Imposter Syndrome: Confronting the Career Development Monster Hiding Under the Bed

Ericka M. Boone, Ph.D.
Division of Loan Repayment (DLR)
Office of Extramural Research
National Institutes of Health
Agenda

- Welcome
- Introduction
- Workshop Goals
- What Is Imposter Syndrome?
- Why Is It A Monster?
- How Can I Vanquish the Monster??
Workshop Goals

• IMPORTANT – This presentation is about how to fix YOU!

• Transparent and interactive conversations and personal reflections to enable identification of imposter behaviors/thoughts

• Suggestions to help Refocus, Reframe, and Self-Empower...
What Are Imposter Fears/Thoughts? What Do They Feel Like??

"The whole problem with the world is that fools and fanatics are always so certain of themselves, and wiser people so full of doubts." – Bertrand Russell, British philosopher.
What Are Imposter Thoughts/Fears?

• Pattern of thought where one **discounts/doubts accomplishments and has a persistent fear** of failing, not measuring up, or being exposed as ‘a fraud’

• Outer mask of perfection…inner feelings of doubt or fear of failure

• Inner feelings of anxiety, doubt; negative self-talk; dwelling on past mistakes

• Accomplishments due to luck or others’ contribution

• Perfectionism/over-preparation…no room for error

• Experienced often by highly successful, intelligent people (i.e., does not = low self-esteem or intellect)

• Often sparked by new opportunities/ transitions

• **NO ONE EVER ADMITS IT**, so you feel alone

• More bouts, more often, can impact personal & professional development…but it doesn’t have to!
Common Imposter Thoughts...

THINGS YOU BEAT YOURSELF UP FOR:

- Stuff out of your control
- Stuff everyone has literally already forgotten about
- Stuff nobody else even noticed

All these people really seem to have it together,
Who Experiences Imposter Thoughts/Feelings?
Imposter Syndrome: Who Experiences It?

Most often experienced in ‘high achievers’ .... not slackers!

70% of individuals have experienced it at some point

That’s 2 in 3 people...so it’s not just you

In fields where considered ‘experts’ with all the answers

More frequent in women than men

Attribute success to talent and grit and failure to bad circumstances;

Attribute success to luck and help and failure to personal ineptitude/didn’t try hard enough

Most often experienced in ‘high achievers’ .... not slackers!

Perfectionist vs ‘natural geniuses’
Reinforcers of Imposter Feelings

...typically rooted in perceived differences between oneself and one’s environment

...reinforcers tend to make one feel like an ‘outsider’
Our Educational Experiences

While the U.S. science and engineering workforce has become more diverse:

- Women remain underrepresented
  - Only 29% of STEM workforce (rep 50% of US population)
- Women (esp. from underrepresented groups) are lost at every educational transition point on their way to a STEM career
  - On average, girls lose interest in STEM careers by age 15

- Hispanics, African-Americans & American Indians/Alaska Natives remain underrepresented
  - Only 11% of STEM workforce (~27% of U.S. working age pop); 70% of STEM is white

- Roadblocks are still persistent:
  - Lack of resources, role models and "relatability"
  - Introduce/engage late; if perceived as ‘harder’ students are less likely to entertain as a career
  - Unconscious bias and microaggressions reinforce feelings of not belonging/no place for you

Bye!!!
This is what EVERY class I’ve ever taken has looked like....

The Media Shows...

Teacher

Scientist

Dentist

Lawyer
Early Life Experiences and Family Dynamics
Our Work Environments

• Uncivil working environments
  o E.g., experiences of microaggression, racism, sexism, questioning leadership, contributions, etc.

• Unchecked abuses of power

• Mismatch between our values and our work/work environment

• Constant pressure to produce

• Lack of relatability, support, mentors, sponsors
Can translate into

- Feeling unseen, unheard and undervalued in our environments
- “You can’t be what you don’t see”
  - President Barak Obama
- If no one looks like you, there may not be a space for you
- It’s hard to be in spaces where you feel like you don’t belong/welcomed
We Can be OUR OWN Reinforcer of Imposter Phenomenon!
The WORST Best Friend Ever...

