

# Imposter Syndrome Essentials



© Dr Margaret Collins: [info@TrainingForUniversities.com](mailto:info@TrainingForUniversities.com)

Get a free, Out of Overwhelm Route Map at  
<https://MargaretCollins.com/overwhelm>

Follow me: [Facebook.com/MargaretCollinsPhD](https://www.facebook.com/MargaretCollinsPhD) or [LinkedIn.com/in/DrMargaretCollins](https://www.linkedin.com/in/DrMargaretCollins)

© All rights reserved | Margaret Collins

1

## We will explore:

- What Imposter Syndrome is...
- Who is likely to experience Imposter feelings and why
- Unconscious bias in the workplace
- How to deal with Imposter feelings
- Helpful strategies in the workplace.



Familiarise yourself with the menu bar controls:

- Mute/unmute audio
- Turn video on/off
- "Reactions" on the menu bar.

© All rights reserved | Margaret Collins

2

## To get the best from today:

Of course, everything shared is confidential!

I need to ask your permission to...

- Share information
- Create a safe space for discussion and sharing
- Give you time for reflection and thinking
- Challenge you gently...?

Is that OK?

© All rights reserved | Margaret Collins

3

## To get the best from today:

What permission do you need today?

Today I give myself permission to...

- Be brave, be honest
- Take a stretch if I'm feeling tired
- Share my opinions out loud
- Enjoy being here and not "at work"!

© All rights reserved | Margaret Collins

4

## What is Imposter Syndrome?

Described by Prof Pauline Clance & Dr Suzanne Imes (1978)

Many very able women reported feeling like a fraud

- Undervalued their achievements
- Believed others overestimated their abilities
- Felt they didn't deserve their success.

They called it "The Imposter Phenomenon"

The paradox is:

You *know* your achievements are real **BUT**

You still can't quite believe it, own them or value them

© All rights reserved | Margaret Collins

5

## What is Imposter Syndrome?

As described by Clance & Imes, you may be affected by Imposter Syndrome feelings if:

- in the face of evidence of achievement
- despite repeatedly showing obvious ability
- you feel you don't really deserve this
- emotionally you don't own your success
- you have a deep sense of "one day I'll be found out".

© All rights reserved | Margaret Collins

6

### What is Imposter Syndrome?

- Not a medically diagnosable condition
- Not the same as a lack of confidence
- Particularly prevalent where expertise is valued
- May affect behaviour or feelings in specific situations or more generally...
- Men and women in equal numbers but different ways...
  - Women and people with more feminine energies are more likely to hold back
  - Men and people with more masculine energies are more likely to push forward

Knowing is not enough!

7

### Why is Imposter Syndrome important?

For the Individual – it has many negative outcomes

People affected by Imposter Syndrome feelings:

- Often overwork/overprepare
- More likely to experience stress or burnout
- May experience depression, anxiety, rumination
- Frustration because they don't meet their own high standards for performance or achievement
- Often experience lower job satisfaction.

8

### Why is Imposter Syndrome important?

If you feel like a fraud you are less likely to:

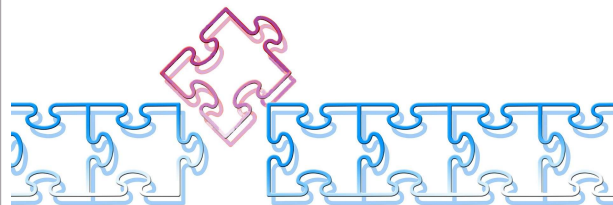
- Choose to appear vulnerable (especially in public)
- Take risks
- Put creative ideas "out there"
- Volunteer for "stretch positions" or take risks
- Compared to your peers you show less "career striving".

9

### Imposter Syndrome – how does it affect you?

As you reflect on Imposter Syndrome:

- How might it affect you personally?
- How might it affect you professionally?
- Why do you most want to change?



10

### Imposter Syndrome

Most significant elements include:

- Likely to be or to feel different
- Experience of unconscious bias (esp in the workplace)
- "Imposters" think about themselves differently...



Let's explore these in more detail!

