



COVER STORY

# How to overcome impostor phenomenon

Experts share why impostor feelings arise and how psychologists can overcome them and best help others with the same struggle

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Up to 82% of people face feelings of impostor phenomenon, struggling with the sense they haven't earned what they've achieved and are a fraud (Bravata, D. M., et al., *Journal of General Internal Medicine* (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7174434/>), Vol.

35, No. 4, 2020). These feelings can contribute to increased anxiety and depression, less risk-taking in careers, and career burnout.

“There’s an ongoing fear that’s usually experienced by high-achieving individuals that they’re going to be ‘found out’ or unmasked as being incompetent or unable to replicate past successes,” said [Audrey Ervin \(http://www.ervincounseling.com/\)](http://www.ervincounseling.com/), PhD, a clinical psychologist in Doylestown, Pennsylvania, and academic director of Delaware Valley University’s graduate counseling psychology program, who frequently sees impostor phenomenon in her patients and students.

While people commonly colloquialize this as impostor “syndrome,” “phenomenon” or “experience” are better terms because impostor phenomenon isn’t a clinical diagnosis, said [Pauline Rose Clance \(https://www.paulineroseclance.com/impostor\\_phenomenon.html\)](https://www.paulineroseclance.com/impostor_phenomenon.html), PhD, ABPP, an Atlanta-based clinical psychologist and professor emerita at Georgia State University, who coined the term “impostor phenomenon” with her colleague Suzanne Imes, PhD (*Psychotherapy: Theory, Research & Practice* (<https://psycnet.apa.org/record/1979-26502-001>), Vol. 15, No. 3, 1978). “It’s a phenomenon experienced by many, and remembering that can help normalize it,” she said.

It’s especially prominent among people with underrepresented identities. For example, BIPOC people who work or study in predominantly White environments wrestle with impostor feelings at higher rates, either contending with feelings that they don’t belong or that they’re products of affirmative action, said [Kevin Cokley \(https://education.utexas.edu/faculty/kevin\\_cokley\)](https://education.utexas.edu/faculty/kevin_cokley), PhD, a professor of educational psychology at the University of Texas at Austin who has studied impostor phenomenon since 2013.

Trans and nonbinary people experience a similar phenomenon, according to Ervin, who frequently works with gender-expansive clients. “There’s a very pervasive internal theme of not being woman or man enough, coupled with external fear that the world won’t see you, so you’re an impostor,” she said.

## The effects of impostor phenomenon

It's natural to wonder how you measure up in a competitive environment. A bit of self-doubt can even be a healthy way to adapt, said [Andrea Salazar-Nuñez](https://wellbeing.uw.edu/staff/andrea-salazar-nunez/) (https://wellbeing.uw.edu/staff/andrea-salazar-nunez/), PhD, a clinical psychologist at the University of Washington Counseling Center. "The brain wants to make sure we have all the boxes checked whenever we're in an uncomfortable new setting," she said.

In some cases, impostor phenomenon can also catalyze growth. Acknowledging you don't know everything can open you up to new learning opportunities, even prompting positive contributions to science and society, said Ami Rokach, PhD, an instructor of psychology at York University in Toronto and a clinical psychologist who coauthored a paper on impostor phenomenon among psychology students. "Impostor phenomenon is a spectrum, not binary," he said. "Just as high achievement can fuel impostor phenomenon in self-doubting people, impostor feelings can fuel high achievement, which would enhance one's beliefs in his or her abilities and achievement."

On the further end of the spectrum, impostor phenomenon can interfere with a person's mental health and overall functioning. Cokley said impostor feelings are strongly linked to increased anxiety and depression, and his research suggests that is especially true among Black, Asian, and Latino college students (*Journal of Counseling Psychology* (https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2017-09930-002), Vol. 64, No. 2, 2017). "Psychologists might work hard to overcome these feelings, but that can come at a mental health cost when achievement is driven by internalized doubt," he said. Impostor feelings can result in isolation, too: A systematic review found that people experiencing impostor phenomenon often perceive themselves to be the "only one" having those feelings (Bravata, D. M., et al., *Journal of General Internal Medicine* (https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7174434/), Vol. 35, No. 4, 2020).

Experts say impostor phenomenon may also affect a person's performance, keeping them stuck with impostor feelings. For example, if a Black woman at a university job interview sees only portraits of White male leaders on the wall, she'll feel the space wasn't created with her in mind. "That can become a self-fulfilling prophecy on your performance," Salazar-Nuñez said. [Lincoln Hill](https://www.chicagocounselingcollective.com/about-us) (https://www.chicagocounselingcollective.com/about-us), PhD, a Chicago-based postdoctoral fellow who [studies](https://www.proquest.com/docview/2446980060) (https://www.proquest.com/docview/2446980060) how Black women

experience impostor phenomenon, said microaggressions in the workplace or educational environment can have the same effect.

