



“THE CAT IS OUT OF THE BAG: UNRAVELLING IMPOSTOR SYNDROME”

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Brief message

I am Harshitha, a Master's student at Radboud University studying Molecular Mechanisms of Disease. I wrote about imposter syndrome because I suffer from it, and I wanted to make other people who were possibly feeling the same way feel recognised and not alone. I truly believe that everyone deserves a chance to celebrate both their mistakes and successes that occur during the pursuit of their professional goals without feeling doubtful or fearful of their earned merit!

Have you ever felt like the perfect score you got on your recent test was because you had sheer good luck? Or that sometimes you find yourself wallowing in misery because your experiments did not work, and you feel like you are not meant to be a scientist?

Although you may seldomly feel fully confident and feel like you truly belong in your professional landscape, psychologists have described what you feel as a common experience amongst many people [1]. They call it the “Impostor Syndrome”, a roller-coaster of an internal experience, often characterised by a fear of being perceived as incompetent, with bouts of self-doubt [2]. It was first described in 1978 when Pauline Rose Charles and Suzanne Imes discovered that numerous high-achieving women in academia were convinced they had fooled everybody who thought of them as intelligent, despite possessing legitimate degrees, promotions, and awards [3].

“Impostors” often attribute their warranted successes to intangible factors, such as luck and good timing [3]. The debilitating syndrome also drives its sufferers to deny praise for their achievements and overwork in order to cope with their constant fear of being exposed as frauds, further fuelling the development of low self-esteem, low self-confidence, and feelings of inadequacy [4]. Long term effects of feeling insecure and incompetent can include aversion to participation in professional settings and a lower drive to achieve set aspirations and goals. A distinct implication of impostor syndrome is the fear of failure [3]. This fear is augmented when “impostors” are faced with challenging tasks that involve evaluation of their performance on completion. The fear of failure causes sufferers to resort to dysfunctional practices, such as procrastination and perfectionism. Sufferers who strive for perfection tend to overwork themselves, which can sometimes cause burnout. They further credit their successes to the amount of work they put in, although it may have been disproportionate to the amount of impact it had on the calibre of the task itself [4]. People who indulge in procrastination and intensely work at the last-minute associate their successes with luck. Unfortunately, sufferers of impostor syndrome are usually unable to break their cycle of maladaptive habits due to the fear that breaking them may increase their chances of failing [4]. Ironically, some people also experience a fear of succeeding, as this increases visibility and responsibility, therefore increasing the likelihood of being “found out”[1].



Although breaking free from the shackles of impostor syndrome may seem daunting, it is not impossible. As the fear of being discovered as fraudulent forms the cornerstone of feeling like an impostor, most people suffer in silence and seldom seek help [4]. The first step towards navigating through impostor syndrome is to recognise negative, overly self-critical thoughts and acknowledge them for what they are. This strategy not only makes these thoughts less intimidating but also opens up a dialogue between people who experience the same thoughts and feelings [4]. Another remedy would be to consciously try internalising one's accomplishments to counter repeated thoughts of self-doubt. Breaking out of the vicious circle of impostor-like thinking is imperative to triumph over impostor syndrome [4]. Two cognitive interventions, namely thought stopping and shipping, can be practised to break toxic cycles of impostor-like thinking. Thought stopping involves identifying negative thoughts and replacing them with positive thoughts rooted in self-compassion

and affection [4]. This will aid in evolving impostors into people capable of constructive self-criticism of their abilities while fostering compassion instead of striving for impossible perfectionism. Thought shipping promotes the concept of pitching an idea to others without waiting for it to be perfect [4]. This forces sufferers to venture out of their comfort zone, boosting personal growth and creativity through learning from mistakes. Finally, seeking professional counselling and therapy can prove extremely beneficial in overcoming impostor syndrome [4].

If you feel overwhelmed at any moment in the future, remember that you are not alone and that probably many people around you feel the same. Dare to pursue your goals and prove impostor syndrome wrong!

References

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2. Ramsey E, Brown D. Feeling like a fraud: Helping students renegotiate their academic identities. *College & Undergraduate Libraries.* **25(1)**, 86-90 (2018).
3. Clance PR, Imes SA. The imposter phenomenon in high achieving women: Dynamics and therapeutic intervention. *Psychotherapy: Theory, research & practice.* **15(3)**, 241 (1978).
4. Chandra S, Huebert CA, Crowley E, Das AM. Impostor Syndrome: Could It Be Holding You or Your Mentees Back? *Chest.* **156(1)**, 26-32 (2019).

EXAM QUESTION

Question 4

Do you want to practise your knowledge regarding the topic of this brief message? Then, let us see if you can answer the following exam question.

Primary and secondary appraisal of a stressor is both included in the stress-coping model. Lack of social support and a social network affects...

- A. primary appraisal
- B. secondary appraisal

The answer to this question can be found on page 33 in this journal.