- Hello! Welcome and thank you for being here today. My name is [NAME] and I am the [TITLE] at [FIRM].
- I'm here to talk to you today about a topic I would bet more people in this room are familiar with than not … Imposter Syndrome – what it is, and how you can overcome it to embrace your success while remaining authentically you.
- First, let me start with a little bit of my own background, so you don't have to sit there the whole time thinking to yourself "who the heck is this lady, and what does she know about feeling like an imposter?!"
- Like I said, my name is Andrea, and I am an Iowa girl, born and raised!
- I got my degree in Political Science and International Relations from [COLLEGE]. Once I finished up there, I headed to [LAW SCHOOL] where I earned my juris doctor.
- After I graduated, I did what anyone with a brand-new law degree would do … I took an entry-level marketing position at a financial services company – a field I had essentially zero knowledge or experience in!
- Luckily – for both myself and possibly the marketing team – I quickly found my way to [FIRM]'s Compliance department, which was a surprisingly perfect fit for someone who had just spent several years studying the nuances of the law.
- While that might seem like a relatively easy career beginning … I'd like to mention I started at [FIRM] in 2007, which if you'll remember, was about 30 seconds before the financial system went into a historic meltdown. People who had been in the industry for decades didn't know what to do, much less a 20-something-year-old recent graduate with no background, no training, no expertise, and not even much INTEREST in the securities industry! Saying it was a "trial by fire" would be putting it mildly.
- But as with all of life's trials, all I could do was put my head down and get through it. In retrospect, it may have been a blessing in disguise to be thrown into the deep end so early on, but it sure didn't feel that way at the time.
- So now, you've got me, a law school graduate, working in finance, an industry I knew essentially nothing about.
- Naturally, the powers that be at [FIRM] decided the best next step would be to send me, a woman in her 20's, to dozens of industry events to represent not just myself, but my entire company, to hundreds of mostly older, mostly male, and almost always more experienced securities professionals.
- Are you starting to see where I may have had some self-doubt creeping in?
- But, more than 16 years later, I'm still here, I'm still standing, and I've even worked my way up to Executive Vice President.
- Does this mean I have it all figured out, and I'm 100% confident and sure of myself all the time? Of course not. But it does mean I've learned a few things about believing in myself and finding success while staying true to who I am along the way.
- Before we can talk about how to overcome Imposter Syndrome, let's talk about what exactly Imposter Syndrome is.
- In spite of its serious-sounding name, it is not a medical diagnosis.
- What it is, is the inability to believe that one's success is deserved and has been legitimately achieved as a result of one's own efforts or skills.

- This term has actually been around since the '70's, when two female psychologists coined the term, and noted three critical attributes of the phenomenon[1]:
    - 1. Thinking other people have an exaggerated view of your abilities
    - 2. Fear of being exposed as a fraud
    - 3. The continuous tendency to downplay your achievements
- And while a little self-doubt isn't necessarily a bad thing, when you're dealing with this kind of chronic stress it can lead to anxiety, depression, burn-out, feelings of guilt, and even affect your willingness to take risks and try new things because you're so afraid of failing[2].
- The term was originally primarily associated with women, but we now know that Imposter Syndrome doesn't discriminate – people of all genders deal with this issue. In fact, studies have found about 82% of us deal with Imposter Syndrome at some point[2], and this includes people like Albert Einstein, Maya Angelou, Michelle Obama, Howard Schultz, Tom Hanks, Tina Fey … the list goes on and on[3].
- Imposter Syndrome can feel a little different for everyone, but there's five primary 'types':
    - **The Perfectionist**. This type of imposter syndrome involves believing that, unless you were absolutely perfect, you could have done better. You feel like an imposter because your perfectionistic traits make you believe that you're not as good as others might think you are.
    - **The Expert**. The expert feels like an imposter because they don't know everything there is to know about a particular subject or topic, or they haven't mastered every step in a process. Because there is more for them to learn, they don't feel as if they've reached the rank of "expert."
    - **The Natural Genius**. In this imposter syndrome type, you may feel like a fraud simply because you don't believe that you are naturally intelligent or competent. If you don't get something right the first time around or it takes you longer to master a skill, you feel like an imposter.
    - **The Soloist**. It's also possible to feel like an imposter if you had to ask for help to reach a certain level or status. Since you couldn't get there on your own, you question your competence or abilities.
    - **The Superperson**. This type of imposter syndrome involves believing that you must be the hardest worker or reach the highest levels of achievement possible and, if you don't, you are a fraud.
- Do any of these sound familiar? Maybe you identify with one or several of these 'types.'
- For me, personally, Imposter Syndrome made me feel like I had to be, act, or speak a certain way – especially when I was around people who were more experienced, and more accomplished, than I was. If I didn't, surely, they'd find out I didn't deserve to be there with them.
- But here's the catch – being, acting, and speaking how I thought other people wanted me to be actually made me feel like more of an imposter. Instead of working to better myself, to achieve what I wanted to achieve, and bringing my own unique viewpoint to my work, I ended up mimicking others around me. Not only was it unfulfilling, but you're never going to get the best

