



FACING YOUR IMPOSTER SYNDROME

Newcastle University - Creative Fuse - Captured Programme

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INTRODUCTION

Mortal Fools is a multi award-winning theatre, drama and creative learning company in North East England, based in Northumberland. Our core purpose is to support people of all ages to form better inter-personal connections – it's a fundamental pillar of wellbeing and it strengthens people, groups and businesses.

If Mortal Fools' core purpose is to support other people to have strong inter-personal relationships, everyone who works at Mortal Fools has to be able to do that too. This means having the personal knowledge and skills to do it – and all of us in the company have to be committed to cultivating an environment at work and in all of our activities which creates the culture that we want. Imposter Syndrome is one of those tricky things that, if not dealt with appropriately, can quickly get in the way of how individuals approach their life and work and have detrimental effect on how we work with other people – especially in challenging situations.

WHAT IS IMPOSTER SYNDROME

Impostor syndrome is also known as Impostor phenomenon, Impostorism, Fraud syndrome or the Impostor experience and it is a psychological pattern of thinking in which you doubt your skills, talents, or accomplishments and which gives you an internal experience of believing that you are not as competent as others perceive you to be.

To put it simply, Imposter Syndrome is the experience of feeling like a fraud—you feel as though at any moment you are going to be found out —like you don't belong where you are, and you only got there through luck or other people helping you. It can affect anyone no matter their social status, work background, skill level, or degree of expertise.

The term was first used by psychologists Suzanna Imes and Pauline Rose Clance in the 1970s. When the concept of Imposter Syndrome was introduced, it was originally thought to apply mostly to high-achieving women. Since then, it has been recognised as affecting all genders equally.

While Imposter Syndrome might affect us more in specific circumstances, the greatest problem with it is its impact over the longer term, stopping us from taking chances, from speaking up for what we believe in, from progressing in our careers and our relationships.

Most people experience some form of Imposter Syndrome at some points in their lives.

Characteristics of Imposter Syndrome

To help you consider how much it affects you, we looked at some of the common signs of Imposter Syndrome:

- An inability to realistically assess your competence and skills
- Attributing your success to external factors
- Berating your performance
- Fear that you won't live up to expectations
- Overachieving



- Sabotaging your own success
- Self-doubt
- Setting very challenging goals and feeling disappointed when you fall short

HOW IMPOSTER. SYNDROME AFFECTS US

We then took 2 minutes to consider whether you recognised these signs in yourself in your professional context. We also considered if there are any *specific* situations / settings where these affect you most.

Kiz shared the example of sitting on the Board of a Charity, and feeling like she was sharing a space with “proper grown ups”

Stan shared their example of being asked by a friend to join a musical recording session, despite doubting his own musical ability

ZOOM OUT TO LOOK AT EARLY HUMANKIND

Human beings have always been designed to live and work in groups and our species has evolved by joining together in groups and doing things, accomplishing things together and, as such, our need to belong in the safety of a group is psychologically hard-wired into all of us. We all want to belong, to be accepted, valued and supported. In the times of early humankind, our very survival depended on it.

At this point in our history, if you found yourself on the outside of a social group, you were the one much more likely to fall prey to outside dangers like predators, or natural threats like extreme weather.

And that hard-wiring in our brains has evolved very little now we're in the 21st century – in fact – the parts of our brain that control these responses, known as the limbic system, have hardly changed at all.

The limbic system, often known as our fight or flight response, is a non-thinking part of our brain, and because of that, it can't rationally tell us that the environment we're about to walk into – the boardroom, the meeting, the presentation, the rehearsal – is not a place that will cause us actual physical harm, and so our bodies are triggered to react in all the same ways that it might if we were facing an actual threat to our lives.

