

8 Techniques to Overcome Imposter Syndrome

Career Development



You enter a meeting and present well. As you leave the meeting, however, your mind is flooded with thoughts like, “Did I sound stupid? What if they realize I didn’t belong there? I should have said something more meaningful!” If so, perhaps you have imposter syndrome, which is talked about often. But, what exactly is it?

It is important to note that I am not a psychological professional. Much of the psychology-focused information shared throughout this article comes from a MedCircle imposter syndrome webinar I attended by Dr. Judy Ho, a licensed and triple board certified clinical and forensic neuropsychologist. Please see an expert if you want to explore this topic in more depth and/or explore therapies like cognitive behavioral therapy or ACT (acceptance and commitment therapy).

Imposter syndrome is not a diagnosis used in mental health. It comes from the collection of ideas, experiences, and symptoms we experience together. Imposter syndrome can exist in people who don’t have the requisite skills for some role they assume and try to convince others they do or, more commonly, in people who do have the requisite skillset for a role, but are convinced they do not. In this article, we’ll tackle the latter scenario.

Imposter syndrome can impact career, relationship, health, and fitness in a variety of ways, for

example, the person who earned a promotion, but is convinced she doesn't deserve it, or someone in a great relationship who thinks it's too good to be true. A person dealing with imposter syndrome may feel he can only be complimented if he does well on something complicated. If it comes easy to him, he may not let the compliment penetrate.

Imposter syndrome can be chronic or situational, or both, and can sneak up on you in certain situations. For example, when you earn admission into an elite school or are offered the job of your dreams, you may think, "Will I be able to handle this? Am I in over my head?" That's imposter syndrome rearing its ugly head.

This can become a vicious cycle because, when imposter syndrome strikes, the extremely analytical part of our brains goes into overdrive and, an hour later, we may still be overinterpreting everything and thinking about all we think we cannot manage. Thoughts become things, and our brain takes that and runs with it. Nothing negative happened, but it's all dire and negative in our minds. Additionally, we sometimes take imposter syndrome with us from one place to another. If we feel like we are not worthy at work, we may take that feeling home and snap at loved ones because we're on edge.

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Unsurprisingly, imposter syndrome can cause sadness, anger, and irritability, thus, making those afflicted lose interest in things they like to do because they're so concerned about being found out.

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Imposter syndrome can contribute to negative psychological effects, such as depression and social anxiety when individuals lack self-confidence, feel unworthy, or fear being seen as a failure to others.

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If you're thinking, "I'm successful! How could I suffer from imposter syndrome," know that even successful people suffer from it. No matter who you are and how much confidence you have, statistics suggest you've likely faced imposter syndrome given the results of a 2018 national study of 3,000 UK adults conducted by Access Commercial Finance. That study showed that "62% of us have experienced imposter syndrome at work in the past 12 months," which jumps to 86% in adults aged 18-34.

Women have been shown to experience imposter syndrome more, but that may be an artifact of research. Women may just be more willing to talk about their experience with imposter syndrome.

Imposter syndrome has a lot to do with self-doubt, which is good news because it means we have some control over it, so how can we overcome it? This article will offer eight techniques for keeping imposter syndrome at bay, so it does not negatively impact your career journey.

General behavioral changes

One way to battle imposter syndrome is to change our behavior and thought-patterns in a broader way. The benefit to this technique is that it will likely improve our lives in more ways than just battling imposter syndrome.

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Understand the cycle between your thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, so you can intervene at any of those levels. For example, thoughts are very important, so you might try daily affirmations. Every morning, write one thing you're good at or a useful skill you possess. Over time, those thoughts are ingrained in your mind and your overall thought patterns and thoughts about yourself change for the better.

You can also change your behaviors. One way to do this is to accomplish an overwhelming number of tasks, one small task at a time. Ask yourself, "What one thing should I be doing right now," instead of anticipating the entire rest of your day. It can be a somewhat involved task like, "I'm going to spend an hour researching this matter" or something as simple as, "I'm going to make a cup of tea." Do this for each task one by one without getting ahead of yourself.

If you continue to feel overwhelmed, set a timer for a certain amount of time (25 minutes, for example) and tackle one task followed by a five minute break to do something relaxing like listening to music, walking outside, or whatever calms you. As Dr. Ho points out, 25 minutes does not completely overwhelm us, but we can get a lot done when we're singularly focused.



Taking minor breaks throughout the day or indulging in small activities, for example, listening to music can allow individuals to recharge and refocus when feeling overwhelmed with multiple tasks.

This approach to tackling your day, although a more general technique, aids you in combating imposter syndrome because the more you're accomplishing, no matter how small, the more evidence you have to combat your imposter syndrome.

