

AN INTRODUCTION

To begin this article, we'd like to reference an anecdote from famed author Neil Gaiman and his own experiences with imposter syndrome. On his [blog](#), he writes:



„Some years ago, I was lucky enough to be invited to a gathering of great and good people: artists and scientists, writers and discoverers of things. And I felt that at any moment they would realise that I didn't qualify to be there, among these people who had really done things.

On my second or third night there, I was standing at the back of the hall, while a musical entertainment happened, and I started talking to a very nice, polite, elderly gentleman about several things, including our shared first name. And then he pointed

to the hall of people, and said words to the effect of, 'I just look at all these people, and I think, what the heck am I doing here? They've made amazing things. I just went where I was sent.'

And I said, 'Yes. But you were the first man on the moon. I think that counts for something.'

And I felt a bit better. Because if Neil Armstrong felt like an imposter, maybe everyone did. Maybe there weren't any grown-ups, only people who had worked hard and also got lucky and were slightly out of their depth, all of us doing the best job we could, which is all we can really hope for."

To preface this article, we have to make a clear distinction between Imposter Syndrome and feelings of Imposterism. Although leadership language and articles often refer to 'Imposter Syndrome', this language is not precisely correct. What is often referred to as Imposter Syndrome is instead Feelings of Imposterism (FOI). Let us be clear:

Imposter Syndrome is a serious, psychological condition that is best handled by professional psychologists. Those with Imposter Syndrome suffer through chronic feelings of intellectual fraudulence that override any feelings of success or external proof of confidence ([Gill Corkindale, 2008](#)). It is also by no means uncommon, especially among the academic and business elite. It is estimated that between 25-30% of high-achieving individuals may suffer from Imposter Syndrome. If, after reading this article, you believe you might be suffering from Imposter Syndrome and not feelings of Imposterism – please seek professional help.

In a milder form, Feelings of Imposterism (FOI) on the other hand are much more common. A study conducted in 2011 found that almost 70% of *all* adults experience feelings of Imposterism at some point during their life ([Sakulku & Alexander, 2011](#)). So, it should not come as a surprise that many of our clients at MagnoliaTree – all of whom are senior executives and decision makers of strategy – suffer from this struggle to internalize success. What is surprising however, is how few of our clients know about FOI, its effects, and how to overcome it.

This piece will focus heavily on the latter condition: temporary FOI associated with taking on new roles, transitioning to a new company, or during a period of crisis. As many of us have struggled with radically new working conditions in the wake of a COVID-19 workforce, it is likely that you have faced feelings of Imposterism. Through our research and experience, we hope to provide those struggling with Imposterism a clearer picture of the condition that is Imposter Syndrome and methods of dealing with these feelings of inadequacy.

This article is the result of significant research into the condition and the psychological research which has been conducted on it. However, it is by no means a definitive piece on the topic. Should you want to learn more about Imposter Syndrome or Imposterism please utilize the resources provided at the bottom of this piece. With that, let us explore Imposter Syndrome and feelings of Imposterism.

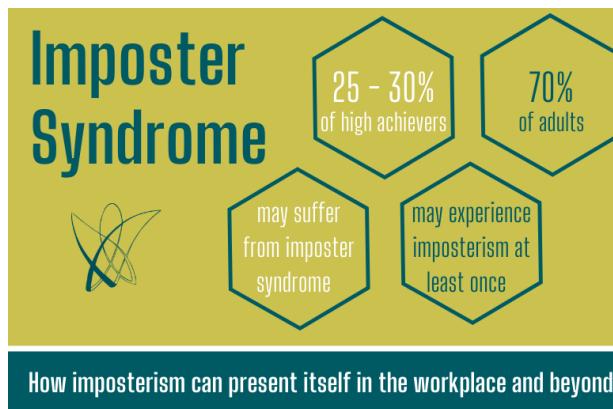
SO, WHAT IS IMPOSTER SYNDROME?

