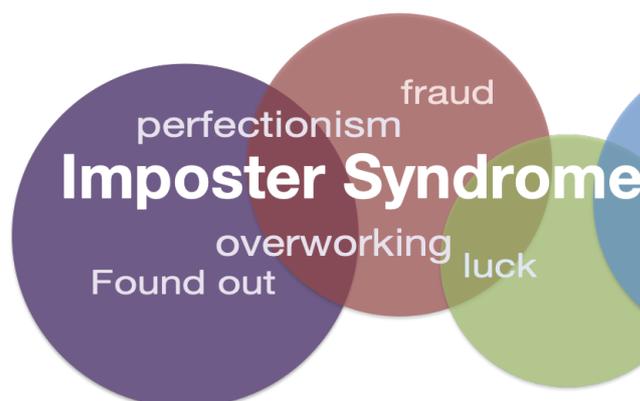


Imposter Syndrome information sheet

Around 70% adults are estimated to experience imposterism at some point in their lives (Sakulku & Alexander, 2011).



What is Imposter Syndrome?

- The term imposter syndrome first emerged in the late 1970s in a paper written by psychologists Clance & Imes. They explored a phenomenon they often encountered amongst high achieving women – a persistent internal belief that they were ‘intellectual phonies’, a fear of being ‘found out’, and a conviction that their success was due to an external cause (luck) or a temporary internal quality (effort) as opposed to their own inherent ability (Clance & Imes, 1978).
- Whilst imposter syndrome was initially thought to be most prevalent amongst women, and particularly those from black and minority ethnic backgrounds, men and people from all cultures can experience it.
- Imposter syndrome is commonly experienced within an individual’s work or academic life. However, it can also emerge in the context of personal relationships – for example, feeling that your partner, friends or family might not accept you if they find out the truth about who you ‘really are’.
- Imposter syndrome is not a diagnosable mental health disorder, but it can be identified by a cluster of symptoms and tendencies. These often stand in the way of people living their lives to the fullest as imposter syndrome can contribute to stress, anxiety, low self-esteem and depression.

What are the signs of Imposter Syndrome?

- A central feature of imposter syndrome is *feeling like ‘a fraud’* – as if you don’t truly deserve the job, position or level of achievement you have gained. This will likely be accompanied by a fear that other people will discover you as being ‘less than’ you appear to be.
- Those with imposter syndrome may manage these feelings and fears by *trying to achieve more* – for example, seeking further qualifications or taking on additional projects – in order to ‘prove themselves’. Whilst such accomplishments may bring a sense of relief, this tends to be temporary, and a ‘vicious cycle’ may emerge when the feelings fade and the perceived need to accomplish more returns.

Perfectionism is common amongst those who experience imposter syndrome.

- It may feel hard to let go of a project until it’s been completed to an impossibly high standard - something which can lead to *procrastination* and also *avoidance*. This is evident when someone won’t take on new or more challenging tasks for fear that they won’t be able to complete them perfectly. This tendency can sadly prevent people developing a ‘growing edge’ and reaching their full potential.

- Perfectionist traits also go hand in hand with *overworking* and a person devoting excessive amounts of time to work or study. This, in turn, can affect their work-life balance, wellbeing and relationships.
- Imposter syndrome often prompts people to *compare themselves unfavourably to others*. It may seem as if other people are always happier, achieving greater things, or feeling more confident. For the person with imposter syndrome, this can be hard to bear due to their *strong inner drive to always be 'the best'*.
- Those with imposter syndrome typically find it *hard to accept both praise and constructive criticism*. They may feel unworthy of compliments and congratulatory comments – always finding a way to deflect or explain them away (“well, it was fluke” or “oh, it’s nothing”). On the other hand, when they hear that they could have done something differently, or that there’s room for improvement with one of their undertakings, they tend to feel devastated – as if it’s proof that they’ve been found to be inherently lacking. In response they may become quite defensive or fall into a state of despair.

Self-help tips for those with Imposter Syndrome

- *Realising you’re not alone* with your experience of imposter syndrome can really help, which is why some form of *group therapy, peer support or mentoring* might be worth considering. To know that other high-achieving, accomplished and seemingly confident people experience similar fears and doubts may normalise and validate what you’re going through, helping to put your feelings in context.

