



Imposter Syndrome

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### **The program**

In today’s busy world, it can be easy to feel overwhelmed by competing priorities and feel unsure that when we achieve success, we truly deserve it. We may doubt the skills, talents, or accomplishments we have worked for. We may have a persistent fear of being exposed as frauds who don’t deserve accolades or luck. It can feel as though we are deceiving others because we don’t feel as intelligent as we outwardly portray ourselves to be. This feeling is known as “Imposter Syndrome”. In this program, you will be introduced to Imposter Syndrome, learn how it impacts your feelings and actions, identify signs of it in ourselves and others, and learn strategies to overcome it.

The following key topics related to building resilience will be covered:



**Define** Imposter Syndrome and learn its characteristics

**Identify** ways that Imposter Syndrome can impact mental health

**Learn** how to identify Imposter Syndrome in ourselves and others

**Learn** and strategize ways to overcome the negative feelings associated with Imposter Syndrome for ourselves and those around us who may be experiencing it

### **What is Imposter Syndrome?**

### Reflection question

**When you hear the term “Imposter Syndrome,” what do you feel?**

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### Imposter Syndrome Defined

A person sitting next to a person's head

Description automatically generatedImposter Syndrome or Imposter Phenomenon is “a behavioral health phenomenon described as self-doubt of intellect, skills, or accomplishments”.1 It is a commonly experienced event that can affect anyone, but is most frequently reported in high-functioning, high-achieving people.

People with Imposter Syndrome can rationalize away successes despite evidence that they are worthy of their accomplishments.2 On the outside, there is no apparent reason for them to feel like an imposter, and yet they still do. This is what makes it such a challenging psychological phenomenon. While it is commonly researched and experienced, it is not known how pervasive Imposter Syndrome may be. This is partly because there is not currently a formal or widely accepted medical definition (e.g., DSM-V criteria).1 However, it is agreed by experts that Imposter Syndrome has an impact to one’s mental and behavioral health.

With Imposter Syndrome, it can be possible to mistake it for humility or vice versa. How do you know what the difference is?3

* Humility is an accurate assessment of one’s own capabilities against a complex situation. It’s realistic to acknowledge that no person knows everything. Showing that you have humility or are humble in the face of praise shows that you are human and are aware of both your strengths and opportunities.
* Imposter Syndrome differs from humility because it comes from a sense of inadequacy in the environment despite objectively being competent. People feel more inadequate than others facing the same complex situation, thinking that they don’t belong there at all.

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**Click here to enter notes on defining Imposter Syndrome**

### Types of Imposter Syndrome

Despite feeling a sense of accomplishment when things go well, with Imposter Syndrome, there is a failure to internalize this feeling of success. This leads to those with Imposter Syndrome experiencing a spectrum of fear, anxiety, fraudulence, and other pathology leading into the next task and possibly, future tasks.1

According to research, there are five main types of Imposter Syndrome. They are4:

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**The Perfectionist -** This person believes that unless they are perfect, others will see that they are not as good as they appear to be. A perfectionist always “knows” that they could have done better.

**The Expert-** Imposter Syndrome presents as the person believing that because they don’t know everything possible about a subject or have mastery of it that they will be found out as not knowing enough or being good enough.

**The Natural Genius –** A person does not believe that they have natural intelligence or competence, despite frequently displaying it to others. A person feels like an imposter if they do not get something right the first time or mastery takes longer than what they feel is

**The Soloist –** Asking for help to reach a goal can make one with Imposter Syndrome feel inadequate and question their abilities and competence. In these cases, the Soloist will spend as much time and effort as possible to complete a project on their own without asking for help.

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**The Super Person –** Someone who appears to be the hardest working person in the room may have Imposter Syndrome. They believe that if they are not at the highest level, then they are a fraud, and others will expose them.

