

# Exploring the Imposter Syndrome

By Suzanne Mercier

In 1978. Psychologists Pauline Rose Clance and Suzanne Imes from Georgia State University, coined the term Imposter Syndrome.

## **Imposter Syndrome was thought to be a female affliction**

They had been working with high achieving academic women who had the secret sense that they were not as capable as others thought, even though their academic record reflected a very different story.

The symptoms of the Imposter Syndrome were described as:

- ❖ the persistent belief in one's lack of competence, skill or intelligence in the face of consistent objective data to the contrary
- ❖ an internal experience of intellectual fraudulence, particularly among high achievers
- ❖ the belief that one is not deserving of his/her career success and that others have been deceived into thinking otherwise
- ❖ an intense subjective fear of the inability to repeat past successes
- ❖ a self-concept that one's record of accomplishments is not due to ability but rather to luck, fate, charm, attractiveness or having manipulated other peoples' impressions
- ❖ the secret conviction that one is truly less intelligent and competent than he/she appears
- ❖ an unrealistic sense of one's competence in which one down-plays strengths and exaggerates



or does not tolerate any deficiencies or weaknesses.

## **However, it has been revealed to be an equal opportunity phenomenon!**

Research through the 1980's, including further studies by Dr. Pauline Rose Clance, has recognised that the Imposter Syndrome is experienced equally by males and females, by academics and people in the commercial work force, by people of different cultures.

## **Fear of Success has a strongly female bias; Fear of Failure strikes males and females equally**

In 1997, Sharon Fried-Buchalter reported the results of a study conducted among an equal number of male and female marketing managers. Theories had been put forward about Fear of Success, Fear of Failure and the Imposter Syndrome as a way of explaining "why some individuals adopt educational and career goals that appear inappropriately low in comparison with their abilities, engage in self-sabotaging behaviour with respect to their careers, or devalue and denigrate their actual accomplishments. The study was intended to investigate gender differences around these concepts. Results from the research indicated that Fear of Success had a strongly female bias due primarily to gender stereotyping which led to the belief that success was unfeminine and that there would be a price to pay for the success. Also contributing to the Fear of Success are childhood messages received by either the male or female child - such as parental reactions to performance, emphasis on

rivalry and competition, winning being rewarded, losing penalised. Fear of Failure is linked to an external Locus of Control (a term within psychology that refers to an important aspect of personality. Locus of Control refers to an individual's perception about the underlying main causes of events in his/her life. More simply: Do you believe that your destiny is controlled by yourself or by external forces (such as fate, god, or powerful others?) Research findings from the same study indicated Fear of Failure is experienced equally by males and females and that it leads to behaviour designed to avoid losing.

### **Imposterhood™ has been revealed to be a self-presentation strategy**

In 2000, 4 researchers from the Department of Psychology, Wake Forest University (Mark R. Leary, Katharine M. Patton, Amy E. Orlando, Wendy Wagoner Funk) conducted a series of research studies to test theoretical assumptions regarding the Imposter Phenomenon.

The study identified two types of Imposters: True Imposters and Strategic Imposters who used imposterism as a self-presentation tactic, lowering the expectations of other people so their performance looked better, to convey an impression of modesty or to attain other interpersonal benefits. After investigating further, they learned that even true imposters employ imposterism as a self-presentation strategy, although their motivation was more around protecting their self-esteem than about acquiring accolades.

According to the researchers, the Imposter Syndrome is a self-handicapping behaviour throwing up obstacles to success to protect or enhance self-esteem.

### **The condition is associated with sensitivity & low self-discipline**

A study conducted in 2002 by Naijean S. Bernard, Stephen J. Dollinger and Nerella V. Ramaniah sought to understand whether the

Imposter Syndrome was associated with any particular one or more of the 5 big personality factors: openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness and neuroticism.

Results found that individuals identified as experiencing the Imposter Syndrome have low levels of Conscientiousness. This personality factor relates to self-discipline, dutiful behaviours, focus on achievement, planned vs. spontaneous behaviour. It influences the way in which we control, regulate and direct our impulses.

The other key finding was that sufferers of the Imposter Syndrome rate highly on the personality factor Neuroticism. This personality factor relates to the tendency to experience negative emotions such as anger, anxiety or depression. People who score highly on this parameter tend to be emotionally reactive and vulnerable to stress. They are more likely to interpret ordinary situations as threatening and minor frustrations as hopelessly difficult. They can be in a bad mood for extended periods of time. Problems in emotional regulation can diminish the individual's ability to think clearly make decisions and cope effectively with stress.

