

Fear of success: Are you suffering from Imposter syndrome?

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Imposter Syndrome – What is it?

In our journeys through the corporate ranks or professional endeavours, there will no doubt be times when we question our own ability or attribute success to other factors like luck. However, when these instances becomes so prevalent that it prevents you from internalising success and leaves you with a constant dread of being identified as a “fraud”, then you might be prone to a phenomenon called – Imposter syndrome.

The term was first coined in 1978 by Psychology researchers Professor Pauline Clance and Suzanne Imes in a study of 150 highly successful women from various professional fields¹. They found that despite objective evidence of their talent and achievement, they experienced persistent feelings of inauthenticity and felt that they did not belong in their roles and would be found to be a ‘fake’ sooner or later. This feeling of inadequacy could not be explained by anxiety alone. Additionally, common characteristics of people experiencing imposter syndrome is their attribution of success to luck, extreme hard work or factors unrelated to their ability.



Case Study

Tobin Holmes was a young Englishman who had studied classics at Oxford before graduating in the top 5% of his class at Insead. He was first introduced to a consultant when he was a middle manager in a telecommunications company upon his promotion to a senior management role. Holmes was very clever, but he feared he couldn't take on the new job's responsibilities. At the root of the dilemma was his suspicion that he was just not good enough, and he lived in dread that he would be exposed at any moment. Yet, at the same time, he seemed bent on betraying the very inadequacy he was so anxious to conceal. In his personal life, he indulged in conspicuously self-destructive behaviour. At work, he found it increasingly difficult to concentrate and make decisions. He worried-and now for a good reason- that the CEO and other members of the board would notice his problems at the office. When would they realise that they had made a horrible mistake promoting him to the senior executive team?*

When the fear and stress overwhelmed his, Holmes quit his job and accepted a junior position at a larger organisation. Given his genuine talent, however, it did not take long before he was asked to head up one of that company's major country units, a role widely known to be a stepping-stone to the top. In this new role, Holme's feelings of doubt resurfaced. Rather than risk being exposed as incompetent, he left the job within a year and moved on to yet another company.

Holmes could not let himself move up to the most senior levels in an organisation because, deep inside, he feared that he was an imposter who would eventually be discovered.

Consequences of this Phenomenon

The detrimental effects of imposter syndrome not only impact themselves but also colleagues and the organisation. Individually, this form of self-doubt causes heightened levels of stress and anxiety. Imposter syndrome could also prevent individuals from accepting opportunities for career advancement such as leadership roles. This has been shown by case studies of high-potential managers who leave their organisation and accept lower responsibility roles at alternative companies to “escape” the chance of being found out as an imposter.

Working with individuals experiencing imposter syndrome can also present some difficulties. Imposter syndrome sufferers tend to be “absolute” perfectionists, who set excessively unrealistic goals and burden themselves with endless work duties to make up for their lack of self-esteem. Unfortunately, this perfectionist behaviour could also spilled over to colleagues and subordinates as these individuals find it difficult to delegate tasks and expects others to work as hard as them². This may result in excess levels of stress, a reduction in team morale and loss of team cohesion.

The effects of imposter syndrome can also impact on an organisations performance financially. Although individuals who experience persistent self-doubt often have high work ethics, they often make themselves work hard and also their employees. This may create a contagious gulag-like atmosphere where the organisational culture becomes solely driven by teeth grinding hard work. This would lead inevitably to; high employee stress, burn out, absenteeism and turn-over rates. More importantly, imposter syndrome also affects people's decision making abilities³. Managers suffering from excessive self-doubt are less ready to listen to counter arguments and alternative propositions⁴.

Therefore, they are more likely to suppress the companies' entrepreneurial capabilities and place all decision making responsibilities on themselves.

This problem would be exacerbated when an organisation's culture does not permit error making. Under this type of culture, leaders are constantly under pressure to make the right decisions. If these leaders also have a tendency to experience high self-doubt then this anxiety and stress would cascade down to the employees and create a vicious cycle. Recent research conducted in California State University suggested that supervisory leadership style and mentoring functions is correlated to subordinates levels of imposter syndrome⁵. The ultimate organisational outcome of this would be decreased performance and revenue.

