

The Imposter Within

Have you ever doubted yourself? And feared being exposed as a “fraud”, despite external validation and evidence of your own competence, while feeling that you do not deserve to be where you are and what you have accomplished?

Studies suggest that about 70% of us have Imposter Syndrome (Goldhill, 2016).

If so, you are not alone and there are many of us feeling the exact same way without really understanding why this fear is surfacing. This is the “dirty little secret” (Wilding, 2019) shared by many high achieving individuals who feel that most of their success is due to sheer luck, not their own abilities or competences. This is defined as the Impostor Syndrome and was first introduced in 1978 by Dr. Pauline R. Clance and Dr. Suzanne A. Imes and emerged through their article "The Impostor Phenomenon in High Achieving Women: Dynamics and Therapeutic Intervention" (Clance & Imes, 1978), in later years recognized to equally affect both men and women. Several researchers have since its introduction in 1978 investigated the phenomenon and one of the experts within the field, Dr. Valerie Young, has further divided the phenomenon into sub-categories (concepts familiar to many); “the Perfectionist, the Superwoman/man, the Natural Genius, the Soloist, and the Expert” (Wilding, 2019). But despite category or type, more than 70% of us are experiencing this fear of being exposed, one or several times during our career.

“Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg has said, “There are still days when I wake up feeling like a fraud”” (Goldhill, 2016).

But why are people feeling like this?

Well, the answer is multifaceted and there are many variables contributing to the feeling of being a “fraud”. Researchers have separate views and some focus on personality traits, while others look at relational, behavioral and cultural causes. It can also be related to environmental and social contexts, where one creates a sense of belonging (Abrams, 2018).

The opposite: “People who are too dumb to know that they’re dumb”.

Nevertheless, many do agree that the phenomenon correlates with high achieving individuals and that the true impostors do not suffer from the Impostor Syndrome. So, if you are suffering from the syndrome, you are most likely doing a good job. Hence, those who do not suffer from this might have a reason to doubt their abilities – maybe having too much of a confidence and suffering from what is known as the “Dunning-Kruger effect”, not being aware of their own incomprehension. According to an associate professor of sociology at the University of Notre Dame, Jessica Collet, this can be summarized as: “People who are too dumb to know that they’re dumb”, which means “They don’t feel at all like frauds - they feel they know exactly what they’re doing and how could other people not know what they’re doing. But it turns out, they don’t know enough to know how little they know” (Goldhill, 2016). It is also important to be aware of the fact that the Impostor Syndrome does not discriminate, and that people from any demographic may suffer from this phenomenon - even though every segment is not hit equally hard (Hendriksen, 2015).

Not a predictor of success.

However, there is no reason to aspire to get the Impostor Syndrome, as it may lead to depression and anxiety which again can lead to burnout, and it should not be seen as a desirable condition. It is very stressful and creates massive everyday tensions to the

individual, following the feeling of putting on a show to prevent exposure (Goldhill, 2016). But as people who are suffering from the Impostor Syndrome becomes aware of their condition, it is equally important that they become aware of the fact that they neither need to fear showing confidence and belief in their own abilities.

“Own your success” – 9 steps to overcome the Imposter Syndrome.

Regardless of what one might think, it is not that complicated to overcome these feelings, but one needs to be aware of it and work with oneself – and embark on a journey of self-discovery and personal development.

9 steps to overcome the Imposter Syndrome.

1. The first step to overcome this feeling of inadequacy is to acknowledge one’s feelings and why these feelings occur. Remember that reality is not the same as your feelings, and what you feel might be very different from what other people see.
2. The next step is to talk to people you trust and feel you can connect with. You might get surprised about how many of the people you talk to are experiencing the same thing and can relate to what you tell them, and how you are feeling.
3. Map and understand your own strengths and weaknesses. When you know yourself on a deeper level and have a full overview of your own strengths and weaknesses you won’t need to worry so much about if you are qualified or not.
4. Break free from perfectionism and give yourself some slack.
5. Own your success with pride and joy and see that it is due to your own abilities and not some external factors or sheer luck.
6. Reward yourself and make sure to celebrate yourself when you are doing good.
7. Don’t get hung up in your mistakes. Move on and learn from it.
8. Educate yourself and learn how your personality type works with this diagnosis and how you can overcome this syndrome.
9. Get enough sleep, as this will help you to stay more focused and connected to reality. Not stuck in your own inner battles and negative thoughts.

To conclude, it is important to say that the syndrome must not be mistaken for a predictor of success, it is merely an indicator of high achievers (Goldhill, 2016).

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