Try to spend at least some of your time as a ‘human being’ rather than a ‘human doing’.

- *Consider the relationships where you are valued for who you are rather than what you do* or what you have achieved (long standing friends, family members, a trusted partner and pets can help). Find a hobby or pastime that you enjoy for the fun or pleasure it brings you as opposed to having to master or be ‘good’ at it.
- *Listen to your self-talk and see if you can adjust any harsh self-judgements or self-critical beliefs*. With imposter syndrome we tend to fear that others will judge us in the same way that we judge ourselves – but it’s often unlikely they would be as tough! Whilst we may not be able to change or control other people’s perceptions of us, we can work on our own. *Be more compassionate and realistic with your self-talk* and you may well minimise the fear that underpins imposter syndrome. For example, try switching ‘I’ve not made a good enough job of this task and everyone’s going to pick holes in it’ for ‘I’ve put time and effort into this, and I’ll be open to any feedback’.
- *Practice accepting both praise and accepting criticism*. See what it feels like to smile and accept a compliment. The more you do this, the easier it will become to internalise a sense of accomplishment, which will counteract negative self-beliefs. When you receive less favourable feedback remember it usually relates to something you’ve done as opposed to being a reflection of who you are. How might you learn or grow from it?
- *Be aware that some traits of imposter syndrome can be linked to deeply embedded but sometimes unconscious beliefs*, often passed on to us by our families or the cultures we were raised in. Examples of this might be ‘it’s boastful and unappealing to take pride in your achievements’ or ‘it’s unfeminine to be ambitious’. To an extent, we can’t help but be influenced by things like this. However, self-development work or *individual therapy* can help us to bring such unconscious beliefs to light and reappraise them.

- *Remember that imposter syndrome can be especially prevalent amongst people who feel underrepresented in their workplaces or places of study* – often on account of factors such as gender, ethnicity, class or age. If this is something that fuels imposter syndrome in your particular setting, it can be healthier and more constructive to bring it out in the open and discuss it as opposed to leaving it as ‘the elephant in the room’. Employers and institutions may do well to consider whether they create the impression that only ‘certain types of people’ do well when working for or studying with them.
- *Finally, it’s worth remembering that some traits associated with imposter syndrome may have their benefits.* Therefore, don’t try to change your personality or reboot your outlook completely. Cultural changes suggest we’re becoming more open to people in positions of leadership ‘being human’ and having doubts and vulnerabilities. Modesty and humility are also qualities more likely to win respect than arrogance or hubristic pride. As with so many things, what is important is finding balance and preventing these traits from developing into full-blown imposter syndrome which impedes confidence and development.

Professional information for Imposter Syndrome & further useful information for those experiencing Imposter Syndrome

- www.impostersyndrome.com Valerie Young is an internationally recognized expert on impostor syndrome and author of the award-winning book *The Secret Thoughts of Successful Women: Why Capable People Suffer from Impostor Syndrome and How to Thrive in Spite of It* (Crown/Random House). Her website features information and blog articles about imposter syndrome.

- <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/w3csvtbs> This BBC ‘The Why Factor’ podcast explores imposter syndrome, in particular focusing on its prevalence amongst women and those from minority groups where there may be common stereotypes around competence and suitability for certain roles.
- The Good Men Project features an article on more specific aspects of men's experience of imposter syndrome, along with tips on how to address these <https://goodmenproject.com/featured-content/men-overcoming-imposter-syndrome-lbkr/>

References

- Clance, P. R. & Imes, S. A. (1978). The impostor phenomenon in high achieving women: Dynamics and therapeutic intervention. *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research, and Practice*, 15, 241-247
- Sakulku, J. & Alexander, J. (2011). The impostor phenomenon. *International Journal of Behavioural Science*, 16, 1, 75-97

FD Consultants

Individual support

At FD Consultants we can offer coaching sessions to explore the impact of Imposter Syndrome. We are a network of accredited therapists. We specialise in stress, anxiety, depression, burnout and trauma care.

Organisational support

For organisations looking for employee psychological support, FD Consultants are the well-being service who will best deliver a reliable, quick, and bespoke support system in the workplace. FD Consultant’s team of accredited specialists will offer ongoing support to help manage stress, prevent burnout and provide specialist trauma care where required, enabling your staff with the tools to cope, and recover more quickly.