

Episode 51: Revisiting Imposter Syndrome
Released on September 10, 2021

[00:00:01.64] ANTHONY SIS: The opinions expressed by the guests and contributors of this podcast are their own and do not necessarily reflect the views of Cornell University or its employees.

[00:00:11.15] [MUSIC PLAYING]

[00:00:13.36] Welcome to the Inclusive Excellence Podcast. On today's show, we'll be revisiting one of our favorite episodes from season two of the series. We'll share why we chose this episode and what has changed since we first recorded the original one. My name is Anthony Sis.

[00:00:29.85] TORAL PATEL: My name is Toral Patel.

[00:00:31.35] ANTHONY SIS: And you're listening to the Inclusive Excellence Podcast.

[00:00:35.11] [MUSIC PLAYING]

[00:00:45.85] Hey, Toral. How's it going?

[00:00:47.51] TORAL PATEL: Hey, hey. How are you?

[00:00:49.13] ANTHONY SIS: You know, I'm glad that we took a little bit of time off. We took about a month.

[00:00:54.89] TORAL PATEL: We did.

[00:00:55.58] ANTHONY SIS: Yeah. So what we did-- the last episode was on Disability Independence Day, which I'm not going to lie, had a lot of fun editing and recording. So I'm glad with the way that turned out. But did you know that that was our 50th episode?

[00:01:07.49] TORAL PATEL: Oh, no. I had no idea we reached 50 already.

[00:01:10.28] ANTHONY SIS: We sure did. So because of that, I just thought it would be a neat idea to maybe revisit some episodes that we may have recorded in previous seasons that is worth revisiting, I would say-- and not to say that none of the episodes are worth revisiting. I think all of them are. But definitely wanted to highlight some of the ones, some of our favorite ones. So I took the initiative to select one for season two.

[00:01:36.56] And this is actually a pretty special one because this was actually not your first, but your second episode that you recorded as co-host of the podcast. Do you remember that?

[00:01:45.98] TORAL PATEL: I was still nervous back then.

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[00:01:47.66] ANTHONY SIS: You were. I guess what's special about it too is that this was your first episode interviewing guests. So you could definitely tell how nervous you were in the beginning.

[00:01:58.19] TORAL PATEL: Still nervous, but I think a little bit more comfortable in this space than I was back then, for sure.

[00:02:03.14] ANTHONY SIS: You got to give yourself a little bit more credit than that, though. So you've definitely grown. You've definitely evolved. But this episode, aside from that content and aside from thinking about this is the first episode you had interviewed guests with, it's a topic that I feel like still comes up time after time again, no matter what. And so the topic was on imposter syndrome. And in season two, we interviewed two colleagues of ours here at Cornell to talk about this topic. And both of them were women of color, Jen Majka and Jess Krom-- Jess Krom, who is no longer working at Cornell, but we send a lot of love. And I just think it's worth revisiting to talk about. So let's dive deeper into it, yeah?

[00:02:43.68] TORAL PATEL: Yeah, definitely.

[00:02:44.93] ANTHONY SIS: So episode 14 is "Am I Good Enough-- Overcoming the Imposter Within." And I loved this episode. So first and foremost, it's two women of color. And I think there's something unique about that experience to talk about imposter and feeling like an impostor in certain spaces as a woman of color. So I just think that intersection of identities is so crucial to really highlight and elevate.

[00:03:09.62] And I'll be honest and tell you that this was one where I had some ideas for some questions, and then it was one of those rare opportunities when you give it to the guests, they just bring it to like a whole other level. So the level of vulnerability that Jess shared at the time, I remember, because she was expecting her child, and just her vulnerability and what she shared about her process with that in the episode, as well as being a woman of color, being a Black woman in the workplace, was just so amazing to me. She really set the bar high. And I was like, wow, where do I even go from here? What do I share in this episode?

[00:03:44.42] So that and then Jen Majka, of course, with her knowledge and her expertise and the way she articulated her experience with this topic to me, it was just so profound. And I still think about this to this day. And it's an episode that I still share with our colleagues every now and then too. But the topic of imposter syndrome just doesn't go away. I mean, what do you think, Toral?

[00:04:04.16] TORAL PATEL: I agree with you. And I think what we've all experienced with the pandemic, I think it's more forefront for everybody. We're starting to come back to work. We're starting to come back to what we used to consider a normal working environment. And I think that imposter syndrome is showing up again because not everybody feels safe. So I agree with you that this is definitely one of these topics that they're always present in anybody's life based on what's happening.

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[00:04:29.28] So it's not something that you overcome once, and then, oh I'm, done with imposter syndrome for the rest of my life. It doesn't work that way. So I agree. That was also one of my favorite episodes that we've ever done as well. I know you mentioned earlier that we had two women of color, but I also want to point out that we had four individuals of color talking about the imposter syndrome as well.

