

# Dealing with Imposter Syndrome

# Imposter Syndrome



# Imposter Syndrome

**Imposter syndrome:** an all-encompassing feeling where an individual perceives they're not qualified enough or skilled enough to have earned their accomplishments and success; fearing that others will eventually discover they are a "fraud."



# Imposter Syndrome



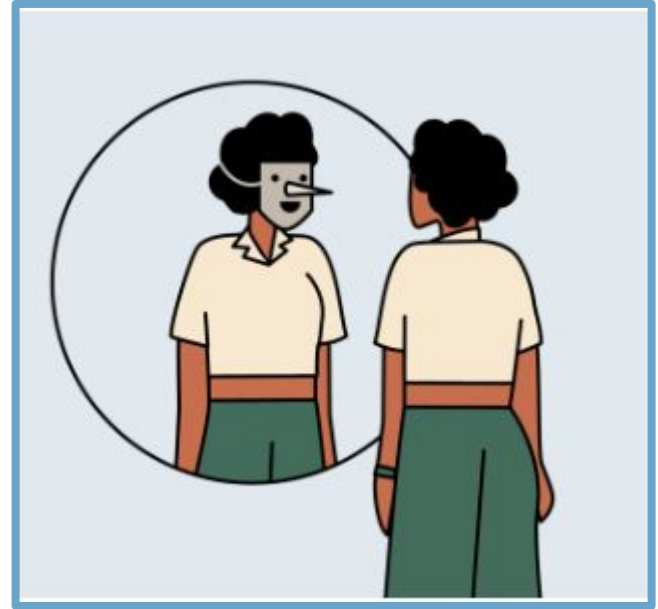
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From the original paper (Clance and Ames 1978):

"Despite outstanding academic and professional accomplishments, [people] who experience the impostor phenomenon persist in believing that they are really not bright and have fooled anyone who thinks otherwise. Numerous achievements, which one might expect to provide ample objective evidence of superior intellectual functioning, do not appear to affect the impostor belief."

# Signs and symptoms

Does this feel familiar?



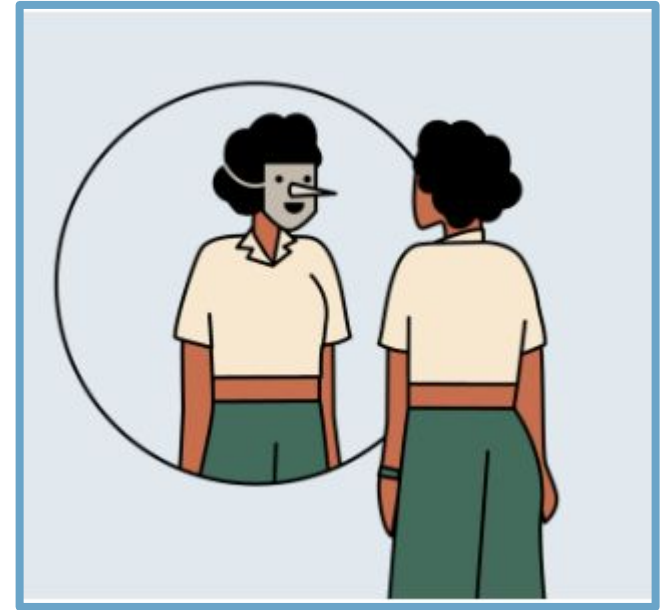
Dr. Arlin Cuncic

<https://www.verywellmind.com/imposter-syndrome-and-social-anxiety-disorder-4156469>

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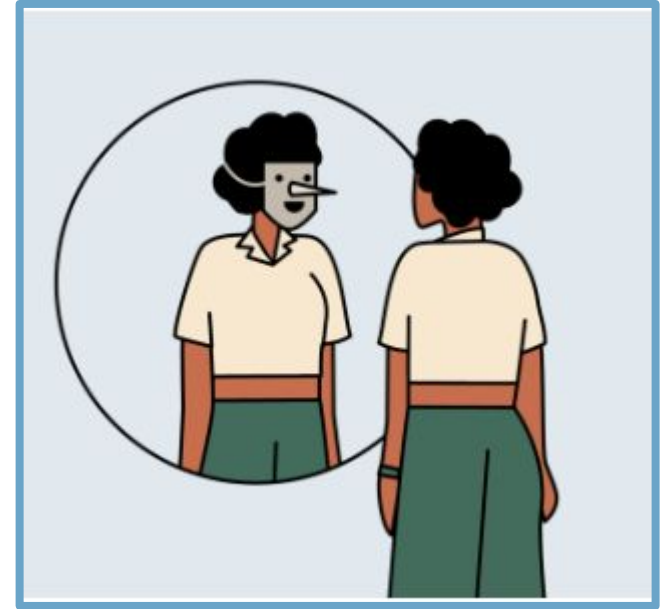
- An inability to realistically assess your competence



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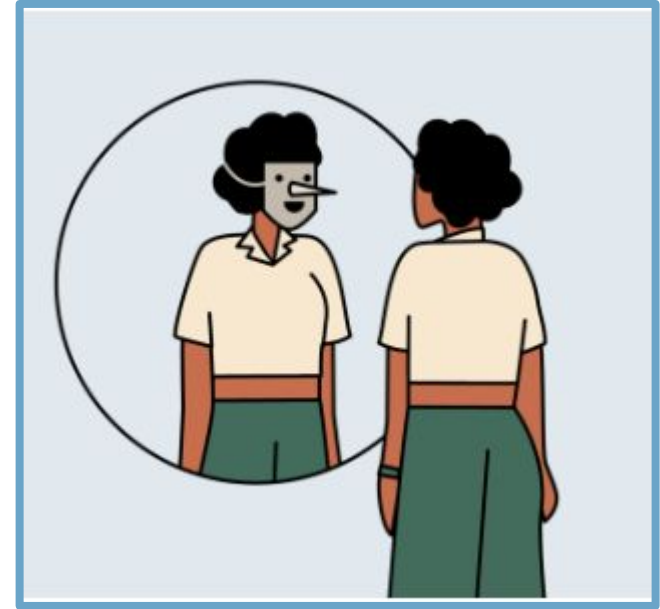
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- Attributing your success to external factors/luck



