

# The Impostor Syndrome - Caltech Counseling Center

## Impostor Syndrome

Impostor syndrome can be defined as a collection of feelings of inadequacy that persist even in face of information that indicates that the opposite is true. It is experienced internally as chronic self-doubt, and feelings of intellectual fraudulence.

It is basically feeling that you are not really a successful, competent, and smart student, that you are only imposing as such.

Some common feelings and thoughts that might characterize the impostor syndrome are: "I feel like a fake" "My classmates/professors etc. are going to find out I don't really belong here," "Admissions made a mistake," etc.

The impostor feelings can be divided into three sub categories:

1. Feeling like a fake: the belief that one does not deserve his or her success or professional position and that somehow other have been deceived into thinking otherwise. This goes together with a fear of being, "found out", discovered or "unmasked". People who feel this way would identify with statements such as: "I can give the impression that I am more competent than I really am." "I am often afraid that others will discover how much knowledge I really lack".
2. Attributing success to luck: Another aspect of the impostor syndrome is the tendency to attribute success to luck or to other external reasons and not to your own internal abilities. Someone with such feeling would refer to an achievement by saying, "I just got lucky this time" "it was a fluke" and with fear that they will not be able to succeed the next time.
3. Discounting Success: The third aspect is a tendency to downplay success and discount it. One with such feelings would discount an achievement by saying, "it is not a big deal," "it was not important." One example of this is discounting the fact that they made it here, which is really a big success. Or saying, "I did well because it is an easy class, etc." Or, you might have a hard time accepting compliments.

This is not an all or nothing syndrome. Most of you probably could identify with a few statements but not with others. Some people may identify with impostor feelings in some situations and not in others, or maybe you may not identify with these feelings but have friends who do.

## Who is likely to have the impostor syndrome?

The impostor syndrome is associated with highly achieving, highly successful people. This makes impostor feelings somewhat different from the concept of "low self-esteem" because there is a discrepancy between the actual achievement and the person's feelings about the achievement that may not be present in low self-esteem. People in different professions such as teachers, people in the social sciences, people in academia, actresses and actors, may all have impostor feelings. It was originally associated with women but recent research indicated that men suffer in similar numbers.

Attitudes, beliefs, direct or indirect messages that we received from our parents or from other significant people in our lives early on may have contributed to the development of impostor feelings. Certain family situations and dynamics tend to contribute to impostor feelings: when the success and career aspirations conflicts with the family expectations of the gender, race, religion, or age of the person, families who impose unrealistic standards, families who are very critical, and families who are ridden with conflict and anger.

Some researchers identify two main types of family dynamics that can contribute to impostor feelings, although there may be others.

**Family Labels:** Different children in a family may be identified or labeled differently. For example, some families have one "intelligent" child and one "sensitive" child. While growing up, many times families will not change their perception of each child, no matter what that child does. Therefore, the sensitive child, even if she gets better grades or more awards may not be recognized for her intelligence. This can lead to doubting her intelligence and believing the family is correct even with evidence, which contradicts these labels.

**Family messages of superiority:** Other families can give their child full support to the point where the family and girl believe that she is superior or perfect. As the girl grows up and encounters challenging tasks, she may begin to doubt her parent's perceptions and may also need to hide her difficulties in order not to disturb the family image of her. As a result of these normal difficulties, this girl may come to believe that she is only average and even below average.

### **The connection between impostor feelings and success:**

Impostor feelings relate to an inability to internalize past and current success. Being successful does not alter how you feel about yourself and does not alleviate feelings of inadequacy.

**Fear of Success:** Also, people with impostor feelings can have a tendency to over internalize failure. People who feel like impostors may fear success and the responsibility and visibility that come with it. Since being more successful will increase the tension between the inner feelings and the outside perceptions.

**Pressure not to fail:** There can be a huge amount of pressure currently not to fail to avoid being "found out." This leads to not being able to enjoy/internalize success.

### **Impostor syndrome and gifted women at Caltech:**

Even though impostor feelings can be present in basically anyone they were found to be associated with giftedness and are very common among gifted women. The experiences of students at Caltech, the values, expectations, and social environment at Caltech can be a fertile ground for impostor feelings.

### **Behaviors and Beliefs that perpetuate impostor feelings:**

**Diligence:** Gifted women often work hard in order to prevent people from discovering that she is an "impostor". This hard work often leads to more praise and success, which perpetuates the impostor feelings and fears of being "found out."

**Feeling of being phony:** A woman with impostor feelings often attempt to give supervisors and professors the answers that she believes they want, which often leads to an increase in feeling like she is "being a fake"

Use of charm: Connected to this, gifted women often use their intuitive perceptiveness and charm to gain approval and praise from supervisors and seek out relationships with supervisors in order to help her increase her abilities intellectually and creatively. However, when the supervisor gives her praise or recognition, she feels that this praise is based on her charm and not on ability.

Avoiding display of confidence: Another way that a woman can perpetuate her impostor feelings is to avoid showing any confidence in her abilities. A women dealing with impostor feelings may believe that if she actually believes in her intelligence and abilities she may be rejected by others. Therefore, she may convince herself that she is not intelligence or does not deserve success to avoid this.

### **Dealing with Impostor Feelings**

If you have impostor feelings., this does not mean that you are stuck with them forever. There are steps that you can take to reduce those feelings and to cope with them when they do come up.

Support: being able to discuss those feelings with others in order to understand that you are not alone and to get a reality check.

Identify those feelings: be aware when you engage in thoughts and feelings of impostor. Awareness is the first step to change and it is not obvious since many times we are not aware of our automatic thoughts.

Automatic Thoughts: Automatic thoughts can be defined as underlying, unquestioned thoughts, which affect how you perceive an event or situation. These thoughts are often so automatic that they occur very fast and you may not even notice them.....but they are affecting your perception An example of an automatic thought related to impostor syndrome would be "I am not smart enough." This underlying thought may lead to thinking such things as: "Everyone else is smarter than me" or "admissions made a mistake."

Do your own reality check: Question these automatic impostor thoughts and feelings and try to come up with more balanced thoughts.

Understanding the difference between feelings and reality: Some people tend to believe that if they feel something strongly it must be right. "If I feel so stupid, it must be that I am stupid." When you catch yourself thinking in this way change it to a coping statement of "the fact that I feel stupid does not mean that I really am."

Change can be difficult and especially difficult if you doubt your own abilities. If you are a Caltech student and would like to talk with someone about the ideas presented here and how they may apply to you please call the Caltech Student Counseling Center at ext. 8331. The receptionist will help you set up an appointment to speak confidentially with one of our staff.