[00:04:48.32] ANTHONY SIS: Yeah. I mean, it's so true. Like I said, it's just one of those episodes where I listen to it, and I'm just like, wow. They shared so much about themselves in that episode, and I'm really thankful for Jen and for Jess, who set that bar really high. And so Toral, I have a question for you. Because this is also, like I said, your first episode when you interviewed guests. So when you listen to this episode again, what were some thoughts, reflections about your own growing, your own experience?

[00:05:17.87] TORAL PATEL: I think the way I described it earlier is that I was nervous. But I think probably another way to describe that was that I was probably right in the midst of feeling the imposter syndrome right as I was recording the episode because I was so nervous. It's not something that I felt comfortable in at the time. So I was probably experiencing it as we were talking about it. And now that we've had a couple of years to look back on it, I realized that the reason-- I described it as being nervous, but I was actually feeling the impostor syndrome right then and there as we were recording.

[00:05:49.52] And so since then, I do agree with you that I'm not as nervous as I used to be in terms of recording. I think it still takes something out of me to be in this space. That will always be the case just because it's not a comfort area for me. But I think I've come to the other side that it's probably more than one thing. It's not just being in front of the microphone, but it's also I'm more comfortable being vulnerable-- and I don't even know-- in front of thousands of people who might be listening to this podcast. I'm more comfortable in that space.

[00:06:19.86] And so I think this is definitely an imposter syndrome that I'm overcoming. And I think it'll probably be-- and "overcoming" will be the right word for as long as I continue to be a co-host. There's something that I will constantly have to overcome. I will never be at the same comfort level as maybe you or others who have done this kind of work before. So I think it'll be a constant feeling for me. But I'm definitely in a much better place in terms of my comfort level than I was back then.

[00:06:48.02] ANTHONY SIS: Yeah. I honestly can't even think of a better way to describe imposter syndrome, honestly. So I say let's just get to it. And we hope that you enjoy revisiting this episode of "Am I Good Enough-- Overcoming the Imposter Within."

[00:07:02.47] [MUSIC PLAYING]

[00:07:08.33] So on today's episode, we have two special guests who are joining us and continuing the conversation around a topic related to diversity and inclusion. In our last episode, you may have remembered that we talked about the topic of imposter syndrome in terms of what it means, our experiences with this concept with Toral and I,

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and also how it has impacted and shaped us in terms of the workplace. And so we're extremely excited to talk more about this topic with our guests, Jennifer Majka and Jessica Krom on today's episode. So Jen and Jess, thank you all for being here today. Can you please share with our listeners a little bit about yourselves in terms of your role here at Cornell, the pronouns that you use, and a brief description of your career path that has landed you here at Cornell?

[00:07:54.98] JENNIFER MAJKA: Sure. Thank you for having me, Anthony and Toral. This is Jen, and I go by she, her, hers. And I am the Director of Diversity Inclusion for the Charles H. Dyson School of Applied Economics and Management and the Cornell SC Johnson College of Business. I have been in this newly created role for about a year and a half. And prior to this role, I served as an assistant dean in the West Campus house system. And I've been at Cornell for about 12 years.

[00:08:22.73] Prior to Cornell, I was living in Northern California, working in higher education administration. I have a master's degree and MA in education with a special emphasis in multicultural training and development, and I am a PhD candidate studying education and social justice. How I got to where I am right now is I have a strong passion for social justice education, and I've weaved that into everything that I've done prior to the current job that I have right now.

[00:08:56.22] ANTHONY SIS: That's amazing. Awesome. Congratulations. A PhD candidate-- so that means you're almost done, right?

[00:09:01.35] JENNIFER MAJKA: Ooh. We'll talk about that more later.

[00:09:03.92] ANTHONY SIS: OK. Well, I know candidacy is a big thing in the PhD jargon, so--

[00:09:07.37] JENNIFER MAJKA: Yes, I am ABD. And yes, I'm a candidate.

[00:09:09.56] ANTHONY SIS: OK, perfect, perfect. Awesome. And last but not least--

[00:09:12.77] JESSICA KROM: Perfect. My name is Jess Krom. And talk about imposter syndrome. Going behind Jen, I'm like, dang! But I love Jen, so it's perfect. And I'm super excited for all the success that she's experienced thus far.

[00:09:25.04] My role at the Johnson Graduate School of Management is the associate director of diversity and inclusion, specifically supporting our MBA candidates and faculty and staff. So I like to think that I have the best job in all of Sage Hall. I get to recruit students, and I also get to be a part of their student experiences. I love, love, love everything that I get to do.

[00:09:45.62] The job is hard. The job is emotional. The job is laborious. But it's challenging, and I get to impact the lives of students. I've been in Ithaca. I like to count

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my time by winters because I'm from Texas, so going into my fourth winter. It's going to be OK, y'all. That's what I tell myself every single winter.