A large body of literature have followed Clance and Imes first study. Although this phenomenon is more commonly found amongst high achieving women, most studies later conclude that men are also susceptible to this syndrome as well. Several lines of theories and research have been proposed to explanation this phenomenon.

Why people experience Imposter Syndrome

Two sets of theories have attempted to explain the origin of this phenomenon; family history and social influences.

Family Origin

Research suggests that parental messages to their children may contribute to individuals' feelings of incapability⁶. Typical examples of this are from parents that have an over-emphasis of achievement but lack warmth and genuine encouragement. Also, selective reinforcement from parents leads females to engage only in behaviour that are validated and supported by parents. Therefore, they may grow up believing that their success is not going to be well received by anyone and are insignificant. Gender difference in parents' attribution to success may also ignite women's feelings of self-doubt⁷. For example, males who succeed in mathematics may be reinforced with the idea that it was due to their natural ability, whereas female's success would be due to hard work.

Society Origin

The norms in society about gender roles could also contribute to women's feeling of fraudulence. The typical female trait as depicted by society is often associated with communal qualities such as warmth, nurturing and relationship oriented. Research have found that female socialization tend to be oriented towards "nurturance and responsibility" while male socialization towards "achievement and self-reliance"⁸. Therefore, successful females in any professional field may experience this incompatibility between the expectations of society and their self-identity⁹⁻¹¹.

The easiest metaphor to explain this tendency is that when we think of successful females, 'Octomom', Nadya Suleman doesn't often come up first. She is probably the most successful person in America when success is measured through reproductive ability in evolutionary terms. The first images of successful women are often CEOs of major corporations or politicians well known for their influential skills or large salary packages. This is because success has always been defined in male terms. Evolutionarily, the bias to describe success in male terms may have contributed to females feeling like they don't belong in those categories. In fact, rarely have women's success been recognized in female terms¹².

Despite the changing demographics of the workforce, females are still a minority in upper management. This reality of a male oriented workplace reinforced females' feelings of fraudulence because when they look around the field, women often *are* impostors. This tokenism of being the lone women among the pack could also contribute to their feeling of self-doubt.

Imposter syndrome in the workplace

Below is a list of common feelings or behaviours that imposter syndrome sufferers might experience in the workplace.

Feelings/Behaviours	What it looks like/hears like
Self-doubt	"I am not as smart as they think"
Fear of being found out to be a 'fake'	"It's only a matter of time people realise I don't belong here"
Frustration at not meeting self-set standards	"I'll never be as good as I want to be, so why bother"
Disregarding positive feedback	"I don't deserve receiving this award"
Fear of making mistakes	"What if my peers realise I am not as qualified as I should be in this position?"

Tips to reducing the effect of Imposter Syndrome

- Celebrate your success and realistically assess your contributions
 - Document your contributions – Specific actions that lead to success & experience, skills and values that underlie your contribution
- Understand that mistakes are part of learning process
- Notice and record your thoughts when you are given positive feedback
- Identify situations when you often have the feeling of an imposter
- Find a supporting coach or mentor

Self-exercise to help you get started

1. Keep a record of the positive feedbacks received
2. Keep a record of the thoughts that inhibit you from accepting positive feedback
3. For every thought that inhibited you, make another reason why you should accept that positive feedback

Are you experiencing Imposter Syndrome?

It is best to give the first response that enters your mind rather than dwelling on each statement and thinking about it over and over.

1. I have often succeeded on a test or task even though I was afraid that I would not do well before I undertook the task.

1 (Not at all) 2 (Rarely) 3 (Sometimes) 4 (Often) 5 (Very true)

2. I can give the impression that I'm more competent than I really am.

1 (Not at all) 2 (Rarely) 3 (Sometimes) 4 (Often) 5 (Very true)

3. I avoid evaluations if possible and have a dread of others evaluating me.

1 (Not at all) 2 (Rarely) 3 (Sometimes) 4 (Often) 5 (Very true)

4. When people praise me for something I've accomplished, I'm afraid I won't be able to live up to their expectations of me in the future.