[1] https://hbr.org/2022/01/youre-not-an-imposter-youre-actually-pretty-amazing
[2] https://www.apa.org/monitor/2021/06/cover-impostor-phenomenon
[3] https://www.phoenixperform.com/single-post/18-famous-imposters

results when you are trying to be something for someone else – you're just going to end up being a second-rate version of them. And it means you're not tapping into your own unique abilities, creativity, and leadership qualities.

- Think about the most successful people you know – or know of. What do they all have in common? I'm willing to bet that all of them, every single one, has something that makes them unique, whether its their communication style, their ideas, their drive, their determination, their passion, their personality – whatever.
- They are successful because they are true to themselves, and that is what makes them stand out above the crowd.
- When you feel different from everyone else in the room, it's an understandable impulse to try to mask that. After all, as humans, we have an instinct, a drive, that tells us to fit in with the herd.
- But in doing that, we're inadvertently telling ourselves 'you, as you are, are not enough' when in reality the exact opposite of that is true! You, as you are, is exactly enough.
- Your age, your education, your experience, your race, gender, etc. do not determine your worth or skill, and in fact, may actually lend you insight that brings unique value to your abilities and perspective.
- Now, I will of course caveat here that sometimes it is beneficial to 'fit in' – it can be what helps you learn how to effectively communicate with others, or learn from people who have experience. But it shouldn't be at the cost of sacrificing who you are.
- Of course, this is way easier said than done. I can stand up here and tell you 'just be yourself! Be confident!' all day long and in reality, it's probably not going to change very much for you.
- But there are some more concrete strategies you can use to identify when you're experiencing Imposter Syndrome, and attack it from its very roots.
- First of all, the next time you're feeling like you don't belong, or you're not good enough, the first thing I want you to do is ask yourself "why?"
- What's triggering that feeling? I want you to actually check your surroundings and see if there's something that's sparking this wave of insecurity. We need to identify the root of the problem.
- Is there something making you feel like you don't 'belong'? Are you the oldest or youngest person in the room? Are you the only woman, only person of color? The newest or least experienced? Maybe you've never done a project like this before, or you're working with a new team. Have you just built up everyone around you so much in your own head that you feel like you don't measure up?
- Try to identify what it is that is making you feel like you don't belong, and remind yourself that those feelings, nine times out of ten, are not actually a reflection of your capabilities.
- Imagine if it were someone else in your shoes, what advice would you give them? Would you turn to them and say 'you probably can't do this because you're the only woman, or the youngest, or the newest, here?' Of course not! So why are you letting yourself think that?
- This is actually the second way you can fight Imposter Syndrome – stop the negative self-talk!
- Next time you catch yourself thinking you don't know how to do something, or you didn't deserve that promotion, or you're a giant fraud, or whatever negative internal dialogue you have going on, you need to make a conscious effort to change that thought.

