You care about fairness at work – so why do you feel like a fake?

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Most people care about fairness at work and want to support colleagues who face marginalization – for example, people of color, women and people with disabilities. Our research has found that 76% of employees want to be allies to co-workers who face additional challenges, and 84% value equity. That's in line with a 2025 national survey that found 88% of employees supported employers offering training on how to be more inclusive.

So why doesn't that support always turn into action?

Our new study in the Journal of Workplace Behavioral Health points to one reason: Some people may freeze with worry because they feel like a fake. Specifically, they feel like they don't have the skills to effectively support their marginalized co-workers, even though they want to. Those feelings may block action, which makes people feel even more fraudulent – creating a loop that's hard to break.

Together, we – Meg Warren, Michael T. Warren and John LaVelle – found that 1 in 5 people who want to support marginalized groups experience the impostor phenomenon even when they have the skills to be effective allies.

The impostor phenomenon, formerly called the "impostor syndrome," is the feeling that you're not good enough – even when there's objective evidence that you are. Researchers have documented it across many workplace and professional settings, including in health care, technology, entrepreneurship, the C-suite and academia.

Importantly, these feelings are linked to significantly higher anxiety and feelings of depression among people who want to be allies. We found that men, leaders, younger employees and people of color were more likely to experience the impostor phenomenon in the context of allyship.

What the impostor phenomenon looks like for allies

Consider "James," a senior project manager. For the past few years, his company has expected all managers to undergo diversity, equity and inclusion training and to support the company's Black Employee Network. Earlier this year, however, the company publicly withdrew its commitment to DEI and removed all mentions of it from its website.

When his team asked for his thoughts, James felt lost. The facts he learned during the Black Employee Network meetings were unsettling and undeniable. Before, he regularly cited these during various meetings with his colleagues and senior leaders. Now, he felt pressured to act as if none of this mattered. He felt frustrated, at a loss for words and a complete fake – like he didn't know how to support his colleagues anymore.

While "James" is a composite character drawn from many stories we've heard over the course of our research, his experience captures the bind that many would-be allies face.

When allies feel this way, they often compare themselves to an imagined "perfect ally," thinking that if they can't be outrageously heroic, they must be failures. They then deal with feelings of inadequacy by procrastinating or overpreparing before stepping up for others – to the point where they miss crucial opportunities where they could have made a difference.

People tend to feel like an impostor when they encounter a challenge that seems bigger than their ability to cope with it. So it's not surprising that a lot of people feel this way about workplace equity. Inequity and bias play out in complex ways in organizations: The rules change rapidly, and people can receive mixed messages about what behaviors are appropriate, valued and rewarded. This can make allyship feel overwhelmingly challenging, even for those who are otherwise skilled.

Work culture also matters. In toxic organizational cultures or hypercompetitive environments, people feel pressure to hide their mistakes, they worry about colleagues sabotaging their efforts, and they see humility as a weakness. In such places – and especially when the would-be ally's role is highly visible and entails heavy responsibility – people are vulnerable to impostor feelings.

Past criticism can add fuel, too. If you've been admonished for standing up for a colleague or have seen others be attacked – including by those who wish to maintain an unjust status quo – you might further feel pressure to only act in ways that are immune to criticism. That's an impossible standard.

Consequences of feeling like an impostor: Feeling worse, doing worse

Leaders in particular are vulnerable to feeling like impostors on allyship. Many haven't been properly trained on how to listen to and support co-workers who might be facing discrimination and are quietly suffering, yet are held responsible for solving complex issues around fairness that long predated them.

And when stuck in this uncomfortable space, people who feel like impostors are likely to become defensive and feel pressured to be a hero. To prove themselves, they may overcompensate in ways that backfire – for example, by loudly claiming support for disadvantaged workers without following up with useful action, or by swooping in to fix issues without respecting the preferences of the people involved.

Unfortunately, this not only affects their ability to be a supportive colleague, but it also likely harms their mental health. Indeed, the impostor phenomenon has been found to be linked to heightened anxiety and feelings of depression, both in our study and beyond.

So you might wonder: What if I opt out of all of this by not thinking about inequity at all? Our research suggests that this is a bad idea. People who are disengaged from issues of inequity, and who don't invest in learning and growing as allies, experience lower self-confidence at work and have lower job satisfaction. Checking out of allyship could be bad for your professional well-being.

The good news is you don't have to be stuck feeling this way. You can take low-risk, bite-sized actions that can pull you out of feeling fake and boost your confidence, all while improving your own professional success and mental health.

Research points to three simple ways forward. First, recognize and loudly celebrate the strengths of marginalized colleagues, which creates an uplifting work culture. Second, take concrete steps to build trust – for example, by giving proper credit to a disadvantaged colleague if their merit is wrongfully questioned. And finally, overcome your cynicism – which research shows invariably suppresses constructive action – and instead adamantly choose hope, even when it's hard.

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