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- An inability to realistically assess your competence
- Attributing your success to external factors/luck
- Berating your own performance

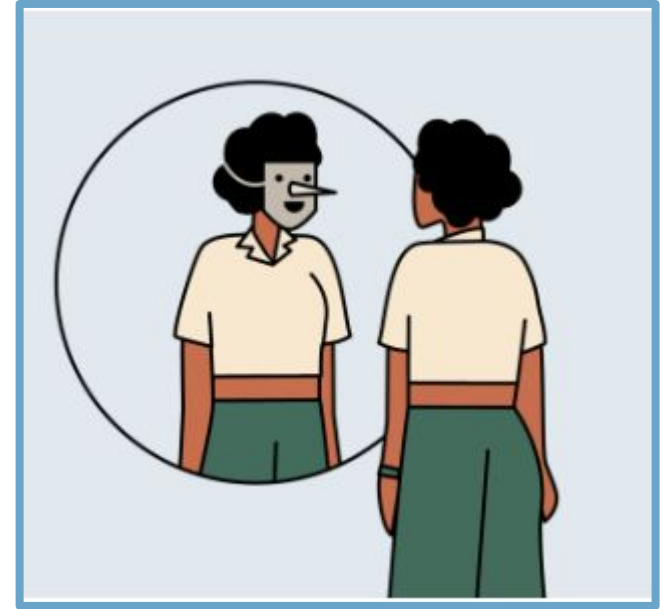




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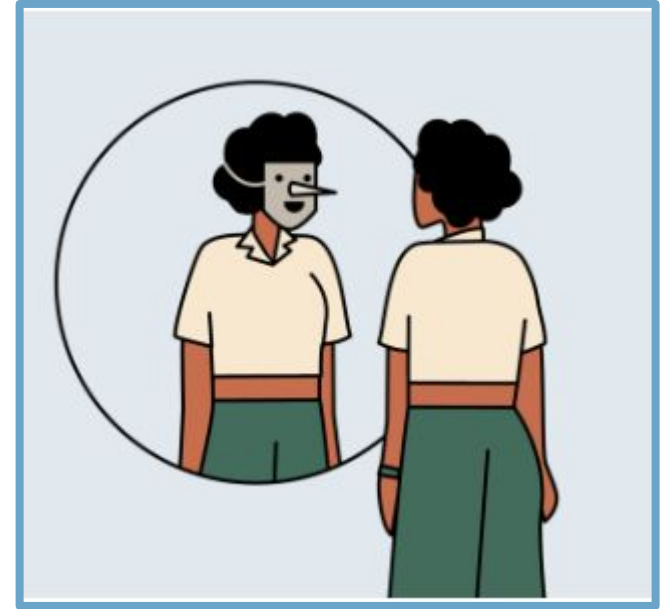
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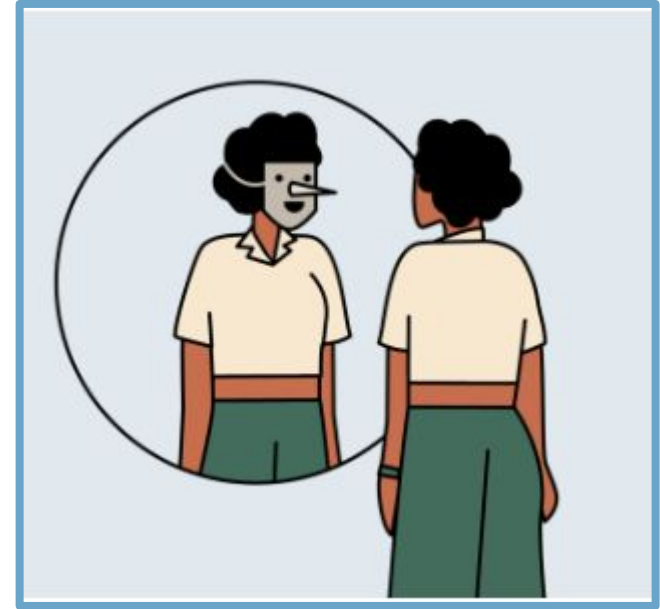
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- Fear that you won't live up to expectations
- Self-doubt



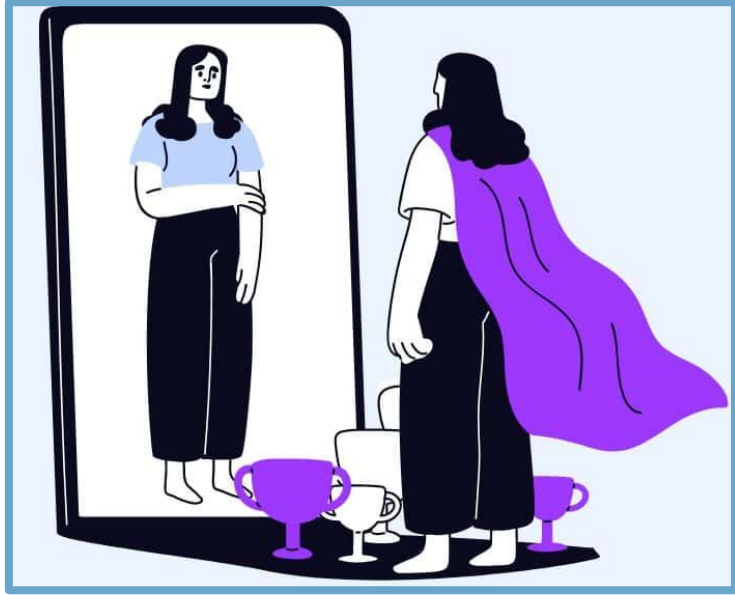
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- An inability to realistically assess your competence
- Attributing your success to external factors/luck
- Berating your own performance
- Fear that you won't live up to expectations
- Self-doubt
- Setting very challenging/impossible goals and feeling disappointed when you fall short



