COMBATTING IMPOSTER SYNDROME

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SIGNS OF IMPOSTER SYNDROME

- Feeling undeserving of successes, awards, or recognition
- Inability to internalize accomplishments
- Attributing success to factors other than one’s ability or intelligence, such as luck, extra work, charisma, or error
- Believing that one has fooled others into overestimating one’s abilities
- Engaging in self-deprecating behaviors and discounting positive feedback
SIGNS OF IMPOSTER SYNDROME

- Seeing failure perpetually looming on the horizon
- Doubting ability to repeat past accomplishments – each success is unrelated to others, making success feel tenuous
- Fearing exposure as an imposter or fraud
- Feeling relief rather than joy when succeeding

- Do you chalk up your success up to luck, timing, or 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 constructive criticism, seeing it as evidence of your ineptness?
- When you 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”?
IT’S COMMON

- In a study of successful people, 70% reported experiencing imposter feelings at some point in their life.
- In a study of graduate students, 25% of men and 39% of women scored high on feelings of imposterism.

MOST LIKELY AMONG:

- *High achievers.* It is most often found among extremely capable individuals, not people who are actually impostors.
- *Perfectionists.* Perfectionism is highly correlated with imposter syndrome.
- *Women.* Though both men and women can suffer from imposter syndrome, it’s more common among women.
REASONS WHY PEOPLE MAY FEEL LIKE IMPOSTERS:

- **How people were raised.**
  - Discouraging messages can impact self-expectations, confidence, and feelings of competence.
    - For example, did accomplishments go unnoticed?
    - How was success defined?

- **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 can turn hostile, leading to competitiveness and isolation.
REASONS WHY PEOPLE MAY FEEL LIKE IMPOSTERS:

- Being an “outsider.”
  - When you’re an outsider, it’s easy to sense that you’re wearing a mask.
  - Examples:
    - Working outside of your native country
    - First-generation college student
    - Woman in a male-dominated field
    - Person of color on a predominately white campus

POTENTIAL IMPACTS ON MENTAL HEALTH

- Anxiety
- Depression
- Stress
- Self-Doubt
- Emotional Exhaustion
- Discomfort
- Shame
- Life Dissatisfaction
REFLECTION MOMENT:

- Write a specific imposter thought you’ve had or witnessed.

- What imposter thoughts were you able to identify in yourself or your colleagues/students?
IMPACT OF IMPOSTER SYNDROME ON BEHAVIOR:

- **Over preparing and hard work**
  - Rely on extraordinary effort and obsessing over details to avoid detection
  - When hard work pays off:
    - For non-imposters, it enhances confidence.
    - Imposters mostly experience a sense of relief.

- **Holding back**
  - Since effort and new opportunities make people vulnerable, people may hold back
    - Don’t apply for promotions
    - Don’t apply for grants
    - Don’t offer opinions
**Impact of Imposter Syndrome on Behavior:**

- **Procrastination**
  - Associated with perfectionism
    - It's hard to meet impossible standards
  - Gives people an excuse for failure
    - I didn't have enough time

- **Never finishing**
  - People shield themselves from possible detection or criticism
IMPACT OF IMPOSTER SYNDROME ON BEHAVIOR:

- **Self-sabotage**
  - People may subconsciously do things to undermine their success when they feel they don’t deserve it
    - Show up late or unprepared
    - Drink too much before a big event

- **Maintaining a lower or ever-changing profile**
  - Choosing a inconspicuous field
  - Moving jobs frequently to avoid being discovered as imposters
IMPACT OF IMPOSTER SYNDROME ON BEHAVIOR:

- Using charm to win approval
  - Using social skills or humor to win approval, and then assuming success is because people like them, rather than due to ability

POTENTIAL IMPACTS ON CAREERS:

- 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
- 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.

- What are some specific ways in which imposter syndrome has impacted your behavior or careers, or those of your colleagues/students?

- What opportunities have been or might be missed?
STRATEGIES FOR OVERCOMING IMPOSTER SYNDROME

TALK ABOUT IT

- Research shows that one of the best things we can do is name imposter syndrome

- Talk about it with colleagues, friends, and mentors/mentees
  - Recognize that it is common
  - Recognize that it strikes highly capable people
RECOGNIZE IMPOSTER MOMENTS

- Recognize when you’re having an imposter moment
- Remove emotion from the situation and approach it more objectively
- Be aware of how stereotypes might impact how you see yourself

STRENGTHEN LINK BETWEEN YOU AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS

- List your successes and DON’T explain them away.
- List evidence and don’t think of qualifiers -- just proof (e.g., school, degrees, awards, etc.).
  - Everyone can be lucky. Successful people use luck and connections to their advantage.
- Go through list and own successes: persistence, initiative, making use of contacts, etc.
- Write down actions you took to take advantage of these contributions.
  - Outside factors take nothing from your achievements.
ACCEPT RECOGNITION

- Stop minimizing compliments.
- Say “thank you.”
- Eventually start saying things like:
  - “I really appreciate you saying that.”
  - “It makes me feel good that my hard work paid off.”
- Saying these words can help you internalize accomplishments more fully.

USE REWARDS

- 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. 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 WITH EFFORT**
- 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 TO A GROWTH MINDSET**
- Fixed mindset: believe in inherent intelligence and ability
- Growth mindset: intelligence is malleable and ability can be built.
- *Don’t think:* “I’m unqualified.”
- *Think:* “I may be inexperienced but I’m capable of growing into the role.”
- Research: Growth mindset is important for persistence, and people who excel in fields devote the most time engaged in practice.
RECOGNIZE YOUR EXPERTISE

- Even as an expert, you likely don’t see yourself as one.
  - Never feel like you have enough experience
  - Prevents you from offering opinions or attempting things

- Recognize that you don’t have to (and can’t possibly) know everything.
  - Be smart and figure out who does
  - Knowing your knowledge limitations = sign of competence

- Even when you don’t know something, still project confidence.

POSITIVELY RESPOND TO FAILURES

- Don’t personalize failures and don’t allow them to affect your sense of self.

- 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.
THERAPY

- If 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.
What other strategies have you found helpful to address imposter syndrome?