Compile the evidence

As attorneys, we know the importance and power of evidence, yet we often fail to take advantage of that power in our own lives.

If you're struggling with imposter syndrome, present the evidence (to yourself) against your position that you're an imposter. For example, if you're starting a new job and convincing yourself that you don't deserve it and your new employer will soon figure it out and wonder why they hired you, write down the reasons you do and do not deserve the job. Remember to think like an attorney, thus, using real evidence (actual facts) without letting imposter syndrome take over and introduce "inadmissible" evidence. If you're truly honest with yourself, you'll likely find that you can more than handle the role.

Yes, but

Even if the foregoing technique produces some evidence that you're not fully experienced for the work you've been hired to do, that doesn't mean you're an imposter. In this circumstance, Dr. Ho suggests employing the "Yes … but" technique. For instance, in the previous example, if your evidence tells you that you're qualified for and ready to take on your new position, but you don't quite have all of the privacy law experience you need, tell yourself: "Yes, I don't have the privacy experience preferred, but there is a lot of self-studying I can do to augment that part of my knowledge!" Remember to look at the full picture too. In the privacy law example, you must remember that privacy laws are ever-changing, so we're all constantly learning more to stay current.

Labeling

Take a breath and understand that thoughts only have the power we give them. Labeling can remind us of the reality of our thoughts. If you have a presentation to your senior leadership team coming up and you think the presentation will be a disaster, these thoughts feel factual, so you need to step back and look at the situation more objectively.

One technique Dr. Ho suggests is to add, “I’m having the thought that…” to the beginning of your thought pattern. The foregoing example becomes, “I’m having the thought that the presentation will be a disaster.”

Adding those five words to your thought makes clear this is *your thought* versus truth. It also allows you to separate yourself from the thought process. This is not about you, your identity, or what will happen; it is merely a thought.

When you manage thoughts in this manner, you feel empowered and more confident.

Don’t avoid or escape it

Be careful not to utilize escapist strategies to cope with imposter syndrome. This could look like playing video games for hours, substance abuse, or gambling excessively when you know you should be doing something else. The problem with escaping is that your imposter syndrome and all of those pervasive thoughts are still there when you stop engaging in the escape.

This is not to be confused with healthy endeavors outside of work. For example, if playing video games for an hour relaxes you and it’s not being used to run from your imposter syndrome, you’re not escaping. You’re practicing self-care. However, when escapism gets in the way of your life, it’s a problem and you may want to seek professional help if you cannot pull back on your own.

Confront it head on, including talking about it openly

When we suffer from persistent imposter syndrome, we don’t tend to perform as well as we would if we weren’t worried about being discovered as a fraud. As a leader, you can talk about the concept openly by ensuring that your team and those around you know they can share their experiences. If it’s authentic to you and you’re comfortable doing so, it can also be powerful to admit to those on your team that you’ve had those thoughts too. It says nothing negative about you or your character. It actually indicates that you care so much that you’re worried about living up to the potential others see in you and doing the best job you can. This is a really powerful conversation for your team members. Every single person has probably experienced at least one instance of imposter syndrome.

Cultivate more resilience

If you’re doing some or all of the foregoing work on yourself and practicing other self-development, you may feel like a failure if you have a setback. Your brain is always trying to protect you from any physical or psychological harm, but it’s going into overdrive like an overprotective parent or caregiver. Some of us get angry at ourselves when we have a setback, but setbacks don’t mean we’ve been unsuccessful.

To combat these thought processes and nurture your resilience, you can pray and/or meditate, and change your relationship with yourself and your brain. Express appreciation for your brain. Dr. Ho suggests giving your brain a name and saying things like. “Thank you for trying to protect me, Betty, but I’ve got this!” This will also lighten otherwise stressful moments because talking to your brain in this manner will likely make you chuckle at the situation. Then, you can think more clearly and remind yourself that it’s normal and you have the coping mechanisms to deal with it.



Meditation benefits emotional well-being and improves brain activity, creating a better connection with your mind.

Use imposter syndrome to your advantage

If properly managed, imposter syndrome can be a motivational tool. Even if it’s not our primary motivation, it can jumpstart efforts into doing something great. If we’re able to realize that we are good enough, understanding imposter syndrome can motivate us to speak positively to ourselves and continue to compile evidence of just how worthy we are. Brittany Leonard’s article, How to Use Imposter Syndrome to Your Advantage, may help in this regard. If, however, imposter syndrome lingers for weeks at a time and is no longer healthy for you, you may want to seek professional help.

Not all of the above techniques may work, and too many may overwhelm. Keep those that work for you. You may not need a large number of techniques. If two to four lesson your imposter syndrome, that’s great!

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