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# Understanding and Overcoming Impostor Phenomenon

A HOW-TO GUIDE



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# Table of Contents

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Key Findings</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Contributing Factors</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Types of Impostor Syndrome</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>Impact of Impostor Syndrome</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>Assessment</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>Reframing Your Impostor</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>References</b>	<b>23</b>



This handbook is provided as a guide for individuals. It is for information and educational purposes only. If you are experiencing mental health symptoms related or unrelated to Impostor Syndrome; we recommend you seek professional advice. Information found in this handbook is based studies and research related to IP. This handbook and its content is for educational purposes only and does not constitute psychological advice.

## Introduction

Impostor syndrome, also known as impostor phenomenon or impostorism, is a psychological pattern in which individuals doubt their accomplishments and have a persistent fear of being exposed as a "fraud." The Phenomenon can manifest in various ways, and there isn't a universally agreed-upon classification of distinct types. However, many experts have identified different patterns or manifestations of impostor syndrome. The term "Impostor Phenomenon" was first coined by psychologists Dr. Pauline R. Clance and Dr. Suzanne A. Imes in 1978 during their clinical research at Georgia State University. Initially observed among high-achieving women, Clance and Imes found that despite having notable achievements, these women often attributed their success to external factors such as luck or timing, rather than their own ability. They also found that this phenomenon was not limited to women alone but affected individuals across different genders, professions, and backgrounds.



## Prevalence

The prevalence of the Impostor Phenomenon is not confined to a specific demographic or professional sector; it can affect anyone regardless of their job, age, gender, or background. However, research indicates variable prevalence rates, partly due to different methodologies and definitions used in studies. A review of studies suggests that up to 70% of people will experience at least one episode of feeling like an impostor during their lives. These feelings can fluctuate based on context, pressure, and new roles or responsibilities.

Impostor feelings are particularly prevalent among high achievers, students, and professionals who are embarking on new careers or who find themselves in competitive environments. For instance, an estimated 25% to 30% of high achievers may suffer from this phenomenon. Among university students, especially graduate and doctoral students, prevalence rates ranging from 40% to 60% have been reported, highlighting the impact of academic pressure and comparison among peers.





## Key Findings

Impostor Syndrome has been extensively studied across various disciplines, revealing several key findings that shed light on its nature, impact, and potential interventions. Here are some of the crucial insights derived from research and observations:

### Affects Both Men and Women

Initially believed to affect women more than men, research has shown that Impostor Syndrome does not discriminate by gender. Both men and women experience impostor feelings, although the triggers and expressions of these feelings might vary based on individual and societal factors.

### Impedes Professional Growth

Those experiencing Impostor Syndrome may be less likely to pursue opportunities for advancement due to fear of failure or exposure as a fraud. This can lead to a cycle of underachievement and missed opportunities, despite the individual's capability and potential.

### Linked to Mental Health Issues

While not a mental health disorder diagnosis, Impostor Syndrome has been associated with various mental health challenges, including anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem. The constant self-doubt and fear of exposure can significantly affect an individual's mental well-being.

### Can Have Adaptive Qualities

In some cases, the fear of being exposed as an impostor can drive individuals to achieve more and perform at a high level. However, this can lead to burnout and stress if not managed properly, indicating that the effects of Impostor Syndrome can be both positive and negative, depending on the context and individual coping mechanisms.



## Workplace Context

Impostor Syndrome can lead to reduced confidence and productivity, as employees fear failure and doubt their abilities, hindering innovation and growth. Such employees may avoid sharing ideas or taking new challenges, leading to missed opportunities and innovation shortfalls. Overworking to compensate for perceived inadequacies can also result in burnout, affecting team morale, collaboration and cohesion.



## Impacts Crucial Soft Skills

Impostor Syndrome can profoundly impact a range of crucial soft skills that are vital for personal and professional development. Skills such as communication, emotional regulation, decision-making and collaboration. The impact of Impostor Syndrome on these soft skills underscores the necessity of addressing and overcoming it to fully realize one's potential and contribute meaningfully in various spheres of life.



## Effective Interventions Available

Interventions like cognitive-behavioral therapy, coaching, mentoring, and peer support groups can raise awareness of Impostor Syndrome in workplaces and educational settings. These measures can assist individuals in coping with feelings of fraudulence. Furthermore, cultivating an accurate self-evaluation of one's skills and accomplishments, along with learning to accept and own one's successes, are crucial tactics for overcoming Impostor Syndrome.



## Contributing Factors

The contributing factors of Impostor Syndrome involve a complex interplay of personality traits, behavioral patterns, and environmental influences that reinforce the persistent belief in one's lack of competence, despite evidence to the contrary. While the specific factors can vary slightly based on different research and perspectives, six commonly recognized contributing factors include the following.