- Instead of thinking "I have no idea how to lead this project," change that to something like "There might be a learning curve, but I've done hard things before, and certainly someone must believe I'm capable or I wouldn't be here."
- It might sound corny, but there's actually a neurological basis to this!
- I'm not a neuroscientist, so grant me a little leeway here, but essentially, when you repeat an action, or a thought, over and over again, it's creating a neural pathway in your brain. The more you think this thought, or repeat this action, the stronger that neural connection gets. And because our brains prefer to take the path of least resistance, they like to default to these stronger pathways. This is how habits are formed, and why they are so difficult to break – because it requires changing how our brain is physically circuiting!
- But just like we can develop habits, we can break them. Our brains remain plastic and moldable throughout our entire lives. Whoever said 'you can't teach an old dog new tricks,' was absolutely, unequivocally incorrect!
- The more and more we perform a certain action, or think a certain thought, the faster and more easily our brain is able to 'transport' these messages, and the easier it is for us to take an action, or feel a feeling.
- This is why when you want to be really good at something, what do you do? Practice, practice, practice[4]!
- When it comes to changing our negative self-talk thought loops, what we need to do is interrupt that ingrained, automatic thought loop and start creating and strengthening new neural pathways, until our new pathway becomes the default.
- There's three steps to doing this. First, you need to recognize when this negative self-talk is happening. Do you automatically start putting yourself down when you're around certain people? Or maybe like we just talked about, you start getting in this negative thought loop when you're the 'only' in a certain situation. Or maybe you get really overwhelmed when you're dealing with a problem you're not quite sure how to tackle.
- Noticing what triggers these thoughts is important, and it's also important to notice the form these thoughts take – what about yourself do you start to put down? Is it your abilities? Your work ethic? Your intelligence? What messages are you sending yourself about whether or not you're capable or deserving of success?
- You might be surprised at how challenging this step can be, and how much negativity you've been letting slip by on a daily basis. The goal here is really to just start to become aware of what you are thinking. With this awareness, we're taking that automatic thought-loop and creating just a little bit of space in there where we can then take the next step of challenging the negative thought.
- So if you notice you repeatedly engage in negative self-talk during certain activities or in certain situations, that's step one. Step two is questioning and casting doubt on those negative thoughts. "Is that true?" "Who says I can't?" "Haven't I done this in the past?" Just questioning the validity of the automatic negativity. Really challenge yourself – you probably don't actually have any 'proof' for these negative thoughts besides your own emotions.

[4] Clear, James. (2018). Atomic habits: an easy & proven way to build good habits & break bad ones . Penguin: Avery.

