

Developing resilience and overcoming imposter syndrome

In today's academic and career environments, graduate students face a great deal of stress, both from external sources (faculty committees, academic chairs, lab supervisors) and internal ones (the pressure to achieve, need to live up to expectations). Under this barrage of expectations, nearly every graduate student will face what's called imposter syndrome at some point in their academic career.

This is normal. Graduate school marks a major transition and period of growth in your life as you experience new challenges, opportunities, and priorities. Balancing these while retaining a semblance of 'normal life' can be overwhelming at times, even for the most prepared of us.

The bad news: imposter syndrome can undermine your academic goals and progress, impair your mental health, and challenge your relationships. The good news: practicing simple mindfulness and resilience-building techniques can help you overcome imposter syndrome.

What is imposter syndrome?

Imposter syndrome refers to a psychological pattern of self-doubt amongst high-achieving individuals who fail to internalize their accomplishments, experience persistent and unmerited self-doubt, and fear being recognized as an imposter or fraud. For many graduate students, imposter syndrome manifests itself in negative comparisons to other students, a sense that they aren't cut out for graduate coursework or don't belong in the academy, or that they only got into graduate school by luck and don't deserve to be there.

Who does imposter syndrome affect?

Imposter syndrome is widely prevalent within higher education, with both graduate students and faculty reporting significant experience with the phenomenon. By some estimates, nearly 70% of academic professionals will experience imposter syndrome at some point in their career. Within academia, students and faculty from underrepresented or minoritized populations are most vulnerable to imposter syndrome. Imposter syndrome can affect us at any level, from our entry into graduate studies up through careers in senior leadership.

What is resilience?

Resilience is the process of adapting in the face of adversity and stress. Highly-resilient people are more able to quickly 'bounce back' from setbacks and find ways to overcome difficult circumstances. Resilience is not an intrinsic trait, but is shaped by our experiences, personal histories, and how we perceive and have been influenced by them. Resilience can be developed through **specific behaviors, thoughts and actions**. Just like any skill, resilience must be nurtured and practiced.

Measuring up: building resilience to conquer imposter syndrome

- 1. Talk about it and find the support you need to thrive.** Imposter syndrome is something many graduate students silently suffer out of fear that they are alone in this challenge. It's okay (and sometimes necessary!) to seek help in breaking the cycle of imposter syndrome. Talking to trusted peers or mentors about your fears can help you realize that imposter syndrome is both normal and irrational. If you don't have supportive mentors or feel comfortable being emotionally vulnerable with peers, look for a graduate student support group or individual counseling options on campus.
- 2. Recognize your expertise.** If you have the opportunity to mentor or tutor others -- incoming graduate students or undergraduates in your academic field or even community youth -- consider doing so. Not only can you provide valuable insight or tutelage, but the experience will remind you how much you *do* know and how much knowledge you have to impart to others.
- 3. Acknowledge your strengths.** Imposter syndrome occurs when we dwell on our flaws or failures, resulting in an internal echo chamber. To combat this, create a list of strengths, successes, and areas you can improve upon. Completing an honest, intentional assessment will allow you to recognize where you are doing well and where there may be legitimate room for improvement.
- 4. Do 'well enough'.** Common traits among people who suffer from imposter syndrome are perfectionism and an internalized pressure to succeed -- traits also common among those attracted to graduate programs. Learn to recognize when you are struggling with imposter syndrome. If you find yourself procrastinating or, alternately, over-preparing and spending more time on a task or project than is necessary for fear your work isn't good enough, take a moment to 'pull back' and examine your expectations. There's a difference between doing something 'well enough' and doing something 'perfectly'. Give yourself permission to do 'well enough' and learn to acknowledge the work you've put in and that it is good enough.

- 5. Change your internal narrative and find assets in challenges.** When we are suffering from imposter syndrome, our internal narratives are overwhelmingly negative: we tell ourselves that our work isn't good enough, that we're not smart enough, and that we shouldn't be in grad school. When you catch yourself in a negative self-talk spiral, take a deep breath, re-focus, and reframe your narrative. Instead of focusing on all that you don't know, remind yourself that you are learning; rather than dwelling on what you've not done, celebrate what you've accomplished.

- 6. Practice mindfulness.** Even if you follow these strategies, imposter syndrome doesn't disappear overnight -- changing your internal mindset takes time and daily practice. Be mindful of how you are feeling and what situations trigger your imposter syndrome. By practicing mindfulness or 'tuning in' to your emotional state, you can bring awareness to your thoughts and make a conscious choice to refocus your mind. When you find yourself starting to doubt your abilities, take a moment, breathe, and take a mental inventory. Remind yourself that you have agency to reframe your thoughts, and focus your attention on what you're doing well in the moment.

Explore more:

ASU Center for Mindfulness, Compassion and Resilience

<https://mindfulnesscenter.asu.edu>

ASU Counseling Services

<https://eoss.asu.edu/counseling>

Impostor Syndrome Is Definitely a Thing, The Chronicle of Higher Education

<https://www.chronicle.com/article/Impostor-Syndrome-Is/238418>

We're all frauds: managing imposter syndrome in grad school, The American Society for Cell Biology

<https://www.ascb.org/careers/frauds-managing-imposter-syndrome-grad-school/>

Battling Imposter Syndrome: Graduate School Edition, Psychology Today

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-in-between/201809/battling-imposter-syndrome-graduate-school-edition>

Imposter Syndrome, Psychology Today

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/imposter-syndrome>

The Imposter Phenomenon in Higher Education: Incidence and Impact, Ohio Dominican University

http://www.na-businesspress.com/JHETP/ParkmanA_Web16_1_.pdf

Feel like a fraud?, American Psychological Association

<https://www.apa.org/gradpsych/2013/11/fraud>

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Feel like a fraud?, American Psychological Association

<https://www.apa.org/gradpsych/2013/11/fraud>

Yes, Impostor Syndrome Is Real. Here's How to Deal With It, TIME

<https://time.com/5312483/how-to-deal-with-impostor-syndrome/>

Building your resilience,

American Psychological Association

<https://www.apa.org/topics/resilience>