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**Click here to add your notes about the types of Imposter Syndrome**

### Causes of Imposter Syndrome

A person sitting on the floor

Description automatically generatedImposter Syndrome is a cognitive distortion that causes people to doubt their own skills and accomplishments.3 People often question where it comes from, but it has several causes and origins. In early studies, Imposter Syndrome was linked to factors such as family dynamics and gender and social stereotypes. However, further research has shown that Imposter Syndrome can occur for anyone regardless of family upbringing or social or gender settings.

The most common causes of Imposter Syndrome include3:

**Family environment** - Growing up, parents or other family members might have put high emphasis on achievement or been overly critical.

**Social pressure** - Being part of a social group where approval or worth seems to be connected to achievement.

**Sense of belonging** - Part of Imposter Syndrome is the fear of being found out that one is not adequate and being forced out of a group.

**Personality** - Some personality types are linked to internalizing feelings of pressure, doubt, and failure. Times of stress or transition, even unrelated to work, can make it worse.

It is very common and can be quite frustrating because it holds us back from the self-confidence we’ve earned and deserve to feel.

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**Click here to add your notes about the causes of Imposter Syndrome**

### Characteristics

Imposter Syndrome can be characterized by many factors. They include4:

* An inability to realistically assess your competence and skills
* Attributing your success to external factors
* Berating your performance
* Fear that you won't live up to expectations
* Overachieving
* Sabotaging your own success
* Self-doubt
* Setting very challenging goals and feeling disappointed when you fall short

If any of these signs feel familiar, be compassionate and proud that you’ve recognized this behavior either in yourself or someone else. While it might seem like an isolating experience, many people feel similarly. The key is to recognize that it can be overcome.

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**Click here to add your notes about the characteristics of Imposter Syndrome**

### **Identifying Imposter Syndrome**

### What to look for

Imposter Syndrome can show up in all aspects of life: work, relationships, daily tasks, etc. Imposter Syndrome shows up in a variety of ways that include1:

* A pair of orange glasses

  Description automatically generated**Over preparation**: People feel they must work harder than others to achieve the same goal. Because of this perception, they feel that they must put in more effort than anyone else and be ready for every eventuality. In their mind, this will “trick” others that they are not an imposter despite feeling as though they don’t belong.
* **Procrastination**: Someone with Imposter Syndrome who procrastinates feels that they must complete hurried ‘last-minute’ preparation to justify their accomplishments. They fear that even with the last-minute effort, they will eventually be exposed as a fraud.
* **Lack of confidence**: Low self-efficacy, or confidence in one’s ability to manage their behavior and successfully handle responsibilities.
* **Undervaluing contributions**: People experiencing Imposter Syndrome undermine the worth of their achievements, which results in a persistent sense of incompetency. This includes actions such as crediting achievements to outside factors, sabotaging self-success, and setting unrealistic expectations.
* **Burnout**: To overcome a sense of incompetence, people push themselves. They expend their energy quickly. Work starts to become more of a chore, and they lose much of their passion for what they do.

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### The impacts of Imposter Syndrome

Imposter Syndrome can worsen a person’s mental health because it tends to create a cycle that is difficult to get out of.5 Fears of failure can create emotional distress, and many people coping with imposter feelings also experience anxiety and depression.

A child sitting next to two masks

Description automatically generated Living with depression or anxiety might mean one already experiences self-doubt, diminished self-confidence, and worries around how others perceive them. This mindset of feeling “less than” can both lead to and reinforce the belief that someone doesn’t *really*belong in their academic or professional environment.

One of the problems with Imposter Syndrome is that the experience of doing well at something does not necessarily change a person’s beliefs. The thought still nags in their head, “What gives me the right to be here?” The more they accomplish, the more they just feel like a fraud. It’s as though they can’t *internalize* their experiences of success and be proud of their accomplishments.

