

What is Imposter Phenomenon?

A psychological experience of intellectual and professional fraudulence (Clance and Imes, 1978; Matthews and Clance, 1985).

It's when we believe that others have inflated perceptions of our abilities and we fear that we'll be "found out".

The original research by clinical psychologists Pauline Clance and Suzanne Imes referred to women, but we now know that men experience it just the same.

It has roots in not feeling good enough and is often a form of a fixed mindset - instead of choosing to improve we conclude we are a fraud and dedicate a lot of effort to trying to avoid this feeling. It usually results in one of the two scenarios: working extra hard to compensate for what we feel we lack, or procrastination.

For some of us, these imposter moments pass — they might be acute after accepting a promotion, starting a new job, or entering a workplace in which our minority status is obvious. But it can also be a permanent way in which we see ourselves, despite unquestionable evidence of success.

There is also a wide spectrum of intensity with this experience. One side of this range is a worry that comes up from time to time that we're not up to the task. On the other there is the paralysing fear of being 'found out'.

Phenomenon or Syndrome?

Although it's typically referred to as the imposter syndrome, this term is incorrect.

Calling it a "syndrome" suggests a psychological shortcoming, a permanent condition and that's simply not the case. It is a phenomenon (an experience) that an individual has, not a mental disorder.

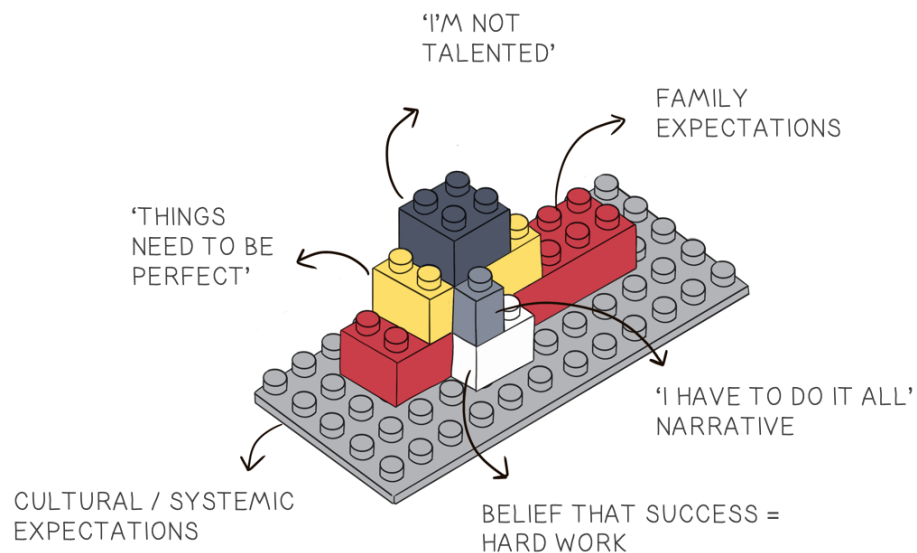
In reality it's a pattern of thinking, a feeling most of us relate to, whether it's with us all the time or just in certain situations.

Why Do We Experience This Phenomenon?

Depending on our individual circumstances there may be systemic issues at play that make us feel like a fraud or that we don't belong, including biases related to gender, class, education, race, ability. We might have outgrown perceived expectations placed upon us by society or our families.

Some of those societal forces will take a long time to truly change. But what we can work with (e.g. through coaching) is our internal world, including limiting beliefs that we have about ourselves and our mindset.

What Building Blocks Is Your Imposter Experience Made From?



How Can It Hold Us Back In Our Careers?

The imposter experience will look differently for different people, but here are some ways in which it can show up:

- Staying under the radar / keeping a low profile
- Overpreparation and perfectionism
- Procrastination. This can take two forms: not starting what we finish but also procrastination followed by frenzied preparation
- People pleasing & avoiding challenging conversations
- Being “hooked” to praise or criticism

Test Yourself - How Intense is Your Imposter Experience?

If you'd like to do an assessment of the intensity of your imposter experience you can find [Pauline Clance's IP Scale](#).



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How to Manage Your Imposter Experience

In the Moment SOS

Being in thrall to the imposter experience can cause a “flight or flight” response. When you regulate your physiology first it is likely to have a positive effect on the clarity of your thoughts. [This TED talk](#) explains this brilliantly.

[Box breathing](#) is a simple but powerful relaxation technique that can help you relax, clear and calm your mind.

Data Collecting / Reality Testing

Get curious

The imposter experience might look different for different people, and have different intensity. A good starting point is to pay attention to when it seems to show up for you. Get curious - what are your particular thoughts and feelings? What does it make you do, or not do?