Do You or Have You Ever....

• Discounted accomplishments/chalked up successes to luck, timing, help from others?
• Thought to yourself or told others, ‘if I can do it, then anyone can’?
• Agonized over even the smallest flaw in your work? Do mistakes keep you up at night?
• View mistakes or critiques as evidence that you are not as equipped as others?
• Hold back from speaking up in meetings, or qualify statements with “this might not be quite right, but...”? 
• Thought, ‘I’d like to apply for that job/that grant, but I don’t think I’m not ready yet’?
• Thought, ‘Wow, everyone here really seems to have it all together, and have achieved so much! I feel like I’m just keeping my head above water’?
• Thought, ‘I cannot afford to make a mistake’?
• Thought, ‘at some point, someone will figure out that I am in over my head and call me out’?
• Tend to remember the incidents where you have not done your best MORE than those times that you HAVE done well?
ANYONE can experience moments of professional (or personal) self-doubt for different reasons

You ARE NOT ALONE!
Imposter Thoughts ≠ Low Self-Esteem

Imposterism ≠ low self-esteem

Doubt ≠ ineptitude

NOT less smart or competent than others

Your negative feedback loop playing back your mistakes could be more active....and louder
I’d like to introduce you to someone...
Even with my education, experience and in the face of the opposite evidence, I still felt like I wasn’t doing enough....
When Did I Encounter Imposter Thoughts?

7th grade math class...
When Did You First Encounter Imposter Syndrome?

“When I first became program director (PD) at an NIH institute years ago, I was the youngest PD and only African American female PD at that institute. The imposter feelings set in from the very beginning because I stood out from my scientific colleagues as the “only” too many times – the only PD in their early 30s (I was 33 and my colleagues were middle-aged or older), one of only three African American scientists (the other two were middle-aged men) and the only African American female. I truly internalized my differences from the norm in that professional setting as negative attributes.”  

NIH Chief Officer Scientific Work Force Diversity
Chat Box Activity (1 min breakout):

What’s Your Imposter Story? What Does It Look Like/Feel Like to You?
Imposter Syndrome Can Be Problematic

Can limit our BOLDNESS in our professional and personal lives and lead to:

- Procrastination
- Missed Opportunities (e.g., jobs, new roles, etc.)
- Reduces Ability to Be Proud of Yourself
- Wasted Time and Emotional Energy
- Despite your outside confident veneer, you’re exhausted and unfulfilled
- Not showing up fully, nor contributing ideas in the workplace

The bottom line?? We’re getting in our own way...
How Did Imposter Thoughts Show Itself In Your Work Or Training?

“My closely-held thoughts of professional inadequacy (or just mediocrity), reared its head one day during a meeting. I sheepishly stated a position. No one said a word. I thought the same position was stated, did he not just hear me say the exact same thing?!

Well, looking back I now realize that my self-doubt truly thwarted my ability to be effective.

"I was afraid to ask questions, thought I had to solve all problems by myself, and really thought I had to be perfect with no room for error – it was exhausting!

Chief, Office of Programs to Enhance Neuroscience Workforce Diversity, NINDS
What Are You Feeding Yourself?

Like the food that you put in your body, the ideas that you put into your head feed your confidence and feed your future.
Negative Self-Talk

- **Automatic mental tapes** start playing in situations that trigger imposter feelings
- Can be loud or soft...but insistent
- Life events, even benign, can tap into *earlier feelings of insecurity*....a reinforcement that you are doing something wrong
- Impacts our *sense of security and ego*
- Can *limit learning/growth opportunities* (focused on what could go wrong...)
- **Identify and refocus** the negative....
  - “I’m not sure I know what I’m doing ...” vs
  - “everyone starting something new may initially feel nervous; I may not know the answer now, but I’m smart enough to find them out”
It’s not who we are that holds us back.... it’s who we think we are NOT
Confronting Imposter Feelings
Free Yourself

