

Managing Yourself

Overcoming Imposter Syndrome

by Gill Corkindale

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Thanks to all the readers who commented on last week's post on Imposter Syndrome, especially to Parag, Jason and Omar – it takes courage to talk about being an 'imposter,' so thanks to you for coming forward. I was also encouraged to hear both the pros and cons of working with those suffering from imposter syndrome in business.

This week I want to set out some definitions of imposter syndrome and some useful steps for dealing with it. If you feel you are holding yourself back, or if you work with someone who displays this behaviour, read on.

It starts with recognising it in yourself and others. Imposter syndrome can be defined as a collection of feelings of inadequacy that persist despite evident success. 'Imposters' suffer from chronic self-doubt and a sense of intellectual fraudulence that override any feelings of success or external proof of their competence. They seem unable to internalize their accomplishments, however successful they are in their field. High achieving, highly successful people often suffer, so imposter syndrome doesn't equate with low self-esteem or a lack of self-confidence. In fact, some researchers have linked it with perfectionism, especially in women and among academics.

Where does it come from? Some researchers believe it has its roots in the labels parents attach to particular members of the family. For example, one child might be designated the ‘intelligent’ one and the other the ‘sensitive’ one. Another theory is that parents can programme the child with messages of superiority: the child is so fully supported that the parents and child believe that he or she is superior or perfect.

Some common thoughts and feelings associated with imposter syndrome include:

“I must not fail” There can be a huge amount of pressure currently not to fail in order to avoid being “found out.” Paradoxically, success also becomes an issue as it brings the added pressure of responsibility and visibility. This leads to an inability to enjoy success.

“I feel like a fake” Imposters believe they do not deserve success or professional accolades and feel that somehow others have been deceived into thinking otherwise. This goes hand in hand with a fear of being “found out”, discovered, or “unmasked”. They believe they give the impression that they are more competent than they are and have deep feelings that they lack knowledge or expertise. Often they believe they don’t deserve a position or a promotion and are anxious that “somebody made a mistake”.

“It’s all down to luck” The tendency to attribute success to luck or to other external reasons and not their abilities is a clear indicator of imposter syndrome. They may typically say or think: “I just got lucky” or “it was a fluke”. Often this masks the fear that they will not be able to succeed the next time.

“Success is no big deal” The tendency to downplay success and discount it is marked in those with imposter syndrome. They might attribute their success to it being an easy task or having support and often have a hard time accepting compliments. Again, they think their success is down to luck, good timing, or having fooled others.

So what can you do to mitigate the negative effects of Imposter syndrome?

- **Recognise imposter feelings when they emerge.** Awareness is the first step to change, so ensure you track these thoughts: what they are and when they emerge.
- **Rewrite your mental programmes.** Instead of telling yourself they are going to find you out or that you don't deserve success, remind yourself that it's normal not to know everything and that you will find out more as you progress.
- **Talk about your feelings.** There may be others who feel like imposters too – it's better to have an open dialogue rather than harbour negative thoughts alone
- **Consider the context.** Most people will have experience moments or occasions where they don't feel 100% confident. There may be times when you feel out of your depth and self-doubt can be a normal reaction. If you catch yourself thinking that you are useless, reframe it: "the fact that I feel useless right now does not mean that I really am."
- **Reframe failure as a learning opportunity.** Find out the lessons and use them constructively in future. This is a critical lesson for everyone.
- **Be kind to yourself.** Remember that you are entitled to make small mistakes occasionally and forgive yourself. Don't forget to reward yourself for getting the big things right.
- **Seek support.** Everyone needs help: recognise that you can seek assistance and that you don't have to do everything alone. This will give you a good reality check and help you talk things through.
- **Visualise your success.** Keep your eye on the outcome – completing the task or making the presentation, which will keep you focused and calm.

Do you have any further coping strategies for imposter syndrome? What works – and doesn't work – for you? Have And what do you think Imposter Syndrome means for business – for example,

which professions or sectors have a higher population of 'imposters'?

Note: There are plenty of resources on Imposter Syndrome, including important work by Valerie Young and this further reading.

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