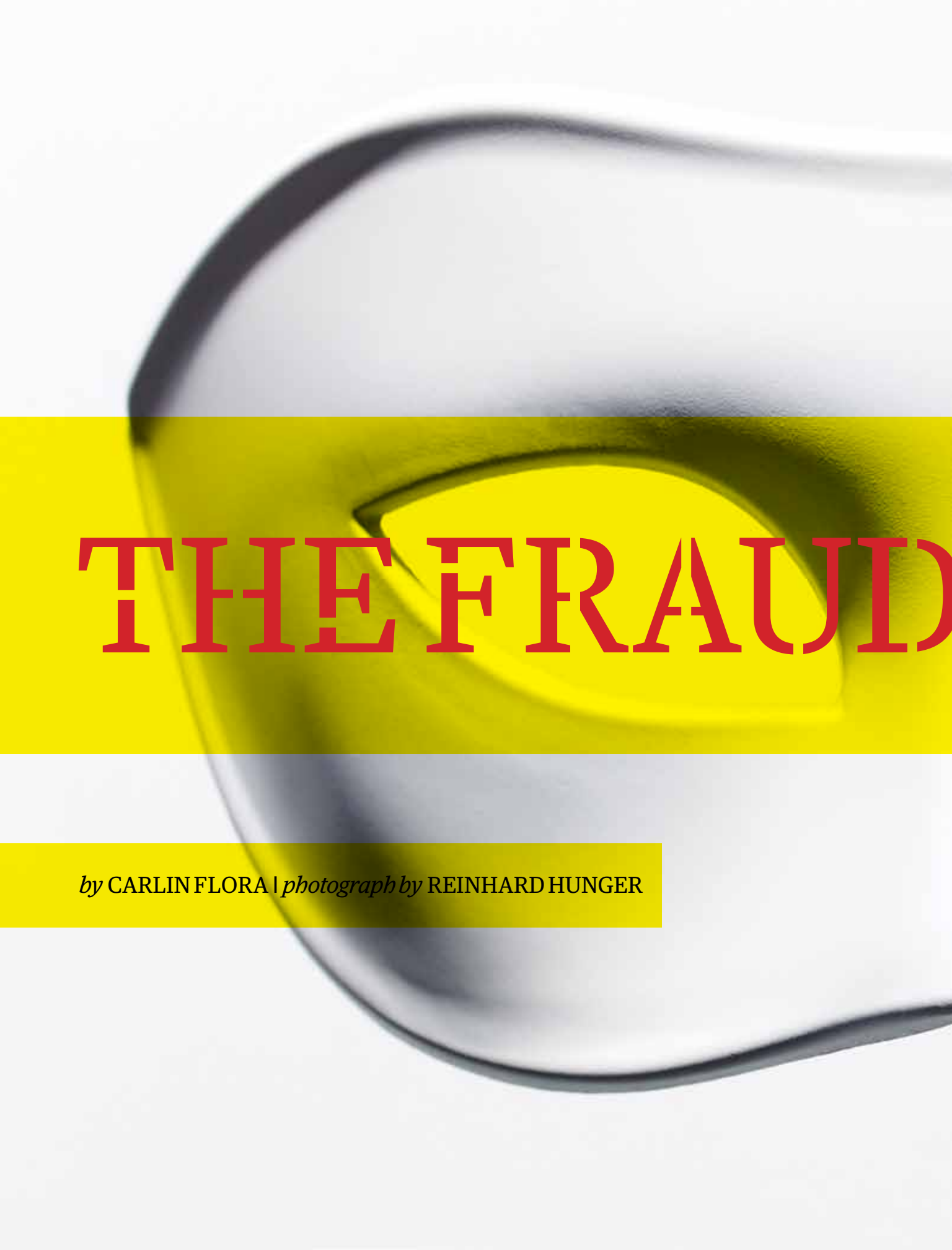
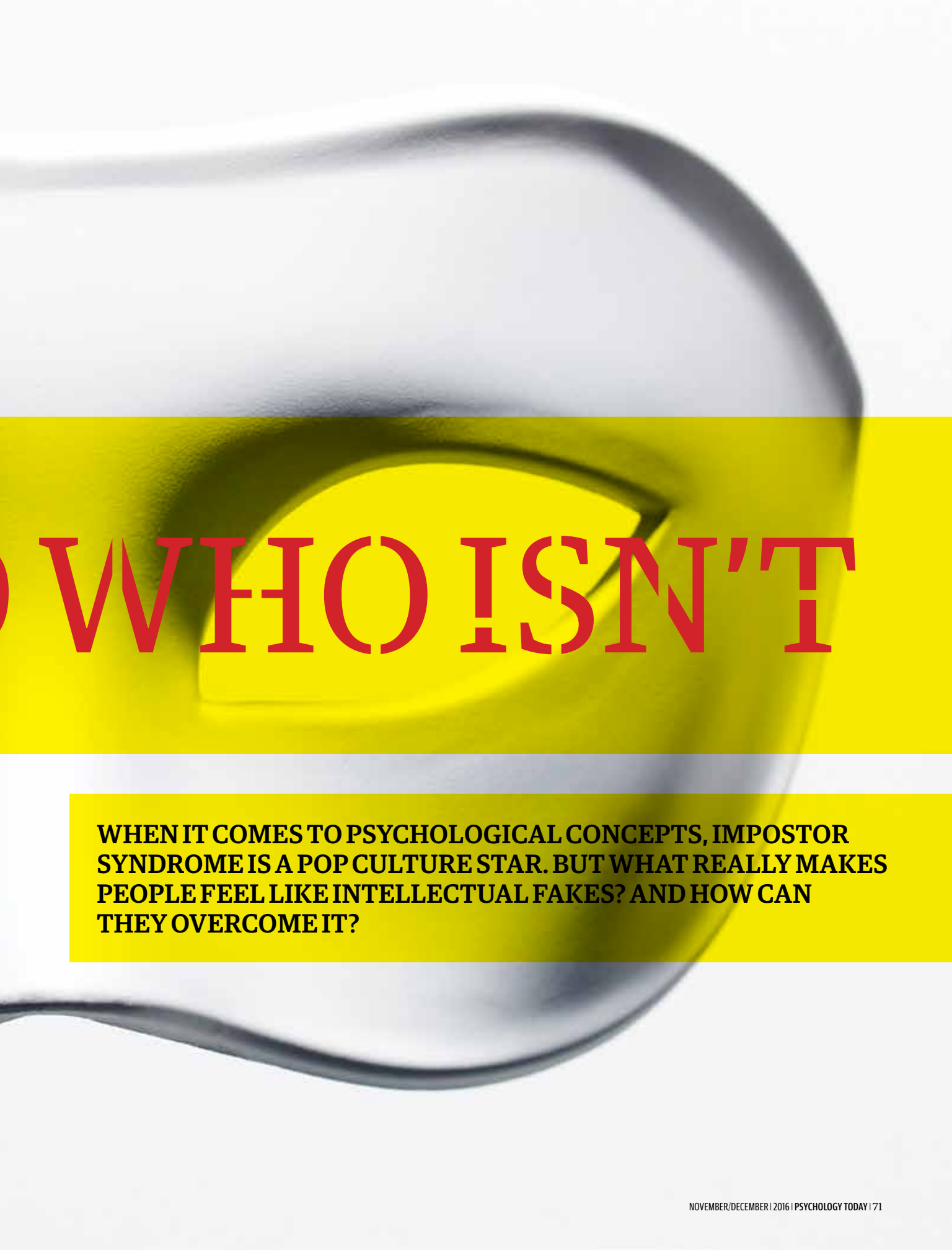