[00:10:04.52] And the way that I got to Cornell-- I have been in higher education for all of my career. I like to make the joke that no one wakes up saying, I want to be an enrollment management professional. That's not what you do at six years old when you're making up different career paths. But for me, being a first-generation college student and having to navigate that path with support and with resources, I immediately found a continued value in education and an opportunity to help other folks who were like me, or similar to me in different ways, navigate the process of getting into school and not only getting into the program, but also being incredibly successful in these programs. So worked in higher education in Texas at my alma mater for quite some time and then took the position to work in the MBA space here at Cornell. So it's been great so far.

[00:10:53.24] ANTHONY SIS: Awesome. And did you say your pronouns?

[00:10:55.02] JESSICA KROM: Oh, no, I didn't. Oh, my goodness. My pronouns are she, her, hers.

[00:10:59.28] ANTHONY SIS: Awesome. Thank you both for sharing. So before we get started on this conversation of imposter syndrome, I do have a question of the day for all of us to answer. So now that we've been all formally introduced to the listeners, we're all going to answer this next question. So it's a tradition that we do for every podcast episode, and nobody knows what the question is other than the person who creates the question or brings us the question. So in that case, it's me again. But next time, it'll be Toral, and then I will know what the question of the day will be.

[00:11:27.80] So the question is, name a recent success or accomplishment that you take ownership of and what made it so successful. I think this is a really good question, especially in the context of imposter syndrome. Sometimes when we experience imposter syndrome, we don't-- it's a hard or difficult thing, rather, for us to take ownership of something that we actually put a lot of effort in. So I'll go first, actually, because mine was fairly recent.

[00:11:52.91] So I just did a presentation in Miami about developing a diversity, equity, and inclusion training strategy. And the topic was something that this organization I used to be a part of in Miami when I lived there-- I was asked to present on this topic at the summit that they host every year. And so particularly with this topic, I was so stressed out about it that I really didn't put all of the components of putting the presentation together until, I want to say, two or three days before I actually had to do the presentation.

[00:12:21.35] Now, mind you, I also had my work responsibilities, and I had other things to do. So I found it very difficult to just sit down and dedicate time to putting this presentation together because I felt like I-- it wasn't so much that I didn't know what to

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say. I just felt like I wasn't competent enough to be able to speak on this topic. And so that was the biggest challenge for me. And I actually expressed this to the organizers afterwards, that it was something that I just could not get over. I could not get over the fact that here I am presenting on this particular topic. I just started this role where I'm doing something similar in terms of helping develop trainings and understand what strategic thinking towards looking at trainings could look like around diversity, equity, and inclusion. And I told them about it afterwards.

[00:13:00.24] But literally, the first thing he said when he saw me and I was about to say this comment was-- he's like, the fact that I opened the door-- everyone had their phones out, taking pictures of the very last slide that you had on your presentation-- clearly says something about the content and about what the people really took away from that particular presentation. Nonetheless, I still felt it throughout the entire presentation. But the fact that he then also told me-- one of the organizers told me there were senior-level folks, executives in that space.

[00:13:26.91] It was just this whole sense of, like, wow, completely from imposter syndrome to now feeling like, oh, my goodness. I own this. This is something I can actually speak on. I felt confident about it afterwards. It's something that I'm like, OK, I just need to now sit with it and say that's something I overcame and that that was a successful presentation that I did.

[00:13:45.33] JESSICA KROM: That's awesome.

[00:13:46.08] ANTHONY SIS: Yeah, yeah.

[00:13:46.65] JESSICA KROM: That's great.

[00:13:48.87] So this one is a little bit personal for me. So as you all know, I'm pregnant. And I'm super, super excited to be a mom. But my journey to motherhood was untraditional, which I think is kind of becoming the new tradition, right? Infertility is just a thing that is out there. And I think there's a little bit more support around how you journey into the space of motherhood.

[00:14:11.77] So for myself and for my husband, we were able to successfully navigate the IVF process, which is incredibly-- I mean, it's just-- it's emotional. It's emotional. It's heavy. It's expensive. It's all of these things. Is it going to work? Is it not going to work? Is this my last chance? All of these things.

[00:14:32.01] And I feel like I most struggled with imposter syndrome in my identity as a woman. Do I really count because I haven't been able to have a baby? All of these different things. And when we successfully navigated IVF and we found out we were pregnant, I still struggled with this identity of, did I cheat? Is this not the right way to navigate this? I just had a lot of really crazy thoughts in my head.

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[00:14:57.63] And over the last couple of weeks, as I've shared this pregnancy with so many people, I have been completely amazed and entirely blessed by so many people who have just celebrated this pregnancy alongside myself and my husband. And I think that's the biggest piece of support that comes with imposter syndrome, is seeing all the people who celebrate you as you try to journey through what you believe is not-- what you believe to be inadequate.