1 (Not at all) 2 (Rarely) 3 (Sometimes) 4 (Often) 5 (Very true)

5. I sometimes think I obtained my present position or gained my present success because I happened to be in the right place at the right time or knew the right people.

1 (Not at all) 2 (Rarely) 3 (Sometimes) 4 (Often) 5 (Very true)

6. I'm afraid people important to me may find out that I am not as capable as they think I am.

1 (Not at all) 2 (Rarely) 3 (Sometimes) 4 (Often) 5 (Very true)

7. I tend to remember the incidents in which I have not done my best more than those times I have done my best.

1 (Not at all) 2 (Rarely) 3 (Sometimes) 4 (Often) 5 (Very true)

8. I rarely do a project or task as well as I'd like to do it.

1 (Not at all) 2 (Rarely) 3 (Sometimes) 4 (Often) 5 (Very true)

9. Sometimes I feel or believe that my success in my life or in my job has been the result of some kind of error

1 (Not at all) 2 (Rarely) 3 (Sometimes) 4 (Often) 5 (Very true)

10. It's hard for me to accept compliments or praise about my intelligence or accomplishments.

1 (Not at all) 2 (Rarely) 3 (Sometimes) 4 (Often) 5 (Very true)

11. At times, I feel my success has been due to some kind of luck.

1 (Not at all) 2 (Rarely) 3 (Sometimes) 4 (Often) 5 (Very true)

12. I'm disappointed at times in my present accomplishments and think I should have accomplished much more.

1 (Not at all) 2 (Rarely) 3 (Sometimes) 4 (Often) 5 (Very true)

13. Sometimes I'm afraid others will discover how much knowledge or ability I really lack.

1 (Not at all) 2 (Rarely) 3 (Sometimes) 4 (Often) 5 (Very true)

14. I'm often afraid that I may fail at a new assignment or undertaking even though I generally do well at what I attempt.

1 (Not at all) 2 (Rarely) 3 (Sometimes) 4 (Often) 5 (Very true)

15. When I have succeeded at something and received recognition for my accomplishments, I have doubts that I can keep repeating that success.

1 (Not at all) 2 (Rarely) 3 (Sometimes) 4 (Often) 5 (Very true)

16. If I receive a great deal of praise and recognition for something I've accomplished, I tend to discount the importance of what I have done.

1 (Not at all) 2 (Rarely) 3 (Sometimes) 4 (Often) 5 (Very true)

17. I often compare my ability to those around me and think they may be more intelligent than I am.

1 (Not at all) 2 (Rarely) 3 (Sometimes) 4 (Often) 5 (Very true)

18. I often worry about not succeeding with a project or on an examination, even though others around me have considerable confidence that I will do well.

1 (Not at all) 2 (Rarely) 3 (Sometimes) 4 (Often) 5 (Very true)

19. If I'm going to receive a promotion or gain recognition of some kind, I hesitate to tell others until it is an accomplished fact.

1 (Not at all) 2 (Rarely) 3 (Sometimes) 4 (Often) 5 (Very true)

20. I feel bad and discouraged if I'm not "the best" or at least "very special" in situations that involve achievement.

1 (Not at all) 2 (Rarely) 3 (Sometimes) 4 (Often) 5 (Very true)

Scoring yourself

Add together the numbers of the responses to each statement.

My Score is _____

What does this mean?

Total scores

Less than 40	Few Impostor characteristics
40 - 60	Moderate IP experiences
61 - 80	Frequently has Impostor feelings
80+	Intense IP experiences

The higher the score, the more frequently and seriously the Impostor Phenomenon interferes in a person's life.

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Reference

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Further Reading:

1. Audio from Inc.
<http://www.inc.com/inctv/2006/09/the-impostor-syndrome.html>
2. Website detailing Dr. Valerie Young's book on Imposter syndrome
<http://impostorsyndrome.com/handbook.htm>