



GME Wellness Sub-Committee Newsbyte

Conquering Imposter Syndrome

By: Shannon Smith, Ph.D. (Licensed Psychologist)
Family Medicine Residency at Winter Haven (BayCare)

Do you ever feel like an imposter? Do you think that your academic and/or professional success is the result of luck or a series of fortunate events? Or, perhaps you believe you have tricked people into thinking you are more competent and/or smarter than you actually are?

This is what we call imposter syndrome, and it is common among medical students and medical residents. Up to 60% of medical students and 44% of medical residents experience imposter syndrome during their training (Gottlieb, Battaglioli, Sebok-Syer, and Kalantari, 2020). Imposter syndrome is highly common among high-achieving individuals with up to 70% of elite professionals reporting experiencing imposter syndrome at some point in their careers (Gravois, 2007). Additionally, imposter syndrome disproportionately impacts minority groups and women (Bravata, Madhusudhan, Boroff, & Cokley, 2020; Mullangi & Jagasi, 2019). Although imposter syndrome is common, individuals with imposter syndrome can often feel alone in this experience, resulting in feelings of isolation (Bravata et al, 2020).

Imposter syndrome is often associated with doubting one's abilities and worrying about being exposed as a "fraud" (Mullangi & Jagasi, 2019). Likewise, it can be a barrier to speaking up in professional settings or pursuing growth-promoting opportunities and promotions (Mullangi & Jagasi, 2019). Multiple studies have demonstrated that imposter syndrome can co-occur with poor psychological well-being, depression, and anxiety (Bravata et al., 2020).

To help combat imposter syndrome, the following strategies are offered by Young (2011):

- **Shift to a growth mindset.** Instead of viewing ability as a fixed trait, it can be helpful to view skills and capability as changeable and able to grow over time. Rather than thinking that you are incapable or unqualified, try reframing your thoughts to "Although I am currently unqualified, I am capable of growing into the role."
- **Realize you are human and reduce perfectionism.** Perfectionistic tendencies can be challenging and can cause tough emotions, such as shame and anxiety. Those with perfectionistic tendencies often set unrealistic expectations and then are critical towards themselves when they are unable to meet these impossible standards. If you can challenge the perfectionism and realize that you are perfectly human with both strengths and growth areas, you may notice a decrease in your imposter syndrome.
- **Celebrate your contributions to your successes.** Although it may be tempting to gloss over your successes, it is important to celebrate each success, big or small. When reflecting on the reasons for your success, try focusing on your role in the success, such as your persistence and initiative. Even if there is an external factor related to your success (e.g., using a personal connection, good timing), think about your specific actions to take full advantage of those external factors.

- **Objectively evaluate your failures.** It is often easy to personalize our perceived failures, such as saying “I am a failure” or “I am so stupid” when you fail a test. However, it is important not to personalize these failures. Rather, think about the specific, objective reasons for the event. For example, saying “I did not study enough” reduces the likelihood of having negative emotions while also allowing us to have a sense of control for future events.
- **Own your strengths.** As a medical student or medical resident, you have a large number of strengths that have allowed you to advance to your current level in medicine. During training, it can be easy to focus on your weakness/areas of growth and minimize your strengths; however, it is important to recognize and celebrate the strengths and expertise you possess. Reflect on your positive personal strengths and the tasks you perform well.
- **Recognize and experience your feelings.** It is important to allow yourself to identify your emotions and to “feel the feels.” Bottling up emotions is not healthy and can cause more stress. Rather, expressing your emotions can provide relief and better understanding into yourself.
- **Pursue mentorship** from strong and supportive professionals whom you can connect to and feel safe/comfortable to talk about imposter syndrome and other challenging aspects of a career in medicine.
- **Remember that you are not alone.** Imposter syndrome is a common phenomenon, especially in elite professions such as medicine. There is a high likelihood that many of your peers are also experiencing imposter syndrome. It can be helpful to talk to your colleagues about this experience in order to feel less alone in this experience and to receive advice on handling this concern.

References:

Bravata, D. M., Madhusudhan, D. K., Boroff, M., & Cokley, K. O. (2020). Commentary: Prevalence, Predictors, and Treatment of Imposter Syndrome: A Systematic Review. *Journal of Mental Health & Clinical Psychology, 4*(3).

Gottlieb, M., Chung, A., Battaglioli, N., Sebok-Syer, S. S., & Kalantari, A. (2020). Impostor syndrome among physicians and physicians in training: a scoping review. *Medical Education, 54*(2), 116-124.

Gravois J. (2007). You're not fooling anyone. *Chronicle of Higher Education, 54*(11).

Mullangi, S., & Jagsi, R. (2019). Imposter syndrome: Treat the cause, not the symptom. *JAMA, 322*(5), 403-404.

Young, V. (2011). *The secret thoughts of successful women: Why capable people suffer from the imposter syndrome and how to thrive in spite of it.* New York: Crown Business.