

Imposter Syndrome

What it is and how to manage its impact

Online Resource

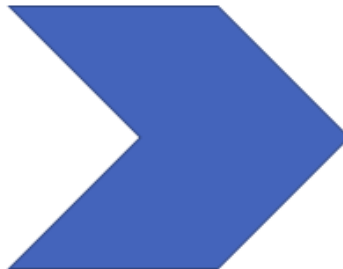
IMPOSTER SYNDROME THOUGHTS

'I only got here because
I'm liked'

'Someone is going to find
out that I'm not worthy of
this role any minute'

'I only got here because
I'm lucky'

'I do not have the skills or
experience for the role I'm
in'



REFRAMED THOUGHTS

'I secured this role
because of my abilities'

'I am doing my best'

'I may make mistakes, but
I'll learn'

'I bring a lot of value to
this project'

Imposter Syndrome

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Imposter Syndrome

About this guide

Why should I read this resource?

Imposter syndrome is experienced by high achieving individuals and so is a common and challenging experience in an academic research environment. This resource provides you with insight on the experience of imposter syndrome and strategies and advice on how to best deal with its impact.

I encourage you to engage in activities to help overcome the negative impact of experiencing imposter syndrome and also to be in a better position to support others.

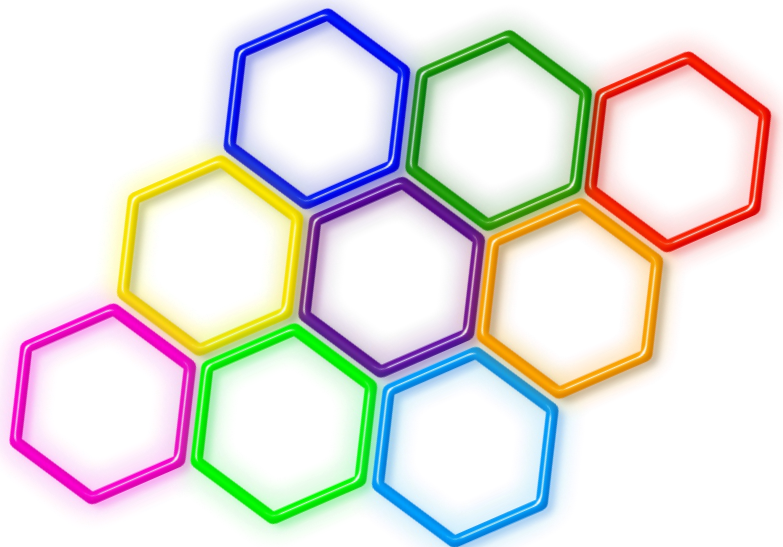
What this resources does not cover

This resource does not touch on resilience and stress management, yet they are natural bed fellows of imposter syndrome.

I recommend that you access additional resources to encourage proactive maintenance of your general wellbeing. All these approaches will support a positive approach to managing the experience of imposter syndrome.

Resources:

- University of Edinburgh Health & Wellbeing webpages: <https://edin.ac/2oiRh2k>
- Thriving in your research position - online guide: <https://edin.ac/2Kf9F1V>
- Pop-up IAD, a library of online training and resources: <https://edin.ac/3fLrzc6>
 - Pop-up: A fresh look at resilience: <https://edin.ac/39zwqNi>
 - Pop-up: Resilience in trying times: <https://edin.ac/33DPZ30>



Imposter Syndrome

What is Imposter Syndrome?

Imposter syndrome is characterised by chronic feelings of self-doubt and fear of being discovered as an intellectual fraud.

Despite evidence of abilities, those suffering from imposter syndrome are unable to internalise a sense of accomplishment, competence, or skill.

Overall, they believe themselves to be less intelligent and competent than others perceive them to be.

Ref: The descriptive study of imposter syndrome in medical students, 2018, Maqsood

This experience was first described by Pauline Rose Clance and Suzanne Imes, both psychologists, in their paper 'The Imposter Phenomenon in High Achieving Women: Dynamics and Therapeutic Intervention' published in Psychotherapy Theory, Research and Practice Volume 15, #3, Fall 1978.

Imposter syndrome is understood to occur among high achievers who are unable to internalise and accept their success.