11

### Being or feeling different...

People who are the first or in a minority...

- the first professional in their family
- the first "whatever" in their workplace
  - female/male
  - person of colour/with disability
  - "non-native"
  - sexual orientation - lesbian/gay
  - political beliefs/social class
  - religion/faith/spirituality - Muslim/Buddhist/Christian.

12

### Being or feeling different...

People who achieved success

- early in life
- with apparent ease
- who were judged to be good (big fish-small pond)...

13

### Being or feeling different...

People who

- work alone – isolation means no comparators
- work in creative industries or professions
- work in areas where intelligence or expertise matter...

14

### Imposter Syndrome – who is affected?

Most significant elements include:

- Likely to be or to feel different
- Experience of unconscious bias (esp in the workplace)
- "Imposters" think about themselves differently...

15

### Implicit or unconscious bias

Social stereotypes about groups of people - help us make quick decisions

They are:

- Learned
- Unconscious
- Unintentional
- Affect our behaviour...

Gender, race, culture, height, weight, social class, accent...

We know these stereotypes are not completely true...  
if we ignore them, they still influence our decisions.

16

### Implicit or unconscious bias

Implicit or unconscious bias affects us all.

We use shortcuts to make decisions about...

- Single parent
- Scientist...
- Leader...
- Men/maleness...
- Women/femaleness...

It starts early in life: <https://youtu.be/nWu44AqF0il>  
See BBC snippet: "Boys toys or girls toys?"

17

### Diversity in Leadership

In Academia in 2013-14:

- 45% of UK 194,245 academic staff are women
- 33% of senior academics (excluding profs) are women
- only 22% of professors are female (4,415 out of 19,750)

In 2019:

- Nearly 29% of professors were female
- Of 24,000+ professors, 129 are black males
- Only 24 of 24,000+ professors are female and black...

18

### Implicit or unconscious bias

Published examples of implicit bias in action include:

Musical auditions:

- historically players were selected on the basis of ability
- mostly the best seemed to be male

except when auditions are conducted behind screens...

(Goldin, C. and Rouse, C. 2000)

Bias = faulty decision-making

They wanted to recruit the best players but unconscious bias negatively influenced those decisions.

19

### Implicit or unconscious bias

But scientists are different, right?

Research lab leaders received a speculative letter and a CV

Male and female researchers judged male applicants

- to be better candidates,
- offered more career support and
- offered higher starting salaries...

(published in PNAS 109, 16474–16479, (2012))

Choose your criteria then,  
make them explicit, measurable, transparent

Make sure someone is monitoring!

20

### Implicit or unconscious bias

Is there a motherhood penalty?

Correll et al, Am J Sociology 112: 1297 (2007)

Women identified as mothers were judged to be

- Less committed
- Less competent

Potential clash of roles:

- Mother vs Ideal employee

Fatherhood is more complicated....

21

### Implicit or unconscious bias

The consequences of implicit or unconscious bias

Greatest for minorities and for high achieving women

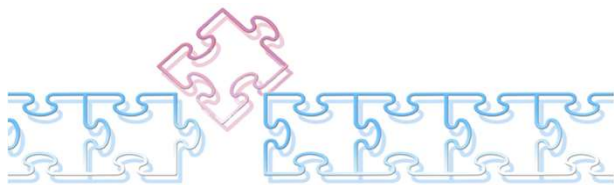
- Standards are set higher
- Achievements systematically undervalued
- Always need to prove it again
- Not liked for their achievements
- Penalised when they behave against stereotype.

22

### How does this affect me?

Take a few moments to reflect/discuss are you different?:

- the first?
- in a minority?
- a square peg in a round hole?
- a big fish in a small pond?
- in a creative or isolated position?
- affected by unconscious bias?



