



IMPOSTOR SYNDROME

Do you feel you have to bluff your way through every class and every day on your job? Are you expecting to be exposed as incompetent at any moment? Do you worry that others will find out that you're not as bright and capable as they think you are? When you succeed, do you think, "I fooled them this time but I may not be so lucky next time." Do you believe other students are smarter and more capable than you are? Do you feel like a fake? You are not alone. Many people have similar doubts. These feelings of self-doubt have a name - "Impostor Syndrome."

Students exhibiting signs of the Impostor Syndrome seem unable to internalize their accomplishments. External proof of intelligence and ability in the form of academic excellence, degrees, and recognition, is routinely dismissed. Instead, success is attributed to luck, timing, perseverance, personality or otherwise having "fooled" others into thinking they were smarter and more capable than these students "know" themselves to be. Rather than offering assurance, each new achievement and subsequent challenge only serves to intensify the ever-present fear of being "found out." Many students bounce from one project to another (a self-protection mechanism that is typical of "impostors"), always on the move for fear of being found out, and convinced of his/her incompetence. A related problem called "self handicapping." People who fear exposure may even arrange to fail in order to provide themselves with "proof" that they are fakes.

In a book called, *If I'm So Successful Why Do I Feel Like a Fake*, Joan Harvey cited research which showed that it is often the most successful people who feel like impostors. When people perform well with little effort and/or advance too quickly, they may have doubts about their true abilities, thereby creating a gap between how others see them and how they see themselves. Such people are often very competent, but exaggerated expectations placed on them can undermine their confidence causing them to avoid situations where they will really be tested. Our culture is partly to blame. Such a premium is placed on effectiveness and "getting it right first time" that there is no room for anyone to admit to making a mistake.

People from all walks of life and at all stages of their college and professional careers want to discover what it takes to overcome the Impostor Syndrome, so they may enjoy the satisfaction of claiming their accomplishments and seeing themselves as capable and competent. We all make mistakes, but the Impostor views this as proof of inadequacy rather than an opportunity to learn and grow.

Note: This material is adapted from articles published in Human Resources, and from "A Model of Internal Barriers to Women's Occupational Achievement," by Valerie Young, Ed.D.