

# Imposter syndrome



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**H**ave you ever felt that you don't have the skills you need to reach a professional goal? Do you doubt your own abilities and hold back from seizing opportunities that come your way?

## Are you paralysed by perfection?

Imposter syndrome has been defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as 'the persistent inability to believe that one's success is deserved or has been legitimately achieved as a result of one's own efforts and skills.'

Most of those reading this article will have spent a large proportion of their lifetime in education or further qualifications, as dental professionals. Whether you are a dental student at the start of your career or near retirement, it is likely that at some point you may feel imposter syndrome, which is usually linked to achievement in highly accomplished individuals.

When I was asked to write about this subject, I decided to approach this in a

way that would appeal to those of all ages and backgrounds in terms of their career progression to date. I also felt it was an ideal time to discuss this as students are starting a new university year and those in hospital posts may be starting a new position or the next year of their specialty training. Often imposter syndrome can surface when facing a transition i.e. starting a new year at school or university or changing a job role. This is due to the pressure on yourself to fit in and setting high standards to achieve.

Having spent five years at university followed by a further 13 years in training, I can confidently say I have certainly felt the symptoms of imposter syndrome at various stages of my training. The main purpose for me to write this is to help readers to realise how they can identify when they are feeling imposter syndrome and what the root cause could be, so they can find a way to overcome this and reach their full potential.

## Symptoms

1. Self-doubt
2. An inability to realistically assess your competence and skills or see your own abilities
3. Attributing your success to external factors
4. Berating your performance
5. Fear that you will not live up to expectations

6. Overachieving
7. Sabotaging your own success
8. Setting challenging goals and feeling disappointed.<sup>1</sup>

## Causes

I believe identifying the root cause and any potential triggers can be incredibly beneficial. Any deep-rooted causes could be revealed with a professional therapist. There are a number of causes of imposter syndrome that can be traced back to childhood or previous life events. Research suggests that upbringing and family dynamics can play a part as well as parenting styles.<sup>2</sup> These could be memories during our childhood of expectations to be a high achiever or being excessively criticised. An individual exposed to a family environment with high levels of conflict could also be a contributing factor.<sup>3</sup>

Personality traits such as perfectionism will certainly contribute. Are we not all perfectionists in some way? We live in an epidemic of perfectionism. From a young age, I recall setting myself very high standards for my academic achievements. This may have stemmed from being the youngest sibling and also the youngest of my extended family who had all excelled in their career choices in the medical field. One of my earliest memories

was my uncle testing my times tables when he came to visit at the age of 4 years old and subsequently the chart remained on our kitchen door! I don't think this contributed to a love of maths but it definitely led me on a path of perfectionism in my school reports and achieving the highest grades in my GCSEs and A levels.

One of the biggest reasons for imposter syndrome is the fear of what others will say and how we may be perceived. How will others respond if we choose a new job? What will our colleagues and family say if we embark on that business venture? The risk of imposter syndrome is definitely reduced when you no longer worry about what others may think.

Peer pressure and comparing ourselves to successful individuals is a huge factor, especially in the world of social media. Reduction of time spent on social media can really help combat imposter syndrome. Although we will not reach the heights of Taylor Swift stardom or the body image of those on 'Love Island,' we can, however, celebrate our own wins and achievements in life, to overcome the risk of imposter syndrome creeping up on us.

## Celebrating achievements and positive feedback

How often have you reflected on your achievements?

Consider an exercise of writing down all of your accomplishments over the past five years. Often we think of professional goals as the most important, but we should actually be considering achievements in all aspects of life. I would suggest doing the 'wheel of life' exercise as in my previous article,<sup>4</sup> which would also help to realise the 'wins' could be a hobby i.e. a sporting achievement, reaching a health and wellbeing goal or a personal achievement. It also helps to check-in at the end of the day and identify three things that went well, in order to shift your mindset and build this practice into your subconscious mind. This

reflection exercise is also useful to do at the end of the year to look back at the past twelve months, before starting 2025!

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Focus on the positive feedback you receive from colleagues and teachers and remember the progress you have made towards improving professional skills and expertise. If you are a teacher or mentor reading this, I urge you to think about how you give feedback to your student or trainee and to tailor the approach to giving constructive feedback based on the individual's needs, being empathetic towards their efforts. The impact of giving negative feedback in an unreasonable way can have a detrimental impact on an individual for the rest of their professional career and most definitely contribute towards imposter syndrome in their future if they doubt their ability.

## Building confidence

What are your core beliefs?

Do you feel worthy?

Is there a particular skill that you would like to improve?

Confidence will develop with competence and time devoted to improving a particular skill. Other useful tips include building self-worth and self-value. Daily affirmations can help to boost this! Take some time to consider the positive impact you have had on the lives of others. This may be some support or teaching you have offered a colleague to help them improve their clinical expertise or

some time to discuss cases so they can offer the best possible care to their patients. Avoid comparison to others and remind yourself everyone's journey is different.

Building confidence is easier said than done, but is something that takes time.

## Self-limiting beliefs and self-sabotage

Identifying our self-limiting beliefs takes time, in order to find what could be holding us back from progressing towards our life goals. These are beliefs within our mindset and can stem from comments others have made or past experiences or events, which we have held onto and can lead to self-sabotage. Negative beliefs of fear of failure may affect our potential to reach our full potential. An example of a self-limiting belief may be 'I am not good enough to succeed and apply for a job role' which could impact pursuing an opportunity that you deserve.

Examples of self-sabotage include not taking the steps needed to create your dream business, not applying for the job you would like or not feeling worthy to nominate yourself for an award or prize.

Remember how far you have come and all of the challenges and hurdles you have overcome. You are destined for great things!

If you would like to get in touch, my Instagram page is Nadia\_orthodontist ♡

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<https://doi.org/10.1038/s41404-024-2878-4>