Plant Your Feet....Breathe
• Overwhelmed? Stop, unclench your teeth, take a breather
• Separate true feelings/concerns from your fears

Silence is NOT Golden
• You don’t have to go it alone; don’t have to know all the answers
• It’s Ok (expected) that you ask questions and for help/support

Be Your Own Best Friend
• Play a new mental tape; visualize your success (vs. imminent failure)
• “How can I make this happen?” versus, “I don’t’ think this will work out”

Brush Your Shoulders Off
• Reframe internal “mistake-o-meter”
• Criticism or questions ≠ your lack of ability
• Detach issues/criticism from feelings about who YOU are (not remotely the same thing)
Free Yourself

Cut Out the Instagram/Snapchat Mentality
• “Comparison is the thief of joy” – Teddy Roosevelt
• Stop idolizing mentors/”possibility models” and comparing your ‘blooper reels’ to their ‘success reels’!

Do Something Good for Yourself and Someone Else
• Mentoring empowers you and someone else!

Engage in Self-Care
Self care is not selfish! What do you do to take care of yourself...recharge?

What’s Your Mantra?
What can you tell yourself everyday to support YOU?
Me? I want to be authentic to me and intentional with the energy that I put into the world
Chat Box Activity:
(2 min)

How Do You Engage in Self-Care?
IGNACIO's Self Care Plan!

Mind
- Meditate
- Take breaks
- Music
- Fun!
- Life-long learning

Body
- Tea
- Nourishing food
- Exercise
- Sleep
- Everything in moderation

Supportive People In My Life:
- Gretchen
- Mom
- Mi viejo
- Alberto
- Lynne
- Caroline
- Reed
- Deborah

Spirit
- Meditate
- Human connections
- Self-reflection
- Fulfillment
- Though using my awesome skills

I want to accomplish:
- Peace
- Serenity
- Control
- Happiness
- Good work
- Be a good person
Institutional Integrity, Scientific Integrity and Safe Spaces

• We’ve focused a lot this afternoon on individual level activities to undergird and support ourselves

• Our working environments also have a responsibility to promote safe, equitable work environments where individuals within do feel they need to be ‘armored’

• Ensuring environments free from hostility, bullying, discrimination and microaggression should be viewed as a matter of scientific integrity/scientific misconduct

• Safe, non-hostile, collaborative working environments proliferate trust, discovery and innovation
Leadership Support and Absolute MUST
• Ensure safe, diverse and inclusive academic environments
• Ensuring safe, diverse and inclusive cultures and working environments and unwavering support for and demonstration of values starts with leadership
• Leadership must communicate and demonstrate the values it purports
  o Can’t be part of the problem, or efforts will ring hollow
• Leadership must listen and then act so we normalize positive, more inclusive environments

Educating Staff, Provide Resources and Safe Spaces
• Regular offerings of trainings and speaker series focused on implicit bias, bullying, discrimination, and other harassing behaviors
• Empower staff engagement groups to voice and help address institutional issues
• Create safe spaces for students and faculty and a pathway for them to exit unsafe environments
Institutional Integrity, Scientific Integrity and Safe Spaces

Reward and Value More Than Publications and Grants
• Stop communicating that other contributions are not important
• Stop devaluing certain kinds of research
• Community service accomplishments should have weight

Challenging the Status Quo and Taking Action
• Regular assessment of culture and environment and develop organizational strategic plans to address
• Taking action against any and all individuals engaging in bullying, discriminatory or other harassing behaviors
• Publicly report issues of scientific integrity, including harassment
• Institute transparent reporting mechanisms
• Stop turning a blind eye, hold offenders responsible and REWARD staff that are culture changers/enhancers
• Culture, diversity, equity and inclusion linked with leadership promotion, retention
We also have a role as individuals…..I know, I know…the tax…but we can participate in our own change

- Postdocs at NIH have banded together
- NIH, CDC, USAID staff have banded together