In general, Ervin said this phenomenon can drain relationships. It's difficult to connect with colleagues and patients when you have walls up because you're scared of being "found out." Richard Gardner, (<https://www.unlv.edu/people/richard-gardner>) PhD, an assistant professor of management, entrepreneurship, and technology at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, said impostor feelings can also interfere with risk-taking: For example, when people fear failure, they might prematurely take themselves out of situations, including careers. And feeling unqualified can also lead people to struggle with negotiating for a better salary, or even cause them to stay at a new job longer than they want to, said Lisa Orbé-Austin (<https://www.dynamictransitionsllp.com/dynamic-transitions/>), PhD, a New York-based psychologist, executive coach, and coauthor of *Own Your Greatness: Overcome Impostor Syndrome, Beat Self-Doubt, and Succeed in Life*.

Over time, these factors can lead to career burnout. "People with impostor feelings often feel relief instead of pride after an accomplishment, which can cause them to keep pushing without taking care of themselves," Ervin said.

## Conquering impostor feelings

While individuals have a role to play in overcoming impostor feelings, it's important to remember that systems play a significant part, too. "There are ways to build resilience to impostor syndrome, but there are also real changes that need to be made to address equity," said Salazar-Nuñez. "The problem isn't necessarily the person; it can also be the setting or culture."

While it's not helpful in developing confident clinicians, Orbé-Austin said graduate and doctoral programs often foster a competitive culture that can result in impostor phenomenon. In one small study (<https://psycnet.apa.org/buy/2020-26107-001>), 88% of postdoctoral psychology students reported they experienced at least moderate impostor phenomenon feelings (Tigranyan, S., et al., *Training and Education in Professional Psychology* (<https://psycnet.apa.org/doiLanding?doi=10.1037%2Ftep0000321>),

online publication, 2020). A work culture with only White or male leadership can also lead marginalized individuals to feel like they don't deserve their place.

At the institutional level, Hill suggests hiring and promoting people with underrepresented identities, training leadership in critical race theory and gendered racism, and creating affinity spaces for underrepresented individuals. It's important, too, for institutions to hold people accountable for their microaggressions and racist dynamics. "Helping people overcome impostor feelings isn't just about encouraging people to feel better about themselves," she said. "It's important for institutions to consider how they may have treated people like they aren't worthy, and how they've contributed to this environment where impostor phenomenon is common."

## Overcoming impostor feelings: Seven strategies that can help

### 1. Learn the facts

As with all negative emotions, one of the best ways to manage impostor feelings is to address the cognitive distortions contributing to them. Jessica Vanderlan (<https://siteman.wustl.edu/doctor/vanderlan-jessica/>), PhD, a clinical instructor of psychiatry at the Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis and a psychologist at Siteman Cancer Center, leads small groups (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7666839/>) of medical residents in discussions about impostor phenomenon. The hospital launched these seminars because impostor feelings among new physicians are common and often lead to burnout. A common suggestion she shares with psychology and medical residents is to take a step back to look at the bigger picture. What facts support that you deserve to be in your role?

"Becoming a psychologist or physician takes years of work, education, and accomplishment," she said. "It can help to zoom out and consider how where you are now compares to where you were last year or five years ago."

In the process, monitor your internal dialogue. Vanderlan recommends a simple exercise of asking yourself how you might support a friend who minimizes their accomplishments and then applying the same supportive language to your own narration.

## 2. Share your feelings

If you don't trust your own "facts," Vanderlan recommends enlisting other people. Sharing your impostor feelings with others can not only reduce loneliness but also open doors for others to share what they see in you.

Be strategic about who you share with. Gardner said airing impostor struggles with peers can promote comparison and increase impostor phenomenon, but venting to trusted individuals outside your professional circle can provide a more helpful picture of your accomplishments and value.

For people with underrepresented identities, Salazar-Nuñez said it can be helpful to connect in empowering spaces and communities, which can provide support and, more important, validation and empathy for navigating impostor phenomenon in oppressive systems.

Hill suggests underrepresented individuals focus on fostering relationships that feel safe and in which you don't feel like a fraud. That may be easier, Cokley said, with people from similar backgrounds. "There's a lot of solace in knowing there are others out there experiencing what you are," he said. "You can share your insecurities and in turn gain new ways to cope."

If your impostor feelings rise to the level where they negatively impact your functioning, then Cokley suggests working through these thoughts in therapy.