- The third step is replacing those negative thoughts with positive ones. It doesn't have to be fancy, a simple "I can do this," or "I earned this." Just a positive, affirming thought. Even if it feels fraudulent at first, eventually those new thoughts will start to sink in, create their own neural pathways, and become automatic, just like those old ones did.
- This is a process, and it takes work, but science actually shows that our brains are hardwired to perform at their best when they are positive – not negative, or even neutral. By re-wiring your thought patterns, you're actually making yourself more capable[5]. It's a self-fulfilling prophecy. Isn't that incredible?
- So next time you notice yourself thinking you're not good enough, make a conscious effort to change that internal dialogue. Eventually it will become automatic, and you'll benefit both in terms of happiness and ability.
- My next tip for fighting Imposter Syndrome is along a similar line, and that is: I want everyone in here right now to make a commitment to stop comparing yourself to everyone else.
- Especially in the days of social media, where it feels like you're constantly being reminded of everyone else's successes, whether it's perfectly-kept homes and expensive vacations on Instagram, squatting 200 lbs on TikTok, or sharing career milestones on LinkedIn, it is really easy to get sucked into the comparison trap.
- But it's not fair to compare your day-to-day life with the 'highlight reels' of thousands of other people. Stop looking at everyone else's 'best' and saying 'oh, I should be that way, too' because first of all, you don't know how long it took them to get there, how many times they fell down and had to stand back up, who helped them along the way, or even if it's just all perfectly-posed smoke in mirrors.
- Remind yourself that your strength might not be being a gourmand chef and making perfect, photogenic, all-organic chicken nuggets for your kids every night, or whatever, and that's okay, because you have your own things you're good at, and you're going to keep getting better, and finding more things you're good at, as time goes on.
- That's called growth, and even if it isn't Instagram-worthy, it's the most impressive thing you can do.
- We all have different paths and different strengths, and if watching someone else's path makes you feel less-than … unfollow.
- Or if you can't unfollow, make a conscious effort to remind yourself that:
    - 1. There's not a 'limited amount of success' to go around. Someone else being successful does not, in any way, take away from your own success. Your colleague getting published, your sibling getting a promotion, or your friend receiving an award – none of those things take away from what you have accomplished. If anything, you want those around you to be successful, because it shows you all of the different ways there are to be successful! Instead of using it as an excuse to think of yourself as 'less than,' use it as inspiration, and to help build your own roadmap to achieving your own success.
    - I also find this mindset useful when it comes to jealousy – it's easy to feel envious of others, even those who are closest to us. But what they have does not take away from what you have.
    - And …
    - 2. You don't have to compete with that person because you are not that person. The only person you're in competition with is yourself. If you have kids, do you pit them

[5] Achor, S. (2010). The Happiness Advantage: The seven principles of positive psychology that fuel success and performance at work.

against each other and make them compete for who can be Mom or Dad's favorite? I hope not. You probably appreciate their own unique strengths, quirks, and perspectives, and believe that they'll each be successful in their own right. So why not grant yourself that same perspective?

- Which brings me to my next tip … be your own cheerleader!
- This is similar to what I was saying about changing your negative internal dialogue, but it takes it one step further.
- I want you to start keeping track of your own wins.
- Everyone here knows how to use a computer, so I want you to create a system – it can be a Google doc, it can be a spreadsheet, it can be a folder in your email – where you physically keep track of your successes.
- When someone gives you kudos, or you get a shout-out in the company meeting, or maybe you just experience your own personal victory and crush that project or do something you didn't think you were capable of, document it, and keep it in that doc or folder.
- When you're having a bad day, or just not feeling like your best, most confident self, you can refer back to this collection of wins, and give yourself concrete proof that you are good enough, that you can handle this, and that you do deserve this.
- Our brains are naturally wired to pay more attention to things that are negative than positive; this is called the 'negativity bias.' We take negative feedback more to heart, we tend to believe negative news more, we tend to remember more negative experiences, and take into account more negative factors than positive when making decisions[6,7].
- Evolutionarily, this made sense, because we needed to notice things that were bad and threatening in order to survive. But while it may have served us well back when we were hunting and gathering and sleeping in caves, these days it's often more of a hindrance than a help. Remember what I said earlier about positive brains actually performing better than brains that are negative or neutral? Decades of studies have shown that those experiencing a positive affect show patterns of thought that are more flexible, creative, integrative, and efficient[8]. Positive mindsets have also been linked to better psychological resilience, and being positive can actually help un-do some of the negative physical consequences brought on by negativity and stress[8].
- Making a conscious effort to keep track of the positive feedback we receive, and making it a point to review it from time to time, will help fight your brain's natural inclination to prioritize the negative, and in turn, will help you expand your abilities even more.
- Plus, it's always nice to be able to refer back to your wins whenever you're applying for a program, or an award, or a new position.
- By reviewing your own past successes, you can actually help yourself be more successful in the future!
- Now that we've got the internal aspect covered, let's look to those around us. What does your support system look like? Who do you surround yourself with, and how do they support your sense of self and your goals? Consider this on both a personal and professional level.
- Maintaining healthy, positive social connections is one of the best things we can do for our mental and physical health – did you know a lack of social contact can add 30 points onto your

