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ow can people be perfectly qualified for their jobs and, at the same time, live in fear they will be exposed as a fraud? That dilemma is at the heart of the imposter syndrome. It is more common than you might think.

Sometimes referred to as imposter phenomenon, imposter fear or imposterism, the experience was first labeled in 1978 by Pauline Rose Clance and Suzanne Imes.

They defined the imposter phenomenon as “an internal experience of intellectual phoniness” that leads people to live in constant fear that their “phoniness” will be discovered. People who suffer from this syndrome doubt their abilities, talents and intelligence despite overwhelming objective evidence confirming their capabilities.

Rather than attribute their successes to braininess and hard work, they chalk it up to “good luck” or the ability to fool others.

You can imagine how anxiety-provoking and stressful such thoughts would be. After all, if you attribute all of your success to luck and the ability to fool others, you would always worry that at some point your luck will run out and you will be discovered.

Originally, the phenomenon was thought to affect only high-achieving women, but later studies confirmed that it is prevalent in all demographic groups and is equally common in men. However, men are much less likely to talk about it.

You would think that high achieving individuals would not be susceptible to such feelings. However, that is not the case. Many extremely successful people experience these feelings.

Maya Angelou famously said, “I have written books, but each time I think, ‘Uh oh, they’re going to find out now. I’ve run a game on everybody, and they’re going to find me out.’ ” In fact, according to one study, roughly 70 percent of people experience the feeling of being an imposter at some point.

Sometimes success can even exacerbate the problem because it leads to new opportunities and experiences that people may not feel prepared for — once again heightening the feelings of inadequacy.

My suspicion is that imposter syndrome is surprisingly prevalent in the legal profession. After all, on average, lawyers are very success driven.



IMPOSTER SYNDROME

You are not alone... and you are not a fraud

By CAMILLE KHODADAD

While there are numerous theories as to why people suffer from this syndrome — from a tendency toward perfectionism to childhood experiences — there are ways to deal with it.

Focus on Objective Evidence: As lawyers, we are good at evaluating facts objectively. If you suffer from this phenomenon, take a look at your “opponent’s” case. What facts support the theory that your accomplishments are attributable to your hard work and intelligence? Focus on the facts that confirm the link between your successes and your hard work, abilities and experience.

Build a Support Group: As lawyers, we are expected to be confident in our abilities 100 percent of the time and never show any signs of weakness. Such an attitude can result in isolation and increase feelings of inadequacy, causing them to spiral out of control. Find supportive friends and mentors with whom you can discuss your feelings and who can be a voice of support and strength when you are doubting your abilities.

Fake It Till You Make It: Otherwise known as “just do it.” Even when you feel uncomfortable with a situation, move through it in spite of that

discomfort and have faith that your preparation and skills will carry you through the day.

Accept Failure as Part of the Growth Process: And when you fail — which we all do — recognize that no one gets through life with a perfect score. Your failure is not because you have run out of luck but because sometimes it happens despite our best efforts. View your failures as an opportunity for learning and improvement.

The next time you doubt whether you deserve the success you have achieved, consider this: Are you looking at yourself through a realistic lens? Are you the fraud you fear you are, or have you worked hard to get where you are using your talents, knowledge and experience? I think you know the real answer. CL

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