### **The type of goals "Imposters" employ, set them up for failure**

In 2005, Shamala Kumar and Carolyn M. Jagazinski conducted research to investigate the relationship between the fears associated with the Imposter Syndrome and a specific type of achievement goal called Ability-Avoid Achievement Goals.

Two types of goals were identified: Task involving goals and Ability Achievement Goals. Each had distinctly different characteristics.

#### **Task Involving Goals**

- I assess my own competence and don't use a comparison with others as the benchmark.

- The goals themselves focus on learning and understanding the task, with task mastery as the end goal.
- People who favour this type of goal have a view of intelligence that it is not fixed, rather that it is malleable.
- Because of that view, or perhaps in conjunction with that view, people who prefer this type of goal setting are higher in adaptive behaviour. They use failure as feedback to enable them to achieve their ultimate outcome - task mastery.

### **Ability Achievement Goals**

In contrast to Task involving Goals ...

- Competence is defined in terms of normative standards - that is, the benchmark for competence is set in comparison to others and performance comes from outperforming others.
- People who set these types of goals use information about both their effort and performance to draw conclusions about their own ability (or the ability of others if they are involved in performance review & development).
- The conclusion they draw is that if an individual puts in higher effort, that means they have lower ability than someone else who took less time to complete the task. Often a completely erroneous conclusion.
- This conclusion, when applied to self, is one of the cornerstones of the Imposter Syndrome and a double bind. The individual puts in more time because he/she is afraid he/she is not good enough. Then, because they put in more time than they see others doing, they conclude that they are right - they are not good enough, reinforcing the original limiting belief.
- People who favour this type of goal setting, generally have a belief that intelligence is fixed and cannot be changed. When these people encounter failure, their egos are threatened because the failure has implications for their intelligence. They can become

quite defensive which makes it challenging for them to receive and benefit from feedback.

- Depending on how the individual perceives his/her ability relative to others around, he/she may engage in adaptive (positive) or maladaptive behaviour (negative). Maladaptive behaviour includes high anxiety, avoidance of challenge, low levels of persistence, performance deterioration. These symptoms are associated with chronic sufferers of the Imposter Syndrome.
- Ability - Avoid Achievement Goals are associated with avoiding any demonstration of incompetence (fear of failure) while Ability-Approach Achievement Goals are associated with avoiding demonstration of competence (fear of success).

Summary of findings from the study included:

- Ability-Achievement Goals are associated with the Imposter Syndrome.
- Women related to imposter fears more than men.
- Women reported lower confidence in their intelligence than men.
- Imposter fears for men were associated with fear of failure (Ability-Avoid Achievement Goals). The more motivated men were by the desire to avoid failure, the greater their imposter fears.
- Women were more strongly associated with fear of success (Ability-Approach Achievement Goals) and to a lesser extent, fear of failure.
- Women have a much lower task involving goal incidence, meaning that there is a stronger tendency for them to compare themselves to others, often unfavourably.

Understanding the Imposer Syndrome is an academic and commercial work in progress. For practical purposes, we can

focus our attention on the consequences of Imposterhood™ feelings, regardless of their cause.

For those of us who can relate to the Imposter Syndrome, these feelings generally limit our ability to perform to the level of our promise. This can be either because we seek to live under the radar avoiding discovery as the fake or fraud we believe ourselves to be or because we become overachievers, putting far more time and effort into what we do for the same outcome,

thus reinforcing that we are simply not as capable or intelligent as others around us.

And if 70% of people in the workforce are experiencing the effects of the Imposter Syndrome, chances are they're feeling the same way!

This is definitely an individual and organisational problem that needs to be addressed.



*Suzanne Mercier, director of Purpose to Profit and Imposterhood, is obsessed with facilitating authentic leadership - of self and others - leading to inspired performance. Suzanne can be contacted on 61 (0) 400 995 942 or [suzanne@imposterhood.com](mailto:suzanne@imposterhood.com). And for information on how to increase the level of authentic leadership and engagement in your organisation, visit [www.purposetoprofit.com.au](http://www.purposetoprofit.com.au) or [www.imposterhood.com](http://www.imposterhood.com)*

*© Suzanne Mercier 2009. All rights reserved.*

*Please feel free to circulate this article provided it is reproduced in its entirety complete with copyright notice.*

*Imposterhood is a trademark of Suzanne Mercier.*

*Purpose  
to Profit*

