COMBATTING 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:**

- *People of color* (Cokely et al., 2013).
- *Those embarking on new challenges, such as starting a new job* (Vaughn et al., 2019).
- *Careers with subjective measures of success, like creative arts* (Parkman, 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.
  - Competitive
  - Lack of mentorship

- Being an “outsider.”
  - When you’re an outsider, it’s easy to sense that you’re wearing a mask.
    - Examples:
      - Working outside of your home 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.

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

- **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

- **Maintaining a low profile**
  - Choosing a inconspicuous field
  - Moving jobs frequently to avoid being discovered as imposters
POTENTIAL IMPACTS ON CAREERS:

- Taking jobs below abilities or aspirations
- Failing to seek advancement or promotion
- Avoiding self-promotion
- Failing to negotiate
- Aiming lower
- Abandoning dreams
- Leaving a job or school
- Not giving opinions or speaking up
- Feeling unbalanced in work-life

REFLECTION:

- What are some specific ways in which imposter syndrome has impacted your behavior or careers, or those of your colleagues/mentees?

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

- **Handout link:**
  - [https://cals.arizona.edu/sites/cals.arizona.edu/files/documents/Handout-Imposter%20Syndrome.pdf](https://cals.arizona.edu/sites/cals.arizona.edu/files/documents/Handout-Imposter%20Syndrome.pdf)