# What Causes Imposter Syndrome?

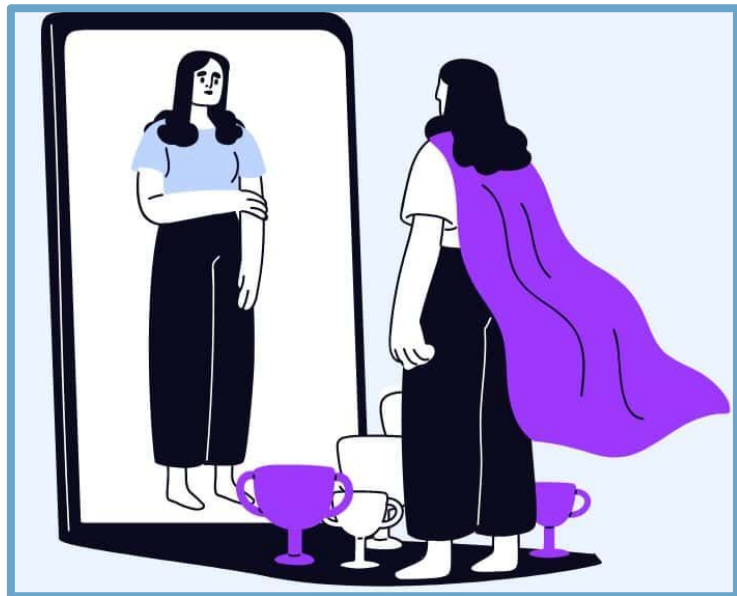


# What Causes Imposter Syndrome?



**Negativity bias:** We are more likely to notice, remember, and be emotionally impacted by negative events in our lives than positive ones, even if the two events are of the same magnitude.

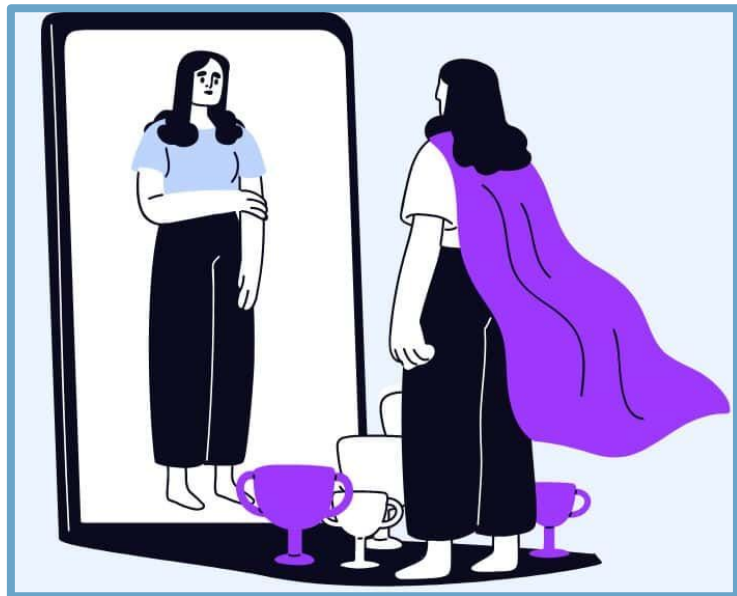
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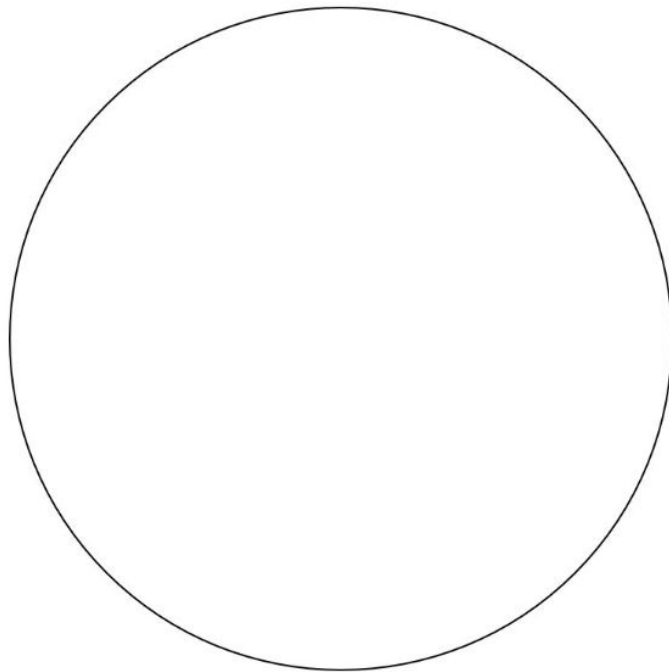
**Confirmation bias:** Humans tend to selectively notice and remember exactly what confirms their already existing beliefs.