When we experience any stress – including the stress caused by imposter syndrome, there are dozens of things which happen rapidly in our bodies. These include:

- A release of glucose to provide a burst of energy – *maybe we find ourselves babbling or unable to sit still*
- A flood of adrenaline – *an energising hormone which activates our muscles for fighting or running away from the danger*
- A flood of Cortisol (the ‘stress hormone’), which (amongst other things) suppresses the pre-frontal cortex, the rational thinking part of our brains, so we might feel confused or unable to form coherent

thoughts. All of this reinforces the feelings we associate with Imposter Syndrome - not being good enough, not being competent, not belonging and ultimately being found out – and then rejected from the group in some way.

As a side note, it's worth noting that many people at this stage of the pandemic are reporting reduced brain functioning – things that previously would have been easy, feel more arduous, exposing and complicated. That – amongst other things like widespread fatigue – is a symptom of the brain's long-term (and continuing) exposure to the stress hormone cortisol, and definitely one to bear in mind in how it is fuelling our feelings of not being good enough or being found out.



Imposter syndrome is a shame-driven experience – when we feel like ‘the other’ – someone who doesn’t belong, isn’t legitimate and is going to be found out.

Feelings of ‘otherness’ will be fueled by different things for different people – it’s commonly linked to being in a minority within a group. For example, gender in spaces with a strong gender bias, it might be because of age – you believe you won’t be taken seriously by other grown-ups, it might be because of race or it might be driven by our life circumstances, our level of education, our world experience, our class... and so on.

Whatever is fueling it for us, these feelings drive us to feel on the outside of the group – which is often as deeply vulnerable and uncomfortable an experience as it was for our ancestors.

And when we feel uncomfortable, it’s a natural driver to find ways to reduce that discomfort, but this can sometimes lead to quite extreme forms of behaviour. You might notice other behaviours in yourself, but some of the most common ones associated with Imposter Syndrome include:

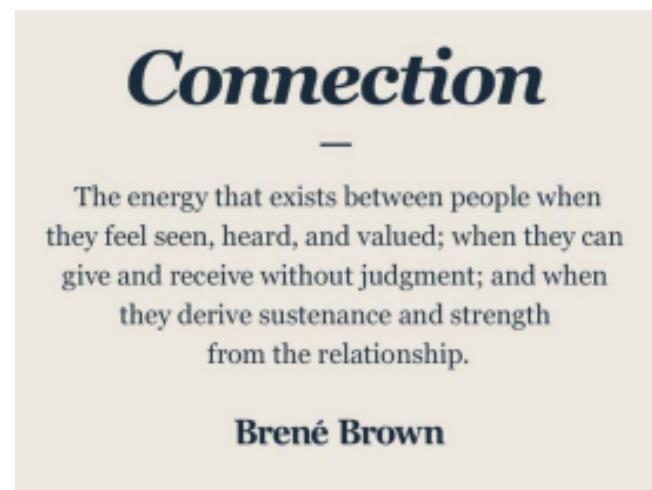
- Doing things to assimilate to the group ‘norm’ in an effort to be accepted by the group – for example, changing how you dress, speak or behave to fit in. The real irony here is that putting on armour and trying to assimilate is exhausting and actually counter-productive because people have a natural bullshit meter, and even if they can’t say exactly why something’s ‘not quite right’ about you, they’ll feel it, keep their distance and then make you feel like more of an imposter!
- Rebell ing against it – come out fighting and push our energy on others in an effort not to be challenged or exposed as the fraud you believe yourself to be – perhaps trying to dominate conversations or spaces, not letting other people get a word in

- Stay small and unnoticed believing that if we do so, no one will ever look too closely at us
- Or we might quit – step away from the group entirely.

FEELING LIKE 'THE OTHER'

We then returned to the settings in which you might experience feelings of being an imposter. We considered what is driving *your* feelings of being an imposter – in what way do you feel like 'the other'?

Remember, once we can name something and consider it and talk about it, it begins to lose some of its power over us. So it's important that you begin to identify the root cause of your feelings of being the 'other'.



