



## COVER STORY

# Feel like a fraud?

You're not alone. Many graduate students question whether they are prepared to do the work they do. Here's how to overcome that feeling and recognize your strengths.

By Kirsten Weir

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William Somerville has always been a good student. In high school and college, he looked forward to taking tests and writing papers — objective measures of success gave him a chance to prove himself.

But as a PhD student in clinical psychology (</ed/graduate/specialize/clinical.aspx>) at The New School in New York City, he began to doubt his abilities. Now he wasn't just studying to make the grade, but actually leading therapy sessions with patients in a hospital psychiatric unit.

"I felt, what gives me the right to be here?" he says.

In those moments, he says, he didn't just feel he was lacking certain skills. He wondered whether he belonged there at all. "There's a sense of being thrown into the deep end of the pool and needing to learn to swim," he says. "But I wasn't just questioning whether I could survive. In a fundamental way, I was asking, 'Am I a swimmer?'"

In retrospect, Somerville realized that he was experiencing typical feelings of the impostor phenomenon. First described by psychologists Suzanne Imes, PhD, and Pauline Rose Clance, PhD, in the 1970s, impostor phenomenon occurs among high achievers who are unable to internalize and accept their success. They often attribute their accomplishments to luck rather than to ability, and fear that others will eventually unmask them as a fraud.

Though the impostor phenomenon isn't an official diagnosis listed in the DSM, psychologists and others acknowledge that it is a very real and specific form of intellectual self-doubt. Impostor feelings are generally accompanied by anxiety and, often, depression.

By definition, most people with impostor feelings suffer in silence, says Imes, a clinical psychologist in private practice in Georgia. "Most people don't talk about it. Part of the experience is that they're afraid they're going to be found out," she says.

Yet the experience is not uncommon, she adds. With effort, you can stop feeling like a fraud and learn to enjoy your accomplishments.

## Pressure to achieve

When Clance and Imes first described the impostor phenomenon (sometimes called impostor syndrome), they thought it was unique to women. Since then, a variety of research on the topic has revealed that men, too, can have the unenviable experience of feeling like frauds, according to a recent research review (*International Journal of Behavioral Sciences* ([http://bsris.swu.ac.th/journal/i6/6-6\\_Jaruwan\\_73-92.pdf](http://bsris.swu.ac.th/journal/i6/6-6_Jaruwan_73-92.pdf)) (PDF, 230KB), 2011).

Many people who feel like impostors grew up in families that placed a big emphasis on achievement, says Imes. In particular, parents who send mixed messages — alternating between over-praise and criticism — can increase the risk of future fraudulent feelings. Societal pressures only add to the problem.

"In our society there's a huge pressure to achieve," Imes says. "There can be a lot of confusion between approval and love and worthiness. Self-worth becomes contingent on achieving."

Other factors can also boost the odds that you feel like a phony. The experience seems to be more common among minorities, according to Clance, a clinical psychologist in Atlanta.

That's not terribly surprising to Frederick Hives, a fourth-year PsyD candidate at John F. Kennedy University in Pleasant Hill, Calif. Hives has struggled with impostor feelings throughout grad school, and says he often feels like he's progressed not on his own merits, but due to sympathy from others. As an African-American student, Hives says, "I was taught I would need to 'work twice as hard to be half as good.' While this instills a goal-oriented approach within me, it also keeps me feeling as though my efforts will never be enough."

Some minority groups may be especially susceptible. A 2013 study by researchers at the University of Texas at Austin surveyed ethnic-minority college students and found that Asian-Americans were more likely than African-Americans or Latino-Americans to experience impostor feelings. Interestingly, the researchers also found that impostor feelings more strongly predicted mental health problems than did stress related to one's minority status (*Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development* (<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/j.2161-1912.2013.00029.x/abstract?deniedAccessCustomisedMessage=&userIsAuthenticated=false>)

, 2013).

Still, differing in any way from the majority of your peers — whether by race, gender, sexual orientation or some other characteristic — can fuel the sense of being a fraud. As the youngest student in her program, Mary Guerrant, a second-year doctoral student of community psychology at North Carolina State University, dealt with strong impostor feelings during her first year of study. Her position as a gay woman interested in studying LGBT issues compounded those feelings, she believes. "My interests are so different from those of my colleagues, which at times can feel incredibly isolating and further fuels my feelings of inadequacy," she says.

