Imposter Phenomenon

# What is Imposter Phenomenon?

*Impostor phenomenon has been defined as an internal experience of intellectual phoniness marked by the inability of an individual to internalize professional successful experiences despite having objective evidence of such achievements. They experience reoccurring self-doubt, inaccurate performance attributions, and persistent anxiety that others will view them as intellectual phonies.*

* Hutchins (2017)

The term was coined in 1978 by Pauline Clance and Suzanne Imes in their paper “The Impostor Phenomenon in High Achieving Women: Dynamics and Therapeutic Intervention.” In their study, they surveyed a group of objectively successful and accomplished academic women. In doing so, they identified patterns of stress, anxiety, and depression related to self-perception, as well as a tendency of attributing successes to luck or misunderstandings.

Clance and Imes proposed that this mental framework of self-doubt they were seeing was the result of internalized gender discrimination, childhood/family dynamics, cultural norms, and other factors. They explained that “despite outstanding academic and professional accomplishments, [those] who experience the imposter phenomenon persist in believing that they are really not bright and have fooled anyone who thinks otherwise.” While originally used primarily in this context of gender dynamics, the concept of imposter phenomenon has since been recognized as a broadly applicable psychological struggle felt by people of all kinds.

## Features of Imposter Phenomenon

Imposter phenomenon is distinct from general feelings of humility, self-doubt, or worry, all of which are normal and healthy when experienced in moderation within appropriate contexts. What characterizes imposter phenomenon is that it is an unhealthy cycle of thinking that is disconnected from reality and involves feelings that are disproportionate to the circumstances. Typically, it manifests in one or more of the following patterns:

* Feelings of incompetence and fraudulence, despite evidence to the contrary. A negatively distorted perception of self, often manifesting as a sense that one is a “fraud” or “fooling” the people around them, such that any positive reinforcement is perceived as ungenuine or mistaken.
* Distorted attributions of success and failure. An inability to internalize accomplishments, where successes are characterized as “luck” or even “a mistake,” whereas failures are internalized and considered personal failings regardless of context.
* Underestimation of personal abilities, distinct from true humility in that it reflects a distortion of reality, an undervaluing or dismissal of genuinely existing skills. This is also different from low self-esteem in that it is a negative self-image largely unrelated to actual successes or external realities.

## What does it look like?

High achieving and highly successful people often suffer from impostor phenomenon, because these feelings are not based in any objective assessment of accomplishment or ability. Below are quotes from people who would be considered highly successful by most metrics, but who nonetheless experience imposter phenomenon.

*“I have written eleven books, but each time I think, ‘Uh oh, they’re going to find me out now. I’ve run a game on everybody, and they’re going to find me out.’”*

* Maya Angelou, Award-winning author

*“Sometimes I wake up in the morning before going off to a shoot, and I think, I can’t do this. I’m a fraud.”*

* Kate Winslet, academy award winner

*“Every time I go to a game I always have that fear of losing or a sense of failure.”*

* Darren Lockyer, Australian rugby league champion

*“There are an awful lot of people out there who think I’m an expert. How do these people believe all this about me? I’m so much aware of all the things I don’t know.”*

* Dr. Margaret Chan, former Chief of the World Health Organization

*“I’m scared to death that at some point I’m going to get found out. You know, Tim [Cook] is going to realize the truth about me, which is I’m terrible.”*

* Alan Dye, Vice President of Apple

## Imposter Phenomenon and Graduate Students

Statistically, graduate students are especially susceptible to imposter phenomenon. This is likely a combination of where we are in our lives during graduate school, as well as the inherently competitive dynamics of academia. Graduate degrees are often transition periods, bridges into professional fields. Students experience a great deal of pressure, expected to be learners, but also increasingly expected to apply their learning to professional goals. With so many diverse and conflicting priorities, there will often be some areas where we feel we are falling short. Over time that can become internalized as distorted perceptions of self-worth, trapping us in negative thought patterns. Most of us will experience imposter phenomenon at some point during our degrees. The trick is seeing it for what it is and not letting it control us.

# Causes of Imposter Phenomenon

While the causes of imposter phenomenon are highly varied from person to person, there are typically two main categories of causes:

### Personal Factors

**Childhood experiences**: Receiving mixed or negative messaging about achievement during childhood is one of the strongest predictors of experiencing imposter phenomenon as an adult. If we grow up being criticized despite our successes, or burdened with unrealistic expectations at a young age, this can detrimentally affect our self-perception.

