

Are You an Imposter?

Jason Liem explains how to create new mental habits to loosen the hold of imposter syndrome

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Do you have a creeping sensation that someone has made a mistake when they hired you? Do you spend an inordinate amount of time and effort checking and rechecking your work until it is perfect? Do you feel the need to know every detail? Do you have feelings of inadequacy that persist despite evident success? Do you write off your achievements to luck or fortunate timing? Do you feel it's only a matter of time before someone discovers your incompetence?

Did you answer yes to two or more of these questions? If so, then you have experienced imposter syndrome.

The Imposter's Roots

Dictionary.com defines imposter syndrome as "anxiety or self-doubt that results from persistently undervaluing one's competence and active role in achieving success, while falsely attributing one's accomplishments to luck or other external forces."

The feeling of being an imposter is not an isolated phenomenon. According to Wikipedia,

up to 70% of us will experience it at some point in our careers.

The imposter infliction isn't confined to gender, profession or age group. It affects all ages, all ranks, and all levels of experience.

A part of what I do as a cognitive coach is to help clients deal with this syndrome. A great majority of my clients are people who have years of education, experience, and knowledge. You would think this would be enough to form a strong bulwark for their confidence.

The problem is self-doubt can start as a whisper in the back of our minds. It could take the form of a tiny pang of anxiety or a minuscule thought of hesitation. At first, we don't notice its presence. Slowly and surely these seeds of self-doubt take root and begin to grow. Before long they've formed destabilising cracks in the bulwark of our self-confidence.

We all experience the inner struggle between self-confidence and self-doubt. This inner

turmoil is magnified for those hounded by the imposter syndrome. Self-doubt can lead to feelings of inadequacy. It can prevent people from internalising accomplishments. Instead, they attribute any success to outside factors. It can trigger perfectionist behaviour. It can awaken anxiety for fear of being discovered or found out.

We shackle ourselves to these irrational thoughts and emotions. Then we misplace the keys.

Finding the Keys to Resilience

The most important step is to adopt the role of the observer. It's about finding a position where we can observe what is happening to us rather than becoming what is happening to us. We need to turn off the brain's autopilot and jump into the pilot's seat. From this position, we can track our thoughts, emotions and physical sensations.

There are four approaches I use from the MINDtalk model to help dampen down imposter syndrome. Although I present them as individual approaches, they share certain elements. Each of

them is an effective tool but used together they have a positive accumulative effect.

Attention

Are you aware of where your attention is at this moment? Are you reading these words? Then your attention is directed outwards and it narrows as you read the string of words on the page or screen.

If you are sitting at a cafe and you take a moment to sip your coffee, you may look up and out of the cafe's window. You take note of the traffic and people passing by. Your attention is still externally directed. But now it has widened from a narrow to a broader perspective.

As you take a second sip you reflect on the meeting you had earlier in the day. Your attention has shifted from an external to an internal perspective. As you recall all the people around the table your attention is still broad. Your focus shifts to a narrow focus when reflecting on an important point a colleague made.

Attention can be either internal/external and broad/narrow. When we focus on thoughts, emotions, and physical sensations we have an internal focus. We have an external focus when our attention is on things in our surrounding environment.

Having a broad focus is when we pay attention to many things at once. A narrow focus means we are focusing on one thing.

Different situations require different attentional demands. The overlapping nature of these dimensions leads to four types of attentional spaces.

- External/Broad
- External/Narrow
- Internal/Broad
- Internal/Narrow

In a calm and reflective mindset, our focus is fluid. It can shift from one attentional space to the next with relative ease. It is when we are in a reactive state where our focus turns into molasses. When anxiety overwhelms us, we can get locked into a single attentional space. We can experience overload when an attentional space lacks the bandwidth to process what we are attending to.

This happens when we find ourselves entangled in the imposter syndrome. For example, we can get stuck in an internal/narrow focus. We find ourselves ruminating about something we should have or should not have said. We get mired down in the minutiae.

What we need to do is to shift our focus to an internal/broad or an external/broad



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perspective. In these attentional spaces, we can consider a broader context and avoid overload. We are in a better position to see the bigger picture.

In order to redirect our attention, we must first occupy the pilot seat of our minds.

Outlook

Our outlook is how we perceive ourselves, others, and the world around us. It is our beliefs that form the bedrock of these perceptions. Beliefs act as a filter determining what information we pay attention to and what we ignore.

For example, two people can have the same experience of a project gone bad. Both attribute the poor results to their performance.

The first person, like the second, feels distraught from the experience. The difference is the first person limits the time they stay in this mental state. They take the proactive step to ask questions to shift their outlook. That is, they ask themselves how they can learn and grow from the experience.

The second person uses bad performance as an affirmation of who they are as a person. They use the incident as a confirmation of their incompetence. They link their poor performance to their self-worth.

One effective strategy is to reflect on a part of our life where we feel and experience confidence. A rich resource to draw from is our hobbies – things we love spending time doing.

