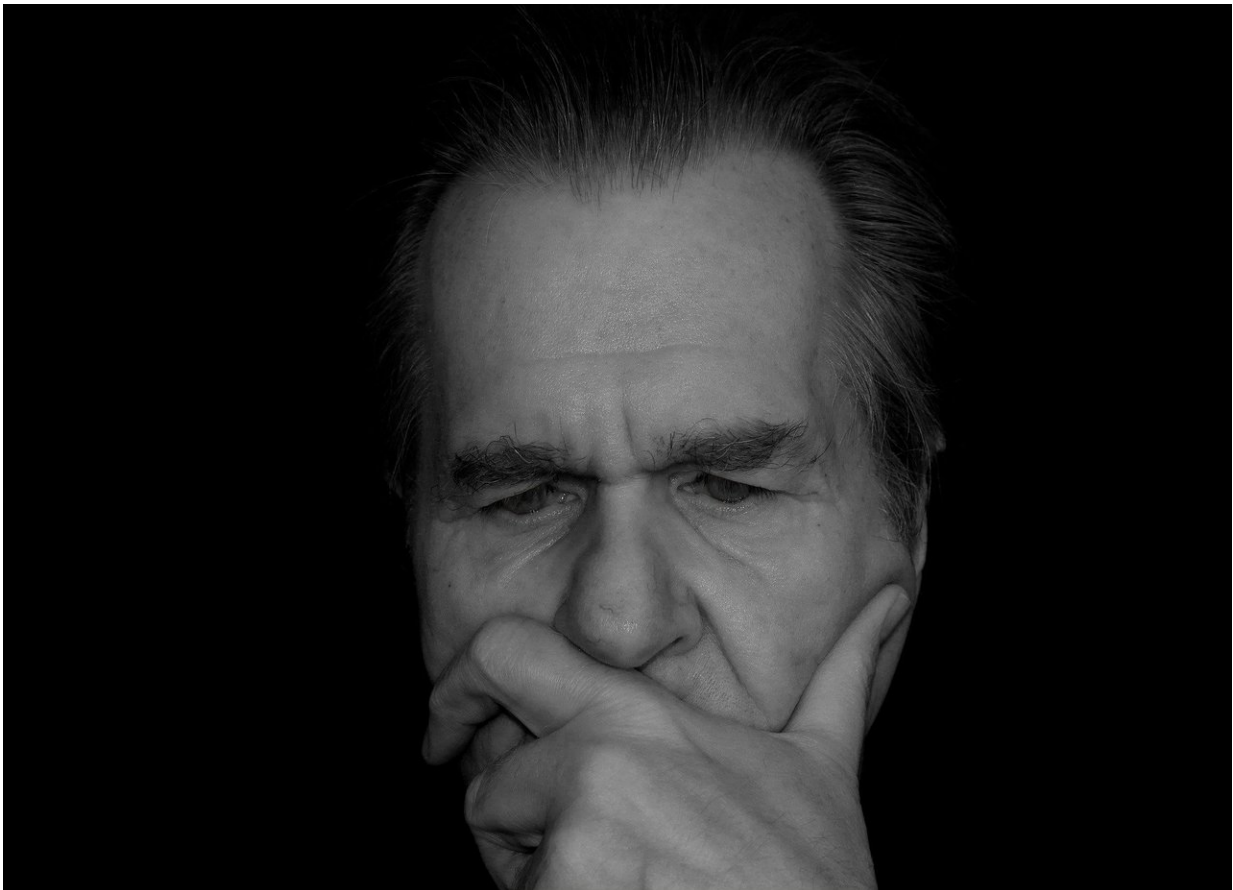


# Study finds an unexpected upside to imposter syndrome

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Even many successful people harbor what is commonly called impostor syndrome, a sense of being secretly unworthy and not as capable as

others think. First posited by psychologists in 1978, it is often assumed to be a debilitating problem.

But research by an MIT scholar suggests this is not universally true. In workplace settings, at least, those harboring impostor-type concerns tend to compensate for their perceived shortcomings by being good team players with strong social skills, and are often recognized as productive workers by their employers.

"People who have workplace impostor thoughts become more other-oriented as a result of having these thoughts," says Basima Tewfik, an assistant professor at the MIT Sloan School of Management and author of a new paper detailing her findings. "As they become more other-oriented, they're going to be evaluated as being more interpersonally effective."

Tewfik's research as a whole suggests we should rethink some of our assumptions about impostor-type complexes and their dynamics. At the same time, she emphasizes, the prevalence of these types of thoughts among workers should not be ignored, dismissed, or even encouraged.