THE FRAUD

by CARLIN FLORA | *photograph by* REINHARD HUNGER



WHO ISN'T

WHEN IT COMES TO PSYCHOLOGICAL CONCEPTS, IMPOSTOR SYNDROME IS A POP CULTURE STAR. BUT WHAT REALLY MAKES PEOPLE FEEL LIKE INTELLECTUAL FAKES? AND HOW CAN THEY OVERCOME IT?

FIFTEEN YEARS AGO, when Kate* started graduate school at an Ivy League university, her ID card didn't always successfully swipe to let her into the buildings, and she decided that something more than a technical glitch was to blame. "I had this jokey narrative that the school was trying to tell me I didn't belong," she recalls. "Everyone was talking about Noam Chomsky. I didn't even know who he was! When my mom came to visit, I cried and told her I wasn't smart enough to be there." ¶Kate in fact graduated with high grades and now works at Google. Yet the gnawing notion that she's not good enough and that she's bound to be exposed as the impostor she really is—or rather that she thinks she is—has haunted her every step of the way. Paradoxically, she tends to aim high, putting herself in situations that exacerbate that very feeling. "Every time I embark on a new challenge, I think, 'Why do I keep doing this to myself?'" she says. Her sense of being unworthy of her own accomplishments pushes her to work harder and to excel. But, she says, "it also makes me insecure and annoying."