[Click here](#) for the Clance IP scale questionnaire

What imposter syndrome is not

People experience the phenomenon of being an imposter and the thoughts and feelings elicited by that experience. Although it has been termed a syndrome, 'a phenomenon of the mind' is more accurate from a medical point of view.

This is not to diminish the impact of the experience of the imposter phenomenon (we will use imposter syndrome as the standard terminology in this resource).

"Ring the Bells that can still ring, forget the perfect offering.

There is a crack in everything, that's how the light gets in"

Anthem, Leonard Cohen



Imposter Syndrome

The experience of imposter syndrome

The experience of imposter syndrome means that you tend to attribute success to temporary causes like luck, effort or that you are liked. You fear being 'found out' and exposed as a fraud and are unable to internalise your accomplishments.

This can often lead to:

- Repetitive negative self-talk
- General feeling of never being good enough
- Struggling to accept praise and recognition
- Obsessing over mistakes and failures
- Overwhelming anxiety of being "found out" or exposed

The impact of these feeling and thoughts can lead to:

- Judging yourself by only the highest standards
- Perfectionism
- Internalise all flaws, mistakes and criticisms
- Dismiss all praise
- Feel a fraud, which can manifest itself in:
 - * Overworking
 - * Self sabotage
 - * Holding back
 - * Procrastination

"Most people experience some self-doubt when facing new challenges", says Carole Lieberman, MD, a Beverly Hills psychiatrist and author

"But someone with [imposter phenomenon] has an all-encompassing fear of being found out to not have what it takes." Even if they experience outward signs of success — getting into a selective graduate program, say... they have trouble believing that they're worthy. Instead, they may chalk their success up to good luck.

The impostor syndrome and perfectionism often go hand in hand. So-called impostors think every task they tackle has to be done perfectly, and they rarely ask for help.

That perfectionism can lead to two typical responses, according to Clance. An impostor may procrastinate, putting off an assignment out of fear that he or she won't be able to complete it to the necessary high standards. Or, he or she may overprepare, spending much more time on a task than is necessary.'

Ref: <https://www.apa.org/gradpsych/2013/11/fraud>

It is generally understood that imposter syndrome is experienced by high achievers. By default, you are surrounded by other high achievers and competition may feel strong. Individuals may have had the emphasis of achievement and a sense of self-worth mixed up.

So what can you do to reduce the impact of the experience of imposter syndrome?

Imposter Syndrome

What can you do to manage imposter syndrome?

The inherent danger in establishing the thinking pattern that you are 'not good enough', is that you will undermine yourself to the point where it will become self-fulfilling.

Creating new thought patterns – neural pathways, and challenging the old thinking patterns is a key way to reduce the experience of imposter syndrome.

Here are a set of techniques, that if implemented consistently over time, can help.

Activity One: The impact of language

Concrete, immovable language can create the feeling of succeed or fail and nothing in between. This is high pressure internal messaging.

Over the next week, notice the language that you use in the context of your research activities. Is it fair (elements of work that are within your control) or supportive or is it pressurised language and creates the idea of succeed or fail? Once you notice the language you use, ask yourself, could it be different? And try to replace the old, potentially, unhelpful language. For example:

Try to reduce the unnecessary use of words such as:

- Should
- Must
- Have to
- Will

Try instead:

- Would be good if . . .
- Would like to . . .
- Have the opportunity to . . .
- Will try . . .

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal blue ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

Imposter Syndrome

Your relationship with failure

'Failure is the only opportunity to start again more intelligently.' Henry Ford

Aristotle said 'there is only one way to avoid criticism. Do nothing; say nothing; and be nothing'. It's the same with failure. It is a necessary part of scientific experimentation and is the same in professional development.

Allow yourself the lenience to make mistakes and learn from them.

Define competence as the ability to figure something out rather than having all the answers.

Activity Two: The implicit value in failure

Note down a recent perceived failure. Document all the benefits and value of that experience, both practical and personal.

For instance:

If I hadn't have been rejected for that position, I would not have that lived experience to be a more compassionate supervisor

Perceived Failure	Benefits and value of the experiences	
	Practical	Personal

Notes:

Imposter Syndrome

Activity Three: Develop a professional mantra

Develop a paragraph that describes the attributes and skills that show you to be a capable and developed researcher. Describe what is within your abilities rather than what is outside of your control.

