

Overcoming Imposter Feelings

Most of us have heard of Imposter Syndrome. Many of us know the frustrating gap between the logical “what we've actually achieved” and the emotional “what we let ourselves to believe about what we've achieved and what that means about us”. Overcoming Imposter Feelings isn't about building confidence through cheerleading. This resource offers ways to look at the evidence and find practical ways to close that gap.

Naming the pattern

This was first described in 1978 by Dr Pauline Clance and Dr Suzanne Imes, who worked with highly capable people unable to internalise their own achievements. What they found was a set of learned feelings and behaviours, not a fixed trait. You can hold clear evidence of your competence and still carry a quiet sense that you'll eventually be found out.

This matters because imposter syndrome is not a medical diagnosis. Feeling like a fraud despite clear evidence of ability means you've learned a pattern of thinking that no longer serves you — not that something is fundamentally wrong with you.

Three cognitive patterns are often used to explain away success: undervaluing it entirely (“anyone could have done that”), attributing it to external factors (“they were just being kind,” “it was good timing”), or the more fearful version — “I've been lucky so far, but I'll be found out eventually.” Most people recognise at least one of these running quietly in the background. Once you see you are using this pattern you can choose to change. The next time you notice it in play, choose to accept that hard work and focus contributed to your success.

Deflection as a habit

Many of us see this in action when a colleague praises our work, or compliments something as simple as our shirt, and the instinct is to deflect before the compliment can land, “This old thing? I picked it up in a charity shop.” That habit scales into professional life just as easily. Someone says “Great presentation” and instead of a simple thank you, the mind goes straight to the audit: the typo on slide seven, the point you forgot to make. Well-deserved credit turns into a harsh review of perceived failure. You could always choose to say a graceful “Thank you.” instead.

Is it you, or is it the system?

It's worth being honest that feeling like an outsider isn't always internal. Systemic bias around gender, race and class plays a real, documented role in shaping these experiences. If standards or expectations are different for you because of unconscious bias, the environment itself sends that signal. The practical focus here stays on what's within your own control, because an institutional system won't change overnight. That's a practical limitation of the scope of this resource, not a denial of the problem.

Reframing failure

People with imposter feelings tend to judge their own failures far more harshly than they'd judge a colleague for the same thing, internalising failure as a source of lasting shame. The more useful frame is to treat failure as neutral feedback on a learning strategy rather than a permanent flaw. Learning from mistakes is a normal part of intellectual growth, not evidence against you. Failure can be a helpful pointer to what you most need to learn.

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Working with the inner critic

Our self-critical voice has a plausible origin: belonging to the group was once a matter of survival, and being cast out was dangerous — an inner voice that minimised that risk, encouraged us to fit in, was genuinely valuable.

The inner critic is now a protective mechanism doing its job with an outdated threat assessment. That mistake, that failure, that being less than absolutely perfect is rarely a threat to your survival, it simply feels like one. Because the inner critic's intention is protective rather than authoritative, it doesn't need to be obeyed — it can be managed. Notice the voice as a thought rather than a fact. Step back and recognise it as an old pattern doing what it always does. Then treat its message as possibly over cautious advice rather than a verdict, and use your common sense to act appropriately.

Closing the gap between achievement and belief isn't about doing more to finally prove your worth. It's about steadily updating the story you tell yourself about the work you've already done — and choosing, the next time a compliment or a setback arrives, to trust what you know rather than the doubt you've learned.

**This is one of a series of Briefing Notes on managing the realities of research life by Dr Margaret Collins.
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