**Mental health:** For those of us who struggle with our mental health, imposter phenomenon is something that often accompanies anxiety or depression. Persistent stress, worry, or sadness can make it easier to become trapped in negative thought patterns, and often make it more difficult to recognize and celebrate our successes.

**Personality type:** Some of us simply have personalities that predispose us to be overly critical of ourselves and less confident in our achievements.

### Systemic Factors

**Discrimination**: Imposter phenomenon was originally studied as a manifestation of internalized gender discrimination. External factors like systemic racism or sexism within our institutions or workplace can have a huge impact on our self-perception. If you are surrounded by a consistent cultural bias that minimizes or ignores your successes while focusing on your perceived faults, it can be very difficult to maintain a healthy and balanced perception of self.

**Microaggressions**: Imposter phenomenon is particularly difficult to avoid when that sense of failure or fraudulence is actually being reinforced (subtly or overtly) by the people around you. Consistent demeaning microaggressions that (implicitly or explicitly) question your competence or belonging can reinforce the negative thought patterns inherent to imposter phenomenon.

**Academic/workplace culture:** One of the reasons impostor phenomenon is so prevalent among universities is academic culture. As graduate students we are objectively more knowledgeable in our fields than the majority of people. However, we exist in an environment where we must constantly compare ourselves to others who know as much or more than us. Grading systems encourage a competitive mindset; the push to publish as a graduate student can be incredibly stressful and lead to feelings of inadequacy. There is an omnipresent sense of evaluation and a culture where everyone is trying to present themselves as the most knowledgeable or capable in their area, in fact we are encouraged to do that kind of self-promotion. This creates an atmosphere where we are always comparing ourselves unfavourably to these idealized versions of everyone else around us.

# Impacts of Imposter Phenomenon

In addition to how it immediately makes us feel, imposter phenomenon typically leads to two general types of actions: procrastination and overpreparation. Both of these are coping mechanisms, different methods we take to try to relieve the feelings of tension, anxiety, or discomfort associated with imposter phenomenon.

**Procrastination:** While often internalized as a character flaw, procrastination is actually a coping strategy. There is a stressor (usually a task or circumstance) that is triggering negative emotions, and one method of mitigating or reducing those negative emotions is to avoid that stressor, to put it off to a future date. This is a maladaptive coping mechanism, because that stressor is still there, but it is important to recognize that the motivation behind procrastination is not laziness, but just an attempt to feel better. Imposter phenomenon tends to lead to procrastination because even tasks that we are objectively capable of performing trigger these uncomfortable feelings of stress and fraudulence.

**Overpreparation:** Because imposter phenomenon is characterized by constant, irrational feelings of incompetence or unpreparedness, it can often lead to overpreparation. To attempt to alleviate feelings of fraudulence, we spend significantly more time and effort than necessary on a task or goal. On the surface, this seems more productive than procrastination, but in reality it is still a form of avoidant coping. Because we are attempting to mitigate the negative feelings through effort, without addressing the actual root cause – the distorted perception of our own capabilities.

While procrastination and overpreparation are common immediate reactions to the feelings associated with imposter phenomenon, over time there are many other larger impacts, both internal (on our own health, energy, and internal lives) and external (on our job and relationships).

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| --- | --- |
| Internal Impacts | External Impacts |
| Expends greater emotional energy on tasks, making things feel more daunting or stressful than they need to be. | Leads to burnout and impair job performance. |
| Negatively affects emotional wellbeing and coping skills. | Negatively influences our relationships with others. |
| Increases emotional exhaustion. | Impacts professional trajectory, making us less confident and motivated to pursue professional goals and advancement. |

# Coping Strategies

The procrastination and overpreparation discussed above are examples of avoidance coping strategies, meaning they attempt to reduce negative emotions triggered by a stressor, without actually addressing the source of those negative emotions. In other words, treating the symptoms of a disease, without actually working on a cure. Impostor phenomenon leads to avoidance coping. To move past it, we need to employ active coping strategies. These are proactive, intentional steps we take to deal with the negative thought patterns of imposter phenomenon.

## No perfect answer

There are a lot of studies into the causes and effects of impostor phenomenon, but relatively few empirical tests of interventions and solutions. Impostor phenomenon shares features with PSTD, with patterns of distorted thinking that lead to maladaptive beliefs and behaviours. Managing impostor phenomenon involves retraining our thought patterns by critically observing and intervening in our own beliefs and feelings.

This is not easy or quick. And won’t be the same for everyone.

# The four Cs of coping with imposter phenomenon

Managing imposter phenomenon proactively is a process of challenging your thinking, celebrating your successes, chronicling your thought patterns, and collaborating with peers and mentors. No single strategy will present an instant solution, and not every strategy will resonate with you personally. The key is trying out different strategies consistently over time to find something that works for you.

