

# The high cost of perfectionism

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A little self-doubt at work can be a good thing, but like anything else—too much can be a bad thing.

When employees, usually high performers, start to doubt their abilities too much it can turn into impostor [phenomenon](#), causing fatigue, dissatisfaction, and the inability to maintain a healthy [work](#)-life balance.

Employees experiencing impostor phenomenon have trouble recognizing and believing their own success and tend to overcompensate, which takes an emotional toll.

Lisa Sublett, assistant professor of industrial-organizational psychology at the University of Houston-Clear Lake, felt a personal connection to this question. She and her colleagues, Lisa Penney, associate professor with the University of South Florida Sarasota-Manatee, and Holly Hutchins, professor at the University of Houston, wanted to expand current research about impostor phenomenon and look at how it is related to family and home satisfaction.

Managing impostor phenomenon can be draining for employees, and they frequently tend to be stressed and deplete emotional resources from feelings of incompetence. The researchers wanted to know if that is related to work-family conflict for them and, in turn, how that affected job satisfaction. They theorized that "feeling like a fake" at work would have a negative impact on their home life and that dissatisfaction at home would be related to lower job satisfaction.

What they found was that employees experiencing impostor phenomenon are more likely to have conflict with work and family roles because they are emotionally exhausted, and they tend to be less satisfied with family life because of it. They were surprised that employees did not seem have lower job satisfaction because of work-family conflict, although emotional exhaustion did contribute to less satisfaction at work.

"The most important point of our study is showing employees who experience persistent thoughts of feeling like a fake are not only experiencing detrimental effects at work but also at home," Sublett said. "These accomplished employees are emotionally drained and struggle maintaining family and work demands. Our study also adds legitimacy to discussing impostor phenomenon as an important talent development

issue, especially for high-potential employees."

Because managers need to keep those high performers, it is important to recognize the signs of impostor phenomenon early and help mitigate those feelings. This research resulted in some practical recommendations for managers that included policy changes as well as individual support to employees.

"We recommend that supervisors become aware of indicators that signal a subordinate is struggling with impostor phenomenon," Sublett said. "As our study shows, these employees are at a greater risk of experiencing high levels of burnout, job dissatisfaction, and work-family conflict. In addition to providing emotional support for these individuals, supervisors can help alleviate impostor cognitions by providing individual coaching on perfectionism and frequent performance feedback."

Indicators of impostor phenomenon include maladaptive perfectionist tendencies like overpreparing and overestimation of mistakes. Employees experiencing impostor phenomenon may use expressions such as "I was lucky," "I was in the right place at the right time," and "If I can do it, anyone can" in describing their work rather than recognizing their own achievements.

The researchers are also working on additional solutions to assist managers in recognizing and addressing the signs of impostor phenomenon.

"One of the co-authors, Dr. Hutchins, has developed a skills-based workshop that helps participants recognize and interrupt the distorted cognitions that fuel impostor thoughts," Sublett explained. "She is piloting this now with faculty at the University of Houston. Preliminary results are promising in lowering impostor cognitions and increasing

core self-evaluation."

Work-life balance continues to be an important topic in the workplace and remains as one of the Top 10 Workplace Trends for SIOP. The team of researchers presented their work in April at this year's SIOP Annual Conference.

"My coauthors and I were all drawn to studying impostor phenomenon because it is something all of us have personally experienced at various points in our careers," Sublett said. "Constantly feeling like a fake, ruminating on errors, and perfectionism at work are very challenging and draining, so it is an important topic to study to understand the negative implications for employees' work and personal life."

For this study they surveyed 463 employees in the southern United States over the age of 18 who worked at least 20 hours per week and had been in the same job for at least 6 months. The researchers believe that the findings of this research lend themselves to exploring a number of other avenues when it comes to the long-term impact of impostor phenomenon on home and family life.

"My coauthors and I are planning to study impostor phenomenon in other contexts as well," Sublett said. "We are currently planning to conduct more research on impostor phenomenon across career stages as well as the effectiveness of different types of intervention strategies."

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