

# Impostor Syndrome: Recognizing and Overcoming Feelings of Inadequacy and Self-Doubt as a Graduate Student

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Of all the things to refer to yourself as the term “fraud” might not rate high on the list. However, as a graduate student that feeling may be all too familiar when writing papers, doing presentations, teaching a class, or engaging in research. As you work, it is the voice in your head, silently whispering “you’re not good enough,” “you don’t belong here,” or “you’re out of your league.” Sure, self-doubt and feelings of inadequacy are normal, but this is different. You may feel overwhelmed and distressed. You may even procrastinate by delaying the completion of an assignment or project. Even more frightening is the thought that you will be exposed as a fraudster attempting to deceive others about your level of expertise and experience. Nevertheless, that feeling is normal and something that many graduate students experience throughout their program and even in the early stages of their career.

First identified in the 1970s by Dr. Suzanne Imes and Dr. Pauline Rose Clance, impostor syndrome is a recognized phenomenon in which people feel unqualified to perform certain tasks, feel unworthy, and are often hindered in their ability to complete tasks due to feelings of inadequacy. It affects both men and women, as well as people from diverse racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Common in high achievers and perfectionists, those struggling with impostor syndrome feel as though their accomplishments are due to luck or external factors rather than their own merits and innate abilities. Unfortunately, this results in individuals downplaying their success because they are unable to accept their achievements. Additionally, those experiencing impostor syndrome may also encounter depression and anxiety as they work through their intellectual self-doubt. The fear of being exposed as a fraud is ever present as individuals engage in a battle to project an external confident and competent self while struggling with internal feelings of incompetence and insufficiency.

The factors influencing an individual's bout with impostor syndrome are both internal and external. Internal factors include the expectations graduate students put upon themselves to be successful. For example, comparing their performance with that of their colleagues, wanting to appear astute or scholarly, or the desire to impress faculty within the department are all contributing factors to impostor syndrome. Conversely, societal, cultural, and familial expectations are external factors that contribute to impostor

feelings. Such as, when families' express unrealistic expectations or are very critical of an individual's educational pursuits, especially due to beliefs about gender, religion, or age. Impostor feeling may arise as the perceived pressure to impress loved ones' increases. Whether influenced by internal factors, external factors, or both, the pressure to be successful has the power to shape how individuals perceive themselves and their abilities.

Impostor syndrome is not a one-size fits all occurrence. Neither is it is an all or nothing experience. The truth is that we've all experienced some level of impostor feelings. In fact, my own impostor feelings delayed me writing this piece. I grappled with my feelings of self-doubt as I questioned whether this topic is truly relevant, if anyone would be interested in reading the piece, or if it would be beneficial. Additionally, I interrogated my word choices and writing style as I struggled to accept whether my writing was lucid enough to engage the reader. I even doubted my ability to write about impostor syndrome considering that I too was burdened with its symptoms.

However, there is hope. You can overcome imposter syndrome and go on to complete your graduate studies. Strategies to help you overcome imposter syndrome include:

- **Recognizing It.** You will never be able to overcome your feelings of inadequacy and unworthiness until you are willing to confront your imposter feelings head-on.
- **Talking It Out.** Believe it or not, you are not the only person experiencing these feelings. Confide in a friend, colleague, or faculty member that you trust. Giving voice to your feelings allows you to release the pressure building up on the inside. It also gives you the opportunity to learn from others experiences and how you might cope with similar experiences in the future.
- **Accepting Yourself for Who You Are.** While we may strive to be perfect, the truth is that even on our best days the idea of perfection is still an illusion. Hence, instead of striving for unrealistic expectations or ideals, acknowledge and accept that your best is the best. When you begin to embrace your greatness the pressures to compete with yourself and others starts to fade. Besides, when you are not accepting of yourself what you do to appease others will never be good enough resulting in further anxiety, depression, and discouragement.
- **Acknowledging You Level of Experience and Expertise.** It is perfectly acceptable to not know the answer to everything. Furthermore, no one expects you to. Don't be afraid to acknowledge your weaknesses and ask for help. Conversely, take pride in your current level of experience and expertise. Graduate school is a training ground where you can practice, experiment, and grow. Treat this time as a learning experience, seizing upon every opportunity to develop, perfect your craft, and hone your skills.
- **Speaking Life to Yourself.** Beating yourself up is no way to overcome your imposter feelings. Instead, speak positively about yourself, your success, and your abilities. You are a smart, capable, competent, and successful individual that will complete their graduate degree. You worthy of success and all recognitions.

The good thing about impostor syndrome is that it doesn't last forever. As you build your knowledge base and skill set you'll find that impostor syndrome slowly diminishes as your confidence grows. Until then, the key is recognizing it for what it is and confronting it head on.

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