[00:15:26.28] So for me, over the past couple of weeks, everyone is just like, oh, my gosh, you're showing, or it's pictures, how are you feeling, everyone checking up on me and on us. And I would say in the past couple of months, I've really leaned into the truth, my truth, walking in my truth that, yes, I am a mother. It doesn't matter how it happened. It doesn't matter when it happened. And with all of the support that we've experienced thus far and all the people who have celebrated alongside us, those are the things that help me to journey past imposter syndrome of, yes, I am a mom, and it doesn't matter how it happened.

[00:16:00.12] If IVF didn't work and we adopted or whatever journey we had to take in order to bring a baby home or to have a child in our space, that's a journey that we were going to take in order to be parents. And so I would say over the past couple of months, and as we went through this process, that would be my biggest successes, is leaning in and owning my own truth that I am going to be a mother to a beautiful baby boy in the next couple of months. And I couldn't be more excited about that. So yeah.

[00:16:28.20] ANTHONY SIS: That's amazing. Congratulations. And Jess, just to clarify too, you said IVF. Can you just clarify to our listeners maybe what IVF stands for?

[00:16:37.38] JESSICA KROM: Yeah. So I'm not a doctor, and I'm going to be honest-- throughout this entire process, they kept throwing all of these letters at us, all of this medical mumbo-jumbo. So essentially, what we did was I was on medication for quite some time, took all the shots, all that good stuff. And essentially, the doctor will go in-- got my eggs, all of my eggs that were viable, my husband's semen, put those together outside of our bodies, and then put the fertilized egg back into me. So that's the IVF process. Maybe that's a little too graphic. I don't know if that's what you all signed up for.

[00:17:10.74] ANTHONY SIS: Thank you for sharing the process. I was just wondering if you could just let people know what it stands.

[00:17:14.91] JESSICA KROM: IVF is In Vitro Fertilization. My bad.

[00:17:18.39] ANTHONY SIS: It's all good. Thank you.

[00:17:19.47] JESSICA KROM: Well, there's so many different lovers out there-- IVF, IUI. And so there's so many different things. But I will say that throughout this process, being an employee of Cornell University was instrumental in our process-- the insurance, the support, everything that's there. This process can be financially debilitating or a barrier for many folks. And honestly, I don't know if we would have been

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able to do it without the benefits that we have here at Cornell. So we're super thankful. So we might name this-- this kid's middle name might be Cornell. You never know. No, it's not going to be.

[00:17:53.89] JENNIFER MAJKA: It's Jen here. I think my story goes back-- I will tell the backstory, but it's relevant to something recent to your question. So the back story is I started this position in February, 2018 It's a brand-new position. And I was hired to basically build a program and an office from scratch. I was very reluctant to take the position to begin with because I wasn't confident that I would have the institutional support to do the D&I work that needed to be done. And all of us in this room work in D&I. We know that we need that support system.

[00:18:33.04] But David Wooten convinced me to take the position, and I did. And I was very grateful for him and to have his guidance and leadership in my first few months on the job. David recommended that I look into University of Michigan Ross Business School and look at what they were doing. And they were hosting a diversity week, an annual diversity week. And so I was like, oh, that's a great idea. Maybe I should try that at the Dyson School.

[00:19:03.52] And so I did it, and it was great. But the second time around, I started planning in December, January. And I had this idea that I wanted to bring the workplace to our students. And our students are very driven and very motivated by their future careers. And so I wanted Diversity Week this year to be directly relevant and applicable to their future careers, and I wanted them to learn about what's going on within D&I in the workplace. And so I invited seven corporate partners to come to campus, and they did various workshops. And then Anthony, thank you very much for also doing a workshop during our Business Club Summit-- it was awesome-- on allyship.

[00:19:55.03] And so I would say also that in my work in the past year and a half and laying this foundation, I had to do a lot of groundwork with students and gaining their trust and also using students in their peer networks to get people to come to events. So on the graduate side, I think that students are naturally inclined to come to these things. On the undergrad side, it's a little bit more challenging. So we'll always offer food, but that's not often the best incentive to get them there.

[00:20:33.44] So I tried to really develop these relationships with students and trying to get them to get their peers involved and interested in coming to Diversity Week. So it was very, very successful. We had several workshops that had over 110 participants. The feedback that's come in so far has been very positive. And always going into these things, I always have this dread and this fear that nobody's going to show up or that it's going to bomb or that it's like-- and so I'm coming out the other end. And there's a lot going on that week outside of Diversity Week as well that I was dealing with. But coming out on the other end, I'm just very glad that it was successful.

[00:21:15.79] ANTHONY SIS: And let me just say, as somebody who went to a couple-- I believe two or three additional events during that week-- it was awesome. It was

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extremely successful, in my opinion, just to see the engagement not just from the students, but from other faculty and staff who were there to support as well.