### **#1 Family and Cultural Background**

Early family dynamics, parenting styles, and cultural expectations can significantly influence the development of Impostor Syndrome. Individuals raised in environments where high achievement is expected or where there is a strong emphasis on status and success may internalize the idea that their value is tied to their achievements. This can lead to feelings of inadequacy and fear of not meeting those expectations.

### **#2 Personality Traits**

Certain personality traits, such as perfectionism, neuroticism, and a tendency towards anxiety, can predispose individuals to experience Impostor Syndrome. Perfectionists, in particular, set unrealistically high standards for themselves and may feel like impostors when they inevitably fail to meet these standards every time.

### **#3 Educational and Professional Environments**

Highly competitive academic or professional settings can exacerbate feelings of being an impostor. When individuals are constantly comparing themselves to exceptionally talented peers or colleagues, they may doubt their own abilities and contributions, fearing they don't truly belong.

# Contributing Factors

## *#4 Gender Stereotypes and Discrimination*

Gender stereotypes and experiencing discrimination or bias can contribute to the development of Impostor Syndrome, especially in fields where a person's gender is underrepresented or marginalized. This can make individuals question their place and achievements, worrying that they might be tokens or diversity hires rather than truly deserving of their roles.

## *#5 Transitions and New Roles*

Entering a new role or undergoing a significant transition, such as starting a new job, promotion, or transitioning to a different career, can trigger feelings of impostorism. The uncertainty and increased expectations associated with new challenges can make individuals doubt their qualifications and fear that they will not live up to them.



## *#6 Social Comparisons*

The tendency to compare one's achievements and progress to those of others can fuel Impostor Syndrome. Social media platforms, where people often present idealized versions of their lives and successes, can intensify this effect, leading individuals to feel that they are not as capable or accomplished as their peers.

Understanding these contributing factors is crucial in addressing Impostor Syndrome, as it allows individuals and professionals to target these underlying issues with specific strategies, such as cognitive-behavioral therapy, coaching, mentoring, and developing supportive communities, to mitigate the impact of these feelings.

## Types of Impostor Syndrome

The concept of Impostor Syndrome encompasses a variety of experiences, leading to the identification of five types or patterns that individuals may exhibit. Understanding these types helps in recognizing how Impostor Syndrome manifests in different people and can guide tailored strategies for overcoming these feelings. The following are the five types of Impostor Syndrome, as identified by Dr. Valerie Young in her book "The Secret Thoughts of Successful Women".

### *The Perfectionist*

Perfectionists set extremely high standards for themselves, and even a small mistake can make them feel like a failure. They tend to focus on areas where they could have done better, rather than on their successes. This type of impostor fears that they will not always be able to achieve perfection, which they equate with competence.



### *The Superwoman/man*

This type feels they must work harder than others to prove their worth, often staying late at the office, over-preparing for tasks, and sacrificing personal time to keep up with their own impossible standards. They measure their competence based on how many roles they can juggle and excel in, fearing being exposed as an impostor if they cannot handle everything perfectly.

### *The Natural Genius*

Individuals who see themselves as natural geniuses set their bar for success at first try and effortless completion. If they have to struggle or work hard to achieve something, they think it means they are an impostor. This type is used to skills coming easily and equates effort with a lack of intelligence or skill.



### *The Soloist*

Soloists feel they must accomplish tasks on their own, and if they need to ask for help, they see it as a sign of failure or incompetence. They highly value independence and believe that seeking assistance reveals their fraudulence.



### *The Expert*

Experts measure their competence based on "how much" they know or can do. They fear being exposed as inexperienced or unknowledgeable. This type often seeks out additional certifications or training because they feel they never know enough to be truly qualified.



# Impact of Impostor Syndrome

## *Decision Making Challenges*

Impostor syndrome deeply affects decision-making by instilling a pervasive fear of failure and exposure as a fraud, leading to an overly cautious approach. Individuals may hesitate to make decisions, especially bold or innovative ones, due to a lack of confidence in their own judgment and abilities. This hesitation can result in missed opportunities, delayed actions, and an over-reliance on the approval or feedback of others, undermining leadership and innovation. Moreover, the constant self-doubt associated with impostor syndrome can lead to decision paralysis, where the fear of making the wrong choice prevents any decision from being made at all.

## *Difficulty Delegating*

Impostor syndrome significantly complicates delegation, primarily because individuals feeling like impostors doubt their own capabilities and fear that delegating tasks might expose their perceived incompetence. This fear can lead to a reluctance to pass on responsibilities, as they might believe that doing everything themselves is the only way to ensure success and avoid scrutiny. Consequently, this can result in overwork, burnout, and decreased productivity, as they take on more than they can manage instead of utilizing the strengths and skills of their team. Moreover, the lack of delegation stifles team development and trust, as team members are denied opportunities to take on new challenges and prove their competence.

