

Impostor syndrome is more common than you think—study finds best way to cope with it

September 24 2019



A student experiences impostor syndrome in this photo illustration. Credit: BYU Photo

The impostor syndrome, a phenomenon that manifests when people feel like frauds even if they are actually capable and well-qualified, affects people both in the workplace and in the classroom. A new study reveals

that perceptions of impostorism are quite common and uncovers one of the best—and worst—ways to cope with such feelings.

Findings of the study, co-authored by Brigham Young University professors Jeff Bednar, Bryan Stewart, and James Oldroyd, revealed that 20 percent of the [college students](#) in their sample suffered from very strong [feelings](#) of impostorism. The researchers conducted interviews with students in an elite academic program to understand the various coping mechanisms students used to escape these feelings, but one particular method stood out above the rest: seeking [social support](#) from those outside their academic program.

The findings of their interview study suggest that if students "reached in" to other students within their major, they felt worse more often than they felt better. However, if the [student](#) "reached out" to family, friends outside their major, or even professors, perceptions of impostorism were reduced.

"Those outside the social group seem to be able to help students see the big picture and recalibrate their reference groups," said Bednar, a BYU management professor and co-author on the study. "After reaching outside their [social group](#) for support, students are able to understand themselves more holistically rather than being so focused on what they felt they lacked in just one area."

Along with seeking social support, the study also uncovered negative ways students coped with impostorism. Some students tried to get their mind off schoolwork through escapes such as video games but ended up spending more time gaming than studying. Other students tried to hide how they really felt around their classmates, pretending they were confident and excited about their performance when deep down they questioned if they actually belonged.

In a second study, the researchers surveyed 213 students to confirm what was revealed in their interview study about seeking social support: reaching out to individuals outside the major proved to be more effective than reaching in to individuals within the major.

Surprisingly, the study also reveals that perceptions of impostorism lack a significant relationship with performance. This means that individuals who suffer with the impostor syndrome are still capable of doing their jobs well, they just don't believe in themselves. Researchers also explain that social-related factors impact impostorism more than an individual's actual ability or competence.

"The root of impostorism is thinking that people don't see you as you really are," said Stewart, an accounting professor at BYU and co-author on the study. "We think people like us for something that isn't real and that they won't like us if they find out who we really are."

Outside the classroom, researchers believe that implications from this study can and should be applied in the workplace as well. "It's important to create cultures where people talk about failure and mistakes," Bednar said. "When we create those cultures, someone who is feeling strong feelings of impostorism will be more likely to get the help they need within the organization."

More information: Richard G. Gardner et al, "I must have slipped through the cracks somehow": An examination of coping with perceived impostorism and the role of social support, *Journal of Vocational Behavior* (2019). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jvb.2019.103337](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2019.103337)

Provided by Brigham Young University

Citation: Impostor syndrome is more common than you think—study finds best way to cope with it (2019, September 24) retrieved 23 June 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2019-09-impostor-syndrome-common-thinkstudy-cope.html>

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