



COMBATTING IMPOSTER SYNDROME

Laura Hunter, PhD, MPH
University of Arizona
lahunter@arizona.edu

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?



REASONS WHY PEOPLE MAY FEEL LIKE IMPOSTERS:

- **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).

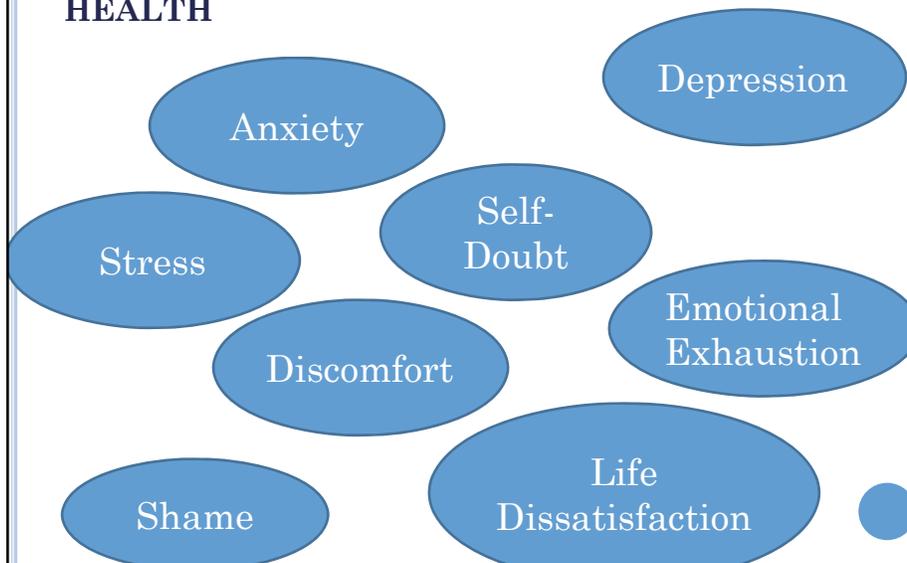


REASONS WHY PEOPLE MAY FEEL LIKE IMPOSTERS:

- **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



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



IMPACT OF IMPOSTER SYNDROME ON BEHAVIOR:

- **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 skimmed 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

- Handout link:

<https://cals.arizona.edu/sites/cals.arizona.edu/files/documents/Handout-Imposter%20Syndrome.pdf>

