



The Imposter Phenomenon¹

There has been a push in recent years to refer to feeling like an imposter the Imposter Phenomenon rather than Imposter Syndrome. This is because the use of “syndrome” is typically used to describe a long-term and pervasive medical condition and it is therefore incorrect to use this definition.

Imposter feelings have been observed in ethnic minority groups. Several factors that increase psychological stress were identified, that fueled the imposter phenomenon, including being first generation (the first in the family to attend university), financial pressures, and racial discrimination, indicating the problem is less about feeling like an imposter and more likely due to feeling actively unwelcome in academic spaces. Being part of any marginalised group within the academic setting (being LGBTQ+, having a disability) can also lead to imposter feelings due to lack of visible role models.

To understand the Imposter Phenomenon, it is first necessary to understand some of the key aspects of a PhD program that may fuel these feelings, including: receiving recognition; receiving critique; comparing oneself with others; developing skills; application of new knowledge; and asking for help.

When surrounded by extremely talented peers, it can be easy to see the accomplishments of those around you and find it difficult to see what value you bring. As an undergraduate, the author was top of her class and excelled at whatever she put her mind to. Being a PhD student she was surrounded by people that were just as clever, if not smarter, and this came as a big shock, particularly as my self-worth up to that point had largely been pinned on my academic success. The often hyper-competitive nature of academia can exacerbate imposter feelings, as we can feel pitted against our peers. This is a problem with the research culture itself, where competitiveness is often rewarded over collaboration.

Misschien is voor onze deelnemers het woord imposter te zwaar, maar herkennen ze wel deze gedachten:

“I haven’t been told I am doing a good job so I must not be good enough.”

“My colleague won a poster prize and I didn’t. I don’t deserve to be here.”

“I’ve not received any positive feedback recently from my PhD Supervisor so they must regret hiring me”.

An exercise you can do to remind yourself of why you deserve your PhD position is to write down:

- Your education and work experience up to this point.
- Five things you are proud of [12].
- Your five top skills.
- Any positive feedback you receive. By keeping this as a positive affirmation in your work space, it can act as a constant reminder of your ability.

Tip: If you struggle to write any of these objectively, ask a friend, colleague, or even your supervisor for help filling out these details.

¹ Zoë J. Ayres () Managing Your Mental Health During Your PhD — A Survival Guide —. Springer Nature Switzerland AG.



Fighting Back

Don't be a perfectionist The need to be infallible and excel at our jobs is deeply linked with imposter feelings. Striving for perfection may feel like the best way to deliver on our research goals, but it may in fact be detrimental to both our mental health and our work output.

Ask for help. Don't expect to know all the answers, or know detailed research methodology before you start. Given that everyone is so busy, you may feel like you are asking for a lot of help in the early days of your PhD, but this is entirely expected. You are not a burden. Developing skills and application of knowledge can take even longer. You may have to ask to be shown how to run an experiment several times before it sinks in. You are learning.

Realise that the fact that you were accepted for your PhD program means that you have a proven track record of being able to think independently, conduct research, and have the background knowledge to succeed. That's right—you already have all the skills you need to complete your PhD. To be frank, if you were not capable, your PhD Supervisor would not take you on as a student because their time is valuable to them.

Celebrate Little Wins as Well as the Big As PhD students we have a tendency to always delay gratification: "I published a paper, but I best start writing the next straight away". Celebrating the little wins as well as the big can help. This means getting an experiment to work, or even just getting out of bed. Our victories are different on different days.

Create a List of Your Achievements Having a list of your achievements that you can look over in a low moment can help consolidate that you deserve to be where you are. Tip: This could be as simple as scheduling in keeping your CV up to date in the event of a job coming your way, so that your CV is ready for when you need it.

Speak to a Professional If the inner imposter voice is too loud and affecting you in your professional and/or personal life, speaking to a medical professional and seeking guidance is worthwhile. We can too often minimise the impact that feeling like an imposter has on us.

Call Out That Inner Voice Would you speak to a friend like that? If not, call that inner voice out actively. You deserve to be friends with yourself too.

Accept Recognition When receiving a compliment, it can be easy to be self-deprecating and laugh/joke about how we don't really deserve the recognition we are receiving. Next time you get given a compliment, try saying "thank you" instead.

Realise Perfectionism Is Not "High Standards" We can get into a cycle of aiming for "perfect" and if we do not achieve this then we feel we are not good enough. If perfection is getting in the way of completing tasks, your perfectionism has become more a hindrance than a help.

Create a "Good Mail" Folder When you receive praise in an email, or kind communications, transferring them to a "good mail" folder to look back on when you are feeling low is a way to remind you of all the positive interactions that you have had and why you deserve to be where you are.