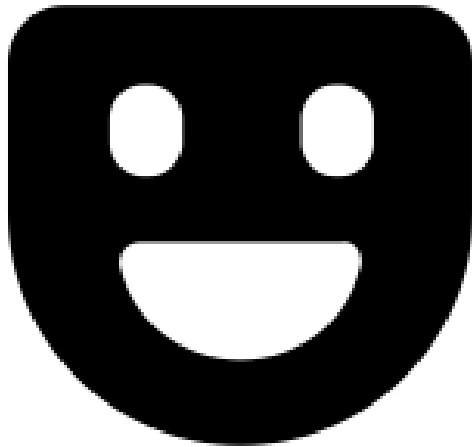


IMPOSTER SYNDROME



What is Imposter Syndrome?

Imposter syndrome is a *misperception* that you are undeserving of achievements, belonging to a group, or being held in high esteem. You might feel as if you are not as competent, intelligent, capable, or skilled as others see you. As a result, you feel as if someone is eventually going to find out you don't deserve to be here, and will be exposed as a fraud, an imposter, once people find out what you are really like.

Who has Imposter Syndrome?

Imposter syndrome is common, *particularly* among people who have made big achievements or have many degrees. But research suggests this may be more common among women and BIPOC folks. There are some reasons why you might start feeling Imposter Syndrome once you go to UCSD. Author Neil Gaiman tells this story about one of his experiences:

Some years ago, I was lucky enough 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.

You Are "The Smart One"

If you have always been told that you are smart, this can cause you to make your intelligence a central part of your identity. You may also develop what

psychologist Carol Dweck calls a **fixed mindset** about intelligence. If you have a **fixed mindset**, you tend to think of things like being smart, being capable, or being talented as innate traits. And if “smart” is a trait that you either have or don’t have, you aren’t going to see a “C” grade or failing a midterm as a single incident, but evidence that you aren’t actually smart after all.

Dweck proposes that you can instead cultivate **growth mindset**, you see intelligence, skills, and capabilities as things you can develop and grow with practice, work, and opportunities. The growth mindset perspective on a C is that your grade is a learning opportunity, and that improving your grade is achievable with the right work and right approach.

You Have Always Been At the Top

If you came to UCSD, you have been a high achiever until you came here. But high achievement is a relative statement. Coming to UCSD usually means that you are comparing yourself to a pool of students who were *all* at the top of their schools before UCSD. Suddenly, you may find yourself falling in rankings compared to classmates... but that’s because you are comparing yourself to a different pool of students. You aren’t wrong in thinking you are good. It’s just that everyone is good, and what it takes to stand out has *changed*.



Nobody Else Looks Like You

When you feel like you don’t match the culture or the majority of a class, university, or space, you may often end up questioning whether that mismatch is a mistake and whether you, in fact, are not supposed to belong to the group. This may be because of your ethnicity, gender, gender identity, orientation, socioeconomic status, or because you are the only person in your family to have ever gone to college. You may end up feeling out of step with everyone around you, as if you just can’t fit in.

Imposter Syndrome Can F@\$%Right Off

So now that you can name it and we can talk about it as a self-inflicted misperception of reality, what can we do to combat Imposter Syndrome?

Recognizing It When It Happens

First of all, you need to recognize when the feeling of being an imposter happens. The feeling of being an imposter thrives in the secrecy of shame and feeling alone. So first, recognize what you are feeling, then remind yourself that this is a normal sense of doubt.

Acknowledge Your Achievements

It's easy to forget the things you have achieved and barriers you have overcome. So when you are feeling that sense of imposter syndrome, now is a time to review the things you have done, the letters of recommendation that have been written for you, and your victories in the past. You are still the person who has done those things!

Mentors and Cheerleaders

The sense that you are alone or fooling people is harder to overcome if you have people who care about you, believe in you, and cheer you on. One of the keys to your success is developing relationships with other people in college. A cheerleader can be a family member, a friend, a classmate, an academic advisor, a friendly staff member, a TA, or a professor. A mentor can be any cheerleader who also can help you make decisions or who you want to model your career or path after and who can give you some help making your way through school. The more you have people who can remind you of your positive traits and abilities, the more you can get past those doubts you feel inside you.