## *Procrastination and Over-Preparation*

Those experiencing impostor syndrome often delay starting tasks, fearing they won't complete them satisfactorily. This procrastination is not just about time management but stems from a deep-seated belief of not being good enough, leading to a cycle where tasks are put off until the last minute, potentially compromising quality and increasing stress. Concurrently, the same individuals might engage in over-preparation, spending excessive time on tasks to ensure perfection and avoid criticism. While aiming to cover every possible flaw, can drastically reduce efficiency, it can be overwhelming as disproportionate amounts of time are devoted to tasks that may not require such a meticulous level of detail.

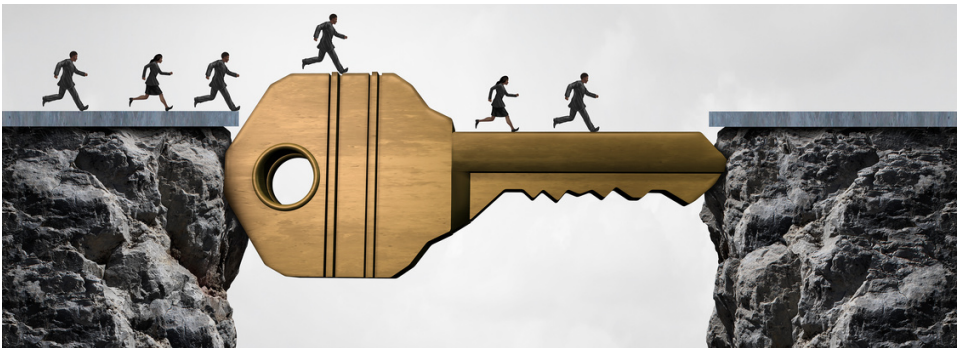
## *Increased Stress and Burnout*

Impostor syndrome leads to stress and burnout through a combination of high self-expectations, fear of failure, and constant self-doubt, creating a cycle that can be difficult to break. Individuals with impostor syndrome often push themselves to work harder to cover up what they perceive as a lack of knowledge or ability, leading to long hours and overexertion without acknowledging their accomplishments. This relentless pursuit of perfection and fear can result in significant stress, as they are perpetually worried about meeting their own unrealistic standards or being judged by others.

Over time, the chronic stress from these unrelenting pressures can lead to burnout. Burnout manifests as physical and emotional exhaustion, cynicism, detachment, feelings of ineffectiveness, and a lack of accomplishment. Individuals experiencing burnout often report feeling drained, unable to cope with daily tasks, disengaged from work and social activities, and disillusioned with their roles and achievements. The irony is that the very efforts to avoid being "unmasked" can lead to the outcomes impostor syndrome sufferers fear the most: decreased performance and a sense of failure.

## *Limited Career Growth*

Impostor syndrome can be a substantial barrier to career growth, as it often causes individuals to underestimate their capabilities and avoid seeking advancement opportunities. Those affected may hesitate to apply for promotions, take on new projects, or step into leadership roles due to a fear of failure. This self-doubt and reluctance to step out of their comfort zone mean they miss out on valuable experiences and visibility that could propel their careers forward.





# Indicators



- **Chronic Self-Doubt and Sense of Intellectual Fraudulence:** Constantly questioning your own achievements and chalk them up to luck, timing, or deceiving others.
- **Attributing Success to External Factors:** Believing your success is due to external factors rather than your own competence.
- **Fear of Being Exposed as a "Fraud":** Worrying that others will eventually find out that you're not as knowledgeable or skilled as they think.
- **Downplaying Success:** Minimizing your achievements and reluctant to accept praise for them.
- **Overachieving:** Pushing yourself to work harder to prevent others from discovering your "lack" of knowledge or skill, potentially leading to burnout.
- **Setting Very Challenging Goals and Feeling Disappointed upon Failure:** Setting impossibly high standards for yourself and feeling devastated when you fail to meet them.
- **Difficulty Accepting Praise:** Brushing off compliments and feeling uncomfortable when praised.

## Self-Assessment Questions

If you suspect that you might be experiencing impostor syndrome, consider reflecting on the following questions:

- Do I often attribute my successes to luck or external factors rather than my own effort and abilities?
- Am I afraid that others will find out I'm not as capable or intelligent as they think?
- Do I frequently feel like I don't belong or deserve my job/position despite my achievements?
- Am I perfectionistic, setting extremely high goals for myself and feeling crushed when I don't meet them?
- Do I downplay my competence and achievements, believing that anyone could do what I do?
- Do I overwork to prevent being exposed as a "fraud"?
- Do I struggle to accept praise or recognition, feeling like I don't deserve it?

Answering "yes" to several of these questions may indicate tendencies towards Impostor Syndrome. It's important to note that while these feelings can be common, they are not a reflection of true incompetence or lack of skills.

An additional assessment tool is the Clance IP Scale:  
<https://paulineroseclance.com/pdf/IPTestandscoring.pdf>











## References & Resources

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The information provided herein is based on insights, research and Artificial Intelligence (AI). It's important to note that while every effort has been made to ensure accuracy and relevance, information is subject to change. The content is based on available data and observations up to the present date and should be used as a general guide or informational resource.

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