23

### Imposters think differently...

Most significant elements include:

- Likely to be or to feel different
- Experience of unconscious bias (esp in the workplace)

**Solutions include:**

- Find your tribe!
- Reframe/re-tell your stories
- Challenge unconscious bias

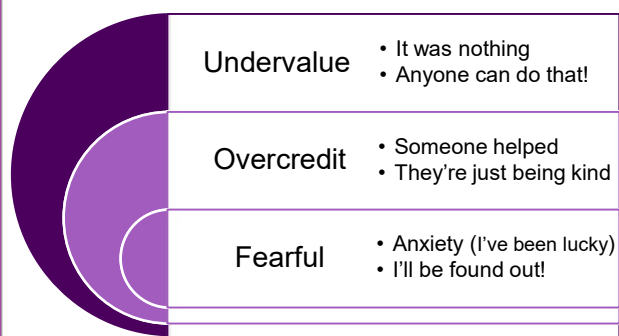
- "Imposters" think about themselves differently...

- Attitudes to success, failure and competence
- Perfectionists with very active self-critical voices?

24

### Imposters think differently...

Do you recognise these patterns?



25

### Imposters think differently...

People have habitual, unhelpful ways of thinking

Many consistently

- Undervalue their achievements
- Attribute their success to others
- Believe others overestimate their abilities.

Knowing this is the start  
but knowing is not enough!

26

### Imposters and success...

The question is...

Assuming we are real Imposters,  
how come we've achieved so much?



What are your excuses?!

27

### Imposters and success...

Factors beyond their control:

- I was lucky
- good timing
- a fluke
- poor competition
- they were just being nice
- the first choice candidate turned them down...

28

### Imposters and success...

Maybe the most common reason:

- but only because I worked so hard!

The underlying belief is that, at some level,  
it shouldn't need such hard work!

For women or people with more feminine energy  
"hard work" can be a real shame trigger...

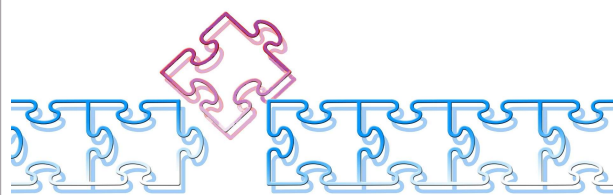
For men or people with more masculine energy  
"being seen as weak" is a shame trigger...

29

### Imposters and success...

How do you think about your own success?

- Are you fearful, over-crediting, undervaluing?
- Is success simply down to luck or others being kind?
- Does hard work feel like "cheating"?
- Can you enjoy and celebrate your successes?



30

### Imposters and failure...

Generally, imposters internalise failure -

- if I fail
- if it goes wrong
- if it's not good enough
  - ... it must be my fault, I should have done more



How does failure make you feel?

31

### Imposters and failure...

How do you describe or define failure?

- The state of not meeting a desirable or intended objective
- A lack of success
- Things didn't turn out the way I wanted!



How does failure make you feel?

32

### Imposters and failure...

How do you react to failure?

- A sign of weakness, your fault, a source of shame?

Did "failure" sometimes turn out to be even better?!



Reflect on some of the "failures" that have turned out well for you....

Sometimes we discover that not getting what we wanted or expected opens the door to even better things, new opportunities or deeper growth...

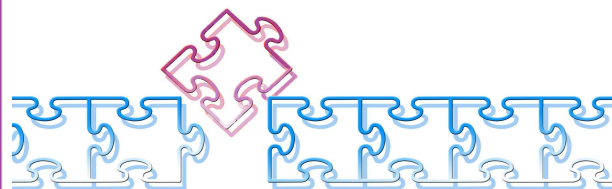
33

### Imposters and failure...

What if failure was:

feedback on your learning strategy?  
an essential learning experience?  
a chance to improve growth?  
simply normal?

What would be more helpful for you in future?



34

### Imposters and competence...

Many people who experience Imposter Syndrome:

- Are perfectionists
- Have very high standards
- Have very active self-critical voices...

35

### Imposters and competence...

Exactly how good is "competent"?

- When you think of yourself...
- How good do **you** need to be at (your job?) to admit that you're competent at what you do?

How many different ways can you complete this sentence:

**"If I really was good enough I would..."**

Can you get 5 different endings?