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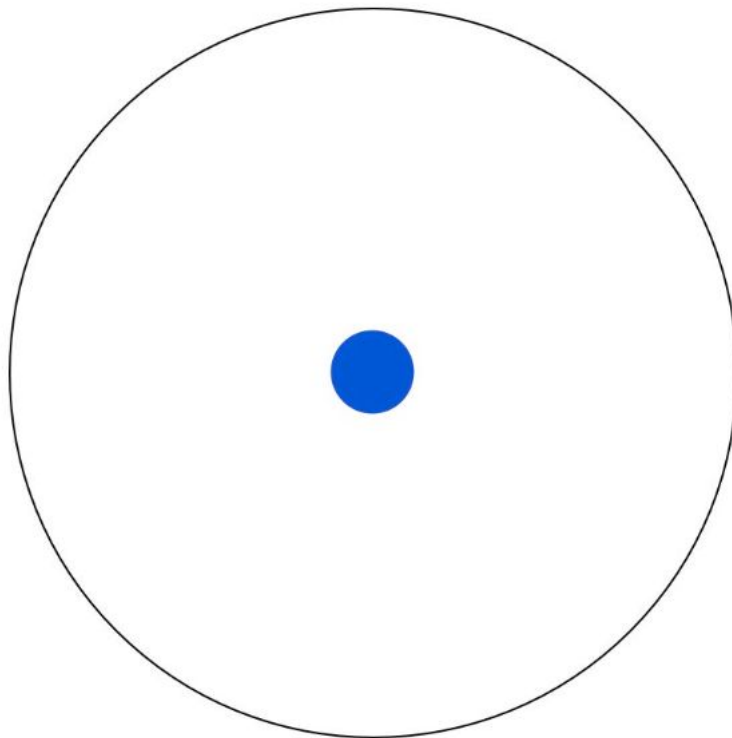
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Imagine a circle that contains all of human knowledge:



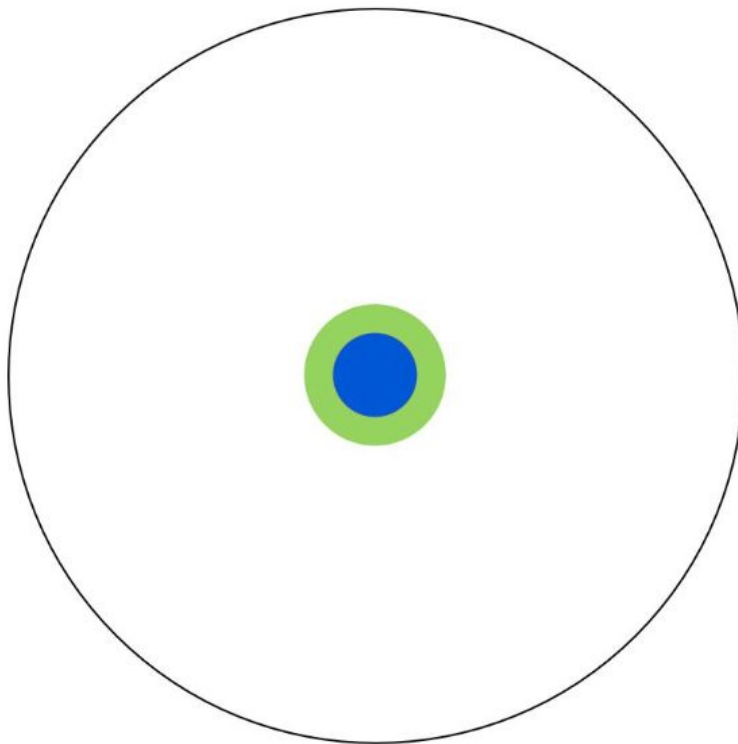
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By the time you finish elementary school, you know a little:



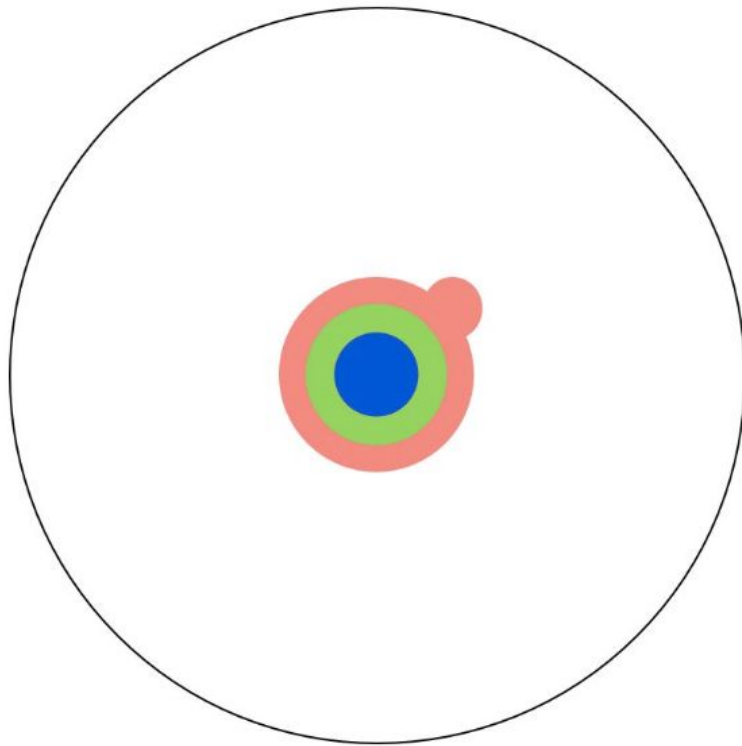
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By the time you finish high school, you know a bit more:



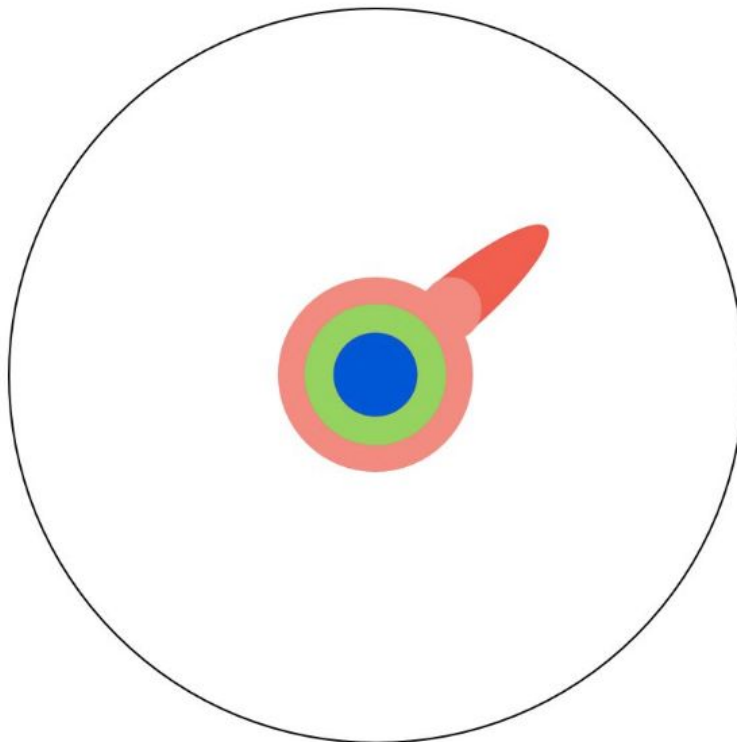
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With a bachelor's degree, you gain a specialty:



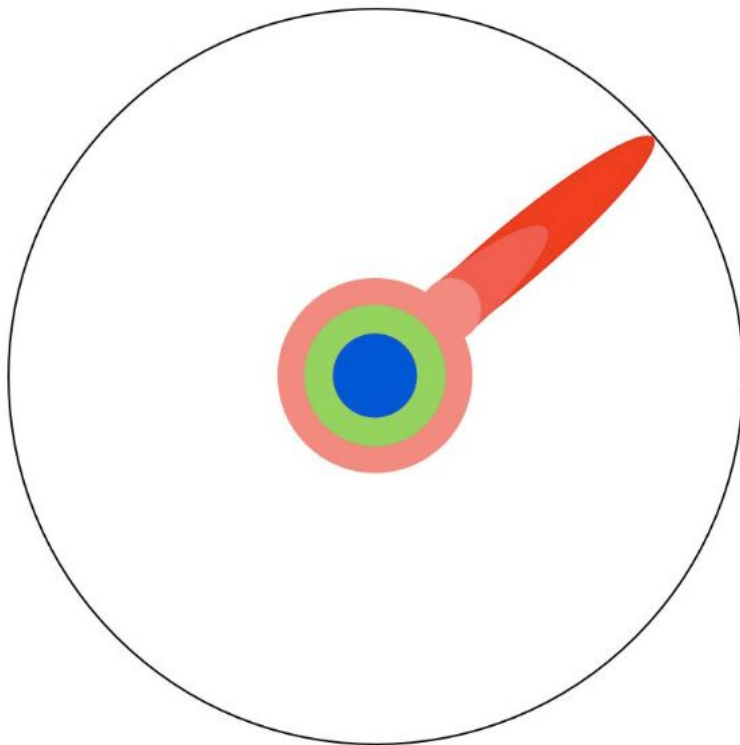
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A master's degree deepens that specialty:



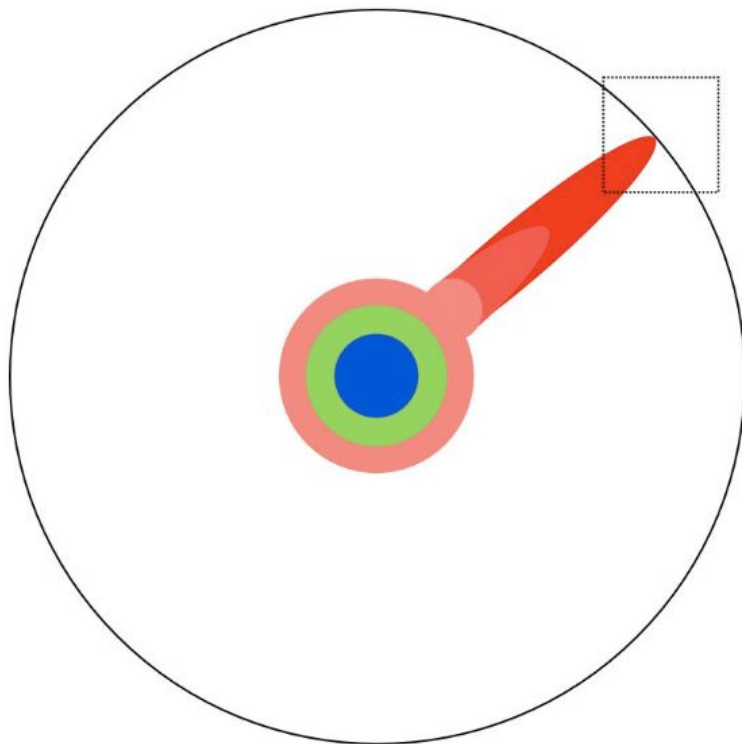
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Reading research papers takes you to the edge of human knowledge:



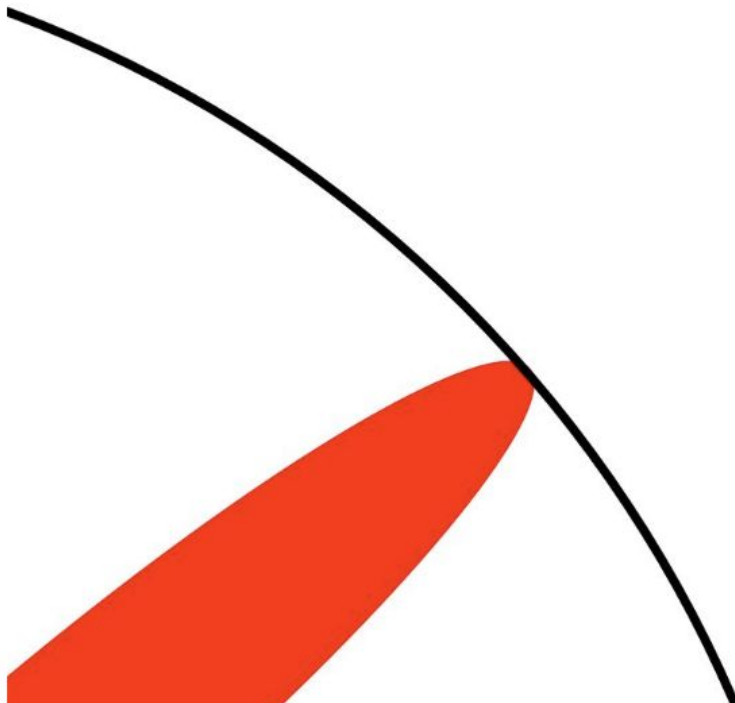
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Once you're at the boundary, you focus:



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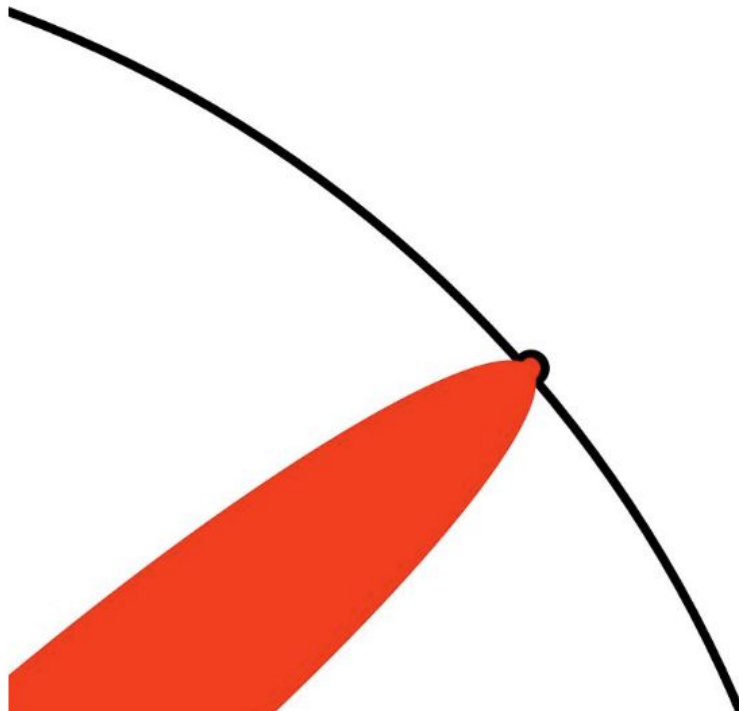
You push at the boundary for a few years:





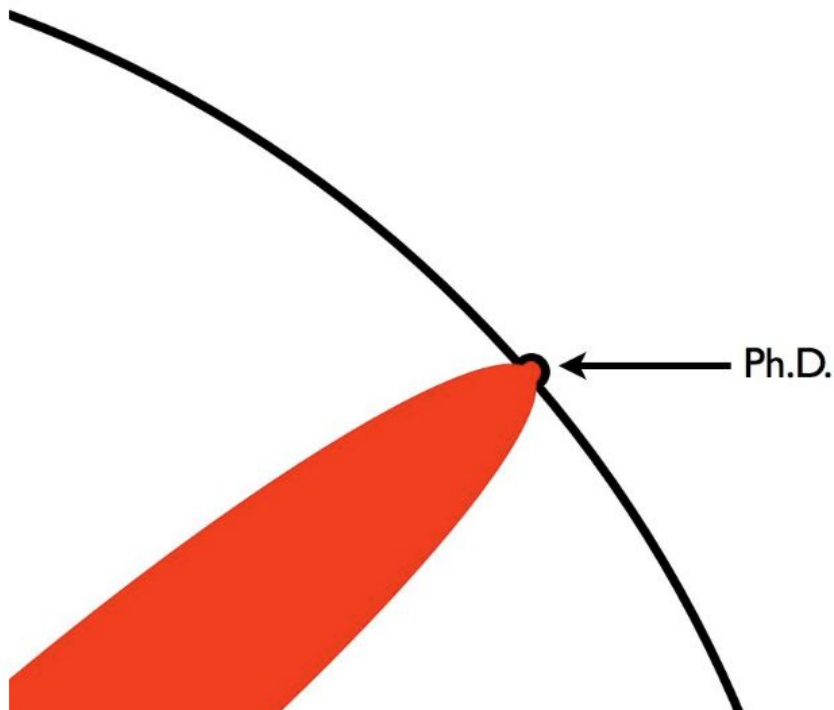
# What Causes Imposter Syndrome?

