

The Imposter Syndrome

Perfectionism is a classic imposter syndrome symptom

Some high-achieving people suffer from a terrible insecurity where they are unable to accept and enjoy their accomplishments regardless of the level of success they may have reached or the external proof of their competence. There is a deep sense of intellectual or professional fraudulence.

Dr. Valerie Young has written about the Imposter Syndrome at her website www.impostersyndrome.com. She includes this quiz to help you identify whether you are a member of this very prevalent but dubious club.

Yes or no:

- Do you secretly worry that others will find out that you are not as bright or capable as *they* think you are?
- Do you sometimes shy away from challenges because of nagging self-doubt?
- Do you tend to chalk your accomplishments up to being a “fluke”, “no big deal” or the fact that people just “like” you?
- Do you hate making a mistake, being less than fully prepared or not doing things perfectly?
- Do you tend to feel crushed by even constructive criticism, seeing it as evidence of “ineptness”?
- When you do succeed, do you think, “Phew, I fooled ‘em this time but I may not be so lucky next time”
- Do you believe that other people (students, colleagues, competitors) are smarter or more capable than you?
- Do you live in fear of being found out, discovered, unmasked?

If you answered yes to any of these questions, please read on.

The imposter syndrome is associated with highly achieving, highly successful people. This makes imposter feelings somewhat different from the concept of “low self esteem” because there is a discrepancy between actual achievement and the person’s feelings about the achievement that may not be present in low self esteem. Imposters fear success and the responsibility and future expectations that brings. There is a huge pressure not to fail. Imposters handle this internalized pressure by being very diligent, using charm and avoiding any display of confidence. It is a chronic and more complex than simply faking it until you make it. This self-doubt can also paralyze a person to not try to get a better job, take on responsibility that he/she is capable of and, in extreme cases, quit his/her job because of the self-imposed pressure where you think that you are only as good as your last effort and are afraid to take on a new challenge.

Since this is internalized, many people are reluctant to talk about their fears or seek any help at all.

In his book, *The Imposter Syndrome, How to Replace Self-Doubt with Self-Confidence and Train Your Brain for Success, 2009, Big Dream Media*, John Graden postulates that messages and lessons learned as children shape your thinking about yourself. If you have been taught to not trust yourself or your abilities, you may have issues with your worth. He recommends working on defining yourself as objectively as possible and redefining the messages you were given and accepted. This may involve intense therapy.

There is an approach that can help called Cognitive Behaviour Therapy. It is simply being aware of your thoughts, checking out the pros and cons as to accuracy and reframing your outlook and beliefs about yourself.

The common styles of distorted thinking are filtering out all the positives and magnifying the negatives; polarizing your thinking into black/white, good/bad analysis; catastrophizing when you always expect disaster; personalization where you think everything people say or do is about you; blaming other people for your pain; emotional reasoning where, because you think something, it must be true such as I believe that I am a phony, then I am; and mind reading where, without others saying so, you know how people are feeling about you. Obviously, feeling like an imposter is fed by these distorted thinking patterns.

The most prevalent thought distortion are the “shoulds”, “coulds” and “oughts”. These are absolute words that trap you into a black and white scenario where life is multihued. These words lead to “can’t”, “won’t”, “never”, “always”, and “everyone”. These negative exaggerations cut you off from possibilities you have for advancement or growth. Try to learn to replace absolute words and phrases with those that give you a chance. Instead of “We can’t do”, try “How can I....?”. Develop a positive approach before you cut off your chance of achieving what you can.

Dealing with these thinking patterns is hard work. It means catching yourself when you go to a place of distorted thinking and automatic thoughts to assess the validity of the thoughts. It helps if you make a chart. Write down your thoughts, as objectively as possible to determine if they are true or false, write out the evidence to support both views, decide how you would reframe those thoughts when (not if) they come back and keep your awareness up. Do your own reality check. Understand the difference between feelings and reality. By vigilantly doing this form of internal mental exercise, you will train yourself to see yourself in a realistic light.

If you find that it is too tough for you to be objective about yourself, go to your partner or a close friend who will be honest with you to discuss how you are feeling. Ask for the truth and listen carefully and openly to what you are being told. After all, the people you trust and who love you can give you a more objective picture and analysis of your life, accomplishments and future dreams. Do not blow them off as just trying to patronise you to just make you feel

better. If you think that that is what they will do, find someone else you know can be fair, impartial and even impersonal and who will give you a non-judgmental ear. Have dinner or a quiet chat at least once a week. Try to not be defensive when you hear things you might not want to hear. Take the risk of sharing your fears and dreams. Open up to the possibility that another person can understand, empathize and help. Expect wonderful possibilities.

Learn to say “Thank You”. A classic imposter syndrome symptom is the discounting or denial of praise. It may be hard for you to say those words because we were taught to be humble and not brag. You may have a lingering doubt about your success. However, when you say “Thank You” and stop your brain from carrying on to tell yourself that the praise is not deserved, you drive home to your subconscious that you are, in fact, worthy of praise and acknowledgement. It takes time to give a sincere and unapologetic thank you but, with practice, you will develop your belief in yourself.

You might also consider getting help from a trained therapist to help you identify distorted thinking patterns and maybe why your view of yourself leads you to believe that you are an imposter. Find out where you can go to a Cognitive Behaviour Therapy group to hone your skills of self awareness. Do the homework even if you think it is silly. This is a proven therapeutic model that can change your life around.

It is hard to live your life thinking that the next call or letter will expose you. You can do something about how you feel. It is entirely within your control.

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