

Overcoming Imposter Syndrome

by Edel Walsh

Do you ever say to yourself “I am a fraud”, “I am going to be found out”, “You will never pull this off”. You’re not alone. This is imposter syndrome. Many high-achieving individuals experience imposter syndrome. This is where you doubt your skills, you have a fear of being “found out” and you believe you don’t deserve your success.

In research carried out by Clance and Imes in 1978, they said that imposter syndrome is “a condition in which people believe they are not worthy of success and have a persistent belief in their lack of intelligence, skills or competence”.

It was originally thought that imposter syndrome affected high achieving women but now we know it is much more widespread. 70% of people have felt some degree of imposter syndrome (J. Hibberd, The Imposter Cure).

Even Albert Einstein himself is cited as saying “The exaggerated esteem in which my life work is held makes me feel very ill at ease. I feel compelled to think of myself as an involuntary swindler”.

Imposter syndrome can vary on a spectrum of occasional worry to a full-blown fear of being found out. This in turn can impact your thoughts, feelings, and behaviours.

The Types of Imposters

There are different types of imposters, and I will discuss five of them. (J. Stoddard, Imposter No More).

The Expert: They believe their competence is measured by how much knowledge, skill, or expertise they have. In other words, they struggle with uncertainty. Before making a decision or moving forward with a project or a piece of work, there will always be one more course the expert will feel they need to take or one more book they need to read or one more person they need to consult with.

While the expert keeps learning, sometimes they end up doing nothing with that learning.

The Perfectionist: This is one that lots of us can relate to and probably the most common type of imposter. The perfectionist wants and needs to get things done flawlessly. The perfectionist might believe that if you want something done properly, then you need to do it yourself. As a result, the perfectionist might have a very long to-do list.

The Natural Genius: They want to get things right first time. They believe that they should just have to learn things once and be able to understand it. If the natural genius is challenged, they might give up on a task or project quickly. The natural genius can display traits of the fixed mindset.

The Soloist: The soloist values their independence over everything. They do not like asking for help and tend to avoid collaboration.

The Superhuman: They tend to measure their competence based on

the number of roles they can juggle, be it at work and at home. The more things on their list, the better.

Can you identify with any of these imposters? Which imposter are you?

Strategies to Overcome Imposter Syndrome

Challenge Negative Thoughts: When imposter thoughts arise like, “I am a fraud”, or “You will never pull this off”, it is important to challenge them. This takes time and effort. When you catch the thought, write it down. Then, ask yourself, is there another way of looking at this?

I coach and mentor students who are training and studying to get their professional accountancy qualification. I hear so often in my private coaching practice “I am not good enough for these exams”, or “I can’t do it”. I support my students to challenge or re-frame these thoughts.





A great re-frame that I often hear is "I am doing my best". Or simply, "I am working hard, and I will pass these exams".

When challenging or re-framing your thoughts, remind yourself of past successes, positive feedback from others, and your unique skills and strengths. Replace self-doubt with compassionate self-talk.

Acknowledge your Strengths and Achievements:

Take time to reflect on your strengths and achievements, no matter how small they may seem. Keep a journal or list of your successes and revisit it regularly to remind yourself of your capabilities and achievements. This will give you a more accurate picture of yourself and help quieten those imposter thoughts. You will now have a log of everything you have done so you know your capabilities.

Take time to think about your strengths and how you can use your strengths to help overcome your imposter syndrome. If you need some help, there is a great strengths questionnaire that was designed by the positive psychologist, Dr Martin Seligman. You can take Dr Seligman's free questionnaire on www.viacharacter.org and you will receive a personalised report on your core strengths.

"Life Begins at the end of your comfort zone" Neale Donald Walsch

Take action to move outside your comfort zone! Thanks to your imposter syndrome, have you been playing things safe? Have you become comfortable with putting things off and avoiding challenging situations?

As humans, we like to stay within our comfort zone as it feels safe. Without stepping outside of this, you might be depriving yourself of new experiences and learning opportunities.

Our comfort zone has its limits. Moving beyond it is good for our well-being, self-development, and self-esteem.

Ask yourself some self-coaching questions:

- What do I want?
- How might I feel if I do this?
- How might I feel if I don't do this?

Reflecting on your failures and mistakes

Reflecting on mistakes and failures is another useful strategy to help overcome imposter syndrome which in turn will also help build resilience. By embracing the fact that failure is a natural part of the learning process, setbacks can be re-framed as opportunities for growth and development.

When I work with students who have failed their professional accountancy exams, the first thing we do is look to the learnings from the experience. There is no doubt that you will learn so much more from failing than you do from succeeding.

Perfection is not realistic or attainable. We are human. Everyone makes mistakes and encounters setbacks. Done is better than perfect!

Set realistic goals and celebrate any progress you have made and re-frame any setbacks as an opportunity for growth.

"Life Begins at the end of your comfort zone"

By acknowledging and accepting failure as a normal part of self-development and the learning journey, it can help alleviate feelings of self-doubt associated with imposter syndrome.

Michael Jordan, the famous basketball player, is quoted on an advertisement as saying, "I have failed over and over and over in my life.... and that is why I succeed".

Seek Support

Seek support and guidance from those you trust when imposter feelings arise. Surround yourself with people who will champion you, who believe in your abilities and can provide encouragement and support.

Imposter syndrome is a silent struggle that affects many. Through self-reflection and seeking support, you can challenge those imposter thoughts or tendencies. Embrace your strengths and accomplishments and re-frame your failures and setbacks as opportunities.

Take this opportunity now to step out of your comfort zone!



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