The impostor phenomenon seems to be more common among people who are embarking on a new endeavor, says Imes. In other words, graduate students may be particularly susceptible.

"Grad students are at an in-between phase in their professional development," says Carole Lieberman, MD, a Beverly Hills psychiatrist and author. "They are often asked to function in a capacity that they don't feel ready to handle."

Most people experience some self-doubt when facing new challenges, says Lieberman. "But someone with [imposter phenomenon] has an all-encompassing fear of being found out to not have

what it takes." Even if they experience outward signs of success — getting into a selective graduate program, say, or acing test after test — they have trouble believing that they're worthy. Instead, they may chalk their success up to good luck.

The impostor phenomenon and perfectionism often go hand in hand. So-called impostors think every task they tackle has to be done perfectly, and they rarely ask for help. That perfectionism can lead to two typical responses, according to Clance. An impostor may procrastinate, putting off an assignment out of fear that he or she won't be able to complete it to the necessary high standards. Or, he or she may overprepare, spending much more time on a task than is necessary.

Aasha Foster, a second-year PhD student in counseling psychology at Columbia University's Teachers College, identifies with that description. "I have certainly been accused of being a perfectionist and obsessing over details until I get nudged to finally let it go," she says. And though she bends over backward to do things perfectly, she's still often unsure about the end result.

Ultimately, the impostor phenomenon becomes a cycle. Afraid of being discovered as a fraud, people with impostor feelings go through contortions to do a project perfectly. When they succeed, they begin to believe all that anxiety and effort paid off. Eventually, they develop almost superstitious beliefs. "Unconsciously, they think their successes must be due to that self-torture," Imes says.

## Facing impostor feelings

If you recognize yourself in the description of the impostor phenomenon, take heart. There are ways to overcome the belief that you don't measure up:

### **Talk to your mentors**

Somerville is now in his fifth year of graduate school and says he no longer feels like he doesn't belong. "The thing that made so much difference was supportive, encouraging supervision," he says. Hives, too, says he's benefited from sharing his feelings with a mentor who has helped him recognize that his impostor feelings are both normal and irrational. Though he still struggles with the feelings, he says, "I am now able to recognize my personal progress and growth instead of comparing myself to other students and professionals."

### **Recognize your expertise**

Don't just look to those who are more experienced for help, however. Tutoring or working with younger students, for instance, can help you realize how far you've come and how much knowledge you have to impart.

### **Remember what you do well**

Imes encourages her clients to make a realistic assessment of their abilities. "Most high achievers are pretty smart people, and many really smart people wish they were geniuses. But most of us aren't," she says. "We have areas where we're quite smart and areas where we're not so smart." She suggests writing down the things you're truly good at, and the areas that might need work. That can help you recognize where you're doing well, and where there's legitimate room for improvement.

### **Realize no one is perfect**

Clance urges people with impostor feelings to stop focusing on perfection. "Do a task 'well enough,'" she says. It's also important to take time to appreciate the fruits of your hard work. "Develop and

implement rewards for success — learn to celebrate," she adds.

### **Change your thinking**

People with impostor feelings have to reframe the way they think about their achievements, says Imes. She helps her clients gradually chip away at the superstitious thinking that fuels the impostor cycle. That's best done incrementally, she says. For instance, rather than spending 10 hours on an assignment, you might cut yourself off at eight. Or you may let a friend read a draft that you haven't yet perfectly polished. "Superstitions need to be changed very gradually because they are so strong," she says.

### **Talk to someone who can help**

For many people with impostor feelings, individual therapy can be extremely helpful. A psychologist or other therapist can give you tools to help you break the cycle of impostor thinking, says Imes.

The impostor phenomenon is still an experience that tends to fly under the radar. Somerville learned the phenomenon existed only after he'd successfully dealt with the feelings on his own. Often the people affected by impostor feelings don't realize they could be living some other way. "They don't have any idea it's possible not to feel so anxious and fearful all the time," Imes says.

Luckily, it is possible.

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