Kate identifies as having impostor syndrome—as do a lot of people these days. Facebook CEO Sheryl Sandberg drew a cultural spotlight to the term with the publication of her 2011 bestseller, *Lean In*, in which she admits to having felt like a phony as a student at Harvard and then in the corporate world. In a 2012 TED talk that has garnered 36 million views, social psychologist Amy Cuddy shared some of her own personal dealings with impostorism. In recent years, celebrities, including Neil Gaiman, Kate Winslet, Renée Zellweger, and Lena Dunham, have outed themselves as having felt like big fakes. Within the vast universe of confessional online essays, so many have dealt with the topic that it spurred its own backlash essay, "You Don't Have Impostor Syndrome," on the website *Jezebel* earlier this year.

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THE TRUTH ABOUT FEELING FAKE

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Liz Bingham, 54

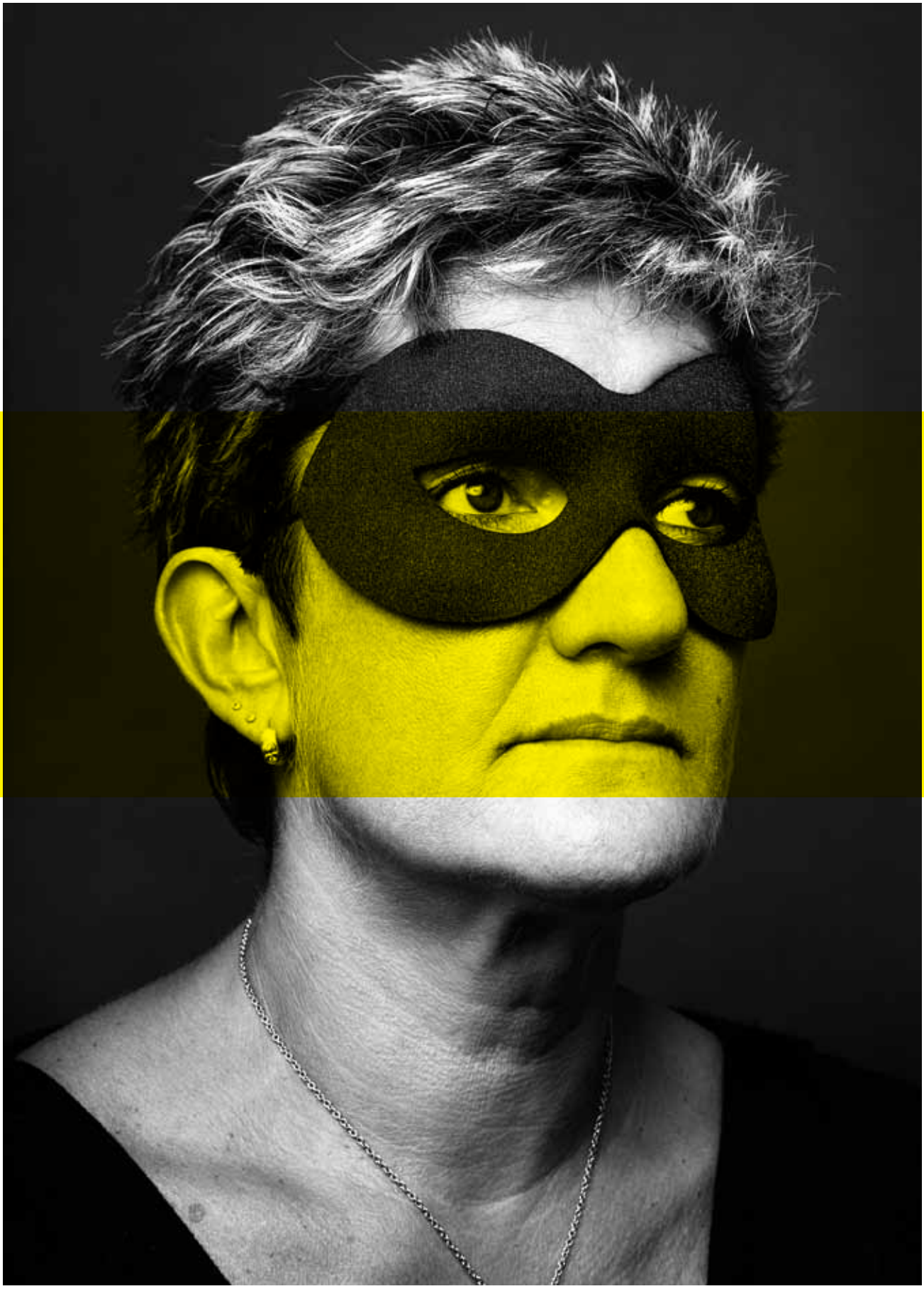
"I COME FROM a working-class family," says Bingham, a partner at the London branch of the financial services firm EY, where she has worked for 30 years. "I went into the workplace after high school. I was a closeted gay woman in a male-dominated profession. I spent the first five years of my career dreading the question, 'Which university did you go to?'"

