

IMPOSTER SYNDROME (also known as impostor phenomenon, impostorism, fraud syndrome or the impostor experience) is a psychological pattern in which one doubts one's accomplishments and has a persistent internalized fear of being exposed as a "fraud".



How prevalent is Imposter Syndrome and does gender play a role?

It is thought that up to 70 percent of the population may have experienced imposter syndrome at some point in their lives.

Although it initially appeared to researchers that imposter syndrome was more prevalent in women, there is growing evidence to suggest that men are not immune. A major difference may be in the way in which men and women respond to it. Studies have suggested that women who scored high on measures of anxiety and impostor syndrome also worked harder and competed harder to prove themselves. Men who scored high, on the other hand, avoided situations where their weaknesses could be exposed. Their primary motivation was to consistently appear strong by pursuing activities that were likely to showcase their strengths.

Still attribution theorists argue that while men tend to own success as attributable to a quality inherent to themselves, women are more likely either to project the cause of success outward to an external cause (luck) or to a temporary internal quality (effort) that they do not equate with inherent ability. Thus, it would make sense that women would be deemed more prone to imposter syndrome.

There is also evidence to suggest that the syndrome is more common in those that differ in some way from the majority of their peers – whether by race, culture, age, sexual orientation etc. In the South African context, efforts to redress the inequalities of the past may have fuelled the sense of being a fraud for certain individuals e.g. with perceived token appointments.

Besides the gender distinction, are some people more prone to Imposter Syndrome than others?

Many people who feel like impostors grew up in families that placed a big emphasis on achievement. So, they are highly motivated to achieve and are actually highly successful people by objective standards. This makes impostor feelings somewhat different from the concept of 'low self-esteem' because there is a discrepancy between the actual achievement and the person's feelings about the achievement that may not be present in low self-esteem.

Perfectionism goes hand in hand with Imposter syndrome. 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 the researchers who initially coined the term Imposter Syndrome. 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 over-prepare, spending much more time on a task than is necessary.

Ultimately, the impostor phenomenon becomes a cycle. Afraid of being discovered as a fraud, people with impostor feelings go through contortions to do a project perfectly. When they succeed, they begin to believe all that anxiety and effort paid off. Eventually, they develop an unconscious belief system that success cannot come without that self-torture.

Also, people with impostor feelings can have a tendency to over internalize failure. People who feel like impostors may fear success and the responsibility and visibility that come with since being more successful will increase the tension between the inner feelings and the outside perceptions.

Impostor feelings are generally accompanied by anxiety and, often, depression. By definition, most people with impostor feelings suffer in silence, as they're afraid of being discovered to be a fraud.

Why is it that people who are driven and good at their work tend to doubt themselves whereas those that are mediocre are generally happy with their accomplishments?

The latter probably don't share the same features as the former i.e. intelligent, perfectionistic with a strong motivation to achieve.

What can you do if you identify with having Imposter Syndrome and stop doubting yourself?

Awareness

Often the first step is simply having awareness of your imposter syndrome tendencies, where and when the imposter feelings show up.

Talk to your mentors

Supportive, encouraging mentorship, especially with someone who is willing to disclose their own fears and how they have managed to overcome them is like gold. A mentor can help you to see that your imposter feelings are both normal and irrational and help you to know that you're not alone. Once someone in a position of prominence names impostorship, it becomes normal, natural, and predictable. When a senior leader admits to it, you can see people relaxing and being ready to own up to it too. It's as if a weight of unrealizable expectations has been removed from their shoulders.

Recognize your expertise

Mentoring or working with protégés of your own can help you realize how far you've come and how much knowledge you have to impart.

Remember what you do well

Make a realistic assessment of your abilities by writing down the things you're truly good at, and the areas that might need work. That can help you recognize where you're doing well, and where there's legitimate room for improvement.

Realize no one is perfect

Stop focusing on perfection. Do a task 'well enough' It's also important to take time to appreciate the fruits of your hard work. Develop and implement rewards for success

Change your thinking

Reframe the way you think about your achievements. This can help to gradually chip away at the superstitious thinking that fuels the impostor cycle. Be realistic about how what you attribute your success and failures to.

See others objectively.

Practice seeing other people as they really are, with their own needs and foibles, strengths and weaknesses. Learning to see and accept flaws in others will allow you to see yourself in the same way—with compassion and understanding.

Learn to internalize external validation.

When someone compliments you on a task you did really well, resist your habitual negative response and just let the information sink in. Another way to practice this is to ask a trusted ally what your special gifts are; listen carefully and “metabolize” your friend's words.

Have a sense of humor.

One of the best ways to maintain perspective is to laugh as often as possible—especially at yourself. People with impostor syndrome are often unable to joke and relax in the workplace, because they fear that they'll be perceived as slackers. Enjoying your work and your life needn't be a luxury that's reserved for others, but not you

Talk to someone who can help

For many people with impostor feelings, individual therapy can be extremely helpful. A psychologist or other therapist can give you tools to help you break the cycle of impostor thinking.

What is the root cause of Imposter Syndrome?

The development of Imposter Syndrome has been attributed to a few different theories. Most agree that these individuals grow up in achievement-oriented families.

Some researchers believe the syndrome develops when parents send mixed messages — alternating between over-praise and criticism. Others believe it is caused when high achievers are given approval for achievement but not given much validation for their feelings. So they grow up thinking their worth or value is tied only to achievement and then constantly see themselves as falling short of that expectation of achievement.

Still others link it to paternal overprotection or lack of paternal care. It may even be attributed to the actions of well-meaning parents whose children can do no wrong in their eyes. They are put on a pedestal that the child later realises is unrealistic to maintain but still feels obligated to live up to the lofty expectations of the family. Because they are not able to succeed as easily as their parents would have them believe — they begin to see themselves as an intellectual imposter.

Self-Fulfilling Prophecy – if you're so afraid of being exposed as a fraud, are you not in danger of that actually happening?

Not necessarily, people with Imposter Syndrome are driven to hide their own perceived fraudulence at all costs. The lack of talent, achievement and success with which they perceive themselves is very different to how they are experienced by others. So, if they feel they are at risk of being “discovered” to be a fraud they will just work harder and continue to succeed without ever internalising or enjoying their success.

Does the syndrome spill over into other facets of a person's life - for example that you are not a good enough partner, parent, friend or not as effective in your other life roles?

Imposter Syndrome is just as likely to show in a person's other life spheres as it is likely to show up in their professional lives. In a 2010 study by psychologists Rory O'Brien McElwee, Ph.D., and Tricia Yurak, Ph.D., who have researched imposter syndrome, more than a third of the people studied said they felt others saw them as more competent personally or socially than they saw themselves. Some said they weren't as emotionally resilient as they appeared to be, or that they felt as if they had no talent when it came to taking care of kids.

In other words: If you secretly feel like you're a fraud at work, you may well feel like an imposter in your personal relationships with your partner, children and friends.