

IMPOSTOR SYNDROME: ESSENCE, SYMPTOMS AND ROOTS

There is now a growing interest in psychology, psychotherapy, self-knowledge and reflection, which stimulate the discovery of impostor syndrome. People without special education diagnose and begin to treat themselves, which is a bad idea. More research from psychologists and psychotherapists is needed to shed light on such a relatively new phenomenon to correctly inform people about its essence, roots, reasons, and ways to avoid and deal with it.

As defined by P. Clark, C. Holden, M. Russell, and H. Downs (2022), impostor phenomenon (or impostor syndrome) is a sense of intellectual fraudulence and an inability to internalise success and competence. The syndrome is not included in any guide to mental illness and is not considered a mental disorder, according to A. Benisek and N. Pathak (2022). In general, the syndrome can be described as a combination of thought patterns, emotional and behavioural reactions, which causes a person to doubt his/her achievements, success, and intelligence. It also makes one attribute his/her success to other people or external circumstances and at the same time experience the fear of seeming not competent enough. An important symptom of impostor syndrome is that the vast majority of these doubts are the opposite of reality. It must be highlighted that the syndrome is not the same as low self-esteem. It cannot be denied that people with impostor syndrome are highly productive, but they tend to devalue and underestimate themselves. At the same time, people with low self-esteem do not have such productivity as they fear failure before doing anything. This is the difference between impostor syndrome and low self-esteem.

First of all, impostor phenomenon is characterised by the fact that a person cannot accept and recognise within him-/herself his/her own achievements or success, despite the fact that there are external confirmations of these achievements. Second, the “impostor” blames nobody but him-/herself for the fact that something did not work out, even if there was no opportunity to influence it. Third, people with impostor syndrome fear revelations. For example, they believe that if everyone finds out that in fact they are not as competent and good as they seem to be, they will immediately be rejected.

The reasons for such a feeling are usually found in childhood: when a child absorbed how those around him/her reacted to his/her successes and failures. For instance, parents focused primarily on what other people would think about the child or scolded the child a lot and often for mistakes, even the smallest ones. As a result, success, both large and small, was perceived as something that is the norm, and so, the child focused on what people thought of him, on achievements for the sake of achievements, on the fear of being rejected and trying to avoid that.

There are particular family types in which an “impostor” is born. For example:

- “You do not work hard enough!” (perfectionism type) – in this case, parents encourage the child to be perfect in everything;
- Criticism of every action (bullying type) – in such a case, the child is forced to earn approval through success;
- Success is taken for granted (zero attention to the child’s success) – in the previous type, parents pretend not to care, but in this case, they really do not care about the child who is trying to get attention;
- Comparison with other people – in this case, the child wants to distinguish him-/herself among those with whom he/she is compared;
- “You are smart, and you are beautiful” (hanging labels) – the child behaves in accordance with the label;

- “You are the perfect child! Well-done. Go on!” (innate superiority, from which one cannot depart) – here, the child thinks that he/she is constantly expected to succeed, and therefore strives for it;
- Chaotic upbringing (criticism and praise altogether) – in this case, the child does not have an understanding of how to behave, and of what is good and bad because parents react differently to the same things.

Adulthood is also often characterized by the focus on achievements, which makes people feel constantly “not enough”: not fast enough, not smart enough, not meaningful enough, not competent enough. The next factor is people’s desire for continuous improvement and change. Many people, without noticing it themselves, perceive and treat themselves as an object that should correspond, be convenient, meaningful, and valuable in the eyes of others. If others value such an object, then the person also values him-/herself; otherwise, he/she is always bad, incompetent, and never worthy enough.

Social networks actively help shape an “impostor”: people see posts about other people’s results, but often they do not see the hard work behind the success. Seeing a perfect picture and feeling motivated for constant success through the depreciation of what is now further increases internal tension and conflict. It is necessary to remember that the life in the picture is sometimes very different from real life.

Being productive and striving for perfection is a good quality. However, the pursuit of a non-existent ideal can lead to psychological exhaustion or emotional burnout. Both of these ailments reduce productivity dramatically. Therefore, it must be recognized that relaxing and enjoying free time is beneficial for both physical and mental health. In conclusion, it should be emphasised that being productive and striving for perfection is really important, but only when it is done reasonably and in moderation.

References:

1. Clark, P., Holden, C., Russell, M., & Downs, H. (2022). The Impostor Phenomenon in Mental Health Professionals: Relationships Among Compassion Fatigue, Burnout, and Compassion Satisfaction. *Contemporary family therapy*, 44(2), 185–197. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10591-021-09580-y>.
2. Benisek, A. (2022). What is Imposter Syndrome? *WebMD*. URL: <https://www.webmd.com/balance/what-is-imposter-syndrome>.

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