Likewise, be a cheerleader and a mentor to others. Taking on that role helps you see what you do know, what you do contribute, and how you have grown yourself!



Fight Perfectionism

Every perfectionist I work with talks about being a perfectionist as if it is a good thing. They are so discerning that they do not, like other people, accept anything less than the best. The problem with that is that you cannot always be at your best. You will have bad days. And unless you always perform at well below your ability, you will sometimes make mistakes as you learn and grow. So the idea of perfectionism is based on a

level of work that is impossible to sustain.

And when you fail, you will feel ashamed, anxious, and as if you are incompetent. But actually, you will just be a human learning and growing. If you are a perfectionist, you are going to have to work on that with a mentor, a psychologist, or someone you trust.



Fight Comparison

A humorist named Garrison Keillor used to host a radio show called “A Prairie Home Companion” set in the fictional town of Lake Wobegone. One of the common things he said was that in Lake Wobegone, “all the children are above average.” This is, of course, intended to be a humorous turn of phrase. That’s not how averages work. But it turns out that humans tend to think that way — the majority of people surveyed about just about any skill tend to think they are above average. The truth is, most people have a poor sense of how they rank against others, and that they tend to combine a limited sampling of data and wishful thinking to over-rank themselves.

People dealing with Imposter Syndrome have a similar misperception, but the other way. They believe that others they compare themselves with are doing much better, are much better adjusted, and are more capable. But this is equally wrong.

Comparing yourself to others often means you are making false comparisons. Instead, you must focus on seeing your progress more in terms of things you can honestly measure: milestones, steps, achievements that you can or cannot do.

Having a mentor can help you in establishing those measures, and in understanding how well you are progressing!

Love the Struggle

An French educator named Jean Piaget observed that when students learn, they go through a process he called disequilibrium, where they had discomfort with a new idea that did not fit into their previous knowledge and understanding of the world, but with time and work, they were able to reach a new stage of accommodation, where they understood the new concept and

could connect it to their previous knowledge. In short, Piaget found that learning involved discomfort, struggle, and then growth.

When you are truly learning, you should expect that new things are going to start with the potential for initial failure. My Japanese mother used to have a proverb for that, “*Nana korobi ya oki*” or fall down seven times, stand up eight. Failure is normal. What makes you successful is not the lack of failure, but how you respond to it.



You should think of yourself as a perpetual student, always learning. It's okay to have no idea what you are doing, but use that feeling as an opportunity to find the information, to find mentors, and to find help rather than suffering and judging yourself. Most other people are in the same situation!

Humility is Good, So Don't Let Go of It *All*

The only way you are going to lose all traces of imposter syndrome is by becoming a narcissistic egomaniac. Let's face it, it's just human to have some doubts about how awesome you are. If you don't, you will bug the crap out of everyone around you.

What you need to work on is removing the constant fear that you are not really legitimately here at UCSD.

You are here for good reason. I promise.

I close with three quotes. The first is from Tina Fey:

The beauty of the impostor syndrome is you vacillate between extreme egomania, and a complete feeling of: 'I'm a fraud! Oh god, they're on to me! I'm a fraud!' So you just try to ride the egomania when it comes and enjoy it, and then slide through the idea of fraud. Seriously, I've just realized that almost everyone is a fraud, so I try not to feel too bad about it.

The second is from Lupita Nyong'o:

What's it called when you have a disease and it keeps recurring? I go through [acute impostor syndrome] with every role. I think winning an Oscar may in fact have made it worse. Now I've achieved this, what am I going to do next? What do I strive for? Then I remember that I didn't get into acting for the accolades, I got into it for the joy of telling stories. .

The last from Mindy Kaling:

*"Why the f**k not me?" should be your motto.*

