

Guide to Imposter Phenomenon (IP)

Key points

- Imposter Phenomenon (IP) was first identified in 1978.
- Described as a 'psychological experience of intellectual and professional fraudulence'.
- Not so much a syndrome, a psychological affliction of the individual, but more a phenomenon that can be triggered by external contexts.
- Often incorrectly conflated with self-doubt, which can be healthy and motivating.

Characteristics of Imposter Phenomenon

- Intense feelings of phoniness despite successes.
- Fear of failure.
- Having a whole suite of capabilities, successes and achievements but genuinely don't recognise them and can't internalise them.
- Attribute any successes to luck or the contribution of others.
- Fixate on and internalise any small mistakes or errors.
- Overestimate abilities of others.
- Tendency to perfectionism/procrastination.
- Self-sabotaging behaviours e.g. substance misuse, over-working

What can trigger feelings of imposterism?

Triggers for IP come from the *social context*, particularly at times of transition (new job/promotion/career change); if these resonate with a person's *inner narrative*, then feelings of imposterism can be activated.

Triggers are usually linked to **otherness** and **implausibility**. If there's no one 'like me' here (there is actual otherness or perceived otherness), it can feel implausible that I should be here. Implausibility can lead to me questioning my own capabilities.

Impact of unaddressed Imposter Phenomenon

People with IP can believe that it is useful to have it as it encourages them to 'be better, do better.' Whilst **self-doubt** can be useful in giving us the motivation to close any gaps needed in our experience or skills, this is not true for IP. The difference is that people experiencing IP can't internalise positive feedback or praise, so they only ever see lack and gaps; they're constantly trying to 'be better/do better' but without any chance of arriving at that destination. Not tackling IP can therefore lead to burnout, chronic stress, procrastination, anxiety.

IP can take a toll on the nervous system over time. This can result in people 'opting out' and not taking risks. They may choose not to go for a promotion because the physiological toll of being in fight/flight is too much; but as they watch others succeed ahead of them there's regret at the potential they've not been able to follow through on.

Moving beyond Imposter Phenomenon

- Name it, place it at one remove. It's something that is happening to you, it is not you.
- Find someone with no interest in being nice to you and ask them for feedback on your performance. (A person with IP will dismiss most feedback as people just being nice.)
- Ask for specifics when getting feedback. (A person with IP will not respond well to 'It was brilliant' and may worry that only 'brilliant' will ever do in the future. And what even *is* brilliant?)
- Find something you can be rubbish at to get used to idea of not having to be perfect. Build muscle for failing in an area that doesn't threaten you e.g. a pottery or dance class.
- Work with a coach to unpick and update the inner narratives that can be triggered.
- Remember, if you dismiss someone's compliment or feedback you're essentially saying that they're either wrong or stupid or lying; you're dismissing their insight or authority or experience.
- Keep a daily log of your successes, and achievements. From this, mine your personal strengths and capabilities (even if it makes your toes curl).

Valerie Young identified 5 types of Imposter

1. Superhero: I can do it all; measures competence based on how many roles juggling
2. Perfectionist: sets impossibly high standards and fixates on flaws
3. The expert: expect to know everything, always learning. If don't know answer, feel like failure
4. Natural genius: competence linked to ease; if don't get it right first time, feel fraudulent
5. The soloist: do it alone, never ask for help for fear of looking incompetent

Ways to move beyond Imposter Phenomenon

Superheroes: reframe failure as a learning opportunity; seek out an experienced mentor; remember that constructive criticism isn't personal.

Perfectionists: aim to act before you're 'ready'; embrace the mantra 'progress beats perfect'; document your accomplishments to see how you're actually doing.

Experts: avoid unequal comparisons and aim to compare like for like; remember you can still have the skills even if you feel you don't 'fit' in; mentor junior colleagues to engage your inner expert.

Genius: remember success requires lifelong learning and a work ethic, not just natural ability; identify skills that you can improve over time; chunk larger tasks into smaller chunks.

Soloists: talk about feelings of imposterism with trusted people; seek out projects to work with others on; make a list of people that you've learned from.

See more at: <https://www.visualcapitalist.com/are-you-suffering-from-impostor-syndrome/>

Imposter Cycles

As part of her research, Dr. Pauline R Clance discovered what she called Imposter Cycles:

1. Imposter syndrome drives us to overprepare or procrastinate achievement-related tasks
2. The results of our overpreparation and procrastination feed more imposter syndrome