The first research paper on the Imposter Syndrome was written by psychologists Pauline Clance and Suzanne Imes about 35 years ago. They sought to explain why high-achieving women were struggling to internalize their success and labelled their feelings of fraudulence in the face of achievement Imposter Phenomenon. The pair noted that imposters, "see themselves as unworthy of the level of praise they are receiving because they do not believe they have earned such recognition based on their capabilities, causing heightened levels of anxiety and stress." ([Clance & Imes, 1985](#))



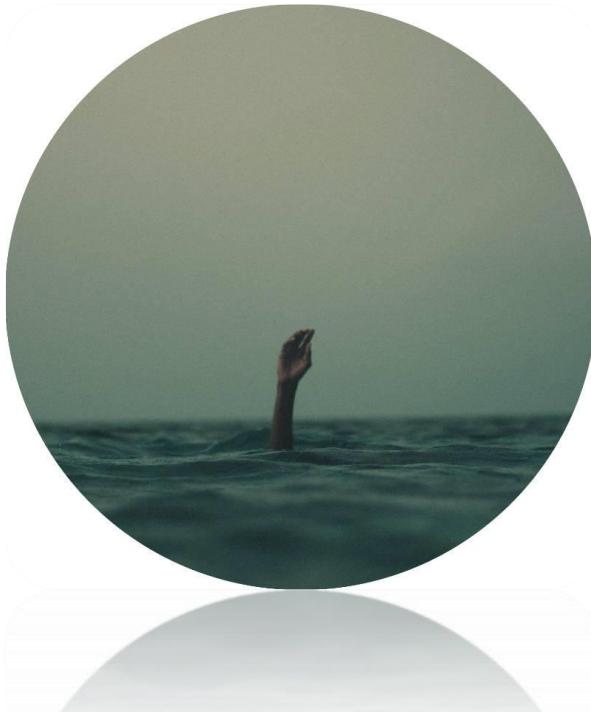
While many of the initial studies into imposter syndrome examined primarily women, contemporary research has revealed that imposter syndrome affects men and women equally and is likely associated with perfectionism. Recent studies suggest that between 25-30% of high achievers may suffer from imposter syndrome and around 70% of adults may experience Imposterism at least once in their lifetime. ([Sakulku & Alexander, 2011](#)) That is to say, FOI is by no means rare, and you should not feel alone or isolated by the experience.

With a basic understanding of what imposter syndrome is, let's examine a list of the ways in which Imposterism can present itself in the workplace and beyond:



FoI is especially prevalent as we take on new roles, or challenges. This is especially true during the current global pandemic, where many of us have had to transition into radically new work structures. In the words of [Kets de Vries](#) (2005), "To some extent, of course, we are all imposters. We play roles on the stage of life, presenting a public self that differs from the private self we share with intimates and morphing both selves as circumstances demand. Displaying a façade is part and parcel of the human condition." Imposterism is a natural part of life and it should be treated as such. The feelings of inadequacy we face in new roles, or facing new challenges, can be overwhelming but are also often temporary. Fortunately, there are many proven methods of dealing with Imposterism revealed by psychologists and experienced professionals exploring Imposter Syndrome.

The unintended consequence of Imposter Syndrome and Imposterism. The psychological consequences of Imposter Syndrome can be severe. Although Imposter Syndrome is not an official psychological diagnosis in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), it is often associated with anxiety, depression, and perfectionism.



Both Imposter Syndrome and Imposterism can also have significant motivational and performance consequences in the workplace. FOI sufferers internalize failure a lot more than positive feedback. They undervalue wins, while overvaluing failures. FOI can lead to a vicious cycle of perfectionism, wherein the subject strives for perfection and as a result drags out deadlines. These delays raise concerns amongst leadership, which is then internalized by the sufferer finds themselves facing greater self-doubt which in turn fuels even higher levels of perfectionism leading to a downward spiral.

As mentioned above, FOI often rears its head during times of transition. It is particularly important to watch out for two radically different, but nonetheless dangerous outlets for FOI when transitioning to a new position or company. Firstly, FOI can result in stagnant growth. When arriving at a new career, someone suffering from FOI may find themselves less likely to take risks or experiment for fear of failure, thus leading to stagnation. Those transitioning into leadership positions are especially susceptible. These people will likely default to their comfort zones. For example, a first time manager might reflexively focus on *producing content* rather than *leading*. It's important to remember that "what got you here, won't get you there."