[00:21:29.14] JESSICA KROM: Great. Thank you.

[00:21:30.52] ANTHONY SIS: Kudos to you on that.

[00:21:31.66] JENNIFER MAJKA: OK. So I'm actually going to say that I've had a pretty successful month. I had two major projects that I accomplished, but the one that I want to talk about is related to diversity and inclusion. I was challenged by my supervisor. So just to give you guys a little bit of backstory, we received an email from our Recreation Services with the monthly challenge for March, the walking challenge and so forth. And she forwarded that email to me and said, hey, can we do something like this for diversity and inclusion?

[00:21:59.45] So for about a month or so, I tried to do research to see what other organizations out there are doing and if there's any types of challenges related to D&I work. And what I found was mostly slogan contests or photo contests and that kind of stuff. So I had to dig deep to come up with something that was challenging. And so we implemented this within the division that reports to Mary Opperman. So everybody that reports to her-- or whoever wanted to could participate. But essentially, what we did was come up with four challenges a week, four different challenges a week related to diversity and inclusion.

[00:22:37.25] So each member had to form a team. So you can form teams up to four or five people. And everybody on the team had to complete two of the four challenges. And so they would receive an email Monday morning with the challenges of the week. They have to complete the challenges, submit a survey at the end of the week. And the following Monday, they get four new challenges. And so we did this for an entire Month. And every week, we picked a winner. But it was a great way for-- team building is one, but two is learn about all of the resources we have here on campus, also put them out of their comfort zone in terms of D&I work. So it was just a great opportunity for people to learn outside of a classroom setting.

[00:23:15.69] And so that was very, very successful. We had over 100 participants in the challenge, 26 different teams. And so I just felt very proud of it. It was something completely different. Nobody has ever done that kind of stuff before. So it's just something that I'm very proud of, and I believe it was very successful.

[00:23:33.83] ANTHONY SIS: It definitely was, as somebody who can attest to your work. Yes. Awesome. Well, thank you all for answering the question of the day. And now I'm going to hand it over to Toral to introduce our conversation specifically about imposter syndrome.

[00:23:48.68] TORAL PATEL: OK, perfect. So Jen and Jess, I'm going to ask you just a general question to start the conversation. How do you both define imposter syndrome?

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[00:23:57.23] JESSICA KROM: I think for me, it's just not feeling like you're good enough. Anytime you walk into a space, you instantly start comparing yourself to everyone in the room, or you instantly start finding a way in which to measure how you are not good enough in some capacity. And imposter syndrome for me has looked very different in a variety of different settings. And I think it can show up in places that you least expect it, places where you thought that you would be 100% comfortable. Even right now when I think about, oh, my gosh, all of these successful things that you just talked about-- imposter syndrome-- my answer wasn't good enough talking about being a mom. You know what I mean?

[00:24:39.26] So I think that it can show up when you least expect it. And it definitely can it-- impacts you. You just start double thinking, triple thinking about things as folks are already moving on to what you're actually focused on. So for me, imposter syndrome is just the idea of not being good enough and finding something to measure against that that reinforces that idea that you're not enough.

[00:25:02.82] JENNIFER MAJKA: I would echo everything that Jess just said, and I would add one other thing is feeling like you don't belong.

[00:25:09.99] TORAL PATEL: So on the last episode, Anthony and I discussed both personal and professional experiences of imposter syndrome. So what are some of the challenges that you've either heard, witnessed, or experienced when it comes to overcoming or acknowledging imposter syndrome?

[00:25:23.73] JENNIFER MAJKA: Back to my PhD. So tough. So I am doing my PhD for myself. I'm not really doing it for a future career. I don't want to be an academic, and I actually know that I definitely don't want to be an academic after doing my PhD. I like doing research, but I like doing research on my own terms. And I don't want to go on the tenure track and be a professor. So it's really for myself.

[00:25:51.09] And I had looked around for about a decade for a program that was focused on social justice education. There's one in the United States that UMass Amherst, and you have to study there. And I'm just not in a position where I can not work full time and move. And so I had kind of given up on that idea, and then I found out about my graduate program, which is through Lancaster University in the United Kingdom in their PhD program in education and social justice. And so I jumped on it.

[00:26:20.10] I went through my coursework. My cohort is from all over the world. There's lawyers. There's people working in NGOs, higher ed folks, social workers, K through 12. So there's a bunch of us doing a lot of different things. And it was a very supportive group. And then once I passed my equivalent to the exam and I became ABD, I'm, like, all alone. And I have this narrative going through my mind, like, oh, my gosh, I can't do this. I cannot do this.

[00:26:54.64] So I've written my first three chapters. I have three more to go. I collected my data two years ago. I've been sitting on my data for two years and just not-- being

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paralyzed, not being able to actually move forward in this. So I had this heart-to-heart with my advisor at the beginning of the semester because I wanted to take time off. And he was like, look, if you really want to finish and get this done, you need to continue on and do it. Because if you take time off, there's a chance that you might not come back to it.