Bingham constantly feared that she wasn't good enough. Chalking up her successes to luck, she nevertheless worked hard, not wanting to leave anything to chance. Even the money and prestige she accumulated weren't enough to quell her distress.

Disclosing her sexual orientation was an initial step toward combating impostorism. "I came out to my boss in my early 30s," she recalls. "We had a great conversation. He said that if I can't be authentic with clients, over time it will diminish my effectiveness. It neutralized that fear that I would be 'found out.'"

Last year, Bingham learned that she was being made an Officer of the Order of the British Empire, an honor bestowed on those who've made a major contribution in their domain. Her lingering sense of impostorism led her to think, They can't mean me! But finally she was ready to accept a compliment. "I went to Buckingham Palace and was given my medal by Prince Charles," she says.

*Name has been changed.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY **ETHAN HILL**

Surya Yalamanchili, 34

IN HIGH SCHOOL, Yalamanchili wasn't a standout. Everything changed after he took a computer programming class and started designing websites for local businesses. His client list ballooned. "It was the first time I felt a sense of accomplishment," he says.

For a time, his teenage entrepreneurship gave him confidence. But a pattern developed: What loomed large in his mind were the rare stumbles. "I thought that if people knew the truth about those, they wouldn't think I was good enough." The chase for brass rings was on: "I didn't think I deserved my past achievements unless I pursued a new one."

Yalamanchili has since assembled a dizzyingly varied and impressive CV. He's been a brand manager at Procter & Gamble, a Democratic nominee for Congress in Ohio (he lost to a Tea Partier), the head of a tech company, and a contestant on *The Apprentice*. Fears that he has to do more to prove himself are quieter for Yalamanchili now, though it hasn't been an instant turnaround. "I've been wrestling with this since I was 17."

One incident pushed Yalamanchili at least partway out of the impostor mindset: In 2014, he fell down a flight of stairs and was badly injured. Convalescing made him pause to actually recognize his achievements. "I thought, 'What good is any of this if I'm not allowing myself to enjoy some of my luck?'" Luck perhaps, but also talent and years of hard work.

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IP formally captures more than just garden-variety insecurity coupled with a tendency to dwell on the negative. Clance and Imes emphasized that a key element is the fear that "eventually some significant person will discover that they are indeed intellectual impostors." Based on a scale that Clance subsequently developed to measure the phenomenon in individuals, research has shown that it's not a fixed trait but something that exists on a continuum