## Challenging your thinking

Imposter phenomenon is a particular pattern of destructive self-critical thinking. It is the voice in our heads telling us we aren’t good enough, that we are a fraud. To manage it, we need to actively challenge those thoughts, replacing them with more balanced, self-compassionate thoughts.

It is important to understand that not all negative thoughts are necessarily unrealistic and distorted. And likewise, not all unrealistic thoughts are negative. The key is to learn how to recognize distorted negative thoughts that contribute to the feeling of being a fraud or imposter.

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| --- | --- |
| Distorted Thought | Balanced Thought |
| If I show this work to my supervisor, they will realize I’m a horrible researcher | As a grad student, I am still learning to be a researcher, my supervisor is here to mentor me and guide my work. |
| I am not smart enough to be in grad school, I should never have been accepted. | The admissions department considers all applications seriously. My past performance shows that I am capable of success in grad school. |

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By replacing distorted thoughts with more balanced thoughts, we can change the way we process information, leading to more realistic appraisals of situations.

### Activity: Thought record

Reflection and assessment are powerful tools in reshaping our thought patterns. By recording our thoughts in their wider contexts and retroactively attempting to identify evidence (or lack thereof) for those thoughts, we can help ourselves move towards a more accurate perspective of our abilities and accomplishments.

#### Step 1: Identify

It is important to stop and pay attention to our feelings, identifying specific thoughts or beliefs related to imposter phenomenon, as well as what situations trigger those thoughts and beliefs. Try keeping a written record to spot patterns.

#### Step 2: Gather Evidence

Instead of letting those thoughts overwhelm us, it is important to approach them critically, gathering evidence to empirically test those thoughts and beliefs. Because impostor phenomenon is an emotional response, generally speaking the distorted thoughts will not hold up to scrutiny, even if they feel incredibly true at the time.

#### Step 3: Generate Alternative

Remember that impostor phenomenon is about misinterpretations of events and feelings. Given that, it Is not enough just to tell ourselves that those feelings are wrong, we need to provide ourselves with an alternate explanation. Even if you don’t believe it at first, treat it like a thought experiment.

#### Step 4: Evaluate Outcome

Reflect on how this process makes you feel. Does the alternative interpretation seem plausible? Is there any actual evidence to support your negative self-perception? Has going through these steps lessened those negative feelings at all? It is likely you won’t see immediate results. It isn’t easy to talk ourselves out of these feelings. But over time, following these steps consistently, you can start to retrain your reactions and thought patterns into a more balanced and realistic form.

#### Example:

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Situation / Trigger | Mood / Feelings | Automatic Thoughts | Supporting Evidence | Countering Evidence | Alternative thought | Outcome |
| What were you doing?  Who were you with? | How did you feel at the time? | What thoughts went through your mind right before you started feeling this way? | What facts support the truthfulness of this though? | What facts or examples indicate that this thought might not be true? (e.g., what would you say if someone else had this thought?) | New thought that takes into account evidence for/against the original thought. | Re-evaluate your mood / feelings. How does the alternative thought make you feel? |
| Seminar class discussion | Anxious (90), nervous (70). | Everyone else has such good points, if I speak up everyone will realize that I’m not smart enough to be here. | I did find this reading very difficult to understand and some of my peers have focused on this area of research. | Last time I spoke in this class, the prof acknowledged that my point was important. | Everyone in this class, including myself, is here to learn. None of us fully understand the reading and my questions or comments will help everyone in the learning process. | Anxious (50),  Nervous (40) |

To try it for yourself, use our thought record activity worksheet.

## Chronicling your thought patterns

Because imposter phenomenon often involves automatic, emotional reactions to situations, managing it should entail a more thoughtful engagement with our thought patterns. Keeping records can help you see things more clearly, identify patterns or triggers, and recognize distorted thoughts for what they are.

### Activity: Observe yourself critically

When you experience imposter phenomenon, try to identify specific thoughts and beliefs and see if you can classify them according to the “patterns of problematic thinking” below:

1. Jumping to conclusions or predicting the future?
2. Exaggerating or minimizing a situation, blowing things way out of proportion or shrinking their importance inappropriately?
3. Ignoring important parts of a situation that might not fit your initial/emotional interpretation?
4. Oversimplifying things as purely good/bad or right/wrong?
5. Over-generalizing from a single incident, a negative event seen as a never-ending pattern?
6. Mind reading, by assuming people are thinking negatively about you when there is no definite evidence of this?
7. Emotional reasoning, using your emotions as proof (e.g. “I feel fear so I must be in danger.”)