21st CENTURY COMPARISON CULTURE

Within western society, we have become very good at comparing our insides with other people's outsides. We struggle, work hard, experience failure and then look at what we can see of others – the part of their iceberg which is visible to us and directly compare it to what we're experiencing. *They* make it look so easy and we forget that *they* will have their struggles too and so immediately we feel that they must be better than us.



Consider social media – those curated versions of our lives where we get to choose exactly what the world gets to see and doesn't get to see of us, photo retouching or blatant altering in the media - all of this fuels our feelings of inadequacy, as we rely on an external affirmation to validate ourselves.

And it's no accident - comparison culture is good for business.

Advertising, for example, in the 1950s was mostly focused on selling us products that would help our lives function better, make them a little easier.

In the 21st century, it is pervaded by messaging that somehow we're not good enough – want to treat the ones you love this Christmas? (aka - if you don't buy them this, you're letting them down), or want to live a more exciting and adventurous life – buy this car / house / games console (aka don't be boring!); want to be sexier, more popular, part of the best party in town, the envy of all your neighbours... buy this buy this buy this!!

Comparison culture permeates our everyday life and we're so used to it being there, it's easy to forget the enormous influence it has over how we feel about ourselves.



ZOOM BACK IN – WHAT CAN WE DO ABOUT IT?

All this feels quite grim – none of us can actually change these external factors BUT we can use this knowledge to manage how this influences and affects us. We began to consider practical ways we can disrupt the negative patterns of thinking which fuel feelings of being an imposter.

If we walk through the world looking for evidence that we're not good enough, we'll always find it. If we walk through the world looking for evidence that we don't belong, we'll always find it. So instead, we must actively work to retrain our brain into patterns of thinking and patterns of action that are not holding us back.

MANAGE OUR LIFE SCRIPTS – THE STORIES WE TELL OURSELVES ABOUT OURSELVES

The first strategy we advocate is taking control of our life scripts. 'Life Scripts' is a term in psychology which refers to the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves. No-one talks to us as much as we talk to ourselves, and so this has a profound impact on how we feel about ourselves and what we believe to be true about ourselves.

With this in mind, it's time well spent considering our patterns of self-talk and taking action to reduce any negative patterns of thinking. This will manifest for each of us in different ways, but here are three simple actions you can consider taking:

- When someone gives you a compliment, simply say THANK YOU, and swallow all other words.
- Consider how you can cultivate a more growth mindset for yourself. Growth mindset is the belief (and actions and behaviours which reinforce those beliefs) that our abilities are not fixed and can be increased.

A Fixed mindset might be *I'm not good at...* but Growth mindset would *I find that challenging, so _____ would help me with that.*

- Identify someone specific you can talk to about these feelings – someone you can share your experiences with and listen to theirs.

Research into Shame clearly illustrates that the less we talk about it, the more we have it. So let's start making it normal to talk openly about these feelings and experiences. We discussed how "shining a light on our shame" can help dissolve some of the power these feelings of Imposter Syndrome have on us.

RECOGNISE YOUR ACCOMPLISHMENTS AND WHAT YOU BRING TO THIS WORLD

You are unique and you bring to the world something that no one else can, so get used to recognising your achievements in practical and regular ways.

- Make a list of your accomplishments - keep them somewhere either visible or that you have access to.
- Make a list of your strengths and your personal values. Ask other people to list some for you too. Keep that list close at hand as a reminder of things you're not willing to step away from.

With these actions, beware the shame gremlins creeping in and telling you how arrogant it is to keep a list of such things!

In her research, Brene Brown talks about shame keeping us bouncing back and forth between two places – *Not Good Enough* and *Who Do You Think You Are?* Neither of these are healthy places to be – so we must use these approaches to help us manage the impact of shame.

We then asked participants to set a specific goal that you can work on in the next 3-6 months, with the aim of improving how you interact with the setting you identified. Remember, these goals should be achievable within your context. You might find starting with small steps and working towards a bigger goal will help you build up to overcoming your feelings in a manageable way.

