

AVOIDING IDENTIFYING WITH IMPOSTER SYNDROME

INTRODUCTION

Imposter Syndrome is what growth feels like. For most of us, being in situations that are new, different or difficult can easily lead to doubting or second guessing ourselves, or feeling out of place or that we don't belong. These feelings are *normal* in situations where we are out of our comfort zone; in fact a lack of self-doubt can be problematic. If you are wondering why, check out the Dunning Kruger effect!^{1,3}

"Imposter Syndrome is what growth feels like"

So, what is the problem with saying "I have (a bit of) Imposter Syndrome"? As with other examples, such as "it's my OCD", or "everyone's a bit autistic" or "it's my ADHD kicking in", it is an example of something that originated within a clinical domain that has bled over into our vernacular. Not only is it disrespectful to those who have been clinically diagnosed with these conditions, in the case of Imposter Syndrome, which is my focus here, the label can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. What started perhaps as a single example of having to lean into the discomfort of something new, can become a pervasive sense of "I don't deserve this" or "I got here by chance" or "People have a false and over-inflated view of my abilities" This can hold us back, even to the point of under-performance¹, such is the power of our minds and the stories that we tell ourselves, and of course this outcome simply adds more fuel to our building internal fire.

THE IMPACT OF IMPOSTER SYNDROME

Imposter Syndrome Impact:

- Links to perfectionism
- Feelings of shame, insecurity and/or low self-esteem
- Performance anxiety
- Stress, depression, burn-out
- Negative impact on relationships especially close ones
- Constant vigilance is emotionally exhausting
- Sabotage own successes
- Under-performance relative to abilities

The research paints a stark picture of the impact of Imposter Syndrome.

Many authors^{1,2,3,5} link Imposter Syndrome with perfectionism, the cost of which is high; not meeting our own impossibly high standards can lead to feelings of shame, insecurity and/or low self-esteem^{3,5}. Research shows that there is also link between a sense of Imposter Syndrome and performance anxiety, depression, burn out, stress and emotional exhaustion^{1,2,3}. Additionally, it can also have a negative impact on relationships¹, especially our close relationships because we are exhausted by always having to self-manage, to keep up the mask and prevent others from discovering what we perceive to be our true self.

The resulting feelings of self-doubt, anxiety and guilt, manifesting in obsessing over minor mistakes, or working twice as hard to prove ourselves, unfortunately can end up sabotaging our own successes⁴ or causing us to start avoiding doing things at all¹.

DEFINING IMPOSTER SYNDROME

So, what exactly is it and who is likely to suffer? The term Imposter Syndrome was coined back in the late '70s by Pauline Rose Clance and Suzanne Imes^{2,4} citing three attributes:

1. Thinking that people have an exaggerated view of your abilities
2. The fear of being exposed as a fraud
3. The continuous tendency to downplay your achievements

Others describe Imposter Syndrome as never being good enough, and/or as not fitting in (the latter being especially true for members of marginalised groups).

The percentage of people who believe they suffer from Imposter Syndrome is surprisingly high, with some researchers suggesting that it affects upwards of two thirds of the adult population in certain areas^{4,5}. People exhibit Imposter Syndrome for different reasons – psychological, developmental and socio-cultural².

Imposter Syndrome Characteristics:

- Believe that others have an exaggerated view of your abilities
- Fear being exposed as a fraud
- Downplay your achievements
- Feel like you don't fit in, or you don't deserve a seat at the table
- Often highly intelligent and high achieving
- Need to know the answers and be at the top of your game
- Over-invest in getting it right
- Ignore or dismiss data or feedback that contradicts your own view of your competence

People with Imposter Syndrome are usually highly intelligent and high achievers; they desire to be the very best among their peers, and yet they wrestle with the idea that they are not deserving or not good enough^{1,2,3}. Feeling like you need to know everything, be at the top of your game, be able to answer every question and not being able to do something until you are the expert, or spending exorbitant amounts of time on something to reduce the chances that you won't live up to the standard you have set for yourself (a standard that is typically unrealistically high), also fuels Imposter Syndrome¹.

Often people with feelings of Imposter Syndrome tend to be experts in not paying attention to or assimilating data that contradicts their own self-beliefs, thus they "dismiss praise, derogate the accuracy of positive evaluation, and engage in other behaviours that insulate them against information that would validate their competence and worth"².

Interestingly people with Imposter Syndrome do not have negative beliefs regarding *all* their role-relevant abilities and many believe that they are hard workers, believing that working twice as hard to prove themselves worthy can make up for it with effort and persistence².

PRACTICAL STRATEGIES TO LESSEN THE GRIP OF IMPOSTER SYNDROME

If you find yourself starting to identify with the characteristics described above, take a long hard look at yourself and your situation, and ask yourself the question, "Am I in (or about to be in) a new or unfamiliar role, situation or place", "Am I about to tackle something I haven't done before?" If the answer is 'yes' then consider that you might actually have "Human Being Growing Syndrome"¹, which does not need to be 'cured'!

Regardless of your situation, the following 'strategies' might be helpful to lessen your feelings of self-doubt.

