



Overcoming Imposter Syndrome

The concept of the imposter syndrome is often talked about, but do you know what it means and how you might apply it both in your own personal development and in working with clients?

What Is Imposter Syndrome?

Kolligian and Sternberg (1991), quoted by Bravata et al. (2020, 'Introduction' section) write: 'Impostor syndrome ... describes high-achieving individuals who, despite their objective successes, fail to internalize their accomplishments and have persistent self-doubt and fear of being exposed as a fraud or impostor.'

Imposter syndrome is not recognised as a psychological condition in the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Health Disorders*.

Risk Factors for Imposter Syndrome

Young (2011) claims that there are five different types of people who experience imposter syndrome:

- the expert – who feels satisfied only if they feel they know everything, and so may over-research before starting a task
- the perfectionist – who sets themselves impossibly high goals, and focuses on weaknesses rather than strengths

- the natural genius – who is accustomed to being capable in a wide range of areas, and so is disconcerted by finding a task that they find difficult
- the soloist – who prefers to work alone, perhaps based on a fear of asking for help, believing that doing so might make ‘expose’ them as a ‘fraud’
- the superhero – who is a high-achieving, competitive workaholic, able to get a huge amount of work done but eventually burning out.

People may be at greater risk of experiencing imposter syndrome if they:

- are facing new challenges
- grew up in a family environment that didn’t provide much nurturing and emotional support, or where they had a gifted sibling
- are from a marginalised population group (Ahmed, 2020)
- have depression and anxiety.

Vicious Cycles of Imposter Syndrome

Vicious cycles can develop as a result of imposter syndrome. For example, when we are simultaneously critiquing our performance while performing, we perform less well because we are not concentrating. And while we are agonising over what we imagine other people are thinking, we aren’t listening when they tell us what they really do think.

Moreover, imposter syndrome thrives on secrecy. We feel alone, and even if we know other people have similar fears, we don’t find this comforting, instead assuming that other people’s fears are unfounded but that our own are rational.

Success can even make imposter syndrome worse – because it brings us into contact with people we perceive as successes and we think we don’t belong there.

Impact of Imposter Syndrome

Imposter syndrome may lead people to:

- downgrade their career choices, or else over-study in an attempt to feel competent
- expect to do badly, even when they have a track record of doing well
- be highly self-critical, not noticing their successes and focusing instead on any perceived mistakes
- stop themselves from doing things, by imposing unnecessary limits on what think they can achieve
- adjust their behaviour to fit how they think other people see them.

Challenging Imposter Syndrome

Avoiding further self-judgement

Imposter syndrome is a very natural human experience, since our brains are wired to be more aware of possible threats than opportunities. Cuddy (2015, p. 94) writes: 'If we all only knew how many of us felt like imposters, we'd have to conclude either: (1) We're all imposters and none of us know what we're doing, or (2) Our self-assessments are way off.' Thus, it is important to encourage people with imposter syndrome not to judge themselves for having these feelings.

Tackling vicious cycles

It can also be helpful to work on breaking the vicious cycles described above. Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) is well suited to tackling vicious cycles in which negative thoughts and beliefs trigger unhelpful behaviours. Bravata et al. (2020, 'Discussion' section) write:

Given the current state of the peer-reviewed literature, mental health professionals faced with patients suffering from impostor syndrome will likely use evidence-based treatments for comorbid conditions such as cognitive behavioral therapy for depression and anxiety, but do not have an evidence base upon which to rely specifically for the impostor symptoms.

Finding your personal power

There are various sources of power, including resources such as money and expertise, and status/authority through holding a particular role. These types of power all fall into the category of perpendicular power – which tends to be temporary, external and arbitrary.

The antidote to perpendicular power is personal power, which is by nature more appropriate to the counselling environment, being based on respect for each party's real self, and a belief in equality. Realising our personal power involves being willing to be authentically us, fully accepting ourselves as we are, as good-enough rather than perfect (Brown, 2022). This requires us to focus on our values and not to feel pulled into trying to pretend that we are different from who we are. Being fully us can in fact lead to a much greater sense of belonging than pretending otherwise.

Tips for Overcoming Imposter Syndrome

- Focus on who you are helping, your own purpose and what lights you up.
- Engage fully with the process and let go of focusing on particular outcomes.
- Reframe anxiety as excitement.
- Embrace failure, viewing it as an opportunity for growth.
- Recognise when you're setting unrealistic targets, and adjust.
- Make small changes rather than setting a seemingly unattainable goal.
- Measure yourself against your past self rather than against other people.
- Do things before you're ready, to show yourself you can do it.
- Laugh at yourself in a gentle, kind way.
- Don't collude with other people's pedestals.
- Remember that others may see you as a role model.
- Bear in mind that it could usually be worse!
- Plan through to the end if possible, but also be willing just to take the next step.

- Stop at the end and acknowledge your feelings; give yourself a pat on the back.
- Ask for help, and allow people to help you.
- Choose people who understand you and know what you're trying to achieve.
- Focus on gratitude rather than scarcity.

References

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