A hobby is a skill we are passionate about developing. When we mess up or fumble, we don't berate ourselves. Rather we take a healthy outlook and learn from our mistakes. As we learn our skills grow, as does our confidence.

The following are a few of the questions I ask clients. Take a moment to write down some of your thoughts.

What hobbies do you enjoy and feel good about doing?

How do you describe your outlook when doing your hobbies?

What does it mean to you when you make a mistake doing your hobby?

What positive thoughts and emotions do you have when doing your hobbies?

What questions do you ask yourself to improve at your hobby?

Narrative

Our brains help us to make sense of our experiences by forming stories. We then form

beliefs from these stories about the world, people and ourselves. These beliefs, in turn, influence how we engage or don't engage with the world.

We all have narratives running in the back of our minds, which shape the images we picture in our minds. These impact our ability to withstand pressure, recover from setbacks and stay engaged.

The imposter narrative when fearing discovery says:

"How has nobody discovered that I am a complete fraud?"

"I must not fail. I need to go over this report (again and again and again) and make sure everything is there."

"I need to know every aspect and detail – complete oversight. I don't want to be caught out by a question."

The narrative is driven by anxiety. It hinges on the belief that you lack the relevant expertise and experience. You feel as if you don't deserve the position and that someone must have made a mistake when hiring you.

The imposter narrative when confronting success says:

"Wow! I got lucky that time."

"It was an easy project. Anyone could have done it."

"That was very fortunate! I don't think I'll be so lucky next time."

The imposter narrative relegates any success or achievement down to luck. The narrative doesn't link the achievement to ability, experience and knowledge. A convenient connection is made to lucky timing or fortunate circumstance.

The imposter script, in whatever form, is unhelpful and belittling. We need to expose this insidious narrative to the focus of our conscious mind. When we write down the sentences on

paper our abstract thoughts become tangible. Words captured as pixels on a screen or ink on paper can't skitter away as they do in the mind.

List all the sentences of your narrative. Then decide with each line whether the sentence is helpful or unhelpful. If the latter, then rewrite the statement so it serves you instead of serving against you. Write it in a form in such a way that it is empowering and constructive.

Energy

The fourth approach is about energy management and conservation.

How energetic we feel determines our level of engagement. When we are buzzing with energy, we feel that we can take on the world. When feeling flat and empty after a hard day all we feel like doing is crashing on the sofa. Feeling drained of energy is not only physiological but psychological.

The imposter mindset can feel like lugging around a heavy bag of wet sand. The continuous stream of self-doubt and negative emotions grow burdensome. We can start strong, but it is only a matter of time before the increasing weight can leave us feeling depleted.

Imagine doing everything with perfection. Having complete oversight over every minor detail. Being vigilant of what we say and do so as not to expose any vulnerabilities. Feeling inadequate despite evidence of success. Who wouldn't feel depleted?

Energy management is about taking physical and psychological care of ourselves. In part this means getting a good night's sleep, getting regular exercise and eating well.

It also means investing our time and effort in things we love doing. This includes any number of interests like sports and hobbies. Investing our time with things that make us feel competent puts us into a healthy mindset. In this state self-confidence is a strong counterforce to self-doubt and inadequacy. Immersing ourselves in our passions is a powerful way of combating the imposter syndrome.

So, what's the fix?

It's important to realise that a mindset is a learned pattern of thinking – a mental habit. The formation of a habit, whether physical or mental, works on the same principles. Once ingrained in the brain a habit is there for life. This means we can't unlearn something. For example, we can't forget how to ride a bicycle or unlearn to speak a language.

The imposter syndrome is a mental habit. Once learned we can't erase it from our brains. But what we can do is create a new mental pattern – a new way of thinking that helps us. Each time we decide to use the new mental pattern, the faster it will embed in our brains. Before long, it becomes our default habit.

Habit formation is not about how long you do it, but rather how often you do it.

The formation of a new mindset requires us to be present with ourselves. From this advantage, we can reflect on our thoughts, emotions and physical reactions. So, when the imposter mindset shows up, we can choose to act in a way that is beneficial to us. We see the imposter as a mental pattern and nothing else. This act alone is a powerful counterforce, which puts us back in control.

I've only scratched the surface of the four approaches, but it's a good starting point for further exploration.

I wish this article could be a panacea to deal with the imposter mindset, but it isn't. What I present is the first couple of steps.

Like my clients, we can accept that we don't have to do this alone. There are a lot of people out there who can help us grow and develop. In part, it is about mustering the courage to ask for that help and support.

about the author



Jason W Birkevold Liem helps people to think about their thinking so they are better at managing themselves, others and situations. He achieves this through an informative and engaging process that educates people about the brain, cognitive psychology and interpersonal communication. As a result, clients are better able to face their professional and private challenges with more confidence, certainty and clarity. Through his company, MINDtalk, he designs and delivers brain-based leadership and personal resilience programs to individuals and to teams. Learn more at www.MINDtalk.no.

