

“Phew, I fooled ‘em this time.... but I may not be so lucky next time”: The Imposter Syndrome among graduate students

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Source: Pishva, R. (2010). “Phew, I fooled ‘em this time.... but I may not be so lucky next time”: The Imposter Syndrome among graduate students. *Psynopsis: Canada’s Psychology Magazine*, 32(3), 35.

“I still believe that at any time the no-talent police will come and arrest me.” - Mike Myers, Canadian Comedian.

Earlier this year, I attended a research conference where I presented a poster on the preliminary results of my Master’s Thesis. As I stood in front of my colourful poster – I was secretly reading it over and over, checking for more typos – and wondering “will anyone find this interesting?” “I have nooo idea what I’m talking about here” “they all know I’m a novice”. I was so immersed in my insecurity that I did not notice someone attentively reading my poster. This uneasy feeling in my stomach is nothing new - I have felt like a phoney from the day I started graduate school. I was not as smart or capable as others were in my cohort. I remember waiting for someone to tap me on the shoulder, saying “excuse me; there was an error at the admissions office...you don’t belong here.”

After nearly two years in graduate school, I am learning that this uneasiness and self-doubt is common, in fact it is referred to as the “Imposter Syndrome”. Clance and Imes (1978) who examined how feelings of phoniness may hinder women’s careers first identified this phenomenon. The Imposter Syndrome is characterized by the inability to internalize one’s successes and belief that peers will eventually recognize that we do not belong. Successes are not attributed to aptitude or hard work; instead, they are believed to be the result of timing, luck, and

the ability to “fool” others. Today, an entire field of research is dedicated to the Imposter Syndrome! We now know that it is prevalent in highly achieving, successful men and women, who grew up in different family structures and work in diverse fields – from psychology to molecular biology.

In the long term, the Imposter Syndrome can have serious consequences: it may hinder one from applying to a new job, or reaching for a promotion. Let us not hand in our office keys just yet – there are ways to overcome the Imposter Syndrome. The first step is to talk to our peers, as we are likely to realize that others feel the same way (ouf!). Accept that feelings of inadequacy are common – in everyone. Accept it. Now move on.

Next, highlight your successes, for instance, put up your academic posters in your office, hang your university diploma. In other words, give yourself visual reminders that you have accomplished concrete milestones in your career. Nevertheless, errors will happen, turn those setbacks into new launching pads and allow yourself to learn from your mistakes. Eventually you will develop a new perception of yourself as a professional – one who values progress as opposed to mere result. You will internalize what others around you already know: you belong here!

However, it is important to maintain a mild level of self-doubt: double-check your work,

and be critical of your findings. Being a confident scientist is not equivalent to being a sloppy one.

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