



Imposter Syndrome: Do You Feel Like a Fraud?

Listening too much to your internal critic creates a cycle of catastrophic thinking.

IN 1970, TWO CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGISTS, Drs. Pauline Rose Clance and Suzanne Imes, first used the phrase **imposter syndrome** to describe “an internal experience of intellectual phoniness” It results in people feeling like they lack the skills, knowledge, and/or competence to do their jobs despite years of education, training, and recognition. Further, in 1985, Joan Harvey and Cynthia Katz identified three core characteristics to further describe this phenomenon:

- 1) denial of competence and inability to internalize success;
- 2) feelings of phoniness; and
- 3) fear of being exposed as a fraud.

Women and people from minority ethnic groups may experience higher levels of these feelings due to gender discrimination, a lack of diversity and inclusion, male-dominated work environments, and a lack of diversity in leadership roles within the organization or industry. The majority of us will experience these feelings at some point in our careers, however transient and temporary in nature.

For individuals who suffer from imposter syndrome, they often attribute their success to external factors rather than internal factors, so they rarely feel a sense of accomplishment related to their achievements and accolades. They have a difficult time accepting praise or recognition for their work and often feel like they don’t deserve their success. They believe that “the bottom will fall out” once others become aware that they did not rightfully earn their position or prominence. They credit external virtues such as luck and timing (being at the right place at the right time or knowing the right people) as the vehicles to their success rather than personal attributes such as hard

work, perseverance, education, and training. They are mired in self-doubt and self-loathing and say things like, “I don’t deserve this job,” “I just got lucky,” or “Once they realize I am a fraud it will all be over.”

A dismal cycle

Despite training, education, and career success, people suffering from imposter syndrome lack self-confidence and do not believe they have adequate work expertise. Their personal uncertainty and doubt make them feel incompetent and unworthy and they feel their skills and knowledge have been overestimated. They feel intense anxiety about their work—despite working diligently—and feel they will never meet the standards and expectations set by their work environment or themselves. Even if rewarded by praise or recognition, this only provides temporary relief from feelings of being a fraud; inevitably, the anxiety cycle starts anew so the person never feels a sense of personal and work-related accomplishment and pride. Individuals may then either procrastinate or overwork to compensate for the anxiety and crippling fear they may be experiencing.

Sound familiar? Many of us feel this way during transitions in our lives, especially when moving from undergraduate studies to law school, and again from law school to working as a full-time lawyer; however, if these feelings persist beyond transitional periods, then it may be time to consider whether you possess personality traits that may be contributing to your feelings of imposter syndrome. These traits include:

Maladaptive perfectionism is a striving for perfection and the setting of exceedingly high



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standards for performance—internally and externally. It is often accompanied by the tendency to be overly critical and unrealistic about goal achievement and work production. Self-worth is measured by external measures such as work production, title, and success and often leads to self-destructive behaviors when unable to meet one's internal measures for success. Individuals are often rigid and inflexible, with unreasonable expectations and standards for self and others; have a difficult time tolerating mistakes in self and others; focus on the negative; have a difficult time achieving job satisfaction; and are unable to internalize achievements. (See also Dr. Diana Uchiyama's article, "Maladaptive Perfectionism," in the December 2019 Illinois Bar Journal, law.isba.org/2uwnUfk.)


High expectations established in childhood often lead to internalization of unrealistic measures for success and failure and follow an individual into

adulthood. Many successful adults were high achievers as children, at the top of their class, and sought out praise and validation through teachers, parents, and grades. They often struggle with not being at the top, especially when facing new challenges as adults; as a result, they may lack a strong sense of self-worth and acceptance.

Fear of failure prevents people from recognizing their own sense of self-worth and self-competency. They have a fixed mindset—a belief that intelligence and talent are fixed traits, possibly from birth—rather than a growth mindset—the belief that one's abilities can be improved through hard work and perseverance. People with fixed mindsets who fear failure may avoid tasks that could undermine or challenge their self-perception as naturally gifted or talented. Such risk aversion may be due to the high levels of anxiety an identity crisis could produce.

What can you do if you experience and identify with imposter syndrome?

First, recognize the impact this thinking is having on your life and work. It is critical to minimize and distract your inner critic on a regular basis. The more you rely on this negative framework, the more deeply entrenched catastrophic thinking becomes in your life and etched into the neural pathways of your brain. You must recognize the negative impact your internal and external standards are having on your life, your work, your wellbeing, your health, and the people you know both personally and professionally.

Finally, it is imperative that you commit to change so that you can live the healthiest and happiest life possible. Find a mentor or friend with whom you can share your concerns. If the impact is too overwhelming and negative, please seek out the help of a professional at the Lawyers' Assistance Program or a qualified mental health professional. 

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