



# Imposter Issues

A self-help tool

## Introduction

Imposter Syndrome has been defined as: ‘...a psychological phenomenon that can occur when people doubt their accomplishments or feel like they are frauds. Despite evidence of their success, they feel like they are not good enough or do not deserve the success they have achieved. They feel like an imposter. Imposter Syndrome can lead to feelings of anxiety, low self-esteem, and even depression.’ (Symonds, 2020, as cited in Symonds 2023). According to research by Matthews and Clance, ‘as many as 70% of people experience imposter feelings at some point in their life’ (Matthews and Gravois as cited in Gravois, 2007).

Underlying imposter feelings is the sense that we are pretending to be something which we aren’t. It feels like we’re putting on a false ‘front’ which others will see through. And when they do, we’ll be revealed for the fraud that we are.

Is there anything you can do if you feel like this? Yes. We believe that you can effectively address imposter feelings. Like all problems it’s a case of breaking it down into its component parts.

In this self-help tool, we take three distinct aspects that can make up someone's Imposter experience. You may identify with one, two or all three of these aspects, so just pick those that are relevant to you.

Our approach is based upon the idea that 'all the world's a stage', as Shakespeare put it. In this metaphor life is a play and we are the actors. We believe that this helps unlock the can help us learn how to manage our imposter feelings and 'act' effectively.

We believe the metaphor of life as a play in which we are the actors can help us learn to play our 'parts' authentically, become more effective professionally, and manage our imposter feelings.





## **This tool is designed to...**

- Give you three ways of addressing imposter feelings.
- Show how Imposter 'Syndrome' is made up of three quite different issues.
- Help you to be more confident despite imposter feelings.

## **Consider using this tool if you...**

- You need to create a list of possible career ideas to start your career thinking.
- Want fresh perspectives to challenge your existing ideas and open up new possibilities.
- You feel more comfortable with creative approaches to career planning that favour

# How to use this tool

In this self-help sheet we provide ways of addressing three aspects of the 'Imposter Syndrome'. Each works on its own, so you do NOT need to use all three (or take them in a particular order). However, bear in mind that in someone's experience the issues can overlap, so you may find useful insights from each.

## **Reframe it (advice for occasional / 'mild' imposter feelings).**

The term 'Imposter Syndrome' makes it sound as though you have a rare and very serious medical condition. But experiencing occasional imposter feelings is perhaps the norm, rather than an exception.

Sakulku and Alexander (2011, p.73) cite research showing that professionals ranging from medical students to marketing managers experience imposter feelings. Parkman notes that: 'Numerous studies document the prevalence of the Imposter Phenomenon in both graduate and undergraduate student populations.' (2016, p55.). Imposter feelings are also common among academics.

So, why is it so common? Probably because no one is more aware of our mistakes and weakness than we are (Goffman, 1959, p28]!

As we go about our daily lives we are always playing different roles: daughter, son, sister, brother, student, graduate trainee, established team member etc. As we do so we naturally self-monitor, sometimes sub-consciously, sometimes consciously to ensure that the things we say and the way we behave is what is expected. Imposter feelings can be seen as being on the normal range of self-awareness.

But does it matter?

When we have imposter feelings we can be concerned that this indicates that we are not performing our role effectively. However, this may not actually be the case at all. Research by Tewfik (2022) suggests that having imposter thoughts isn't associated with objectively assessed poor performance. In fact, those having imposter thoughts were more likely to be judged as better at communicating with others, '...because they encourage those who have such thoughts to adopt a more other-focused orientation'. (Tewfik, 2022, p.1012).

We suggest you 'reframe' the worrying thoughts that arise when you become aware of imposter feelings. This is based on the approach of 'Cognitive Reframing' used in coaching / counselling (Morin, 2022) which entails finding a more constructive perspective on a situation. Most situations can be seen in different ways. But we easily get locked into one view. By considering alternatives we can change how we see and feel about it.

Rather than be worried by imposter feelings, try to see them as a normal part of social situations which shows that we care about how we are doing and how the people around us see us.

Reframe from, this shows that I should be worried because I'm doing something wrong, to: 'imposter feelings are normal and can help me focus on others better.'

## Manage it (advice if you have imposter feelings frequently).

Imposter feelings and the thoughts that go with them can, sometimes, lead us to lack confidence in our abilities. People particularly prone to them say that they find it hard to accept compliments, and tend to attribute their success to luck. There is even the risk that the person will engage in 'self-limiting behaviour, that is avoid doing things which are within their abilities to avoid the risk of failure.