On the flipside, an individual with FOI in the midst of a major transition might instead find themselves jumping to rash decisions in order to prove their worth. Especially during the first 1-2 weeks at a new position, they might attempt to make all of the decisions by themselves, in the process ignoring the opinions of peers, mentors, and subordinates. This can be a dangerous foundation for a new career that *WILL NOT* lead to followership.

HOW TO DEAL WITH FEELINGS OF IMPOSTERISM

Here is a compiled list of methods by which you can resolve FOI:



- ➲ The first step, and perhaps most important, is to recognize that you are experiencing imposter feelings. From there onward, you can consider how to deal with these feelings.
- ➲ Seek support. Needing help is natural, everything doesn't have to be done alone. A coach and a mentor are great pathfinders in helping you navigate through these emotions. A simple step to alleviating feelings of Imposterism is to talk. Seek out your coach, mentors, friends, and family and explain the situation. Often, getting the issue off your chest can help take off some of the anxiety and pressure you are experiencing.
- ➲ The next step is to contextualize the imposter feelings you are facing, ideally together with a trusted advisor. Have you experienced a new challenge, and new career, or some other shift that is causing these feelings of Imposterism? What is the source of these feelings? Feeling useless right now is not the same as being useless.
- ➲ If the source of your Imposterism is a failure, reframe your experience as a learning opportunity. Be kind to yourself. Mistakes are normal, especially in a new and challenging environment. Use your failures as a chance to grow.
- ➲ Lastly, seek ongoing feedback and support. Don't attempt to do everything by yourself, especially in a new position. This will only result in feeling overwhelmed and unable to cope with the situation, which can intensify the feeling of being an 'impostor'.

For people leaders in the workplace, here are additional opportunities to institute organization wide programs to deal with FOI:



- ➡ Consider instituting a program to help others deal with their own feelings of Imposterism. Both California Technology and MIT have instituted programs to debunk myths about belonging and help students to identify Imposter Syndrome tendencies. Many universities include counseling workshops to help students identify their strengths, deal with failures, and understand perfectionism to set more reasonable expectations for themselves ([Cokely, 2013](#)). Consider doing the same in your office.
- ➡ [Huffstutler and Varnell \(2004\)](#) also encourage the development of peer group programs, mentoring opportunities, and identification of organizational expectations, especially those that produce high levels of anxiety.
- ➡ They also recommend instituting a system of mentors to help new employees and long-term employees alike adapt to new challenges.
- ➡ Other recommendations have included the implementation of multifaceted structured feedback systems ([Cogner & Fulmer, 2004](#)),

If you have experienced Imposterism or Imposter Syndrome, we would appreciate you sharing any resources or advice that you may have regarding the condition.

Below is a list of further resources on Imposter Syndrome, Imposterism, and how to deal with both. Know that if you are facing feelings of inadequacy, you are not alone.

FURTHER RESOURCES

Books

- Beating the Imposter Syndrome: <https://www.amazon.com/Beating-Impostor-Syndrome-Portia-Mount/dp/1604915293>
- The Empress Has No Clothes: <https://www.amazon.com/Empress-Has-Clothes-Conquering-Self-Doubt/dp/1609946367>
- The Secret Thoughts of Successful Women: https://www.amazon.com/Secret-Thoughts-Successful-Women-/Impostor/dp/0307452719/ref=sr_1_1?crid=2FLE8UgXIRZME&dchild=1&keywords=the+secret+thought+of+successful+women&qid=1608316461&s=books&sprefix=the+secret+though%2Cstripbooks%2C18q&sr=1-1

Articles/Papers

- The Imposter Phenomenon in Higher Education: Incidence and Impact, Anna Parkman, Ohio Dominican University
- Overcoming Imposter Syndrome, Gill Carindale
- How to succeed when you have big shoes to fill, Rebecca Zucker

Podcasts

- The Imposter Syndrome Files [<https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/the-impostor-syndrome-files/id1503572581>]
- Imposter Syndrome [<https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/imposter-syndrome/id1492518932>]