[6] https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3652533/

[7] https://www.verywellmind.com/negative-bias-4589618

[8]Fredrickson BL. The role of positive emotions in positive psychology. The broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions. Am Psychol. 2001 Mar;56(3):218-26. doi: 10.1037//0003-066x.56.3.218. PMID: 11315248; PMCID: PMC3122271.

blood pressure? And a 70-year Harvard study found that social bonds predicted not only "overall happiness, but also eventual career achievement, occupational success, and income." [5]

- And the quality of those social relationships is important, too. Do you have friends and family that help build you up? If you're constantly surrounding yourself with people who are negative, or people who are always ready to put you down, how can you expect yourself not to fall victim to that same mentality?
- Our social networks influence our own behaviors, whether we're aware of it or not. Behavior is contagious, so if you want to be confident, successful, and positive, not only should you try to model that for those around you – because they can positively influence them – but make sure you're surrounding yourself with people who portray the mentality and behaviors you want for yourself.[9]
- Obviously, it might not be practical to cut every negative person out of your life, but it can help to at least recognize who those people are, and maybe start devoting a little bit more of your energy to cultivating an inner circle who will build you up and inspire you, not tear you down or try to hold you back.
- And professionally, do you have a team you can count on to support you?
- Having people we can count on at work actually has been shown to fuel innovation, creativity, and productivity. In fact, "a study of over 350 employees in 60 business units at a financial services company found that the greatest predictor if a team's achievement was how the members felt about one another."[5] Having people around you who believe in your abilities will not only help you believe in your own abilities, but it can actually motivate you to improve beyond what you're currently capable of.
- And when you think about it, the best leaders in our society don't do it alone. They're successful because they know how to surround themselves with people who are intelligent, who have more experience, who think differently than they do, and they aren't afraid to ask for their input and learn from what they have to say.
- Think of it as your own personal 'Presidential Cabinet' if you will. Not only will this help you grow as a leader and as a person, but it can also help you feel more confident in your decision-making, when you know that people you trust and value have given you their input.
- This next tip might be the hardest one of all, and I'm sure some of you will tune this out as soon as I say it, but …
- You need to embrace failure.
- Accept the fact that you're going to fail. You're human. We're all human. It happens. None of us are perfect, and I guarantee you everyone in this room at some point has made a mistake.
- Failure is inevitable. Absorb that. Take a deep breath and really absorb it. No matter what you do, somewhere along the way, you're going to make a mistake.
- But making the mistake, or experiencing failure, isn't what breaks people. What actually matters is how you handle it.
- Are you someone who tries to pass the blame onto others? "Oh, if so-and-so had done this," or "Well, so-and-so should have checked that …" That right there, that mindset, is how you set yourself up to lose. Even if someone else did play a role, even if the failure was ultimately their fault, it's crucial to always consider the rule you played; not because you should feel bad, or berate yourself, or say "see, self? I knew you weren't good enough," but because the only time failing is truly a failure is when we don't use it as a learning opportunity.