In some cases, it can fuel motivation to achieve, but that often comes at the cost of higher anxiety as someone can become hyper focused on proving that they deserve acknowledgement.4

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**Click here to add your notes about the impacts of Imposter Syndrome**

### Recognizing Imposter Syndrome in self or others

Because Imposter Syndrome does not have a medical definition, it can be difficult to truly “diagnose.” There are some questions that you can ask yourself or someone you think has Imposter Syndrome that may help you determine this phenomenon.4

* Do you agonize over even the smallest mistakes or flaws in your work?
* Do you attribute your success to luck or outside factors?
* Are you sensitive to even constructive criticism?
* Do you feel like you will inevitably be found out as a phony?
* Do you downplay your own expertise, even in areas where you are genuinely more skilled than others?

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**Click here to add your reflections regarding the above questions. If you can answer “yes” to any of them, think about if your feelings are current or in the past.**

### What does Imposter Syndrome feel like?

The feelings associated with Imposter Syndrome represent a conflict between one’s own self-perception and the way others perceive them. Even as others praise their talents, they dismiss successes to timing and good luck. They don’t believe they earned them on their own merits, and they fear others will eventually realize the same thing.

To try to tackle these feelings or prove someone is not a fraud they pressure themselves to work harder to5:

* A cartoon of a person looking at a mirror

  Description automatically generatedKeep others from recognizing their shortcomings or failures.
* Become worthy of roles they believe they don’t deserve.
* Make up for what they consider their lack of intelligence.
* Ease feelings of guilt over “tricking” people into thinking they are better at something than they may actually be.

Further accomplishments don’t change how they feel about themselves. The accomplishments are nothing more than the product of their efforts to maintain the “illusion” of success. They consider any recognition earned as sympathy or pity.

Additionally, despite linking accomplishments to luck, they take on all the blame for any mistakes made, reinforcing the belief that minor errors expose their lack of intelligence and ability. Over time, this can fuel a cycle of anxiety, depression, and guilt.

Living in constant fear of discovery, a person will strive for perfection and may begin to feel guilty or worthless when they can’t achieve it, and possibly become burned out and overwhelmed by their continued efforts.

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**Click here to add your notes about how Imposter Syndrome feels**

### **Overcoming Imposter Syndrome**

### Where to start

Once you have determined that that you or someone you know may be experiencing Imposter Syndrome, it is important to know what can be done to begin to overcome it.

Before jumping in with both feet, it is recommended that you ask a few questions first4:

* What core beliefs do I hold about myself?
* Do I believe I am worthy of love as I am?
* Must I be perfect for others to approve of me?

Answering these questions can help you or someone else to begin to address the feelings that are at the root of the feelings of being an imposter.

It may be difficult because it can lead to the realization of thoughts or feelings that are uncomfortable, but it is crucial to becoming self-aware and confronting some deeply ingrained beliefs that can be holding you back.

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**Click here to add your reflections regarding starting to overcome Imposter Syndrome**

### Strategies to overcome Imposter Syndrome

To move past feelings related to Imposter Syndrome, it is important to become comfortable confronting some of the beliefs one holds about themselves.

This can be hard because we might not even realize we hold them, but here are some techniques you can use:

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**Share your feelings -** Talk to others about how you are feeling. Unfounded beliefs can fester when they are hidden and not talked about.4

**Focus on others -** Try to help others in a similar place as you. If you see someone who seems awkward or alone, ask them a question to bring them into the group. This will help you both to not feel as isolated or alone.4

**Take small steps -** Don't focus on perfection, instead, do things reasonably well and reward yourself for taking action. For example, in a group conversation, offer an opinion or share a story about yourself.4

**Stop comparing -**Every time you compare yourself to others, you will find some fault with yourself that fuels the feeling of not being good enough or not belonging. Instead, focus on listening to what the other person is saying during conversations and be genuinely interested in learning more.4

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**Refuse to let it hold you back -**No matter how much you feel like you are a fraud or that you don't belong, don't let that stop you from pursuing your goals. Keep going and refuse to be stopped.4

**Build connections -** Avoid giving in to the urge to do everything yourself. Instead, turn to others to create a network of mutual support. It also creates the opportunity to share strategies for overcoming feelings of Imposter Syndrome and related challenges you might encounter.5

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### Tackling Imposter Syndrome in five steps

When in the moment, it can be helpful to take a brief moment to slow down and recognize when you are feeling like an imposter.

