Combating Imposter Syndrome

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Credit to Mika Galilee-Belfer

AGENDA

- Three sections:
  - What is imposter syndrome?
  - How can it affect your behavior & career?
  - How can you address it?

- Even if you do not have imposter syndrome yourself, it is important to understand for your colleagues, students, mentees, and family members.
QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

○ Do you chalk up your success up to luck, timing, or error?
○ Do you believe “if I can do it, anyone can”?
○ Do you agonize over the smallest flaws in your work?
○ Are you crushed by constructive criticism, seeing it as evidence of your ineptness?
○ When you succeed, do you secretly feel like you fooled them again?
○ Do you worry that it’s a matter of time before you’re “found out”?

SIGNS OF IMPOSTER SYNDROME

- Feel undeserving of successes
- Do not internalize accomplishments
- Attribute success to factors other than ability
- Believe others overestimate abilities
- See failure perpetually looming
- Doubt ability to repeat accomplishments
- Feel relief rather than joy when succeeding
- Fear exposure as an imposter or fraud
IT’S COMMON

- In a study of 1,326 women in academia:
  - 5% had low imposter syndrome characteristics
  - 29% had moderate imposter syndrome characteristics
  - 46% had frequent imposter syndrome characteristics
  - 20% had intense imposter syndrome characteristics
    (Vaughn et al., 2019).

- Notably, found in all academic levels, from new graduate students to senior administrators.

MOST LIKELY AMONG:

- High achievers. It is most often found among extremely capable individuals and those with advanced degrees, not people who are actually impostors.

- Perfectionists. Perfectionism is highly correlated with imposter syndrome.

- Women. Though both men and women can suffer from imposter syndrome, it’s more common among women.
MORE PREVALENT:

- Women in male dominated fields (Parkman, 2016).
- Students of color (Cokely et al., 2013).
- Those embarking on new challenges, such as starting graduate school or a faculty position (Vaughn et al., 2019).
- Careers with subjective measures of success, like creative arts (Parkman, 2016).

TRIGGERING INCIDENTS FOR FACULTY

- Expertise questioned by a colleague or student
- Scholarly performance and persistence
  - Submitting scholarly work, handling negative reviews or rejections, and dealing with the myriad of expectations during their probationary promotion and tenure period
- Comparisons with colleagues
- Successes (Hutchins & Rainbolt, 2016)
**Reasons Why People May Feel Like Imposters:**

- **How people were raised.**
  - Discouraging messages can impact self-expectations, confidence, and feelings of competence.
    - For example, did accomplishments go unnoticed?
    - How was success defined?

- **Working in an organizational culture that feeds self-doubt.**
  - In academia, criticism is the norm and adversarial language is often used.
  - Competitiveness and isolation.
  - Lack of mentorship.
    - Graduate students experience more frequent impostor fears in programs perceived to have lower-quality mentorship (Cohen & McConnell, 2019).
**REASONS WHY PEOPLE MAY FEEL LIKE IMPOSTERS:**

- **Being an “outsider.”**
  - When you’re an outsider, it’s easy to sense that you’re wearing a mask.
  - Examples:
    - Working outside of your native country
    - First-generation college student
    - Woman in a male-dominated field
    - Person of color on a predominately white campus

**POTENTIAL IMPACTS ON MENTAL HEALTH**

- Anxiety
- Depression
- Stress
- Self-Doubt
- Emotional Exhaustion
- Discomfort
- Life Dissatisfaction
- Shame
**REFLECTION:**

- What imposter thoughts were you able to identify in yourself or your colleagues/mentees?

**IMPACT OF IMPOSTER SYNDROME ON BEHAVIOR:**

- **Over preparing and hard work**
  - Rely on extraordinary effort and obsessing over details to avoid detection
  - When hard work pays off:
    - For non-imposters, it enhances confidence.
    - Imposters mostly experience a sense of relief.
IMPACT OF IMPOSTER SYNDROME ON BEHAVIOR:

- **Holding back**
  - Since effort and new opportunities makes people vulnerable, people may hold back
    - Don’t apply for promotions
    - Don’t apply for grants
    - Don’t offer opinions

- **Procrastination**
  - Associated with perfectionism
    - It’s hard to meet impossible standards
  - Gives people an excuse for failure
    - I didn’t have enough time
IMPACT OF IMPOSTER SYNDROME ON BEHAVIOR:

- Never finishing
  - People shield themselves from possible detection or criticism

IMPACT OF IMPOSTER SYNDROME ON BEHAVIOR:

- Self-sabotage
  - People may subconsciously do things to undermine their success when they feel they don’t deserve it
    - Show up late or unprepared
    - Drink too much before a big event
IMPACT OF IMPOSTER SYNDROME ON BEHAVIOR:

- **Maintaining a lower or ever-changing profile**
  - Choosing an inconspicuous field
  - Moving jobs frequently to avoid being discovered as imposters

POTENTIAL IMPACTS ON CAREERS:

- Reduced research productivity (Wester et al., 2020)
- Leaving academia
- Leaving a job or school
- Abandoning dreams
- Taking jobs below abilities or aspirations
- Failing to seek advancement or promotion
- Avoiding self-promotion
- Failing to negotiate
- Maintaining a low profile, not speaking up
- Feeling unbalanced in work-life
REFLECTION:

- What are some specific ways imposter syndrome has impacted your behavior or careers, or those of your colleagues?
- What opportunities have been or might be missed?

STRATEGIES FOR OVERCOMING IMPOSTER SYNDROME
**TALK ABOUT IT**

- Research shows that one of the best things we can do is name imposter syndrome
- Programs should increase awareness of pervasiveness of imposter syndrome (Vaughn et al., 2019).
- Talk about it with colleagues, friends, and mentors/mentees
  - Recognize that it is common
  - Recognize that it strikes highly capable people

**RECOGNIZE IMPOSTER MOMENTS**

- Recognize when you’re having an imposter moment
- Remove emotion from the situation and approach it more objectively
- Be aware of how stereotypes might impact how you see yourself
VALIDATE AND INTERNALIZE SUCCESSES

- Strengthen link between you and accomplishments.
  - Write yourself a letter of recommendation.
  - List all your accomplishments and the actions you took to achieve accomplishments.
  - Treat yourself with as much compassion as you would treat a friend.
  - Have a ‘feel good’ folder.

ACCEPT RECOGNITION

- Stop minimizing compliments.
- Say “thank you.”
- Eventually start saying things like:
  - “I really appreciate you saying that.”
  - “It makes me feel good that my hard work paid off.”

- Saying these words can help you internalize accomplishments more fully.
DROP PERFECTIONISM

- Perfectionists believe they must deliver an unblemished performance 100% of the time. Anything less is met with deep shame and harsh inner criticism.

- This standard is impossible.

- It’s not a matter of if you will err, but when.

- If you wait for everything to be perfect, you’ll never get going.

BE SELECTIVE WITH EFFORT

- Be selective about where you put your efforts.

- Don’t waste time over routine tasks where adequate effort will suffice.

- Sometimes good is good enough.
**CHANGE TO A GROWTH MINDSET**

- A fixed mindset = inherent intelligence and ability.
- A growth mindset = intelligence and capability can be built.
- Having a growth mindset is important for persistence, and people who excel in fields devote the most time engaged in practice.
- Don’t think: “I’m unqualified.”
- Think: “I may be inexperienced but I’m capable of growing into the role.”

**RECOGNIZE YOUR EXPERTISE**

- Even when you are an expert, you likely don’t see yourself as one.
  - Prevents you from offering opinions or attempting things you’re capable of
- Recognize that you don’t have to (and can’t possibly) know everything.
  - Knowing your knowledge limitations = sign of competence
- Even when you don’t know something, you can still project confidence.
**POSITIVELY RESPOND TO FAILURES**

- Don’t personalize failures and don’t allow them to affect your sense of self.

- If a presentation bombs, it’s one thing to say “I skimped on prep time” versus “I’m incompetent.”
  - You have recourse for the former, but not the latter.

**FIND A MENTOR, BE A MENTOR**

- Supportive environments and supportive relationships can help combat imposter syndrome (Vaughn et al., 2019).

- Find a mentor, be a mentor.

- Build a network of mentors.
GET/GIVE SOCIAL SUPPORT

- Instrumental support
  - Advice, suggestions, resources

- Emotional support
  - Listening, expressing empathy

THERAPY

- If feelings are debilitating, Cognitive Behavioral Therapy has been shown to be effective in treating imposter syndrome.
DISCUSSION:
- What other strategies have you found helpful to address imposter syndrome?

FINAL QUESTIONS OR COMMENTS