Challenge blanket statements

When the imposter experience takes over, our critical inner voice might make blanket statements about our skills or performance. These are typically vague comments such as: “I am such an idiot!” “I was a mess in that meeting!” or “I am not competent for this job!”

Stick with facts and data. What exactly happened? Is there anything that you want to appreciate about what you did? What actually went right? What is the learning here?

It can be hard to be objective enough to challenge our own thoughts which is why it can be so helpful to get support from a trusted ally. Which brings me to the next point.

Share with others

When we have this experience, it can feel like it’s just us (while everyone else seemingly has it together). Nothing can be further from the truth. Sharing with others is a great way to normalise these feelings. You’re likely to discover that they feel exactly the same.

Having a mentor who openly shares their imposter stories can be very powerful. You may also want to explore this with your coach who can help you think this through and identify strategies that are best for you.

Develop a Healthy Sense of Self

Thriving despite the imposter experience is possible when we develop a healthy sense of self. This is when we have an appreciation of our skills and strengths but also a clear view of what we want to improve.

This can be a journey - here are some things you can do that will help you grow in the long run:

Adopt a learning mindset

When we're in thrall to the imposter experience, we are typically in a fixed mindset - instead of choosing to improve we conclude we are a fraud and dedicate a lot of effort to trying to avoid this feeling: often by working extra hard to compensate for what we feel we lack, or procrastinating.

Ask yourself - how can I take more of a growth mindset approach? A growth mindset is the belief that you can be more intelligent, get better and learn more skills through practice, including moments of trial and error.

Try the Catch It / Check It / Change It method which has its roots in CBT (Cognitive Behavioural Therapy):

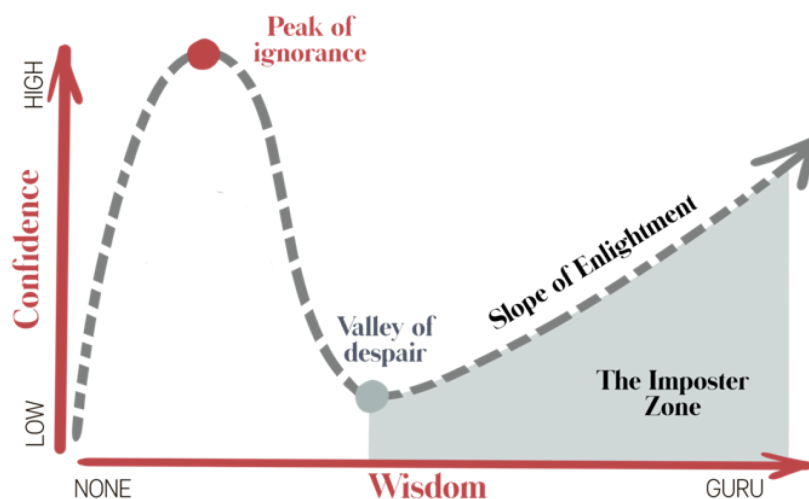
- **Catch It:** Tune into what you're thinking and feeling.
- **Check It:** Does it come from a fixed or growth mindset belief?
- **Change It:** Is it possible to reframe the thought to a more helpful one?

Try this meta reframe

Let's look at this from a completely different perspective. Feeling like an imposter can be a sign of intelligence, or a sign of growing competence. This is because on the opposite side of the confidence spectrum is the Dunning-Kruger effect: not being smart enough to appreciate one's own lack of ability.

When people start acquiring wisdom in a new area, their confidence often peaks when they know little about the topic. The more we learn about something, the more doubts we often have: we realise how much there is still to understand.

As our understanding and experience grows, our confidence does too, but a truly wise person may stay in the "imposter zone" forever. We are in good company there too - some of the world's greatest minds have admitted to feeling like a fraud.



Author

This resource has been created by Marta Abramska, Catseye's own Coaching Queen. Marta has helped many people get better insights into their own experience of Imposter Phenomenon, then develop strategies to feel more confident and even turn it into a strength!

Reference List

Clance, P.R. & Imes, S.A. (1978) The imposter phenomenon in high achieving women: Dynamics and therapeutic intervention. *Group dynamics: theory, research, and practice: the official journal of Division 49, Group Psychology and Group Psychotherapy of the American Psychological Association*. 15 (3): 241.

Matthews, G. & Clance, P.R. (1985) Treatment of the Impostor Phenomenon in Psychotherapy Clients. *Psychotherapy in Private Practice*. 3 (1): 71–81.



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