"There are far better ways to make someone interpersonally effective. Impostor thoughts lower positive thoughts and still lower self-esteem," says Tewfik, who is the Class of 1943 Career Development Professor at Sloan, and whose research often examines workplace and organization issues. However, as her research reveals, "the myth is that this is always going to be bad for your performance."

The paper, "The Impostor Phenomenon Revisited: Examining the Relationship between Workplace Impostor Thoughts and Interpersonal Effectiveness at Work," is available online from the *Academy of Management Journal* and will appear in the June print edition.

## Observations from the field

The concept of the "Impostor Phenomenon" was originally put forth in a 1978 paper by two psychologists, Pauline Rose Clance and Suzanne A. Imes, who initially focused their work on women with high-achieving careers and kept exploring the subject in subsequent work.

Even that original conceptualization observed that people suffering from impostor-style professional self-doubt are often very socially skilled, an aspect of the issue that Tewfik decided to explore in greater detail. Her research includes fieldwork in firms and surveys, to pinpoint the consequences of what she terms "impostor workplace thoughts."

For instance, Tewfik surveyed employees at an investment management firm, to see if and when they struggle with impostor workplace thoughts, while collecting employee evaluations. Over an extended time period, those employees with more impostor-type thoughts were seen by their employers as working more effectively with their colleagues, while being productive overall.

"I did find this [positive relationship](#)," Tewfik says. "For those having impostor thoughts at [the beginning of the time period], two months later their supervisors rated them as more interpersonally effective."

Tewfik then examined a physician-training program and repeated the process of surveying people while they went through the course. Similarly, those with more impostor workplace thoughts were the ones who connected best with patients.

"What I found is again this positive relationship, those physicians [with impostor concerns] were rated by their patients as more interpersonally effective, they were more empathetic, they listened better, and they elicited information well," Tewfik notes.

Because the physician-training program featured recorded videos of its participants, Tewfik was able to pinpoint how some physicians connected better with people: "Those physicians in training who reported more impostor thoughts were also the ones who exhibited greater eye gaze, more open hand gestures, and more nodding, and this essentially explains why patients were giving them higher interpersonal effectiveness ratings."

Tewfik also conducted two additional surveys, using the Prolific platform, with employees across a range of businesses, extracting information about workplace impostor thoughts, their persistence, and their implications for job performance. Among other things, Tewfik did not find a greater prevalence of workplace impostor thoughts for women than for men, somewhat in contrast to the popular perception of the phenomenon—as well as the original 1970s research that focused on women.

## **Rethinking a real problem**

These overlapping field work results and surveys, Tewfik thinks, establish a clear chain of causality related to imposter complexes, in which workers deploy compensatory mechanisms to thrive despite their self-doubts: "Because you're having imposter thoughts, you're adopting an other-focused orientation, which is leading to more interpersonal effectiveness."

The data also suggest that impostor workplace thoughts are not a permanent feature of an employee's mentality; people can shed those kinds of concerns as they become more established in their positions.

In general, Tewfik thinks, such dynamics indicate that workplace impostor thoughts "may not be what we've have originally conceptualized," at least in the popularized form. Indeed, Tewfik prefers

not to refer to workplace impostor thoughts as a full-fledged syndrome, with its connotations of negativity and permanence.

Even so, she adds, "What I don't want people to take away is the idea that because people with impostor thoughts are more interpersonally effective, it's not a problem." People working in nongroup settings may struggle with the same doubts but have no way of compensating for them through interpersonal connections because of their solitary work routines.

"We found a positive net outcome, but there might be scenarios where you don't find that," Tewfik says. "If you're working somewhere where you don't have interpersonal interaction, it might be pretty bad if you have impostor thoughts."

Tewfik is continuing her own research on the subject, examining issues like whether workplace impostor thoughts might be tied to creativity. She says she would be glad if more scholars establish additional empirical conclusions about [workplace](#) impostor thoughts.

"I hope this paper will spur a broader conversation around this phenomenon," Tewfik says. "My hope is really that other scholars join this conversation. It's an area that is ripe for a lot of future [research](#)."

**More information:** Basima A. Tewfik, The Impostor Phenomenon Revisited: Examining the Relationship between Workplace Impostor Thoughts and Interpersonal Effectiveness at Work, *Academy of Management Journal* (2021). [DOI: 10.5465/amj.2020.1627](https://doi.org/10.5465/amj.2020.1627)

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