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Berenice Mendez, 26

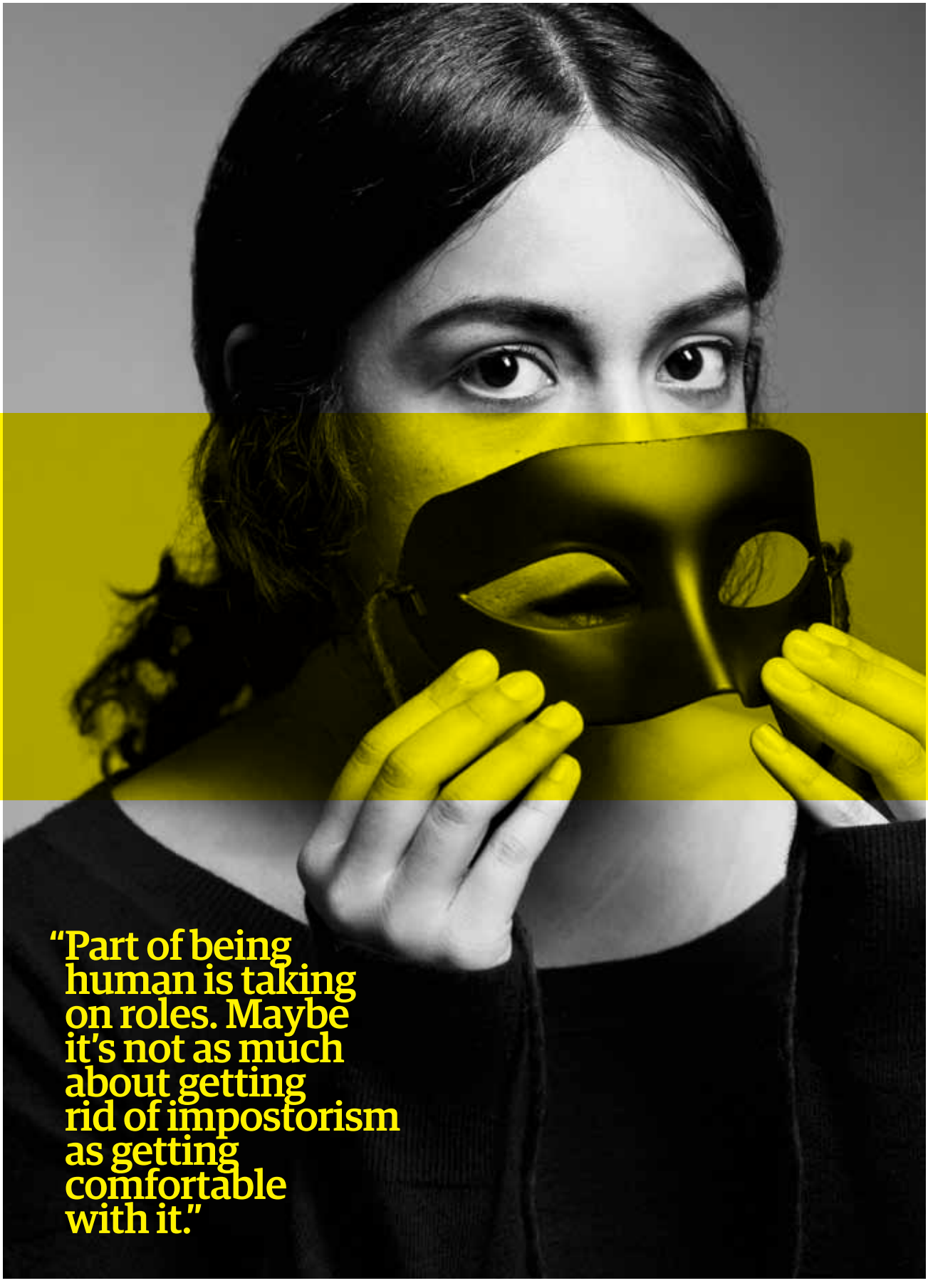
MENDEZ WAS raised in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, just across the Texas border. When she enrolled at the University of Texas, El Paso, impostorism quickly crept in. "I had a feeling I shouldn't be there because I wasn't a citizen," she says. "My peers had more money, and so many concepts were foreign to me, like GPA."

After working for a local graphic design firm after graduation, Mendez applied for jobs in San Francisco. "I did phone interviews and thought I did horribly. I wanted to cry and hide. Then I got called back for second rounds."

Mendez was hired by HelloSign, which furnishes electronic signatures. "When people complimented my work, I thought they were just being nice or believed I was good considering my circumstances—being a Latina and a noncitizen," she says.

"I was hypervigilant about not making mistakes. I struggled to say 'no' to projects. My boss picked up on it. She said, 'You can show me sketches, you don't have to have a finished piece.' But my mentality was that I'd sold myself as a hard worker, and I had to live up to that."

After a year, the twin imposter qualities of sky-high standards and an inability to accurately judge one's own performance led Mendez to be (happily) surprised when her boss gave her a significant raise. "I'm working on my impostorism," she says. "At the same time, feeling that I have to prove myself is part of how I work. I prepare a lot before I do things. That's not necessarily bad."



PHOTOGRAPHS BY **JONATHAN SPRAGUE**

IMPOSTOR *continued from page 77*

has shown that it's not a fixed trait but something that exists on a continuum and that about 70 percent of people experience it at some time. Someone may score low on the IP scale at one point in life and moderate or high at another.