1. WATCH FOR SELF-DOUBT IN OTHERS

If you are someone with a loud voice of self-doubt, start by listening or watching someone you know who can successfully talk about themselves and listen for self-doubt. Often once you start listening or watching for it, you will spot it. Self-doubt is universal and being successful is not being free of self-doubt.

A voice of self-doubt doesn't make it true; a thought is a thought and importantly we can achieve things even if we have self-doubt¹. The aim here is to shift from the fantasy that there are people out there who really 'know', to the fact that everyone is trying to figure it out as they go along.

The problem starts when we argue with that self-doubt, this is what glues us to it¹. We start to get into the trap of generating one 'proof' after another to confirm the story we have told ourselves. There is no end to that cycle. Try to disengage from the argument and the doubting voices and look instead at the evidence to the contrary. Start to notice and internalise the experience of your good efforts.

2. INVESTIGATE ORIGINS AND PATTERNS

Consider where the imposter voice or part of you came from. Often its origins reach back a long way. The narrative that we developed at that time, along with the associated behaviours, were an adaptive strategy that kept us safe and supported our developing sense of self. However, our environment and skills change with time and these old beliefs and behavioural habits no longer serve us; typically they are now self-sabotaging and doing us harm. Connecting our current day reality to our lived experiences in a compassionate and non-judgemental way can be a helpful starting point to understand the origins of our Imposter Syndrome.

Look back and notice patterns, e.g. I got a promotion, initially I was excited, then fearful. Are there other patterns? How did things work out over time, did the fear go away? What helped you get used to the feeling? Ask yourself in what situations do you feel like an imposter¹? Are there times when you *don't* feel like an imposter? How did that feel? Notice what not being an imposter looks like and get comfortable with that.

Observe yourself, notice how quickly you get 'taken down' by the triggers, emotions and responses into a state of not being good enough. People with feelings of Imposter Syndrome usually are very good at getting back up and keep going. Celebrate this and its contribution to your success.

Finally, notice if your imposter feelings are connected to feeling that you need/want the approval of others or meet their expectations. People who are prone to feelings of Imposter Syndrome often rest too heavily on the approval or opinions or expectations of others^{3,6}.

3. CHALLENGE YOUR ASSUMPTIONS AND THE 'DATA' YOU OFFER UP

People with a strong sense of Imposter Syndrome tend to develop a false sense of self. They invalidate other people's perspectives, they go and seek out evidence that supports the version of themselves that they have created and ignore (or simply don't even see) evidence that suggests the opposite, all in service of maintaining the narrative they have for themselves. Does this feel familiar? If so, notice the perspectives of others, versus constantly staring at the world through your own set of lenses. How do others introduce you? Ask trusted others and get some real-world external perspective¹.

See if you can write down the evidence in a kind of a balance sheet. The evidence that supports your assertion that you are an imposter on the left-hand side, and the evidence that you aren't on the other. You will likely find

Strategies:

- Do not attach to the label
- Remind yourself that self-doubt is normal
- Watch others and notice their moments of self-doubt
- A voice of self-doubt doesn't make it true
- Consider its origins and notice the different context between then and now
- Notice patterns – What triggers the feelings? When don't you feel like an imposter and how does that feel?
- Try to detach from seeking approval from others
- Get input from trusted others
- Draft a 'balance sheet'
- Design and execute small incremental steps
- Challenge the data
- Reverse roles: how would you convince someone else?
- Step into your own light
- Reframe mantras
- Remember that being vulnerable is a sign of strength, not weakness
- Strengths are our comforts, "double down on your weaknesses"

the left-hand column easy to complete; whereas you might need an objective 'other' to help you with the second column. Return to your list during times of self-doubt^{3,4}. Celebrate your wins, keep a note of successes, especially ones you thought wouldn't work out so well and actually did.

Consider the following suggestion from Dr Janina Fisher¹ as another way to challenge your assumptions. Find a safe, trusted other, it could be a friend, partner, colleague, coach – they are your partner in this exercise. Your partner starts by saying “your assumption is that you are an imposter and that you are just faking it, my assumption is that believing that you are an imposter, believing that you are just faking it, helped you to survive and got you to where you are today. Which assumption feels better?”

Typically the person who suffers from Imposter Syndrome replies, “yours, but your assumption is wrong”. Our belief that we are an imposter is very strong and will likely cause us to hold on tightly to its message.

So your partner now says, “Okay, we each believe we are correct, so let's be curious about both these assumptions”. The aim here is to open up a crack in our deep-seated beliefs for inspection.

If you are someone who is prone to dismissing or invalidating other people's perspectives, you might like to remind yourself that you don't decide what other people think or how other people feel. You are not in control of other people's perspectives. Try this experiment¹. Imagine going up to someone and asking them a totally innocuous question, e.g. Do you like hot chocolate? Let them answer and then say out loud to them “I'm sorry, but I can't permit you to feel that way.”

I hope that feels absurd. We wouldn't say out loud to someone that they can't feel a certain way when clearly, they do, but we do this in our heads all the time. You are not in charge of how others think or feel. You don't have to understand why they do, you just have to accept it and that in rejecting how they think or feel, you are invalidating their feedback.

