

YOUNG LAWYERS

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OVERCOMING IMPOSTER SYNDROME

I still vividly remember the day my bar results were released. I was too nervous to scroll through the results on my own, so I made my husband check for me. When he told me that I passed, I was surprised at my mix of emotions. First, I was elated, but at the same time I felt immense dread. Something in me assumed there must have been a mistake, and that when the official results came by mail it would expose that I really failed. But, alas, it turned out that I really did pass. Even after I was sworn in, I would often get the feeling that I was not worthy of being an attorney. Although these feelings of self-doubt were more prevalent in my early years of practice, fast-forward almost seven years and those are still feelings I find myself facing. Despite my education and accomplishments, I fear someone will finally decide that I'm

not competent or qualified for the practice of law.

If any of those feelings or thoughts sound familiar to you, you might also be a person who suffers from the phenomenon known as imposter syndrome, an ever-growing issue facing young professionals.

What Is Imposter Syndrome?

Imposter syndrome as defined by Merriam-Webster is “a psychological condition that is characterized by persistent doubt concerning one’s abilities or accomplishments accompanied by the fear of being exposed as a fraud despite evidence of one’s ongoing success.”¹

The term “imposter syndrome,” originally coined “imposter phenomenon,” was first studied in 1978 by American psychologists Pauline Clance and Suzanne Imes. In their article “The Imposter Phenomenon in High Achieving

Women: Dynamics and Therapeutic Intervention,” Clance and Imes used the term “imposter phenomenon” to describe what they observed in high-achieving women, that “[d]espite outstanding academic and professional accomplishments, women who experience the imposter phenomenon persist in believing that they are really not bright and have fooled anyone who thinks otherwise. Numerous achievements, which one might expect to provide ample object evidence of superior intellectual functioning, do not appear to affect the imposter belief.”²

Initial research theorized that women experienced imposter syndrome more frequently and intensely than men. However, over the years it has become clear that the feeling of imposter syndrome is widely experienced. Research has shown that imposter syndrome affects everyone regardless of gender³

or occupation,⁴ and it impacts those across cultures.⁵ It is estimated that 70% of people will have at least one episode of imposter syndrome in their lives.⁶

Imposter syndrome is more commonly exhibited in those working in high-achieving, stressful and competitive professions, and amongst those with traits of perfectionism and achievement orientation.⁷ Therefore, it is not surprising that imposter syndrome is prevalent among those in the legal profession. As lawyers we are commonly perfectionists and overachievers, two traits that can exacerbate the feeling of being an intellectual fraud — especially for young attorneys as they are just starting their practice.

How to Combat Imposter Syndrome

If you are experiencing imposter syndrome, here are a few tools that might help.

- 1) *Realizing you are not alone:* Your feelings are normal, and you are not alone. As previously noted, it is estimated that at least 70% of people will experience an episode of imposter syndrome in their lifetime. That confident attorney you admire has also likely experienced the same feelings of self-doubt. Even high-achieving attorneys like Michelle Obama have shared their struggles with imposter syndrome.
- 2) *Normalizing imposter syndrome:* Realizing you are not alone is only the first step. It is also important that we share our feeling. When you keep feelings of self-doubt to yourself, they can fester and potentially lead to burnout and other mental health issues. It is important as a profession that we share our feelings with our peers. Discussing our collective feelings around imposter syndrome could improve the overall mental well-being of those in our profession.
- 3) *Validating yourself:* You have worked extremely hard to get where you are. You have shown hard work, dedication and skill. Make sure you celebrate your successes and practice self-care. We all make mistakes; don't let yourself be dragged down by things you might mess up, but rather

learn from them. As you have likely heard before, there is a reason it is called the practice of law and not the perfection of law.

- 4) *Asking for help:* You also aren't expected to handle your feelings on your own. If you want to build confidence in your practice, one way to do so is finding a great mentor. That person can be someone in your practice or another attorney. In addition, if you are ever overwhelmed with your feelings of self-doubt, burnout or anxiety, don't hesitate to seek professional assistance. A mental health professional can assist in treating those feelings. The West Virginia Judicial & Lawyer Assistance Program is a great resource for attorneys dealing with stress, burnout, anxiety and depression.

As Dr. Taylor Alison Swift says in her newest single, “You gotta fake it 'til you make it” — and you did. You studied, you worked hard, and you have all the skills and knowledge needed to be a successful and competent attorney. As a young attorney, or even as a well-practiced attorney, that is something we can lose sight of — but it is important to remember you are not alone. **WVU**

Endnotes

1. “Imposter syndrome.” Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, Merriam-Webster, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/impostor%20syndrome>. Accessed 18 Jul. 2024.
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3. Langford, J., & Clance, P.R. (1993). The imposter phenomenon: Recent research findings regarding dynamics, personality and family patterns and their implications for treatment. *Psychotherapy*, 30(3), 495–501.
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5. Clance, P. R., Dingman, D., Reviere, S.L., & Stober, D.R. (1995). Impostor phenomenon in an interpersonal/social context: Origins and treatment. *Women and Therapy*, 16(4), 79–96.
6. Gravois, J. (2007). You're not fooling anyone. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 54(11), A1.
7. Kawcutt et al. Bias, Burnout, and Imposter Phenomenon: The Negative Impact of Under-Recognized Intersectionality, 2 *Women's Health Reports* 643 (2021), available at <https://perma.cc/RP5R-YJU7>.