UNDERSTANDING HOW WE LEARN NEW THINKING / BEHAVIOURS PATTERNS

We ended the session by looking at the Conscious Competence Model. This is a useful model to help us track our progress with implementing new learning, skills and actions. Most goals start at the point of conscious competence and may move back and forth between sections of this model as we encounter setbacks or make progress.



It's worth bearing in mind that it takes around 400 repetitions to build up a strong new neural pathway, strong, learned connections in your brain, so don't be disheartened if this goal you've set yourself takes a while to reach or new the new behaviour takes a while to embed. This is completely normal.

It's worth identifying places where you can put the actions relating to your goal into practice in less high stakes environments to help you build up the neural pathway without so much pressure.

Flora shared how she still feels Imposter Syndrome, but she knows what drives those feelings. The important thing is learning to recognise them when they happen and actively use strategies to make sure those feelings are not what drives your actions and your behaviour.

YOUR QUESTIONS

We ended by opening for questions, where we talked about Positive Psychology - a practice that is based on identifying your personal strengths and what you individually bring to any situation, and then building on those areas of strength.

If you need help to identify those areas of strength, we would recommend looking at 'Values in Action Inventory' or you can use '16 Personalities' - a website which uses Myers Briggs Type Indicator as a reflective tool.

Thank you for attending this CONNECT workshop. We hope you found it useful. To find out more about our CONNECT programme of training, check out our website - www.mortalfools.org.uk/connect

To build on the content and skills outlined in this workshop, or to cover something specific with us in more detail, we also offer 60 min one-to-one coaching with one of our team. For details of this, please contact - Rachel.Horton@mortalfools.org.uk.

THANK YOU FOR TRAINING WITH US.

Income from our training with organisations is used to subsidise our programmes with children and young people.

To find out more visit www.mortalfools.org.uk

FURTHER RESOURCES

Watch

- Brené Brown talk about [Vulnerability](#).
- Carol Dweck talk about [Growth Mindset](#) and how to cultivate one.
- Julian Treasure's TED talk about using your voice to influence [HERE](#).
- A short film about how the flight, fight, freeze, faint or feign/fidget (5Fs survival response) affects our body and mind, click [HERE](#).
- Robert Winston talk about [How We Learn: Synapses and Neural Pathways](#)
- Susan Cain talk about the unique contribution introverts make in workplaces [HERE](#).
- Cultivating empathy has been shown to greatly increase resilience in both yourself and others. You might enjoy this short [RSA animated video](#) on the difference between empathy and sympathy.
- You might also enjoy this short animation about one common way we discharge feelings of shame and fear – common when we are facing challenges – [we blame others](#)
- Mortal Fools' series of short [Advice and Support](#) videos

Listen

- [Unlocking Us](#) and [Dare to Lead](#) Podcasts from Brené Brown
- [A Bit of Optimism](#) Podcast from Simon Sinek
- Mortal Fools' [When the World is Loud](#) audio theatre experience download – designed to support mental wellbeing



during a 70 minute walk / meander about your home.

Read

- *Presence*, and *The Right to Speak* by Patsy Rodenburg
- *The Gifts of Imperfection, Daring Greatly, Rising Strong, Braving the Wilderness* by Brené Brown
- *Mindset: How you can fulfil your potential* by Carol Dweck
- *The Boy, the Mole, the Fox and the Horse* by Charlie Mackesy
- [Say Goodbye to the Inner Critic](#) – a blog from PsychologyToday
- [TED Article](#) about the power of the stories we tell about ourselves.
- A Guardian article on [The Meaning of Life Scripts](#).
- *The Chimp Paradox* by Steve Peters
- [The Reality of Imposter Syndrome](#) – a blog from PsychologyToday.

Do

- [VIA \(Values in Action\) Strengths Test](#) to help you identify your personal values
- [16 Personalities Test](#) to help you identify your strengths and personal tendencies that may be hindering you.

