



Imposter phenomenon: contributing factors

Pluralistic ignorance

Everyone is susceptible to a phenomenon known as *pluralistic ignorance*, where we each doubt ourselves privately, but believe we are alone in thinking that way because no one else voices their doubts. Since it is tough to really know how hard our peers work, how difficult they find certain tasks, or how much they doubt themselves, there is no easy way to dismiss feelings about us feeling less capable than the people around us.

Minority groups

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

Attribution error

We attribute other's success to their skills, character, but our own success to circumstances, help from others etc. This makes sense because we have more perspective on our own situation than somebody else's.

Perfectionism

The need to be infallible and excel at our jobs is deeply linked to impostor 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. *Realise that perfectionism is not the same as having 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 of a hindrance than a help.

Fear of discovery

Impostor syndrome is accompanied by the fear of discovery, of exposure, and that is why people do not talk about it with their colleagues. They try really hard to appear competent and successful, but their real internal feelings do not help: they are insecure about themselves. The big problem with impostor syndrome is that the gap between how you present yourself and how you feel gets bigger and bigger if you do not do anything about it.

Compare to others

We are quick to compare ourselves to others and then it can seem that others are more successful. Particularly in a PhD trajectory where much is still unclear, there are few concrete milestones, the goal will not be reached for another four years and, moreover, little positive feedback is given, it is obvious to compare yourself to others and therefore consider yourself less successful.