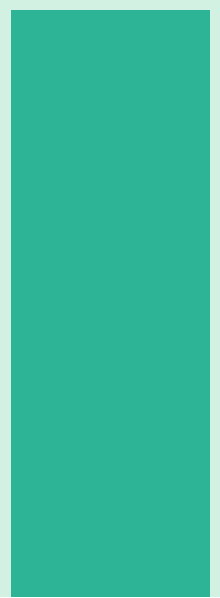
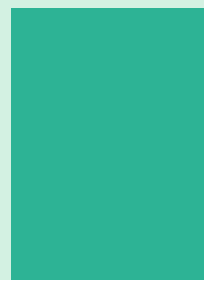
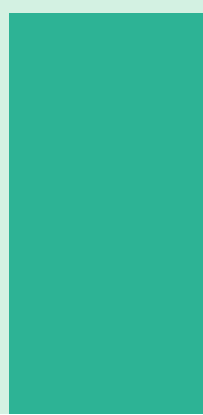
These thought patterns are unhelpful to anyone, especially if you want to develop a successful career. If this sound like your situation you will need to actively manage your moods. You can see this as a part of your normal continuing professional development (CPD).

Things that can help include:

- Keep track of your accomplishments (make a running log of things you've achieved. Include small as well as large projects. Note what you did and the strengths you used. Review this when you start to doubt your abilities. (Gross, n.d.)
- Keep a note of positive feedback (these comments easily get lost and overlooked so save them in a special email folder or jot them down in a notebook. Re-read this when you start to feel down about how others see you (Gross, n.d.)

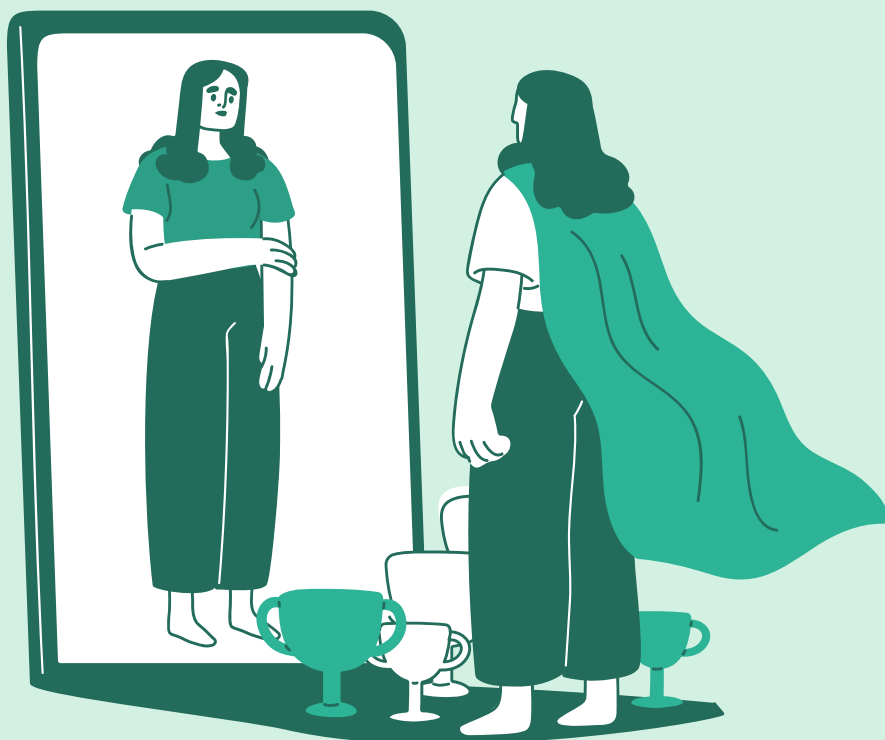


- If you are tempted to attribute something you have achieved to luck, review the situation honestly. (Identify the key turning points on the project. Ask yourself what would an objective observer say made the difference? How far was this down to your determination and skill? While luck made have played a part, in all likelihood it is your efforts that made the difference.)
- Seek positive feedback from those you trust. (You might do this through a formal workplace mentoring or coaching scheme or informally with colleagues you get on with. Provided you pick people who are insightful and on your side this can be very powerful as it reminds you how others see you. And helps to correct distortions in your self-perception. You may consider using the 'Reflected Best Selves' exercise developed by Roberts, et al., 2005 for this).
- Use our self-help tool **Values Based Self-Affirmations** which has been shown to bolster a sense of self-worth.
- Remember that imposter feelings are very common. The chances are a lot of other people you work with are having them at the same time as you, it's just that you can't tell!



- Give yourself some compassion when things are tough. Check out our **Hands Over Heart** self-compassion tool.
- Remind yourself that imposter feelings show you really do care about how you do your job. They indicate that unlike some people you are not arrogant or complacent and are actually quite self-aware. These are really positives and not to be downplayed. Your feelings are likely to lead to focus more closely on how to communicate with others (Tewfik, 2022), which is surely important. By contrast, a shocking amount of people are happy to bluff and bluster their way through their working day without giving it a second thought (James, 2014). Your feelings show that you are a conscientious and reflective professional. This is something to celebrate and build on. Viewed this way imposter feelings show that you're doing something right and have a good attitude to work.

Over time as you build up your evidence base of achievements and find supportive colleagues, you should find that while you may still have moments when you feel an imposter, you will increasingly gain a balanced view of your abilities and be able to tell yourself that you've grown into the role and belong in your job.





**N.B.**

The research on imposter feelings suggests that for some people, this may be connected with the way they were praised as a child; either being given too much or too little. Clance (1985), for instance, argues that extreme patterns of praise and reward can make it difficult later in life to accept praise from others as being genuine. If you think this applies to you, then we'd encourage you to discuss this with a suitably qualified professional.