These are thought patterns that are recognized in people dealing with PTSD, and researchers like Hutchins have suggested that similar thought patterns apply to imposter phenomenon. This helps you understand what your patterns are, which in turn helps you more effectively combat those thoughts.

For a printable version of these guidelines, you can use the patterns of problematic thinking worksheet in the resources section.

### Activity: Practice accepting failure

Instead of avoiding thoughts of failure or obsessing over them, practicing finding a middle ground, focused on learning.

1. Choose a specific instance where you “failed” at something and write it down in detail.
2. Next brainstorm three things that you learned from this perceived failure.
3. Explain how you can use these lessons in the future, either to avoid a similar outcome or to better prepare you for other activities.
4. After some time, revisit this “failure” and assess what the actual consequences have been. Try to list at least one positive.

The goal here is to gradually “desensitize” yourself to perceived failures. This helps avoid the catastrophic thinking that often accompanies imposter phenomenon. It also helps to reframe yourself as a learner, normalizing a growth mindset. Failures are not end points, but beginnings on the next step you need to take. By revisiting the example, you learn to recognize that what you feel about the consequences in the moment is not necessarily a reality.

## Celebrating yourself

Imposter phenomenon is a pattern of thinking centered around fear of failure or inadequacy. When we are trapped in the negative cycle of imposter thinking, we can fall victim to confirmation bias. This means we can subconsciously start paying attention only to our perceived failures, which reinforce our negative self-image. Conversely, we can start to ignore, minimize, or deny our very real accomplishments and successes. Identifying and celebrating our successes regularly can help to counteract the distorted negative thinking of imposter phenomenon.

### Activity: Success tracking

Try to keep a record of your successes or achievements, to help counteract the subjective feelings of failure when they occur.

1. When you complete a task, write it down, even if you are ambivalent or displeased with the result at first.
2. Record any positive feedback you receive about that task from a mentor, supervisor, employer, etc…
3. After some time, reflect on any positive outcomes that resulted from your completion of that task.
4. Add those outcomes to your list.

### Activity: Self-compassion writing

Imposter phenomenon is characterized by a very self-critical mindset. We try can counteract this by cultivating a more compassion relationship with ourselves.

1. Write out a transcript of your self-critical thoughts.
2. Revise your transcript to make it more compassionate and constructive.
3. Imagine a friend of infinite compassion who knows and accepts all of your strengths and weaknesses, endlessly forgiving of any and all of your failings.
4. Write a letter to yourself from the perspective of this friend, acknowledging and encouraging you in every way that you could hope for.
5. Practice believing it.

This seems like a simple exercise, but it can be a powerful experience when you approach it seriously. The goal is to practice treating ourselves with the kind of understanding, compassion, and respect that we would give others. If you are interested in trying out this exercise, you can use our Self-compassion writing worksheet in the resources section.

## Collaborating with others

You are not in this alone. Try to normalize talking to people you trust about these feelings. Imposter phenomenon is nothing to be ashamed of, and you may be surprised by how many of your peers, friends, family, and mentors have experienced the same kind of feelings. Identify and make use of your support networks by:

1. Practice giving and receiving feedback. Learning to recognize when feedback is unfounded, but also learn to see constructive criticism as an opportunity for growth that does not reflect badly on your character or capabilities.
2. Finding a mentor who can talk candidly with you about their own experiences with imposter phenomenon and how they have managed it. Especially if they are someone who you consider to be successful, this can do a lot to help you recognize your own distorted thinking.
3. Identifying supports and spaces for open dialogue about impostor phenomenon. Find places or opportunities to talk about it. Take away its power and stigma by recognizing how it is a difficult, but common phenomenon that people struggle with, each for their own reasons.

# Normalizing Imposter Experiences

While imposter experiences are uncomfortable, they are also widespread. It should not be a source of shame but a starting point for discussing meaningful support.

How can we work to normalize imposter feelings? How can we all be a part of this normalization process to create spaces for open dialogue?

A study (Craddock et al, 2011) specifically about imposter phenomenon and graduate students “suggests that simply providing space for students and faculty to discuss [imposter feelings] may be helpful. In addition to possibly creating a healthy dialogue, it may also provide some students the type of support they need to be successful”.

For now, just remember that you are not alone! Experiencing these thoughts does not mean you aren’t successful! Normalizing and discussing imposter feelings is important, so don't be afraid to reach out and share your experiences.

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