Signs of imposter syndrome (Young 2011):

- Feeling undeserving of successes, awards, or recognition
- Inability to internalize accomplishments
- Attributing personal success to factors other than one’s ability or intelligence, such as luck, extra work, charisma, computer error, or evaluator’s misjudgment
- Believing that one has fooled others into overestimating one’s own abilities
- Engaging in self-deprecating behaviors and discounting praise and positive feedback
- Seeing failure perpetually looming on the horizon – next time one undertakes an important task or project, it will fail
- Doubting ability to repeat past accomplishments – each success is on its own, unrelated to others, making success feel very tenuous
- Fearing exposure as an imposter or fraud
- Feeling relief rather than joy when succeeding

It’s common:

- In a study of successful people, 70% reported experiencing imposter feelings at some point in their life (see Young 2011, p. 17).
- In a study of graduate students, 25% of men and 39% of women scored high on feelings of imposterism (Collette, Avelis, & Lizardo, working paper; see related news coverage here).

Anyone can have imposter syndrome, but most likely among:

- High achievers. It is most often found among extremely capable individuals, not people who are actually impostors (Young 2011).
- Perfectionists. Perfectionism is highly correlated with imposter syndrome (Sakulku & Alexander 2011).
- Women. Though both men and women can suffer from imposter syndrome, it’s more common among women (Collette, Avelis, & Lizardo).

Reasons why people may feel like imposters (excerpts from Young 2011):

- How people were raised. Discouraging messages can linger and have a profound impact on self-expectations, confidence, and feelings of competence. For example, did accomplishments go unnoticed? How was success defined? Were minor infractions criticized, like receiving a “B” grade after years of getting unremarked upon straight “As”? (Young 2011, p. 28-33).
- Working in an organizational culture that feeds self-doubt. For example, in academia, criticism is the norm and adversarial language is often used. Scholarly debate and investigation can turn hostile and derisive, leading to competitiveness and isolation (Young 2011, p. 36-38).
- Being an “outsider.” A sense of belonging can go a long way in fostering self-confidence, and when you’re an outsider, it’s easy to sense that you’re wearing a mask. Examples of being an outsider include: working outside of your native country; being a first-generation college student; being a woman in a male-dominated field; and being a minority on a predominately white campus (Young 2011, p. 40-43).
Potential impacts on mental health:
- Anxiety, self-doubt, depression, stress, discomfort, emotional exhaustion, shame, and general dissatisfaction with life are all potentially related to imposter syndrome (Sakulku & Alexander 2011; Young 2011).

Personal reflection:
Quiz: Yes to any of these indicates some degree of imposter syndrome (Young 2011, excerpts from p. 14-15):
- Do you chalk up your success up to luck, timing, or computer error?
- Do you believe “if I can do it, anyone can”?
- Do you agonize over the smallest flaws in your work?
- Are you crushed by even constructive criticism, seeing it as evidence of your ineptness?
- When you do succeed, do you secretly feel like you fooled them again?
- Do you worry that it’s a matter of time before you’re “found out”?

Kolligian’s Perceived Fraudulence [i.e., Imposterism] Scale: “strongly disagree,” “disagree,” “neutral,” “agree,” or “strongly agree” for each item (Kolligian and Sternberg 1991).
- When I receive a compliment about my academic or professional abilities, I sometimes find myself making excuses for and explaining away the compliment.
- When I am about to take on a new and challenging project, task, or responsibility, I am more inclined to remember my past failures rather than my past successes.
- I feel that there is a significant disparity between the ‘intellectual self’ that others perceive and the ‘intellectual self’ that I really am.
- I often worry about not succeeding with a project or on an examination, even though others around me have considerable confidence that I will do well.

Reflection moment:
Write a specific imposter thought you’ve had or witnessed.

Impact of imposter syndrome on behavior (excerpts from Young 2011):
- Over preparing and hard work – if people believe everyone else is more intelligent, one way to avoid detection is to rely on extraordinary effort and obsessing over all details. For non-imposters, when hard work pays off and they experience success, it enhances confidence. For imposters, they mostly experience a sense of relief rather than a boost in confidence (Young 2011, p. 73-74).
- Holding back – since expending effort and seeking new opportunities makes people vulnerable, people may hold back (e.g., don’t apply for promotions, don’t offer opinions) (Young 2011, p. 74-75).
- Procrastination – procrastination is associated with perfectionism (since it’s hard to meet impossible standards), and it gives people an excuse for failure (e.g., I didn’t have enough time) (Young 2011, p. 77-78).
- Never finishing – by not finishing, people shield themselves from possible detection or criticism (Young 2011, p. 78).
- Self-sabotage – people may subconsciously do things to undermine their success when they feel they don’t deserve it (e.g., show up late or unprepared, drink too much before a big event) (Young 2011, p. 78-80).
• *Maintaining a lower or ever-changing profile* – people may choose a field where they can be relatively inconspicuous or move jobs frequently when they feel their coworkers discover that they’re imposters (Young 2011, p. 75-76).