Until one day, the boundary gives way:



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And, that dent you've made is called a Ph.D.:



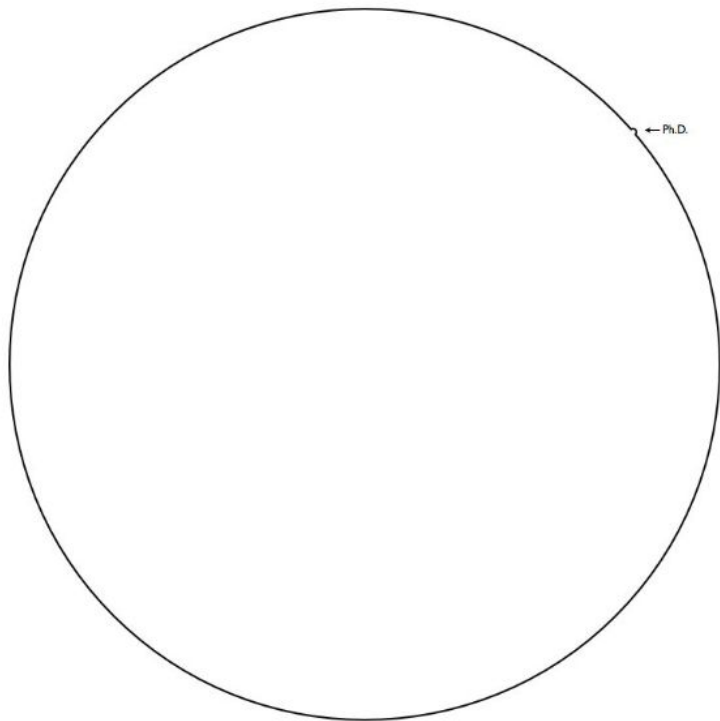
# What Causes Imposter Syndrome?

Of course, the world looks different to you now:



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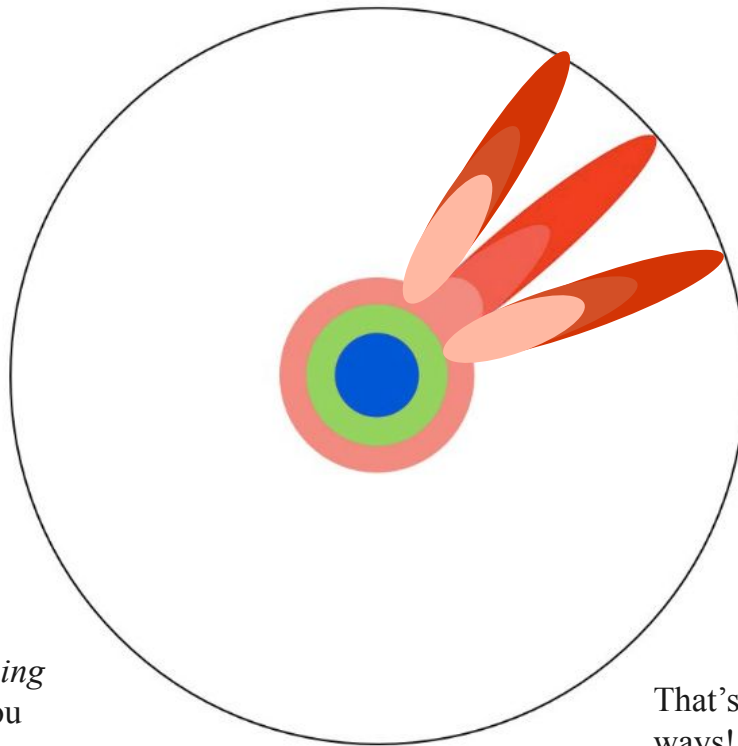
So, don't forget the bigger picture:



# What Causes Imposter Syndrome?

And think about how others' journeys look along the way...

Everyone around you is an expert, but remember that expertise is *narrow*...



You might feel you don't know *anything* about the things that others around you know *a lot* about...

That's completely normal, and it goes both ways!!!

# Prevalence



## IMPOSTER SYNDROME



- 1. Wang et al. 2023 - The Imposter Syndrome Among Doctoral Students, a Scoping Review  
<https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/psychology/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1233434/full>
- 2. <https://dceg.cancer.gov/about/diversity-inclusion/inclusivity-minute/2023/imposter-syndrome>
- 3. Rice et al. 2023 - Impostor syndrome among minority medical students who are underrepresented in medicine  
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# Prevalence



- Graduate students
  - Studies show anywhere from 56% to 70+% of grad students experience severe IS depending on field, survey method, etc.<sup>1</sup>
  - Grad students 6x more likely to suffer from anxiety and depression than general population<sup>1</sup>

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- Women
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# Prevalence

An illustration within a blue border. On the left, the words 'IMPOSTER SYNDROME' are written in bold, dark blue capital letters. To the right, a large, light blue silhouette of a person in a suit stands with one arm raised, holding a trophy. At their feet, a smaller, darker blue silhouette of a person in a suit is crouching down, looking at a briefcase. A small green and orange horizontal bar is positioned above the illustration.

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- Underrepresented Groups
  - IS exacerbated by racism, social stigmas, and microaggressions<sup>2</sup>
  - ~3x more likely at institutions without support and representation<sup>3</sup>

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**The Superperson:** You believe that you must be the hardest worker or reach the highest levels of achievement possible and, if you don't, you are a fraud.

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# Dealing with Imposter Syndrome

## 1. Be comfortable with being uncomfortable

### Now

As a workforce newbie, no one expects you to be an expert in anything, so your early career should be focused around listening and learning.

### Early Career

Ask questions if you don't know something, embrace the learning curve, and don't be afraid of admitting when you're wrong.

### Mid-Career

Your prior experience may have gaps in the modern workforce, so prepare to keep learning as you progress through your career.

### Senior Career

From new tools and technologies to important soft skills, some aspects of your work may take more time than others to gain familiarity with — and that's okay!