In the mind of the self-declared impostor, compliments have a short half-life and achievements feel unearned, criticism cuts deeply and failures linger. Despite clear external affirmations of their worth—a raise, promotion, acceptance into a prestigious university—they feel intellectually or professionally incapable. How, then, have they gotten where they are? They think it must be because of luck, charm, connections, or other factors that have nothing to do with ability.

There are behavioral indicators of impostorism as well. When given a task or assignment, self-declared impostors tend to either work very hard—much more than necessary—or procrastinate. Either way, says Frederik Anseel, a professor of organizational behavior at Ghent University in Belgium, the outcome is interpreted to reinforce their feelings of fraudulence in what he calls the "impostor cycle." The worker bees usually succeed but then think it was only because they put in an unsustainable amount of effort. Procrastinators wait until the last minute so they will have an excuse if they don't do well. And then when they do—which is often the case because they're competent enough to pull off projects quickly—they chalk their success up to good fortune.

Impostorism is also distinguished by its noxious effects, which in some cases can be debilitating. The persistent fear and self-doubt it engenders, as well as the inability to savor achievements, can result in "a persistent state of physical and emotional depletion," Anseel says, which can lead to full-fledged depression. And the negative effects aren't necessarily experienced by the sufferer alone. Supporting a loved one who's convinced of his or her own charlatanism can be draining on partners, children, and friends.

Many accomplished people with a high degree of IP believe that their anxiety about being exposed is what pushed them to get where they are, but even this partly sunny view of impostorism is flawed. A study published earlier this year in *Frontiers in Psychology* found that IP was correlated with a decrease in striving, career planning, and leadership interest among students and working professionals. Similarly, Anseel has found that it's associated with lower levels of job satisfaction and commitment to one's organization or company yet a higher likelihood of staying put instead of exploring better opportunities. Holly Hutchins, an associate professor of human resource development at the University of Houston, discovered that those high on the IP scale report more emotional exhaustion, less job satisfaction, and poorer performance—all kindling for burnout.

FRAUD ALERT

A KEY QUESTION about impostorism may not be "Who has it?" (Answer: almost everyone at some point) or "What does it do to you?" (Answer: nothing good). Instead, especially for those who experience it acutely or chronically, it's "Where does it come from?" Personality seems to be a major component. Anseel and colleagues have found that a lack of self-efficacy is the most important predictor of high IP, followed by maladaptive perfectionism and neuroticism. "People with low self-efficacy doubt their own abilities," he explains. "Maladaptive perfectionism refers to a very high standard, where they hold the bar much higher than others do and never feel a sense of accomplishment, even when their high standard is met. Neuroticism is characterized by a high level of anxiety, worry, and insecurity."

Intelligence may also be a predictor of self-declared impostorism. While no studies have explicitly looked at correlations between IP and IQ, some experts have speculated that part of what triggers impostorism is the Dunning-Kruger effect, a cognitive bias that leads intelligent people to doubt their competency. Plus, intelligent people tend to be surrounded by other intelligent people, leading to skewed social comparisons.

While personality and intelligence may be the seeds of impostorism, it needs a certain type of environment in which to sprout (or, shall we say, fester). Marilyn Puder-York, a clinical psychologist and executive coach, frequently treats high-achieving clients with aspects of IP and sees a common element in their background: parents who placed outsize emphasis on their academic credentials. "They were afraid of not being good enough, of being abandoned in some way by a family who wanted a successful child," she says. "Their ambition was driven by a desire to avoid shame."

Certain workplaces and even entire professional fields are particularly fertile environments for impostorism. "It's hard to separate personality from anything else, but a competitive environment where transparent discussion of confidence or identity issues is discouraged can definitely foster IP," Hutchins says. The type of work one does and whether or not it can be measured objectively also relate to impostorism. As Jessica Collett, a sociologist at the University of Notre Dame, notes, "It's probably less likely in a job such as financial advising, where your investments are expected to make a target return. Evaluations of work in academia are more subjective."

Ah, academia—the very environs where IP is studied seems to be the one where it proliferates most. "My interest in the topic came from working with my own Ph.D. students," Anseel says. "They were very stressed out about their work, and some disclosed that they feared someone would find out they were in the wrong place. I

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IMPOSTOR *continued from page 87*

testing out new behaviors. "What if you shared an opinion in a meeting?" she might suggest. "What are some of the actions you can take and ways you can dress and present yourself that project personal power? How can you behave like a confident person even if you don't feel like one?"