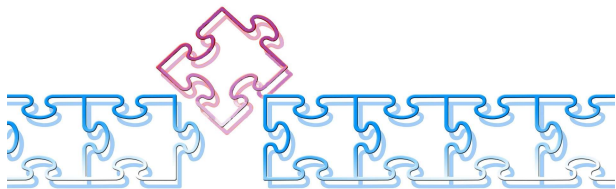
What is your summary definition of being good enough?

36

### Imposters and competence...

Does your definition of competence – being good enough

- sound reasonable/helpful?
- make it more difficult for you to contribute well?
- set you up to fail frequently?
- compare you unfavourably to others?



37

### Do you want to change?

Let's just remind ourselves....

Many people with imposter feelings:

- Undervalue their achievements
- Believe others overestimate their abilities
- Feel they don't deserve their success

They are often:

- Different or feel different in some way
- Experience unconscious bias
- Think about themselves differently
  - perfectionists and highly self-critical.

38

### Do you want to change?

How does your Imposter help you/keep you safe?

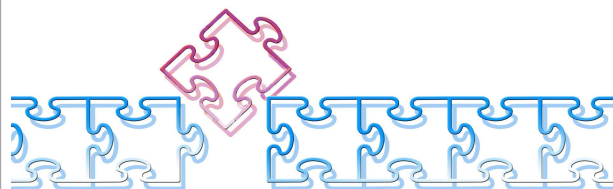
How does your Imposter hold you back?

39

### If you never change?

Ask yourself:

- What will happen if I never change this pattern?
- What price am I paying?
- What opportunities am I missing?
- What options are not available to me?



40

### Imposter Syndrome solutions

Cells that fire together, wire together...

Donald Hebb/Hebb's law

We are what we repeatedly do...

Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit!

Aristotle



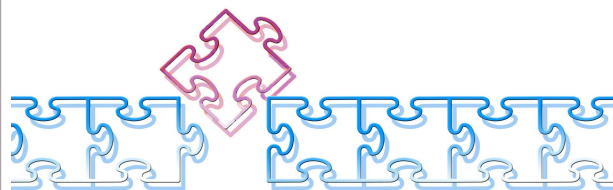
We need to re-train our thoughts and behaviours!

41

### Imposter Syndrome solutions

Do you remember:

- a hobby that you loved and have now outgrown?
- something that used to be boring and now fascinates you?
- music you used to love and now rarely choose to play?
- something you used to hate and now absolutely love?



42

## Imposter Syndrome Solutions

There are many possible solutions – start here!

1. Find your tribe!
2. Reframe your past – tell more helpful stories
3. Retrain your thoughts
4. Make friends with your Inner Critic
5. Know clearly what your “Best Self” wants instead!

43

## Imposters and their Inner Critic...

We all have a self-critical voice

- some people's critics are more active
- some people pay more attention to their critic!

What does your self-critical voice tell you?



Our critics are both unique and universal.

44

## Imposters and their Inner Critic...

The messages from our Inner Critic

- Are intended to protect us, to keep us safe
- Give us a chance to improve – if wanted or needed

Can you...

- Recognise your Inner Critic?
- Externalise them?
- Negotiate with them?
- See a positive intention?



Can you thank your Inner Critic?

45

## Recognise your Imposter...

Think of specific situations where you are very aware of feeling like an Imposter:

- being tested...
- questioned in a meeting...
- interview...
- presenting...
- receiving feedback...
- influencing/convincing others...

46

## Recognise your Imposter...

In situations where...

I usually feel...

I say to myself...

And then I...

47

## Recognise your Imposter...

In situations where...

I'm called to take the lead opinion unexpectedly

I usually feel...

panicked, rapid breathing, rapid pulse, flushed...  
exposed, unprepared and anxious

I say to myself...

I'm going to show myself up,  
not know the answer, look like a fool again

And then I...

find an excuse, say something non-committal and  
get out as soon as I can!

48



## Recognise your Imposter...

In situations where...

Someone asks a question

I usually feel...

panicked, rapid breathing, rapid pulse, flushed...  
exposed, unprepared and anxious

I say to myself...

I'm going to show myself up,  
not know the answer, look like a fool again

And then I...

keep my mouth shut!  
Only, the person who answers doesn't know as much as I do...  
I then beat myself up because I should have said something.