The SBNRR technique (stop, breathe, notice, reflect, respond) can help you slow down and consider the situation, and your own thoughts, feelings, and reactions, in a mindful way.3 and 6

**Stop -** Allow yourself to stop what you are doing and take a moment to pause.

**Breathe -** Give yourself a deep breath and let your thoughts go and not be attached to them.

**Notice -** Notice your feelings, your body, your surroundings, your peers, the situation, your reaction, and anything else that you can notice.

**Reassess -** Evaluate the situation and the reason you felt a need to fall into the idea of being an imposter.

**Respond -** React intentionally. It can be more informed and composed now that you have calmed yourself a bit.

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**Click here to enter notes about the SBNRR technique**

### Seeking help

People with Imposter Syndrome feel that when their hard work is paying off, they can’t keep going at the same rate as they have been, and that feels shameful.3 The shame makes people suffer alone and in silence. People don’t realize how many others suffer from imposter syndrome because no one wants to admit it out loud.

As with many other mental health issues, it is always okay to ask for help. Don't be held back by your fear of being found out.

One struggle that people may have is to determine where to go and who to ask.

* If your Imposter Syndrome feelings are occurring primarily at work, consider reaching out to your manager or a co-worker you trust. Sometimes just talking about your feelings can open your eyes to new perspectives.
* Additionally or alternatively, a mental health professional can help you learn how to overcome these feelings.

Overcoming Imposter Syndrome will take some time and effort, but finding the right strategies for you will not only help you overcome it, but you may learn more about your strengths in the process.7

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**Click here to enter notes about seeking help for Imposter Syndrome**

### **Emotional Wellbeing Solutions (EWS)**

* Short term counselling and support for all employees and immediate family members (if eligible).
* Provided at no cost to you by your employer.
* Easily accessible, voluntary, and confidential in accordance with the law – service that can provide support for personal or work-related issues.
* Staffed by experienced professionals.

“This program should not be used for emergency or urgent care, call the local emergency services phone number, or go to the nearest emergency room. This program is not a substitute for a doctor’s or professional’s care. Due to the potential for a conflict of interest, legal consultation will not be provided on issues that may involve legal action against Optum or its affiliates, or any entity through which the caller is receiving these services directly (e.g., employer). This program and its components may not be available in all locations or for all group sizes and is subject to change. Coverage exclusions and limitations may apply. The Optum EWS information in this training is only applicable to the eligible members in attendance.”

### **About professional support**

You may consider seeking professional support if you experience any of the following:

* Sleep problems.
* Performance issues at work.
* Relationship difficulties with family or friends.
* Loss of interest in hobbies you normally enjoy.
* Lack of care about normal everyday work tasks.
* Excessive anxiety or worrying more than normal.
* Feeling overwhelmed or sad for more than two weeks.
* A noticeable change in appetite, eating too little or too much.
* Behavior and coping methods have become harmful to yourself   
  or others, whether that is through aggressive behavior or unhealthy habits, such as drinking too much alcohol or taking drugs.
* Thoughts of harm to self and/or others. \*

Keep in mind some of these conditions may warrant more urgent professional help.

Your EWS employee assistance program (EAP) is available to all employees and their covered dependents and may include some free counseling sessions per issue, per year. Please check with your employer or your health plan for details.

*\*If you or someone you know have thoughts about suicide or are in crisis, seek help right away. If you or someone you know is in immediate danger, call 911 — or go to the closest emergency room.*

### **Let’s reflect**

Take some time to answer the questions below using the “**Enter text here**” boxes provided to record your answers.

1. What is one thing that you have learned from this program?

**Enter text here**

1. What is one thing that you would like to research more?

**Enter text here**

### **References**

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