Questioning the very distinction between "fake" and "real" can alter the perception of impostorism as abnormal. "In our culture, we're so interested in living authentically and having what we do be a true reflection of what we feel," Cain says. "But part of being human is taking on roles. When judges used to put on robes and wigs, maybe they didn't feel authentic, but they were embracing a role that was legitimate. Playing a role is not inauthentic if it relates back to a core personal project—the thing we're passionate about. I felt like an impostor when I was promoting my book. It was scary, but I grew into it because it was in the service of my core project. So maybe it's not as much about getting rid of impostorism as getting comfortable with it."

Alex Lickerman, a general internist whose personal Buddhist practice influences his work, has a prominent patient who suffers from IP. "He's world famous in his field and the nicest, most gentle guy you'd ever meet—humble and brilliant," Lickerman says. "Managing the expectations of his reputation is very uncomfortable for him. He doesn't think he can live up to it. I urge him to forgive himself if he doesn't and to stop focusing on the narrative that others have forced on him. The focus should be on the work itself."

While easing suffering and improving career prospects are obviously worthwhile goals, a touch of impostorism might not be such a bad thing for everyone or for the culture at large. "There's value in not believing you're the best and the brightest person around," says Susan Pinker, a psychologist and the author of *The Village Effect*. "There's value in humility. I think that when we overemphasize self-confidence—which data clearly show is unrelated to competence—we also champion a form of narcissism. It's reasonable to question yourself. In that respect, talking about impostor feelings adds nuance to our understanding of success." ■

CARLIN FLORA *is the author of* Friendfluence: The Surprising Way Friends Make Us Who We Are.

BRAIN *continued from page 69*

underlying them all. Rapamycin works, says geroscientist Matt Kaeberlein, a professor of pathology at the University of Washington, by targeting a central nutrient-sensing pathway that controls cell growth and division. The pathway goes by the very unoriginal name of mTOR, for mechanistic target of rapamycin, and studies show that mTOR activity tends to increase with age. They also show that suppressing mTOR with rapamycin makes animals stress-resistant, extends their lifespan, and improves cognitive function.

"It's surprising that rapamycin is of benefit for cognitive aging," says Kaeberlein. "We don't understand why. Activation of mTOR is needed for learning and memory. It may be a function of dose." All along the line, rapamycin seems to have two faces, a feature that adds to its scientific allure. Given in high doses, rapamycin kills cancer cells and is used for immunosuppression after organ transplantation—yet it also can boost immune function. It may take only small amounts for positive brain effects.

It turns out that mTOR is a central player in calorie restriction. It also influences mitochondria energetics and the recycling process (called "autophagy") by which old cells are broken down and their components refurbished for new cells. It's seen as a metabolic master regulator. Fasting dampens mTOR activity, and rapamycin given to an array of organisms even in midlife—for just three months in mice—extends their lifespan, Kaeberlein finds. It also shifts the composition of the microbiome.

Autophagy is one important means of cell upkeep and renewal, and it's especially critical in the metabolically active brain. But the body is equipped with another key route to rejuvenation: stem cells. Ongoing studies suggest that one of the most important things that both fasting and rapamycin do is change the environment of stem cells to enhance their function and boost their power of regeneration—paving the way for true revival at the cellular level. With age, says Kaeberlein, "stem cells stop working efficiently. Their environment is not favorable to them." Exercise, he finds, may also be a way to favorably alter the niche stem cells inhabit.

Kaeberlein admits he's toying with the idea of taking a low dose of rapamycin for a limited period of time. "There's enough data showing it is safe in low doses." He is already overseeing a randomized, blind trial of mTOR suppression by rapamycin in pet dogs.

As experimental science sorts out the processes of aging, Isaacson keeps fine-tuning the elements of his multitarget, brain-protection strategy. Turning the basic science into clinical medicine, he is now adding genetic assessment of the microbiome to the biologic data by which he individualizes diet; the gut microflora not only produce essential nutrients, they also contribute to normal brain development and function. But the diversity of the flora changes dramatically with age, at least among Americans, and those changes may compound cognitive decline. Shifting the composition of the gut flora by upping the intake of garden variety fiber-rich foods, such as greens and beans, becomes an added maneuver to delay brain aging.

There's a cosmic joke in there somewhere, that the cutting edge of science comes very close to the way hardy Sicilians have been eating for centuries. But of course, that isn't the same as saying we knew it all along. ■