Blue Rose Counseling, PLLC
MENTAL HEALTH & SUBSTANCE TREATMENT

Thought of the Day...

Imposter Syndrome

Have you ever felt like you don't belong? Like your friends or colleagues are going to discover you're a fraud, and you don't actually deserve your job and accomplishments?

If so, you're in good company. These feelings are known as impostor syndrome, or what psychologists often call impostor phenomenon. An estimated 70% of people experience these impostor feelings at some point in their lives, according to a review article published in the *International Journal of Behavioral Science*. Impostor syndrome affects all kinds of people from all parts of life: women, men, medical students, marketing managers, actors and executives.

What is impostor syndrome?

Impostor syndrome—the idea that you've only succeeded due to luck, and not because of your talent or qualifications—was first identified in 1978 by psychologists Pauline Rose Clance and Suzanne Imes. At that time, they theorized that women were uniquely affected by impostor syndrome.

Since then, research has shown that both men and women experience impostor feelings, and is not limited to women, as originally thought. Today, impostor syndrome can apply to anyone "who isn't able to internalize and own their successes," says psychologist Audrey Ervin.

Impostor syndrome expert Valerie Young, who is the author of a book on the subject, *The Secret Thoughts of Successful Women*, has also found patterns in people who experience impostor feelings:

- "**Perfectionists**" set extremely high expectations for themselves, and even if they meet 99% of their goals, they're going to feel like failures. Any small mistake will make them question their own competence.

- "**Experts**" feel the need to know every piece of information before they start a project and constantly look for new certifications or trainings to improve their skills. They won't apply for a job if they don't meet all the criteria in the posting, and they might be hesitant to ask a question in class or speak up in a meeting at work because they're afraid of looking stupid if they don't already know the answer.

- When the "**natural genius**" has to struggle or work hard to accomplish something, he or she thinks this means they aren't good enough. They are used to skills coming easily, and when they have to put in effort, their brain tells them that's proof they're an impostor.

- "**Soloists**" feel they have to accomplish tasks on their own, and if they need to ask for help, they think that means they are a failure or a fraud.

- "**Supermen**" or "**superwomen**" push themselves to work harder than those around them to prove that they're not impostors. They feel the need to succeed in all aspects of life—at work, as parents, as partners—and may feel stressed when they are not accomplishing something.

Why do people experience impostor syndrome?

There's no single answer. Some experts believe it has to do with personality traits—like anxiety or neuroticism—while others focus on family or behavioral causes, Ervin explains. Sometimes childhood memories, such as feeling that your grades were never good enough for your parents or that your siblings outshone you in certain areas, can leave a lasting impact. "People often internalize these ideas: that in order to be loved or be lovable, 'I need to achieve,'" says Ervin. "It becomes a self-perpetuating cycle."

Factors outside of a person, such as their environment or institutionalized discrimination, can also play a major role in spurring impostor feelings. "A sense of belonging fosters confidence," says Young. "The more people who look or sound like you, the more confident you feel. And

conversely, the fewer people who look or sound like you, it can and does for many people impact their confidence."

This is especially true "whenever you belong to a group for whom there are stereotypes about competence," Young adds, including racial or ethnic minorities, women in STEM fields, international students at American universities, or assumptions of limits of intelligence or abilities of plus size individuals, for instance.

How to deal with impostor syndrome

One of the first steps to overcoming impostor feelings is to acknowledge the thoughts and put them in perspective. "Simply observing that thought as opposed to engaging it" can be helpful, says Ervin. "We can help teach people to let go and more critically question those thoughts. I encourage clients to ask, 'Does that thought help or hinder me?'"

You can also reframe your thoughts. Young says she reminds people that the only difference between someone who experiences impostor syndrome and someone who does not is how they respond to challenges. "People who don't feel like impostors are no more intelligent or competent or capable than the rest of us," Young says. "It's very good news, because it means we just have to learn to think like non-impostors." Learning to value constructive criticism, understanding that you're actually slowing your team down when you don't ask for help, or remembering that the more you practice a skill, the better you will get at it can help reframe the negative thoughts.

It can also be helpful to share what you're feeling with trusted friends or mentors. People who have more experience can reassure you that what you're feeling is normal and knowing others have been in your position can make it seem less scary. If you want to delve more deeply into these feelings, Ervin recommends seeking out a professional psychologist.

Most people experience moments of doubt, and that's normal. The important part is not to let that doubt control your actions, says Young. "The goal is not to never feel like an impostor. The

goal for me is to give [people] the tools and the insight and information to talk themselves down faster," she says. "They can still have an impostor moment, but not an impostor life."

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