

It’s been interesting to molt and evolve as my game (and confidence) has improved.

Where I’d say I’ve noticed it on the business side is it’s kind of fun to have the knowledge about a fast growing sport. Someone asked me about pro player, Anna Leigh Waters, as I got back from lunch and I rattled off a number of different stats and why she’s awesome. **I get to feel like I’m an expert in something that’s not just product.”**

TOOL #12 - Work With a Therapist or Coach



The tools in this guide are not meant to solve all aspects of personal development and mental health. Don't be shy to seek out further support—it could make all the difference.

THERAPY

If you're grappling with extreme feelings of impostorism—for example, your negative thoughts are persistent and preventing you from operating in your day-to-day, and/or they are tied closely to feelings of anxiety or depression, I warmly invite you to seek the support of a counselor or therapist.

COACHING

If your impostor thoughts are frustrating but not debilitating, individual or group coaching may offer an effective way to learn strategies to manage your mindset. Research shows that coaching can help clients with reframing toward a growth mindset, reduce impostor thoughts, and increase self confidence over time.⁷

Commit to Your Plan

“

“To find good work, no matter the path we have chosen, means coming out of hiding. Good work means visibility.”

David Whyte, *Crossing the Unknown Sea*

”

Making This Field Guide Work For You

Reading through this field guide isn't enough. **You must do the work.**

The three actions outlined in the intro, "How to Use This Field Guide," will help you create a path out of imposterism:



Get Curious



Commit



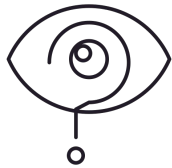
Capture

The following final pages feature prompts, action steps, and resources.

If you practice even *one* of the tools in this guide (though I encourage you to practice more!), you *will* shift your mindset. You'll become more self aware. You'll increase your emotional resiliency. You'll develop confidence.

I'd offer you a money-back guarantee if this Field Guide wasn't free. :)

1 Use Your Curiosity




Get Curious

Play with new perspectives you've read in this guide. Curiosity will be your most useful mindset.

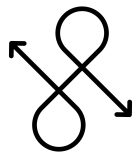
If you are taking one thing away from this guide, **what is that one thing?**

This guide may have brought up questions, ideas, emotions, challenges. Your invitation is to welcome all of these responses... and to get curious about them.

Challenge your assumptions—about the tools in this guide and whether they'll help you.. Ask yourself, “Could this work for *me*?”

 **Explore the “Further Study” section** of this guide for more articles, podcasts, and books about imposterism and the entrepreneurial journey.

2 Commit to Your Work



Commit

Commit to practice. You build internal resilience by proving to yourself that you can follow through on your commitments.

If you commit to consistent practice of these tools, you can change your self perception and reduce the experience of feeling like an impostor. In fact, it's *inevitable* that you'll change if you place your attention and intention on practice.

This could be one of the most important commitments you make to yourself as a founder.

On a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 is *no commitment*, and 10 is *I am committed to this without hesitation*, **how committed are you to practicing at least one of the tools?**

3 Capture Your Progress



Capture

Capture the tools, actions and insights you'd like to start with.

Choose at least one tool in this guide that you resonate with.

- ✓ Create an **action plan**: How will you implement this tool? What 'fieldwork' is required?
- ✓ **Block time** on your calendar for your fieldwork.
- ✓ Find a trusted, supportive person to **keep you accountable**. (Need some accountability? Reach out to me!)
- ✓ **Practice!**

 **Repeat with another tool.**

Go Deeper With Further Study

Founder Stories

- > [Founder Exposed: Opening Up About Startup Failures and Vulnerability](#), First Round Review
- > [How Impostor Syndrome Is My Career Superpower](#), by Barbara Oakley, Time
- > [Answering the Call of Our Lives](#), Alex Elle
- > [What Would Life Be Like If Rejection Didn't Hurt?](#), Cam Houser
- > [The Power of Acting 'As If' - Timeless and ethical strategies for expanding your comfort zone](#), Steve Schlafman
- > ["Imposter Syndrome Is Real And Nothing To Be Ashamed Of" 5 Leadership Lessons With Michael Litt CEO of Vidyard](#)

Podcasts & Videos

- > [Clearing up the Lies We Tell Ourselves](#), by Ali Schultz, Reboot.io
- > [Founders Podcast](#)
- > [How to Deal With Imposter Syndrome as a Startup Founder](#), Had to Ask, Startup Savant

Go Deeper With Further Study

Books

- Life Profitability: The New Measure of Entrepreneurial Success, by Adii Pienaar
- From Start-Up to Grown-Up: Grow Your Leadership to Grow Your Business, by Alisa Cohen
- The Secret Thoughts of Successful Women: Why Capable People Suffer from the Imposter Syndrome and How to Thrive in Spite of it, by Valerie Young
- Lost and Founder: A Painfully Honest Field Guide to the Startup World, by Rand Fishkin
- The Founder's Mentality: How to Overcome the Predictable Crises of Growth, by Chris Zook & James Allen
- Feeling Good: The New Mood Therapy, by David Burns
- The Gifts of Imperfection, by Brené Brown
- The Practice: Shipping Creative Work, by Seth Godin
- The Diversity Advantage: Fixing Gender Inequality in the Workplace, by Ruchika Tulshyan
- The Imposter Cure: Escape the Mind-Trap of Imposter Syndrome, by Jessamy Hibberd
- The Hard Thing About Hard Things, by Ben Horowitz
- Strangers to Ourselves: Unsettled Minds and the Stories That Make Us, by Rachel Aviv

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I gratefully acknowledge the research, thought, and work of those who have studied and explored the impostor phenomenon and related fields.

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I hope this Field Guide supports you in your founder journey.

Please reach out with questions, comments, or ideas.

If you'd like deeper support to implement what's in this guide, I offer 1-on-1 leadership development coaching. [Learn more.](#)

Cali Harris

cali@northstarrising.co

Explore more resources for founders: [North Star Rising](#)

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