Finally, reversing roles can be a useful technique to loosen the grip of our assumptions. Try arguing the case as if you were coaching or mentoring someone with Imposter Syndrome. What would you say to the other person to convince them that their fears are ill-founded and that they are a highly capable and successful individual?¹

4. DESIGN AND EXECUTE SMALL INCREMENTAL STEPS

When we were young, we had lots of things that we couldn't do at first. However, with a supportive environment and a more experienced 'other' helping us, we learned that if we tried, if we leaned into the discomfort of trying to master something new, we could succeed. In education we call it the zone of proximal development, sufficiently out of our comfort zone that we learn and grow, with the help of capable others, but not so much of a stretch that we lose motivation. We see it as normal for kids and yet as adults we seem to cast this idea aside, when in fact it is just as relevant.

Consider the smallest incremental step that you could take to be successful that might validate you and your strengths versus the messages you are believing about yourself? That can help us avoid self-sabotaging behaviour. How can you stretch and not fall into the trap set by yourself or others?

Ask yourself, what would happen if I wasn't successful at x? Often an objective answer to this question is 'nothing bad' but what we say to ourselves instead is people will notice me and/or judge me, and sometimes this can be associated with a belief that it is dangerous to be seen.

While I don't often suggest 'fake it until you make it' as a strategy, it can be useful in tackling Imposter Syndrome. The act of doing something successfully can create a shift in our identity¹.

Finally, I see a lot of focus in the organisations I work with on leveraging your strengths. In principle, I don't disagree with this, but I love this counter-intuitive suggestion from Resmaa Menakem¹. Strengths are your comforts, they are what you do well, this is not where the growth happens. Instead "double down on your weaknesses", there is learning when you lean in and aren't afraid to face the things you need to develop (obviously in small, bite-sized pieces).

5. STEP INTO YOUR LIGHT

I mentioned earlier that feelings of Imposter Syndrome can arise when we are seen, especially for the first time. Being seen or being vulnerable is often associated with a belief that others will judge us poorly when we express vulnerability, yet there are studies that suggest the opposite¹. In one such study, people said that they thought showing their weaknesses and being vulnerable would be repulsive to others, but in fact others saw it as showing strength and made those people more appealing¹. The study concluded that what people saw weakness when viewed from the inside looked like courage when viewed from the outside. Authenticity is a crucial antidote to Impower Syndrome. Try it – pay attention to what happens and how you/others react when someone is willing to be open to uncertainty, risk and emotional exposure.

As many people know, I am a huge fan of the power of language and reframing situations with different words that shed a new angle on things. For example instead of "I am the wrong person for this job" try "I have a lot to offer this position"³, or "I will make my contribution (and do the best that I can) but after that it's over to others. Judge me by what I offer versus the result"¹, or "I earned this seat at the table, I am still learning and will get even better as time goes on. This discomfort right now is a result of my stretching into new things, not a result of an inherent inadequacy". Make one up that resonates with you and try writing it down ahead of situations that are likely to trigger your feelings of Imposter Syndrome (this is a technique known as priming).

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

I want to end where I started. For most of us, Imposter Syndrome is what growth feels like¹. It means you are growing into things that you haven't done or been before. Anybody who tries to accomplish something new is going to feel like they are inadequate to the task and that success is just momentary. This feeling is a good sign, if you are scared, or fear being found out, it means that you are probably growing. You don't have Imposter Syndrome, you have "Human Being Growing Syndrome"¹, which does not need to be 'cured'!

*If you have any questions or would like to learn more, do not hesitate to contact me, Liane Kemp at
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NOTES:

1. *Expert Strategies for Helping Clients Who Struggle with Imposter Syndrome* 2019 compiled by Dr Ruth Buczynski of the National Institute for the Clinical Application of Behavioral Medicine, featuring (in alphabetical order) Dr Janina Fisher, Dr Miguel Gallardo, Dr Rick Hanson, Dr Shirley Harrell, Lynn Lyons, Dr Kelly McGonigal, Resmaa Menakem, Bill O'Hanlon, Dr Christine Padesky, Dr Ron Siegel, Dr Chris Willard, Dr Kelly Wilson, and Dr Michael Yapko
2. Gadsby, S. (2022). Imposter syndrome and self-deception. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 100(2), 247-261.
3. Sherman, R. O. (2013). Imposter syndrome: When you feel like you're faking it. *American Nurse Today*, 8(5), 57-58.
4. Eruteya, K. (2022). You're not an Imposter. You're actually pretty amazing. *Harvard Business Review*, 1-8.
5. Chrousos, G. P., Mentis, A. F. A., & Dardiotis, E. (2020). Focusing on the neuro-psycho-biological and evolutionary underpinnings of the imposter syndrome. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 11, 1553.
6. Edwards, C. W. (2019). Overcoming imposter syndrome and stereotype threat: Reconceptualizing the definition of a scholar. *Taboo: The Journal of Culture and Education*, 18(1), 3.