



Getting to grips with the imposter syndrome

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Five common expectations imposters have of themselves

Perfectionist

You need to be perfect and reach a 100% result all the time. So best efforts are never good enough. You feel like an imposter because being a perfectionist makes you believe you're not as good as you *should* be. Also, you think others judge you by your perfectionist standards. When you don't reach perfection, you think others are judging you harshly. You *should* be perfect all the time.

Expert

You're the knowledge version of the perfectionist. You *should* know everything about a topic. When you don't or you have to learn something new, that proves you're an imposter. You fret over how much more there is to learn.

Natural Genius

You need to do everything you do easily and to a high standard. It *shouldn't* be hard. Your standards for performing a new task are incredibly high. If it takes effort or it's a challenge, that proves you're an imposter.

Soloist

You believe asking for help is a sign of failure. You value independence over everything else. You *should* be able to do everything on your own. Working with others who are competent and performing well is a sign you're an imposter. You *should* be able to do it all on your own.

Superhuman

You try to juggle so many roles at once and you work super-hard. You're a parent, competent professional, sports coach, School Board member, charity fundraiser. If you fall short in any of them, or can't keep up the frantic pace to accomplish all these roles to a high / perfect standard, then you feel like a failure and a fraud. You *should* be able to do it all.

What it feels like to be an imposter

- Inadequate and full of self-doubt
- Devaluing your efforts
- Success is down to luck
- Not as confident and capable as others think you are

- Fearing judgment and discovery
- Negative self-talk
- Sensitive to criticism
- Feeling like a fraud
- Undeserving of your job or promotion

- Denying your success and expertise
- Agonise over the smallest mistakes
- It's only a matter of time before I'm found out



How you might think, behave and react

- Fearful of not living up to expectations, whether they're real or imagined
- Dismiss positive feedback
- Not asking for help
- Having an idealised view of what you should be achieving, or the life you should be living, and then feeling inadequate when you don't live up to the ideal
- Avoiding activities you've convinced yourself you'll fail at

- Dependent on others' validation and when you don't get it, feel your imposter syndrome even more
- High levels of stress and anxiety
- Feeling guilty and shameful
- Overworking and striving to overachieve
- Self-sabotaging: not even trying something because you've convinced yourself you'll fail

Confirmation bias confirms the imposter syndrome

Think about it. The confirmation bias tells us that we look for, and then find, evidence that confirms our beliefs and feelings. It's like the imposter syndrome doubled or trebled.

Where does it come from?

Our beliefs about ourselves are very powerful. They come from:

- expectations from parents
- family environment
- your personality type
- lack of approval from parents, school and experiences
- labels
- comparisons
- subtle messages
- bias and exclusion.

Beliefs are important as they help us to simplify our world, think quickly, choose what to focus on. And they're hard to change.

How to manage it

Challenge the beliefs and choose to change your view

Rigid belief	Softened belief	New belief
I'm an imposter	I worry sometimes I'm an imposter	I now understand where my imposter beliefs come from and have come to terms with them
I'm not good enough	My confirmation bias is pretty strong	I understand my key talents, strengths and skills
I must keep my fears a secret	Sharing will be good. I may well find out I'm not alone	It's not just me! It's been good to talk openly and share experiences
I'm not up to the task	It's pretty normal to feel insecure and challenged with a new task	I've got a growth mindset. Give it a go
I must never fail or I'll be found out	Most people fail occasionally	Failure is a normal part of life. I'll learn from mine and build resilience
I have to work harder than everyone else to avoid detection	Working harder will get in the way of other priorities	I'll allocate two hours to this maximum
I need to do everything perfectly	I'll do a good job	Nobody and nothing is perfect
I credit my achievements to luck	I'll call it serendipity	I've worked for this and my success has been recognised
Everyone else is capable and knows what they're doing	That's not what you find when you get to know people	To feel challenged and fearful at times is human

Connect with your successes: coach not critic

It's about making them stick. So, talking to others about them is helpful, but internalising them is also important. Why? You don't want to totally rely on external validation; instead hold it in your own mind. Develop your inner coach, rather than an inner critic. Externalise your inner critic; don't see it as your voice, but that of an outsider.

And let your inner coach take over, see grey, rather than stark black and white.



Look for evidence

Take a court of law approach.

- What's the evidence for your imposter feelings?
- What's behind it? What else is going on here?
- What would you think if someone else was experiencing what you're experiencing?
- Put the case for your defence.

Choose compassion over criticism

Recognise when you're stressed and struggling without over-reacting and being judgemental. Be supportive and gentle with yourself when you're struggling. Everyone struggles at times - everyone.



Drop comparisons

Wealth, success, looks - whatever it is - it's a story you're telling yourself about others. But you don't know. Who has this perfect life with perfect relationships, perfect kids, a perfect job and perfect hair? Who? The reality is often far different from the facade.

Amy Cuddy: We think that everyone else who has that job or goes to that fancy school is feeling great, confident and deserving. They're not.

- We're not aiming for 100%, never doubting yourself, never questioning yourself and being overconfident.
- Humility has a place. But when self-doubt and insecurity stay too long, find your compassionate voice and inner coach. Discomfort isn't to be eliminated completely, but understood.

You can't control everything

Focus on what you can control and take action over. Give up ceaseless striving, particularly perfection.



Continue to build self-awareness

Reflect, evaluate and get to know your talents, strengths and skills. Then use them more. Take time to reflect.

- What triggers recurring bouts of the imposter syndrome?
- What beliefs are still alive and well?
- What has worked in the past to trigger your inner coach?
- What imposter syndrome elements are you ruminating about?
- How can you get into the loft and stand above the torrents of your rumination?
- Who do you need to talk to?
- To what extent is this a human degree of self-doubt and insecurity?

Recognise the upside of insecurity and self-doubt

A small dose of both grounds us and makes us human. Doubt and insecurity are questioning parts of our brain. They tell us to be cautious, not reckless.

Think of insecurity and confidence as not separate, but intertwined. Rather than opposite ends of a line, they're more like a circle. Uncertainty tells you: there's still more to learn. Continually looking for certainty is exhausting and fails to recognise the volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous world we live in.

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