While imposter feelings are not to be confused with autistic 'masking', they may have some similarities. If you are autistic and experience imposter feelings and / or masking, please discuss your individual needs with someone in Disability, as you may find that the general advice in this self-help guide is not applicable to your situation.

## **Challenge and re-write it (advice for dealing with prejudice and stereotypes).**

The term 'Imposter Syndrome' makes it sound like a medical condition. Something you have as an individual. But this is not necessarily the case. When you are playing a role 'audience' reactions are crucial (Goffman, 1959, p. 21). Increasingly, researchers argue that we should consider how social prejudice contributes to triggering imposter feelings, particular among groups who may not fit with certain stereotypes of what a 'good' manager or 'real' academic look like (Fenestra et al., 2022).

This is explored by Callie Edwards Womble (2018, p. 20), who writes about her own struggles in dealing with social stereotypes:

'For me, the imposter syndrome, stereotype threat, and intersectionality are not just theoretical frameworks for understanding emotion and behavior; they also provide a practical lens into my daily reality as a young, Black woman in the predominately middle-aged, White, male academy. Like many women, I have various intersecting social identities. I am young, Black, a daughter, a friend, a wife, an entrepreneur, a researcher, and a Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) to name a few. However, I have always struggled with labeling myself with one particular identity: a scholar.'

Womble describes an intensely personal journey through which she was able to 're-conceptualise' what it meant for her to be a scholar. She talks about how she critiqued the traditional stereotypes of who could be a scholar and what constituted a genuine scholar. She found examples of other Black female scholars and came to realise how many people in her community were wise and learned even though they lacked formal qualifications. She created her own definition of being a scholar that incorporated the positive place of making mistakes, learning from failure and not being perfect.

She makes three practical recommendations (Womble, 2018, p. 32) for others wrestling with similar injustice:

- '... be gentle with yourself...' (avoid criticising yourself and blaming the victim).
- '... seek out, utilize, and, if needed, develop a ...[supportive]... community ...'
- '... celebrate your successes...'

While in this section we have so far focused on demographic stereotypes, each profession has its own unofficial 'script' for what that professional should be like. Often these are restrictive and shaped by patterns of hidden societal privilege. For instance, there is the tradition of the 'alpha male' manager, the aggressive 'Dragon's Den' entrepreneur, or the 'macho' police officer.

The metaphor of acting, reminds us that we don't have to stick to the 'words' we've been given. We can change the way they're delivered and re-write the script. Think of people who have broken the mould. People like Greta Thunberg, Stormzy, or Markus Rashford who showed that you could be a world leading football player *and* a food poverty campaigner.

Becoming aware of the effects of these stereotypes can rightly lead to anger. Anger, if focused constructively, can be powerful source to tap into, that motivates us to 'prove them wrong'. So don't be afraid of your emotional reactions. Some of the students who have contributed videos to the [This Student Can](#) resource, talk about how their determination to prove others wrong gave them the grit they needed to overcome obstacles.

Consider the 'script' you have been given.

- Avoid taking it at 'face value'. What are the unspoken assumptions about what it is like to be an 'x'?
- What are the different ways this could be changed or re-imagined?
- What role models can you find that have challenged the status-quo?
- How can you bring your personality, values and individual style to the role?



Re-writing the script is about working out how *you* want to play your role authentically. The Management theorists Goffee and Jones (2006, p. 17) write that ‘... you must be yourself – more – with skill...’. Perhaps the key to overcoming imposter feelings is, after all, to be your authentic self.

- If you think you might be affected by stereotype threat, consider using our self-help tool **Values Based Self-Affirmations** which has been shown to bolster a sense of self-worth.
- You may also find our **Expectations under the Microscope** self-help tool relevant. You can use this tool to examine how different ways of doing a job and playing a role, express your personal values.
- Our self-help tool **Level Playing Field** is designed to help you identify the resources and people you can draw on to ‘level things up’ and help you overcome inequality.
- You should also give yourself some compassion when things are tough. Check out our **Hands Over Heart** self-compassion tool.

Womble (2018, p. 31) concludes that: ‘Giving voice to my reconceptualization of a scholar was a profoundly empowering experience’. Her story is an encouragement for anyone who doesn’t fit into the mould to find their own way of being in the world. How do you want to change things?



# Pause, Reflect, Act

- Which of the three approaches seemed relevant to you?
- Which ideas seemed most helpful to you?
- What are the key insights you've taken from this self-help guide?
- What actions do you need to take now to build on this exercise?
- Who could help you with this?
- Are there other related self-help tools you'd like to use as well?

NB: Because everyone is different and no one solution on its own is necessarily a magic bullet, please look at our other self-help tools as well and use the ones that work best for you.

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If you are a member of staff from another educational organisation and want to use a limited number of our self-help tools with your students, we'd love to hear from you and share good practice. We'd ask that you retain references to University of Huddersfield as a matter of courtesy and acknowledge the other sources we've used. Thank you.