## 3. Celebrate your successes

People who struggle with impostor feelings tend to brush off their successes, which Orbé-Austin said only exacerbates the experience. If someone congratulates you, don't move on too fast. Pay attention to how you respond

and aim to speak more positively about yourself. Orbé-Austin said taking time to applaud yourself, whether you gain a new credential or publish a paper, or just have a good client session, can help you internalize your success.

You could simply reflect on your efforts, but external, concrete reminders are also important. For example, if you receive an email with positive feedback, save it or print it. Vanderlan said she keeps a few emails from reviewers and past supervisors near her desk so she can look at them and remember how others see her. The accomplishments don't have to feel significant. "It can also be little things that, taken together, show you to be an incredibly competent, high-functioning professional," Cokley said.

## 4. Let go of perfectionism

You don't have to lower the bar, but adjusting your standards for success can make it easier to see and internalize your accomplishments. Vanderlan suggests focusing on your progress rather than aiming for perfection. "In clinical work, there may not be a perfect way through a patient scenario, but we have to be OK with being good enough," she said.

And when you don't meet your standards, resist the urge to see your failure as an exposure. Instead, Orbé-Austin suggests reframing failures as opportunities to learn and grow—which will ultimately move you toward the success you're seeking.

It may help to release yourself from rigid roles. For example, Orbé-Austin said people with impostor phenomenon often see themselves as helpers—people who come to the rescue. "Breaking free from those roles so you can be someone who doesn't know it all or someone who can't always help can allow us to be more robust people and professionals," she said.

## 5. Cultivate self-compassion

Self-compassion—as Ervin describes it, using mindfulness to shift from an external locus of self-worth to an internal one—can help you let go of

perfectionism. Try to observe when your impostor feelings surface and how you respond to them. “Whereas impostor phenomenon is unconscious and mindless, mindfulness can help you move in a different direction,” Ervin said. “It’s about learning to recognize those feelings of fear and learning to truly be OK as you are, without your accomplishments.”

That may be more difficult for underrepresented individuals, who historically have to work harder because of systemic barriers. In that case, Hill suggests bearing in mind the systemic factors contributing to your impostor feelings, while reminding yourself that your accomplishments aren’t tied to your value. Pursuing community over competition, which Hill said is a historically White value, can help, too.

## 6. Share your failures

Hearing what other people think of you isn’t the only way to grow out of impostor phenomenon. Gardner said discussing failures in a group can help paint a more realistic portrait of what other people are struggling with.

For example, you can look at your CV and see all the papers you’ve published, but you are also aware of all of your papers that were rejected. But when you see a colleague has published a paper, you don’t know what happened behind the scenes. Seeing your worst and someone else’s best can spark comparison, which can aggravate impostor feelings.

To combat this, Gardner and other junior professors in his field occasionally share their failures in a Facebook group, including critical review comments on research papers and admitting if they didn’t get tenure. “These things happen to every single person, even if they’re top of their field,” he said. “Sharing the learning moments in those failures can be a really good organizational culture practice.”

## 7. Accept it

As you learn to work through impostor phenomenon, it will probably interfere less with your well-being. But taming impostor feelings doesn't mean they'll never show up again. Vanderlan said it's common for them to arise at any career shift: from school to internship, internship to postdoc, postdoc to career, and so on. This may be exacerbated when a person's social reference changes, Gardner said. For example, if you were valedictorian in high school but go to a prestigious university with dozens of other valedictorians, you might not feel like you're at the top anymore.

"We're always going to be faced with new experiences or roles, and that's when this will really come out," Vanderlan said. "So it's good to recognize even if you're making progress, you might be in a position next year where these things come up again."

Remember that impostor feelings can arise at any career shift, especially if the people you are surrounded by have different achievements.

## Further reading

The road to becoming a psychologist: Indicators of success and hardship during the university years (<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00223980.2020.1771538>)

Rokach, A., & Boulazreg, S., *The Journal of Psychology*, 2020

Self-esteem as a mediator of the link between perfectionism and the impostor phenomenon (<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0191886918304276>)

Cokley, K., et al., *Personality and Individual Differences*, 2018

Women—particularly underrepresented minority women—and early-career academics feel like impostors in fields that value brilliance

Muradoglu, M., et al., *Journal of Educational Psychology*, in press

Impostor feelings and psychological distress among Asian Americans: Interpersonal shame and self-compassion (<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0011000019891992>)

Wei, M., et al., *The Counseling Psychologist*, 2020

[“I must have slipped through the cracks somehow”: An examination of coping with perceived impostorism and the role of social support](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0001879119301095?via%3Dihub)

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Gardner, R. G., et al., *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 2019

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