[9] https://www.psychologicalscience.org/observer/contagious-behavior

- I'm sure you've heard stories about people who are wildly successful now who had to deal with failure and rejection before they were able to achieve what they did.
- Henry Ford's first two auto companies failed! Oprah Winfrey was fired as a television anchor! Harry Potter and Star Wars were rejected multiple times before someone finally took a chance on them! The list goes on and on.
- Failing does not mean you are a failure!
- When we embrace the possibility, or even the probability, that we are going to fail, and see it as an opportunity for growth rather than as proof that we are bad or unworthy, we change the meaning of failure. We remove the 'fear' aspect. We turn it into a tool we can leverage instead of a punishment we are trying to avoid.
- So accept the fact you're going to fail, and embrace that. Get excited at the opportunity to fail. Own your failures. Use them as lessons learned, and you will always come out on top, and you will always come out a better version of yourself.
- This brings me to my next point …
- When you are staring down a problem you don't know if you can solve, or you're second-guessing putting yourself out there for that promotion, or sharing your great business idea, or taking whatever risk it is that scares you …
- My number one piece of advice? Just do it.
- Whatever 'it' is, push through the uncomfortableness of it, and just do it. Stop second-guessing, stop saying "well, maybe after I achieve XYZ I'll be ready …"
- You're probably never going to 'feel' ready. You just need to take a chance and do it. Maybe you succeed, maybe you don't – but remember, we just talked about how failure is actually opportunity in disguise. Failure is not the enemy. Defeat is the enemy, and you are the only person who gets to decide if you are defeated or not.
- Whether you want to acknowledge it or not, every person in here has some part of themselves that believes they're capable – or else you wouldn't be here. If you didn't think you were capable of doing what you do, or doing more than you currently do, you wouldn't put in the effort and take the time out of your day to come to an event like this.
- Take that little voice inside of you that says "I can" and *listen to that voice.* I can almost guarantee it has served you well more often than not in the past, so why aren't you listening to it more?
- And you know what? Maybe you don't have the experience, or maybe you don't know everything, or maybe you're not always perfect, but the only way you're going to get that experience, or learn what you don't know, or get better, is by doing whatever it is that is making you doubt yourself.
- As the saying goes, 'fake it 'til you make it.' Learn by doing. Channel your doubt into determination, and use that to fuel the fire to get better – not as a reason to hide and turn down opportunities.
- My last piece of advice was also my first piece of advice, and that is to remain authentically you.
- Embrace your idiosyncrasies, they are what make you who you are. Embrace your shortcomings, they are where you have room to grow.
- Stop worrying about fitting into the mold you have in your mind of 'who you ought to be by now.' You are the only person measuring yourself against that mold. Break the mold! Be bold, be confident, take chances.
- If you fall down, get up again. The only reason others will judge you is if they
    - a. Are using you to mask their own insecurities or …
    - b. You aren't able to handle your setbacks and adversities with grace.

- Take ownership of where you fall short, but just as importantly, take ownership of where you stand out! Treat others with the same grace, the same kindness, that you want to be treated with. When we cultivate this positivity, when we cultivate a culture where people aren't afraid to be themselves, to take chances, we are cultivating a culture of success. We are creating an environment where people can not just function, but thrive.
- And don't be afraid to step out of your comfort zone. In fact, try to do it as often as possible. If you want to reach your full potential, you need to give yourself the opportunity to reach that potential. You don't reach your potential by sitting back, taking it easy, and never doing anything that challenges you. You reach your potential when you take chances, by trying new things, and by letting the best version of yourself develop and shine through in everything you do.
- Think about yourself 10, 20, or even 30 years ago. Would you have imagined you would become the person you are today? Think of the adversity, the challenges you've handled along the way and how they have shaped you.
- I mean, 25-year-old [NAME] would have never imagined, on my first day stepping into the [FIRM] offices, that I would end up as an [TITLE]. When I had no idea what I was doing, surrounded by all of those people at industry events who knew more than me, who were older than me, I would never have thought I would be a "40 Under 40" honoree for *[PUBLICATION]*! And you know what? Even with a J.D., three FINRA licenses, and 15 years of experience, I still don't always know what I'm doing, or always feel sure I'm the right woman for the job.
- But you know what? I do it anyways. And it seems to be working out for me so far.
- My challenge to you is to do the same. Embrace who you are, do something that scares you, and don't for one minute tell yourself you're not capable or good enough to reach the level of success that you want. There are no Imposters here; there are only capable, brilliant people who deserve the chance to shine.
- Thank you so much for being here today!