



ACUE

Student Success
Through Exceptional
Teaching

Recognize Indicators of Imposter Phenomenon

Many students who feel like they do not belong in the academic environment may not know that they are suffering from imposter phenomenon (Schock, 2021). A characteristic of imposter phenomenon is the feeling that you are a fraud and will one day be found out. Students who struggle with imposter phenomenon are generally terrified of failure, avoid taking risks, and may make poor academic choices (Schock, 2021).

Imposter phenomenon is not limited to students but is also found in the workplace and on campuses among staff, faculty, graduate students, and even leaders. In fact, over 80% of global workers identify with feeling a sense of imposter phenomenon at some point in their lives (Bravata et al., 2020). These individuals believe that their colleagues are smarter or more capable than they themselves feel. People who experience imposter phenomenon can feel doubt about their competencies, accomplishments, or promotions, think that they don't deserve to hold their position or job, and are anxious that others may discover this, too (Chapman & Kennette, 2021).

Behaviors Related to Imposter Phenomenon

To mitigate the impact of imposter phenomenon, it is helpful to recognize the behaviors that students and colleagues with imposter phenomenon may show, such as

- not speaking up in class or meetings, not taking part in discussions, or missing staff meetings,
- social isolation, including an unwillingness to serve on committees, or present at conferences, or attend campus social events,
- submitting late or incomplete assignments or tasks and conducting less research,
- a reluctance to publish research, and
- not asking for help when it is needed (University of Waterloo, n.d.; Weir, 2013).

Because students and colleagues with imposter phenomenon are concerned about making mistakes, they may not perform at their full capability, or they may struggle to complete their work. Working with them in a supportive way without lowering standards or making exceptions can help them succeed.

Understanding the Varying Impact of Imposter Phenomenon

First-generation students, people of color, and women in higher education are particularly affected by imposter phenomenon for several reasons. First, most stereotypes of marginalized communities and individuals often do not portray academic or professional success. This also makes it more likely that marginalized students, staff, faculty, and leaders are subjected to



microaggressions. These situations cause people to develop feelings of otherness, which amplify the feelings of imposter phenomenon (Doggett, 2019).

The consequences of imposter phenomenon are significant and can lead to poor academic and professional decision-making, anxiety, depression, and burnout. Mitigating these risks is an ongoing process that can be developed in several ways.

Mitigating the Impact of Imposter Phenomenon

Sharing research on imposter phenomenon can help students and colleagues recognize it in themselves and know that they are not alone in the thoughts and feelings they may be experiencing. Opening a class session or meeting with an anonymous poll or survey with questions relating to imposter phenomenon and then sharing the results may help relieve anxieties, build a sense of community, and help others become more aware that they are not alone in what they are experiencing and why they may be having those feelings in the first place. For example, you may ask participants to respond to prompts adapted from the Clance IP (Impostor Phenomenon) Scale (2013) with either “yes or no” or using a scale such as 1–never; 2–rarely; 3–sometimes; 4–frequently; 5–always.

- I fear that people may find out that I’m not as capable in my work as they think I am.
- I often feel that I may fail at a new task or assignment even though I generally do well at what I attempt.
- I find it difficult to accept compliments for my work or accomplishments.

There are practices you can implement into your course design, teaching, and collegial support that can help mitigate the impact of imposter phenomenon. The table below supplies examples of such practices and how they may be implemented.

Indicator	How to address
Not speaking up in class or taking part in discussions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assign participation points for discussions whether online or in-person. • Note which students or colleagues you have heard from in the discussion and call on those who have not taken part in recent sessions. Let your class and colleagues know that you are doing this because you need to hear from everybody to ensure the course meets everyone’s needs and that everyone’s input is valued.



Social isolation	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Create opportunities for participants to engage with one another through online forums, assigned group tasks or projects, or icebreaker activities at the beginning of class or the opening of the semester.• Reach out to reluctant colleagues and offer to attend a meeting or conference with them as support.
Submitting late or incomplete tasks or assignments	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• People suffering from imposter phenomenon may struggle with completing work on time because they are afraid that it isn't <i>good enough</i>.• Send students and colleagues several reminders for upcoming assignments and deadlines and offer support. If someone requests an extension, ask them to provide the current state of their work no matter how far they have gotten. This allows you to supply feedback and encouragement.
Fear of making mistakes or setting unreasonably high expectations for themselves	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• It can be helpful to encourage students and colleagues to make lists of their accomplishments. Often people who suffer from imposter phenomenon do not recognize their own hard work, skills, or talents. Instead, they attribute their successes to luck or chance. The downfall here is that they don't believe they have created their success and so they don't believe in their ability to succeed.
Not asking for the help that is needed	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Consider having an anonymous question box for people to submit questions.• Create an FAQ sheet or link that you add to each term to reflect questions students generally have about your class or certain assignments.• Partner colleagues with others who have successfully completed the task or who can serve as a mentor to allow the person to speak more candidly as questions arise.



ACUE

Student Success
Through Exceptional
Teaching

References

- Bravata, D., Madhusudhan, D., Boroff, M., & Cokley, K. (2020). Commentary: Prevalence, predictors, and treatment of Imposter Syndrome: A systematic review. *Journal of Mental Health & Clinical Psychology*, 4(3), 12–16. <https://doi.org/10.29245/2578-2959/2020/3.1207>
- Chapman, M., & Kennette, L. (2021, November 29). *Combating imposter syndrome in academia*. Faculty Focus. <https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/philosophy-of-teaching/combating-imposter-syndrome-in-academia>
- Clance, P. R. (2013). *Clance IP scale*. <https://paulineroseclance.com/pdf/IPTestandscoreing.pdf>
- Doggett, J. A. (2019, October 10). *Imposter phenomena hits harder when you're Black*. HuffPost. https://www.huffpost.com/entry/imposter-syndrome-racism-discrimination_I_5d9f2c00e4b06ddfc514ec5c
- Schock, G. (2021). *How imposter syndrome affects students—and instructors*. Today's Learner. <https://todayslearner.cengage.com/how-imposter-syndrome-affects-students-and-instructors/>
- University of Waterloo, Centre for Teaching Excellence. (n.d.). *Impostor phenomenon and graduate students*. <https://uwaterloo.ca/centre-for-teaching-excellence/teaching-resources/teaching-tips/planning-courses/tips-teaching-assistants/impostor-phenomenon-and>
- Weir, K. (2013, November). *Feel like a fraud?* American Psychological Association. <https://www.apa.org/gradpsych/2013/11/fraud>