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## 2. Open up to people you trust

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Leverage your social networks, from people you follow and look up to on social media platforms, to mentors you've connected with through school or other educational avenues.

### Early Career

Your coworkers and even your manager can be tapped for advice or insights to help you see your skills and accomplishments through a different lens.

### Mid-Career

While colleagues can be a great sounding board, this is also a great opportunity to tap outside networks for career advice and encouragement.

### Senior Career

The individuals you trust the most are either younger than you or holding positions underneath your own, but don't hesitate to reach out if that is the case.

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## 3. Focus on the facts

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Staying objective in times of self-doubt can make the difference between having a moment and spiraling into inaction. Remind yourself that every problem has a solution.

### Early Career

Admit when you've made a mistake, then determine how the error occurred, once you take stock of the issue, you can focus on finding a solution, and then move on.

### Mid-Career

Rather than making assumptions based on previous experiences, focus on the facts surrounding this issue and think objectively toward a solution.

### Senior Career

Instead of putting pressure on yourself to make every task your best one yet, try to remember that oftentimes, "done" is better than "perfect."

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## 4. Acknowledge how far you've come

### Now

While you may not have a lot of professional experience to bolster your confidence, keeping a list of any accomplishments you're proud of can be a solid reminder of your strengths.

### Early Career

You've worked hard to get where you are, even if it's a stepping stone toward where you really want to be. Bookmark your own LinkedIn profile and visit it whenever you feel self-doubt creeping in.

### Mid-Career

Your progress in your career is a result of the work and dedication you've put in so far. Sometimes all it takes is a quick glance in the rearview mirror to appreciate everything you've accomplished.

### Senior Career

If you're consulting or in a leadership role, appreciate the hard work required to get to where you are — embracing that quality at this stage in your career can prevent imposter syndrome from creeping in.

# Dealing with Imposter Syndrome

## 5. Embrace that feeling like an “outsider” may be normal

### Now

Look at your youth and lack of experience as your workplace superpower. Your perspective is just as important as those of your more established colleagues, so speak up when you've got a great idea or burning question.

### Mid-Career

You've likely experienced this feeling in the past, only to have overcome it and pushed forward. Keep a list of those accomplishments in a convenient spot as a reminder that you can get through any “awkward” career stages.

### Early Career

Make a point of getting to know your colleagues on a more personal level as a way to build your network and cultivate a stronger sense of community in your workplace.

### Senior Career

Your age and level of experience might feel like an obstacle, but younger, less experienced colleagues can benefit from your insights, so embrace your expertise and find ways to leverage it across teams for stronger collaboration.

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## 6. Utilize feedback in development

### Now

Proactivity is one of the best antidotes to imposter syndrome, so don't be afraid to ask for constructive feedback from your manager. Getting into this practice early in your career can cultivate a healthy attitude toward your work.

### Mid-Career

Sometimes, the biggest block to adopting feedback is thinking we know what's best, so do your best to stay humble and trust in the process.

### Early Career

Think of feedback as a source of inspiration and use it to reinvigorate your approach to a given task. If you're unclear on objectives, keep asking questions until you're confident that you can complete the work.

### Senior Career

Every stage in your career can use fine-tuning, even when you're at the top. Oftentimes, this means looking to lower-ranking employees for feedback.



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## 7. Know that you are enough

### Now

Remember that everyone starts somewhere, and your current level of experience is exactly what your colleagues expect from you.

### Early Career

You've already come a long way in your career, and there's plenty more in store for your future. Remember that each stage of your career gets you closer to your goals.

### Mid-Career

Embrace whatever you bring to the table at this stage of your career. You have a unique blend of skills and experience that no one else in your organization can replicate.

### Senior Career

You didn't get this far in your career through sheer luck — you worked hard to reach this point and everything you've done is a testament to your work ethic, expertise, and skill set.

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## Important Caveat:

Just because this is a common feeling, that doesn't mean it's OK for people to actively make you feel this way. Rampant Imposter Syndrome *can* be indicative of a toxic workplace.

- **Speak to an NU Ombudsperson:** <https://www.northwestern.edu/ombuds/>
- **File a report with the Office of Equity:**  
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# Resources at NU

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## For Support:

- **Aaron and Chase**
  - We've dealt with this too, and are happy to talk
- **Affordable Counseling at The Family Institute @ Northwestern**
  - <https://www.family-institute.org/>
- **Your peers and mentors**
  - The more we all acknowledge these sort of feelings, the easier they are to deal with





## Expectations : **our** expectations for the summer

- You belong here! Your skillset is very valuable.
- Enjoy the journey. By putting in the effort this summer, you will be successful.
- Meet our deadlines (and if you have trouble, just let us know – we can work this out together).
- Be respectful of your colleagues.
- Keep asking questions and staying engaged. Learn whether research is the right career path for you.
- Have fun!
- We're evaluating your success based on you having an educationally enriching experience this summer. It's more about the journey than the results.



# Expectations : **your** expectations for the summer

- Create realistic expectations
  - you won't publish a refereed journal article by the end of the summer, but you will learn a lot about your science)
  - may help improve mental health and potentially reduce imposter syndrome
- Note that we are not “judging” you on the “quality” of your research – don't judge yourself harshly either.
- Consider what is most important for you to get out of the summer, and help us help you make this happen.

# References



- Rice et al. 2023 - Impostor syndrome among minority medical students who are underrepresented in medicine  
<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0027968423000226>
- Wang et al. 2023 - The Imposter Syndrome Among Doctoral Students, a Scoping Review  
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- <https://dceg.cancer.gov/about/diversity-inclusion/inclusivity-minute/2023/imposter-syndrome>
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