• *Using charm to win approval* – people may use social skills or humor to win approval, and then think their success is only because people like them, rather than ability (Young 2011, p. 76-77).

**Potential impacts on careers** (Young 2011):
• Taking jobs below abilities or aspirations
• Failing to seek advancement or promotion
• Avoiding self-promotion
• Failing to negotiate
• Aiming lower
• Abandoning dreams
• Leaving a job or school
• Maintaining a low profile, not giving opinions or speaking up in meetings
• Feeling unbalanced in work-life

**Reflection moment:**
Write a specific way imposter syndrome has impacted your career or the career of someone close to you.

**Strategies to Address Imposter Syndrome** (Young 2011):

• *Talk about it with colleagues, friends, and mentors.* Research shows that one of the best things we can do is name imposter syndrome and recognize that it is common and it strikes highly capable people.

• *Recognize when you’re having an imposter moment.* Remove emotion from the situation and approach it more objectively. Also, be aware of how stereotypes might impact how you see yourself.

• *Strengthen the link between you and accomplishments.* Create a list of evidence of your success and DON’T explain it away. Just list the evidence and don’t think of the qualifiers -- just stick to the proof (e.g., grades, school, degrees, scholarships, awards, etc.). Note that everyone can be lucky, use their connections, and/or be in the right place at the right time, but successful people are the ones who use the luck, good timing, and connections to their advantage. Go through your list, and own your successes: persistence, initiative, going extra mile, and making use of contacts. Write down the specific actions you took to take full advantage of these contributions. Outside factors take nothing from your achievements -- use this as evidence that you are the bright, capable person everyone thinks you are.

• *Accept recognition.* Stop minimizing compliments. Instead, say “thank you.” Eventually start saying things like “I really appreciate you saying that” or “It makes me feel good that my hard work paid off.” Saying these words can help you internalize accomplishments more fully.

• *Reward yourself when you accomplish something.* Learn to appreciate your accomplishments.

• *Get a different perspective.* Write a letter of recommendation for yourself. Ask your friends what they think of you. Usually, other people have a more realistic opinion of your work.
• **Drop perfectionism.** Perfectionists believe they must deliver an unblemished performance 100% of the time and nothing short of perfect is acceptable. Anything less is met with deep shame and harsh inner criticism. This standard is impossible. It’s not a matter of *if* you will err, but *when*. If you wait for everything to be perfect, you’ll never get going.

• **Be selective about where you put your efforts.** Don’t waste time over routine tasks where adequate effort will suffice. Sometimes good is good enough.

• **Change from a fixed mindset to a growth mindset.** A fixed mindset is the idea that you have inherent intelligence and ability that is fixed. Either you can do math or you can’t. Either you’re artistic or not. A growth mindset is that intelligence is malleable and capability is something that can be built over time. Instead of thinking “I’m unqualified,” think, “I may be inexperienced but I’m fully capable of growing into the role.” Research shows that having a growth mindset is important for persistence, and people who excel in diverse fields devote the most time engaged in deliberate practice.

• **Recognize your expertise.** You may never feel like you have enough understanding or experience. Even when you are an expert, you likely don’t see yourself as one. It may keep you from offering an opinion for fear of being wrong or you may not attempt things you’re perfectly capable of doing. Recognize that you don’t have to (and can’t possibly) know everything. Be smart and figure out who does. Having a healthy respect for the limitations of your own knowledge and expertise is also a sign of competence. Even when you don’t know something, you can still project confidence.

• **Realize how you respond to failure.** Don’t personalize failures and don’t allow them to affect your sense of self. For example, if a presentation bombs, it’s one thing to say “I skimped on prep time” versus “I’m incompetent.” You have recourse for the former, but not the latter.

• **Talk to someone if needed.** If these feelings are debilitating, Cognitive Behavioral Therapy has been shown to be effective in treating imposter syndrome.

**Reflection moment:**
Write a specific strategy you intend to use to combat imposter syndrome.

**Citations:**
Collette, Jessica, Jade Avelis, & Omar Lizardo, working paper; see related news coverage here. “Family Friendliness, Fraudulence, and Gender Differences in Academic Career Goals.”