[00:27:24.04] So here I am. I'm doing it. I took a class here at Cornell. Cornell, by the way, offers a lot of awesome classes for free. I took a class on ATLAS.ti, which is a qualitative data software tool that you use to help with coding your data. I have 200 transcribed pages, single-spaced pages for my focus group interviews, and so it's overwhelming. It's a lot of data. But I feel like for me and overcoming imposter syndrome with my PhD is looking more of a growth mindset rather than a fixed mindset. So fixed mindset means that I believe that my intelligence is fixed. I can't get any smarter. I am who I am because of my genetics. Whereas if I change my thinking to a growth mindset and looking at that my intelligence is malleable, that I can actually-- with hard work and determination, I can actually push through this and get it done.

[00:28:26.58] So I'm determined now. I'll let you know--

[00:28:31.07] ANTHONY SIS: Please do. I want to read the dissertation.

[00:28:32.88] JENNIFER MAJKA: --when I'm finished.

[00:28:35.07] ANTHONY SIS: That's awesome.

[00:28:36.21] TORAL PATEL: So can I ask you just a quick follow-up question? What do you think was the one or two factors that helped you go from the fixed to the growth mindset?

[00:28:45.90] JENNIFER MAJKA: I think part of it is I think I'm at the point of no return now. No, for real. Because I have put in so much time and work and money into this, and I'm this far. I feel like if I would have been like, you know what, this isn't for me during my coursework, then that would have been fine, and I would have walked away. But now I feel like if I don't finish, then that's on me. That's nobody else. That's totally on me because I'm almost there.

[00:29:16.68] I also will say that I have a good peer support network, peers who have their PhDs and EDDs. And they're kind of pushing me and helping me. And it's good to know that there's other people who have felt this way or who are feeling this way, that I'm not alone in it. So yeah.

[00:29:36.99] ANTHONY SIS: And so you said ABD. That's all but dissertation?

[00:29:39.70] JENNIFER MAJKA: Yes.

[00:29:40.17] ANTHONY SIS: OK. Could you talk a little bit about what that means?

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[00:29:42.01] JENNIFER MAJKA: Sure. So when you do a PhD program, at least my PhD program, you have coursework that you have to complete, and then you have to complete your comprehensive exams, and then you have to do a proposal for your dissertation. And so once you pass all that, then they put you out into the world, and you're all alone. I mean, you have your advisor, but you're basically all alone, on your own time frame, doing your research and writing up your dissertation. So it's like advancing to candidacy, so that's why I'm a PhD candidate, not a PhD student. That's what it means.

[00:30:17.11] ANTHONY SIS: Thank you for sharing.

[00:30:17.85] JENNIFER MAJKA: Yes. And I would say one other thing that I have to-- because doing a PhD-- so I'm in my 40s, and never-- I personally would not ever recommend you waiting until your 40s to do a PhD if you want to do a PhD. However, I do know other peers who are in their 40s who have done their PhD in their 40s, and even 50s, and it's great, so great.

[00:30:40.51] For me in my life, I have two very young, high-energy children that drain my energy. And I work full time. And so it's difficult for me to carve out time for the PhD. Whereas if I were smarter and had done this in my 20s or 30s before I had kids, life would be a different story. But I always do things the hard way. I always wait and do things the hard way.

[00:31:11.23] ANTHONY SIS: That really resonates with me, because I'm also the same way too. And I also think that that's such a characteristic, too, of that imposter syndrome. It's like, I don't have the time, or I can't do it because I have xyz commitments. But then I hear stories like yours where I'm like, oh, my goodness, but actually, I can. I'm already making the list in my head of things I should be working on, especially because I'm single. I don't have a partner. I don't have children.

[00:31:34.45] But yet here you are, doing that and working full time. I'm doing the comparison thing. But I do think that is something that a lot of people who experience imposter syndrome also say to themselves. They're like, oh, if they could do it, I should be doing that too. So it's not about the comparison piece. As Jess said, it's about whenever you are ready to achieve that growth mindset to be able to do what it is that you want to achieve and be the best version of yourself.

[00:31:57.94] JENNIFER MAJKA: Yeah. One thing that you said reminded me of a-- I guess maybe a symptom of imposter syndrome. I don't know if that's the right word to use here. But I feel like I kind of need to collect these things to legitimize myself, to make what I do valid. And especially when you're working in higher education and you're working with professors, if you don't have a PhD after your name-- you know? So it's like, yeah. So that's another component of imposter syndrome.

[00:32:36.66] ANTHONY SIS: Definitely.

