

COSWL/COSIAC Workshop

2015 LSA Summer Institute

Imposter Syndrome

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“The trouble with the world is that the stupid are cocksure and the intelligent are full of doubt.” (Bertrand Russell)

A definition

“Imposter syndrome can be defined as a collection of feelings of inadequacy that persist even in face of information that indicates that the opposite is true. It is experienced internally as chronic self-doubt, and feelings of intellectual fraudulence.”

<https://counseling.caltech.edu/general/InfoandResources/Impostor>

Symptoms

- attributing success to luck
- discounting success
- feeling like a fake
- dreading that people will find out you aren't as talented as they think you are or as you should be.

“It can be hard to tell when you’ve got it: those others might have a syndrome, your reasoning goes, but I’m genuinely out of my depth. It’s a classic case of “comparing your insides with other people’s outsides”: you have access only to your own self-doubt, so you mistakenly conclude it’s more justified than anyone else’s.”

[http://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2013/nov/09/
impostor-syndrome-oliver-burkeman](http://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2013/nov/09/impostor-syndrome-oliver-burkeman)

Who gets it?

- High-achievers
- Different professions, e.g.
 - teachers
 - people in academia
 - actors
 - athletes
 - . . .

The American author and poet says 'I have written eleven books, but each time I think, "Uh oh, they're going to find out now. I've run a game on everybody, and they're going to find me out."'"



Poet Maya Angelou. Picture: AP. Source: AP

Academy Award winner Jodie Foster told 60 Minutes she feared she's have to give her Oscar back after winning best actor for *The Accused*.

"I thought it was a fluke," she said in the interview.

"[It was] the same way when I walked on the campus at Yale. I thought everybody would find out, and they'd take the Oscar back. They'd come to my house, knocking on the door, 'Excuse me, we meant to give that to someone else. That was going to Meryl Streep.'"



Actor Jodie Foster receives the Cecil B. Demille Award on stage during the 70th Annual Golden Globe Awards. Picture: Getty Images. Source: *News Limited*

The most Academy Award and Golden Globe nominated actor in history told Ken Burns in an interview, "You think, 'Why would anyone want to see me again in a movie? And I don't know how to act anyway, so why am I doing this?'"



Meryl Streep poses with her Oscar for Best Actress for 'The Iron Lady' during the 84th Academy Awards in Los Angeles, California. Picture: Getty Images. Source: AP

"All I can see is everything I'm doing wrong that is a sham and a fraud," he said.



Actor Don Cheadle arrives at the world premiere of Paramount Pictures and Marvel Entertainment's 'Iron Man 2'. Picture: Getty Images. Source: AFP

The producer of the Batman movies still has occasional bouts of impostor syndrome, according to *The Huffington Post* .

When he's on the set Uslan says, "I still have this background feeling that one of the security guards might come and throw me out."



Michael Keaton and Michelle Pfeiffer in Batman Returns. Picture: filmstills. Source: *News Limited*

The writer and creator of hits such as *Two and Half Men* and *The Big Bang Theory* told National Public Radio that he needs to "go and hide".

"When you go and watch a rehearsal of something you've written and it stinks, the natural feeling is 'I stink.' I'm a fraud. I need to go and hide," he said.



Executive producer Chuck Lorre and actors Ashton Kutcher and Jon Cryer. Picture: Getty Images. Source: *Supplied*

Closer to home

“Catherine Cardelús, an assistant professor in biology ..., first noticed the phenomenon as a graduate student ... ‘I was thinking, ‘I’m not cut out for this. I really can’t do this’ -- even though there was ample evidence to the contrary,’ she remembers. And the negative, self-sabotaging thoughts didn’t stop, they continued through her postdoc and into her full-time positions. ‘I’m a high achiever and I’m successful, but I’ve had those moments of waiting for someone to tap me on the shoulder and tell me I don’t belong,’ she says. ‘Or to tell me I was really lucky to get that paper in that journal.’ Cardelús has discussed the issue at international science conferences. **‘It’s pervasive,’ she says. “Absolutely pervasive.”**”

<http://www.nature.com/naturejobs/science/articles/10.1038/nj7245-468a>

Is it all bad?

Can you put it to good use?

"That last five minutes before you go on that first [Broadway] preview, if you don't have that 'what the hell am I doing here [feeling]' if you don't have that then they say it's time to quit," he said.



American actor Denzel Washington at a 2010 press conference. Picture: AFP. Source: AFP

"It's helpful to have some arrogance with paranoia," Martin said. "If we were all paranoia, we'd never leave the house. If we were all arrogance, no one would want us to leave the house."



Musician Chris Martin of Coldplay performs onstage at the iHeartRadio Music Festival. Picture: Getty Images. Source: *Supplied*

Once again – who gets it?

- People in disenfranchised social categories?
 - Women, underserved minorities, first generation academics... Or do different groups have different ways of dealing with it?
- Who doesn't get it?
- Who doesn't own up to it?

- “Impostor syndrome ... is presumably even more common than surveys suggest: after all, it’s not the kind of thing to which people like to admit”

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- “When psychologists first began to study the impostor phenomenon, they suspected it was something experienced primarily by women. That has proven not to be the case. In fact, it is one of the few psychological issues initially thought to affect primarily women that later was determined to relate to both genders.”

<http://www.impostorsyndrome.com/book/what-about-men/>

Okay, so what can you do?

Think of confidence as a skill you need to develop.

- Start by recognizing that you aren't the only "imposter" in the room.

Deal with it as a social issue

- Confidence isn't just an individual thing, but a social thing.
 - You **and others** feel like frauds in relation to people, situations, institutions.
 - Our profession may be the ultimate breeding ground for this syndrome.
- Confidence isn't a global thing, but a situated thing.
 - When are you more likely to feel confident/unconfident?

Do some ethnography.

- Maybe you can even get others to do this with you.
- Notice how interactions go in your classrooms and gatherings.
- Find patterns
- Try to see other people from different perspectives.
- Learn to recognize other people's insecurities.

Figure out what your triggers are.

- Take stock of the situations in which you feel the most insecure. The times when you've felt stupid, what was it that made you feel stupid?
 - Was it a particular person?
 - Was it a particular activity?
 - Was it something that happened?
 - Was it some small failure?
 - ...

And more individually

Try to catch yourself when you have imposter-type thoughts.

- Change the narrative to focus on what you did to earn what you have.
 - Develop an account of what you know.
 - Develop an account of what you've done or accomplished (and minimize the difference between the two)
 - Today, this week ...

Other resources

1. <http://startupbros.com/21-ways-overcome-impostor-syndrome/>
2. http://geekfeminism.wikia.com/wiki/Impostor_syndrome

