

Mitigating Imposter Syndrome

Imposter syndrome can be defined as a collection of feelings of inadequacy that persist despite evidence of success. “Imposters” suffer from chronic self-doubt and a sense of intellectual fraudulence that overrides any feelings of success or external proof of their competence (Corkindale, 2008).

Though imposter syndrome was identified decades ago, it is not always well understood, especially by students. Many students who feel like frauds may not know that they are suffering from imposter syndrome. Instead, these students are terrified of failure, avoid taking risks, make poor career and academic choices, and may even drop out of their college or university. Mitigating imposter syndrome can go a long way in motivating students, calming anxieties of not belonging, and increasing student success overall.

By sharing the research on imposter syndrome as well as the actions that can help overcome these feelings, we can help minimize the negative consequences of imposter syndrome.

Sharing the Research

To share the research with your students, you can begin by piquing interest in the topic and using that to facilitate a discussion around it. It is important to make this conversational because many students will benefit from knowing that their peers are experiencing similar feelings.

You can pique interest and facilitate conversation by using one or more of the learning experiences below.

Assigned Media or Text

If you decide to begin with an assigned media learning experience, find a video or audio recording on the topic. This [Ted-Ed video](#) can be a useful tool in this discussion and can be used in conjunction with a synchronous chat or discussion forum to facilitate conversation on the topic.

Sharing your Personal Experience

Although we of course want to be mindful of maintaining appropriate boundaries with our students, appropriately sharing your personal experience with imposter syndrome can help students realize that the feelings are not related to actual capabilities or potential. It may also help students open up about their own feelings and realize that many of their peers are experiencing similar feelings. Sharing your experience can be as simple as a short forum post. The sample post below is an example of the way in which you can share your personal experience with your students.

“As an undergrad student, I felt certain that I didn’t belong, and someone would show up and call me out on being a fraud and I’d be sent home. I was afraid to raise my hand with a stupid question or wrong answer that would surely expose me. It was in my second year of college that I read about imposter syndrome, realized that most of the people I knew were feeling the same way, and decided that just because I felt that way didn’t actually mean I didn’t belong or that I wasn’t capable of succeeding in college.”

Anonymous Class Poll

You can also create and assign an anonymous class poll, either synchronously or asynchronously. Once the deadline has passed and most students have participated, collect the data and share it with the class either through a discussion forum post, email, or microlecture. It will help students to see that many of their peers are experiencing similar feelings. Below is a sample poll with simple True or False questions that can be assigned in the middle of synchronous teaching or as an asynchronous assignment.

1. True or False: I sometimes feel like I do not belong in this college/university/class.
2. True or False: I am afraid that I am not really smart and one day everyone will figure it out.
3. True or False: All the things I achieve I think are just because I was lucky, there was a mix-up, or the stars happened to align.

Sharing Actions to Mitigate Imposter Syndrome

Once you have piqued student interest in imposter syndrome and facilitated a discussion that allows students to recognize it in themselves and know that it is a common experience, you can share actions that will help mitigate the feelings. The list below includes examples of actions that lessen the impact imposter syndrome can have on students.

1. Now that you are aware of imposter syndrome and your tendency to experience these feelings, recognize when they begin to emerge and label them as feelings of imposter syndrome.
2. Visualize your goals and visualize yourself achieving them.
3. Identify all the ways your accomplishments demonstrate what you have already achieved.
4. Make a list of all of your qualifications for being in college.
5. Talk to others. It helps to know that imposter syndrome is a common experience rather than a reflection of your worth or capabilities.
6. Remind yourself to have a growth mindset, and work to view failures as learning opportunities.

Sources

Bennett, J. (2018). How to overcome 'imposter syndrome.' *The New York Times*.

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Corkindale, G. (2008, May 7). Overcoming imposter syndrome. *Harvard Business Review*.

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