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[00:32:37.00] JESSICA KROM: I think that that's a great segue way into the example that I was going to use, because for me, whenever I walk into any meeting or any space here at Cornell, I am a young Black woman. And I'm just like, well, three strikes. I'm already out. I am a Black woman, and I'm proud to be a Black woman. And I know that that identity will sometimes make people feel itchy.

[00:33:00.25] And that's a them problem. That's not a me problem. And I constantly have to check myself to remind myself there's nothing wrong with being Black. There's nothing wrong with being a woman. There's nothing wrong with being young. There's nothing wrong with not having a master's yet. If I can name it, if I can call it out and start to speak my own truth and reaffirm who I am-- I mean, even in that moment of saying those things, I'm like, yes, I am proud to be a Black woman working in this space and doing what it is that I'm able to do. And I think that's the every-day or every-moment or every-hour step that I have to take in order to overcome some of the itchy situations that exist in culture and in our society today of I can't lose pride in who I am because it makes someone else uncomfortable. Because that's when we take five steps backwards.

[00:33:55.12] As I think about imposter syndrome, I come from Texas, and so there's already that stigma of I'm slow because I'm from the South. And I'm just like, I'm from Houston, which is the fourth biggest city in the United States. You know what I mean? So I don't have a horse. And that's OK, right? But for me, I would use this example of coming into the Johnson School and supporting MBA candidates. I have a bachelor's of science in education. I've always been passionate about education and helping others. And that's one of my strengths, is being able to amplify the talent that I see in other people and being encouraging to them. But at the same time, I struggle with that every single day of encouraging myself and reminding myself that I am just as qualified as the person with the PhD sitting next to me to support students.

[00:34:44.53] And the way in which I combat that every day as I sit in meetings with people who have had incredibly impressive careers or have all of these letters behind their names because they are incredibly educated is to tap into my board of directors. These are my friends and my squad of people who remind me of all of the great things that I have accomplished. And I think it's really important to have a close group of friends or support system or mentors or sponsors that continually remind you that you are equipped to be in those spaces. And I had a really good friend remind me of, well, Cornell makes mistakes, but they don't make mistakes that often. And do you think that you would be in this position if you weren't able, and do you think that you would continue to excel in your career, advance in your career, if you weren't equipped to do what you were doing?

[00:35:34.31] And sometimes, I have to lean back into that and trust what folks are telling me. Because if you leave it to me, I will out-think what they're saying or double think or triple think that I'm not good enough. And there are moments where-- Jen is working on her PhD, and I look at her with so much admiration. I'm like, this woman is killing it. She is killing it. She's a mom. She's got kids. She's got a partner. She's doing

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diversity work. She started this diversity work on her own, like its shaping. And this is hard work that we do every day. Working in the diversity, equity, and inclusion space in and of itself is hard work.

[00:36:12.88] ANTHONY SIS: Absolutely.

[00:36:14.06] JENNIFER MAJKA: It's hard. It's hard. It's very messy.

[00:36:16.62] JESSICA KROM: It's so messy. And you have to walk on eggshells. And to the point that Jen made earlier, you are constantly defending what you know to be true to folks who are looking for quantitative data and want to know the numbers and want you to prove what it is that you already know. And in this space, it's really hard to do that because a lot of the work that we do is very much so qualitative. It's relational. It's all of the things that don't really fit well with, quote unquote, science or real, live, tangible success stories.

[00:36:52.73] It's very hard to measure the success of D&I, but it's very easy to measure the success of admissions or career or student services. How many students are you matriculating or yielding? How many students are getting jobs? How many students are graduating? You can pull that data all year long. But in the DI space, how many folks have you helped reduce their participation in microaggressions? How do you quantify that?

[00:37:16.82] And so as you're doing this work and as you're sitting in these rooms and making decisions and really trying to advocate for your students or advocate for your staff or advocate for your faculty, you're also having to advocate for yourself that the words that I'm saying are true. The words that I'm saying are right. And so for me, when I'm in those meetings or in those spaces with people who are incredibly smart, I have to go back to the things that my board of directors have said to me and said, this is not a mistake that you are sitting in the rooms that you're sitting in. Sometimes, and probably for a long time, you may be the only woman in the room, or you may be the only Black woman in the room, or you may be-- I'm not even 35, and I'm sitting in all these meetings, and people are asking me my thoughts.

[00:37:59.99] And there are oftentimes moments where I'm just like, man, I'm going to put foot in my mouth. I should just be quiet. But that's not who I am. I am very vocal. Jen knows this. I am very much. So I oftentimes have to apologize or send a note after a meeting of, I'm really sorry about that. Sorry to be so passionate. Oftentimes, a trick that I use before I go into a meeting where I'm instantly intimidated by who is in the meeting or what we're going to discuss is to send a note to my board of directors or to look over the things that they've already told me and remind myself-- power pose to a certain extent-- of I've got this.