I've provided some example statements below:

'I will drive a project forward even under resource and budget constraints'

'I am persistent and committed, putting effort into my non research project obligations.'

'I do my best to complete my research obligations.'

'I have completed five applications for additional projects this year, created relationships with three key research institutes and still have my sense of humour.'

'I am a parent, a carer and am still able to progress my specialist knowledge in my research area.'

My professional Mantra:

The form consists of two large, empty square brackets, one on the left and one on the right, facing each other. Each bracket is composed of a vertical line and two horizontal lines at the top and bottom, creating a wide space for text entry.

Imposter Syndrome

Manage Perfectionism

There is a lot of value in perfectionism in contributing to high quality work, however, it has its downsides, in the idea that if it isn't perfect, it stops you from delivering altogether.

Look instead at the opportunity of attaining Excellence, rather than perfect (which isn't really possible to achieve, because you are not in control of every element of your research life).

Activity Four: Aim for Excellence

See this as a playful experiment to challenge your own status quo and as an experiment to break the habit of perfectionism.

1. List all the elements of an upcoming research objective that are within your control
2. Document what the output of each task needs to look like to meet that objective in terms of quality.
3. Commit to a certain amount of time and effort for each individual task, creating a false limit.

Once you have used up your allotted time for each task, look at the quality of the output. Is it good enough to meet expectations? What more do you need to do so that it is excellent but not perfect? You may need to allot more time, but still create limits on yourself to help reduce your commitment to perfectionism.

Research Objective:		
Elements within my control:	Output	Time limit
<ul style="list-style-type: none">		
Elements out with my control:	What good enough looks like	Time Limit
<ul style="list-style-type: none">		
What more could I have done to make it excellent, but not perfect:		

Imposter Syndrome

Feedback

Imposter Syndrome is often a well kept secret. Meaning that we do not challenge the assumptions that we make about how other people perceive us professionally

Activity Five: Gather feedback on your research activities

Write down three elements of your research activities that you believe are not good enough. Then ask for some evidence of other people's perspective.

Good feedback is not just opinion, but evidence. Perhaps start with asking peers to take note of an element of your research activities and then ask them what they saw went well and what you might suggest they did differently.

Think of it as data collection to challenge your imposter hypothesis.

Research Activities	
1	
Feedback:	
2	
Feedback:	
3	
Feedback:	

Talk to someone

You are not alone. Talk to someone you trust. Share your feelings and thoughts. If you have a mentor, talk to them. You may be surprised at how common the experience of imposter syndrome is and how reassuring it is to share those experiences with others.

www.ed.ac.uk/iad

References and Resources

- <https://vimeo.com/20121374> - Loving kindness meditation
- <https://www.ellevatenetwork.com/articles/7945-7-coping-strategies-to-overcome-impostor-syndrome> - coping strategies for Imposter Syndrome
- <https://www.actionforhappiness.org/> - loads of fab resources
- https://www.huffpost.com/entry/7-coping-strategies-to-overcome-impostor-syndrome_b_58925a49e4b0aa61e8f534a9?guccounter=1 - coping mechanisms for overcoming imposter syndrome
- Ref: <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/impostor-syndrome-two-thirds-female-scholars-suffer-badly#survey-answer>
- Paper: Impostor phenomenon and motivation: women in higher education <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/03075079.2019.1568976?scroll=top&needAccess=true>
- Paper: The impostor phenomenon in high achieving women: dynamics and therapeutic intervention https://www.paulineroseclance.com/pdf/ip_high_achieving_women.pdf
- Overcoming Imposter Syndrome - <https://impostorsyndrome.com/10-steps-overcome-impostor/>

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Caroline Broad, caroline@broadassociates.co.uk, is a professional skills development trainer for researchers. Caroline's interactive workshops focus on raising our self awareness and developing practical skills that will help you be a more productive, innovative researcher whilst maintaining wellbeing. Broad Associates flagship programmes are in researcher resilience and innovation in academic industry partnerships. She is the Entrepreneur in Residence for the Royal Veterinary College, owns a campervan called Nerys and volunteers for Action for Happiness.

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