

How Women Can Banish Self-Doubt at Work

Reminding ourselves of our accomplishments helps keep negative thoughts at bay



By **Sian Leah Beilock**

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Workplace stress is inevitable, but in many situations it is women who feel the pressures of their careers more acutely.

Beyond managing the expectations of homes and families, women — in their work — can have the less tangible feeling like they do not belong, a particularly common occurrence in male-dominated fields. Anybody who is viewed as being lower in social status, standing or importance in a field can experience rejection sensitivity: an anxiety about being undervalued or not taken seriously. This is not to say that women are the only individuals who experience this. But it is clear that women are frequently plagued by worries, especially when they find themselves in competitive situations where they have not previously been present in high numbers — such as in Silicon Valley start-ups or the US House of Representatives.

As the president of Barnard College in New York, and a cognitive scientist who has spent her career focused on why people doubt themselves, I am well-versed in the circumstances that can cause anxiety. And being in situations that highlight women's historical exclusion can send otherwise competent women into a spiral of self-doubt that negatively impacts how they process the world around them.

It starts at a young age. Researchers have found that by age six, girls are less likely than boys to believe that their sex is “really, really smart”. At the same time, these girls also start shying away from the activities that they think are reserved for the smartest children.

Later in life, if women think a certain profession is only accessible to men, they are less likely to pursue career opportunities in that field. Just by being cognisant of gender norms in a certain area, women can reinforce them and, unfortunately, limit themselves.

It is easy to be critical of ourselves and to ignore evidence of our successes. But we can also work to overcome our own insecurities. For every negative thought that crosses our mind, it is essential that we lift ourselves up and remind ourselves in very specific terms of what we have accomplished. This is so important because when negative thoughts go unattended, we end up reallocating our mental resources to manage our fears rather than focusing on the task at hand. This resource depletion is not just contained to what we are doing in the moment; the impact of this stress spills over and can have a longstanding impact on how women process new situations and use critical thinking skills.

To combat this, spend a few minutes jotting down your thoughts before a high-pressure situation. Getting these anxieties down on paper is like downloading them from your mind, as they are then less likely to pop up and distract you. It is also helpful to list your unique traits, what your strengths are and what makes you a well-rounded person. This helps put your mind at ease, but it will also put things in perspective and prove that there are more important things to focus on than just one test or PowerPoint presentation.

Mentors and support groups are great for helping us stay attuned to our successes. Keeping a running list of achievements and the positive feedback you receive is also a helpful resource to turn to whenever self-doubt creeps in. And if you reinterpret how your body reacts to stress, you can turn a negative (“I’m so worried about this project”) into a positive (“I am so excited to ace this project”).

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Keeping a sense of humour and a positive outlook even in the most stressful or frustrating situations can also be helpful. Remember, we only have a limited amount of focus. This is why doing two things at once, such as driving and talking on the phone, can be so dangerous. When you dwell on the negative, unwanted thoughts can flood your brain, preventing you from expending all of your mental resources on excelling at your work responsibilities.

We are working to instil this way of thinking in the students that I work with each day. We are preparing women to make their mark on the world, and that means not just teaching the skills needed to get a seat at the table, but the psychological tools to manage worry and self-doubt.

In doing this, we hope to see more women represented more equally across every career field. Because when women see other women operating on a level playing field, they will be less likely to doubt their own capabilities. They will happily — and rightfully — pursue their interests, including in the areas once dominated by men. And, perhaps most importantly, women will no longer doubt that they too belong.

The writer is president of Barnard College at Columbia University and was previously a professor of psychology at the University of Chicago.