[00:38:35.45] And I think that's hard work in and of itself. There are some people who just walk into meetings, and they know that they're supposed to be there. They don't have to think about preparing to be in a space. But that's not a luxury that I have in this

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moment. I aspire to be able to walk into spaces and be very confident, but right now, I am stretching a muscle that I know is essential for me right now in order to do the things that I want to do in the future.

[00:38:57.96] TORAL PATEL: So what is something that you would want staff at Cornell to know about in regards to working here who may be experiencing imposter syndrome?

[00:39:05.48] JENNIFER MAJKA: You are not alone.

[00:39:06.56] JESSICA KROM: Yeah, you're not alone. You're not alone. I think it's important to be as inclusive as possible. I think it's very important to be intentional about language, because oftentimes, we mess up without even thinking something as we speak. I think sometimes that we put folks in cages or boxes without even intending to do so. And I think it's just be as inclusive as possible, because you don't know how similar your story could be to the person sitting next to you.

[00:39:37.17] And one thing that Cynthia Saunders-Cheatham and Lynn Wooten said when we did an event at Johnson-- both Black women, both Black women in leadership within the College of Business here at Cornell-- and something they said that resonated with me is, well, if you're a Black woman in the room, they're going to look at you anyway, so you might as well give them something to look at. And I was just like, yes, yes, yes, all the snaps. But don't edit this out.

[00:40:07.83] And so I think in that moment where you see folks who you can connect to in a variety of different ways when they say things like that, well, they're going to be looking at you anyway, so give them something to look at. Like, yes, I will. And there are so many moments where folks who are trying to be helpful say, OK, mind your P's and Q's. Don't rock the boat. You got that good job. Make sure you stay there. Retire from Cornell, those types of things. I'm making a little bit of joke about my grandma. Like, you've got this great job. Make sure that you do well. I love you, Granny, if you listen to this. Incredible woman.

[00:40:46.58] ANTHONY SIS: Shout out to Jess's grandma.

[00:40:49.82] JESSICA KROM: But there is a generation out there that would be very much so in agreement with don't rock the boat. And as soon as Cynthia and Lynn said those words of give them something to look at, it just instantly sparked this thing of, like, this is why we do what we do. We're not in this space to maintain the status quo. We're here to make change, impact change. And it's not going to sit well with everyone. It's not going to be well received by everyone. It's hard work. And that's the hard work, is pushing and pushing and pushing against systemic and institutionalized processes and systems that are in place that need to be rocked.

[00:41:28.01] And so I don't know. I would just say to staff and faculty members out there, they're going to look at you anyway, so give them something to look at. Go

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ahead. This is your time to shine. And be as inclusive as you possibly can, because there are moments where we unintentionally put people in boxes or reinforce imposter syndrome when we're not meaning to. And so be very cognizant of how you show up and what language you use in certain spaces.

[00:41:52.70] JENNIFER MAJKA: I love that. I don't have much more to say except that Cornell needs more brave spaces to have these types of dialogues and conversations with one another. I can remember back when I first started at Cornell as a new employee here, you feel like nobody else feels the way that you feel. And so if we broke that down and remove that stigma and help people feel like they're not alone, that they belong, that there's other people here that feel the same way.

[00:42:24.92] ANTHONY SIS: Hopefully this podcast-- we've talked about a lot of things, but hopefully that begins to really dismantle-- or at least start the conversation is what I like to tell people with the podcast, that this isn't the end all, be all. This is just the start of a conversation with a couple of guests who have experience in this topic. And hopefully, it continues to be something that this tool, this podcast can serve as a resource for other people to know, as Jen said, that you are not alone.

[00:42:49.57] JENNIFER MAJKA: Yeah. And it's not just us. It's not just staff. During the Belonging at Cornell launch, I was paired with a person I didn't know because I followed the rules.

[00:42:59.84] JESSICA KROM: I did too. Hi, Don.

[00:43:02.21] JENNIFER MAJKA: And it was a professor. And he and I got talking. He actually mentioned imposter syndrome and how he was feeling that here at Cornell. And I'm looking at him. I'm like, you're an accomplished professor and a researcher, and you published. And yet he's feeling this as well. So yeah, we are not alone.

[00:43:24.16] JESSICA KROM: No. Absolutely.

[00:43:27.60] ANTHONY SIS: Thank you for listening. Be sure to subscribe to us wherever you listen to podcasts and rate and submit a review on Apple Podcasts. It helps new listeners find us and the show. For the latest updates on diversity, equity, and inclusion at Cornell, be sure to visit diversity.cornell.edu. My name is Anthony Sis.

[00:43:47.88] TORAL PATEL: My name is Toral Patel. Thank you for listening to another episode of the Inclusive Excellence Podcast.

[00:43:53.82] ANTHONY SIS: This podcast is a production of the Department of Inclusion and Belonging in collaboration with the Cornell Broadcast Studio.