Do you recognise your "typical" situations/symptoms?

49

## Recognise your Imposter and be ready!

What's your implementation intention?

"If I feel ..... then I will ....."

These "**If ... Then**" plans are **implementation intentions**

"**If** I find myself thinking 'I'll just keep quiet', **then**

I'll remind myself that, deep down I know I want to be brave  
so I'll just take a deep breath, muster all my courage, and  
say something/ask a question"

You remind yourself of what your best self wants!



What are your implementation intentions?

50

## Changing thoughts...

If you are or you feel different...

**Knowing this you can choose new messages:**

- Your past doesn't define your future...
- Being different isn't better or worse...
- Diversity can bring greater creativity...
- I have new insights to share...

51

## What could you do...

Each time your Imposter re-appears, remind yourself...

- I've felt this before
- Just because I feel this doesn't make it true
- I can take a deep breath and carry on
- Feeling insecure doesn't make me wrong
- Sometimes "fake it..." actually works!



What will you do? What would help you most?

52

## Expect resistance...

When you begin to change

- You may experience stress or anxiety...
  - So take some deep breaths and carry on!
- Your self-critic will re-appear...
  - So remind yourself that's normal and carry on!
- Your might not get it right first time...
  - Remember it takes time to grow new brain cells!

53

## Expect resistance...

The key is to retrain our thoughts and behaviours.

We have made a start today!

Do you need

- More training or more practice?
- Role models?
- New, empowering beliefs?
- New ways of thinking and speaking...



What is your commitment to yourself?

54

### Inspiring TED talks:

Brené Brown 2013

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8-JXOnFOXQk>

Brené Brown 2010

[http://www.ted.com/talks/brene\\_brown\\_on\\_vulnerability.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_on_vulnerability.html)

Brené Brown 2012

[http://new.ted.com/talks/brene\\_brown\\_listening\\_to\\_shame#](http://new.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_listening_to_shame#)

Amy Cuddy 2012

[http://www.ted.com/talks/amy\\_cuddy\\_your\\_body\\_language\\_shapes\\_who\\_you\\_are](http://www.ted.com/talks/amy_cuddy_your_body_language_shapes_who_you_are)

Sheryl Sandberg 2010

[http://www.ted.com/talks/sheryl\\_sandberg\\_why\\_we\\_have\\_too\\_few\\_women\\_leaders.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/sheryl_sandberg_why_we_have_too_few_women_leaders.html)

Reshma Saujani 2016

[https://www.ted.com/talks/reshma\\_saujani\\_teach\\_girls\\_bravery\\_not\\_perfection?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/reshma_saujani_teach_girls_bravery_not_perfection?language=en)

© All rights reserved | Margaret Collins

55

### The man in the arena...

"It's not the critic who counts... The credit belongs to the person who is in the arena; whose face is marred with dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly ... who at the best knows the triumph of achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly ..."

Theodore Roosevelt

© All rights reserved | Margaret Collins

56

### If at first you don't succeed...

"If we want to be courageous and we want to be in the arena, we're going to get our butts kicked.

There is no option.

"If you want to be brave and show up in your life, you're going to fail. You're going to stumble. You're going to fall. It's part of showing up."

Brené Brown



So - show up or stay out of the arena?

© All rights reserved | Margaret Collins

57

### What have we covered?

- Possible sources of Imposter feelings
- How well we fit – or break – stereotype expectations
- Attitudes to success, failure and competence
- Our self-critical feelings.

© All rights reserved | Margaret Collins

58

### What about the gremlins?

- The doubts may never go away completely
- Learn to anticipate, recognise and name them
- There's no magic wand – retrain your thoughts
- Go ahead and do it anyway
- Keep practicing until you're... good enough!



How will you celebrate?!

© All rights reserved | Margaret Collins

59

### Today we explored:

- What is Impostor Syndrome
- Who is likely to feel like an Imposter
- Why we might feel like an Imposter
- How this is affecting our life
- Examine our "rule book" (and maybe re-write the rules)
- Practical strategies to set free our Imposter!

© All rights reserved | Margaret Collins

60