Impostor Syndrome

Joshua Drew
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“BUT I AM VERY POORLY TODAY AND FEEL VERY STUPID AND HATE EVERYBODY AND EVERYTHING. ONE LIVES ONLY TO MAKE BLUNDERS”
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CHARLES DARWIN TO CHARLES LYELL IN 1861, ONE YEAR AFTER ON THE ORIGIN OF SPECIES
I am assailed with my own ignorance and inability. Honesty. If I can keep an honesty to it… If I can do that it will be all my lack of genius can produce. For no one else knows my lack of ability the way I do. I am pushing against it all the time. Sometimes, I seem to do a good little piece of work, but when it is done it slides into mediocrity…
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John Steinbeck, June 18 1938 while writing The Grapes of Wrath
Unmasking the impostor
The impostor syndrome

* A condition where people are unable to internalize their own success

* Often feel that they have succeeded because of luck, timing, or other external forces

* Comes with feelings that everyone else is smarter and that they do not belong where they are
Underlying causes

- A culture of brilliance
- Appearance of a meritocracy founded on infallible success
- For people who are a minority in science the tacit (or explicit) belief that they are there only b/c of "what box they checked off"
Just a few weeks ago I was at a conference and got that sick feeling that my work wasn't nearly as impressive as other student's.

Impostor syndrome? Oh yes. I often wonder if someone is going to come by and tell me they've made a mistake.

I have no fricking idea as to what I am doing or whether what I've done is correct #PhD

I still have it :-S

When I compare myself to other grad students, I always feel like I come up short.

For a grad student blog

Omnipresent:

I have topic-specific impostor syndrome; I worry someone's gonna find out I don't know basic molecular biology protocols.
***** (Public School Teacher)
I was part-time, nontrad student for many years, felt like academic outsider even in grad school & first year teaching. (Yes)

10/16/12 2:54 PM

***** (PhD in virology)
I went to a 'lesser' (aka SLAC) instead of a big name school for UG b/c I didn't think I was good enuf. Wld redo if 2nd chance

10/16/12 3:01 PM

*****
Major case of impostor syndrome today. My backbrain nearly has me convinced that I'm a hopeless hack and folks are just too polite to say it

10/24/12 10:55 AM

***** (Faculty member at R1 school)
I feel it almost every time I start something new! New job, new paper, new research topic... (1/2)

10/16/12 2:33 PM

*****
One weekend and five crippling attacks of impostor syndrome later, I proudly signed off on my derivation of the Hartree-Fock equations.

10/15/12 1:38 PM

***** (Ph.D in chemistry)
I couldn't confidently give a talk on my PhD with my boss in the room until 3 years in to my PhD #impostersyndrome

10/16/12 2:48 PM

***** (PhD in quantitative fisheries biology)
Worked @ sea for 3 yr then joined quantitative lab w/ big names/papers for PhD. Wanted to learn but felt lesser than other grads.

10/16/12 2:52 PM
How does this impact you?

- The impostor syndrome can manifest itself in several different ways
  - Aggressive
  - Passive
  - Lower grades, lack of participation
  - Students do not go after awards etc.

XXXX (PhD student in Oceanography)
Have seen it totally destroy peoples usual confidence. Usually seems a lack of adequate supervision and support.
10/16/12 3:02 PM

XXXX (PhD student in entomology)
I.S. makes me work harder and read more in an effort to keep ahead of the bad feelings. Good overall, but can be very stressful
10/16/12 3:00 PM
It can manifest itself in public or in private

Cuts across genders, races, sexual orientations but does interact with societal norms

XXXX (Prof at Fancy Pants University)
I can't talk about... "they" will find out I don't know as much as "they" think I should. But who is "they"??? (THAT is the Q)
10/16/12 2:39 PM

XXXX (PhD in Amphibian conservation)
I have no problem speaking in classes or group discussions. When alone and writing is when I start doubting myself.
10/16/12 3:02 PM

XXXX (Undergrad student)
I was just having this same conversation with a classmate. "Everyone seems like they have their shit together..." - no they don't
10/16/12 3:19 PM
I remember talking to a patriarch (cousin's grandfather) who said of my cousin "yes, that's nice that he got his degree from Cambridge, in mathematics, but he was not the first in his class. Until he is the first in his class, I am not satisfied."

That still makes me want to knife the old man (god rest his soul). So I think there are certain cultural norms that would in some way limit your ability to express the sense of your own success, which might make one more prone to this syndrome.

- Professor of Economics of Sri Lankan descent
Here at Columbia

🔹 We are fortunate to have great students and faculty here

🔹 Their knowledge can be intimidating

🔹 However no one is born with this knowledge

XXXX (PhD in quantitative fisheries biology)
Working on it by realizing they feel the same way, understanding my strengths are different, talking about it, & doing good work.
10/16/12 2:55 PM

XXXX (Public School Teacher)
I think it pushed me to be better student & teacher to prove to myself I belonged.
10/16/12 3:12 PM
The knowledge they have is just different from yours (remember the circle comment)

You are spending your time studying specifically what you are interested in. By the time you leave here you **WILL** be one of the world’s experts in your sub sub sub sub field

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**XXX (World expert in spider ID)**

well, I'm a HS dropout, not a PhD, so maybe I AM an imp. But didn't realize people outside my educational demographic felt this

*10/16/12 2:51 PM*
What you can do

- Identify that we all feel this way
- Do not rely on exogenous validation
- Support others when you know they are down
- Importance of having a community
- Chronicle your successes

XXXX (Faculty member at R1 school)
I constantly remind myself that EVERYONE else feels it too. I still feel it, but I'm able to move on despite it.
10/16/12 2:50 PM

XXXX (PhD student in Oceanography)
Going to conferences helped me a lot, but then I think my research community is really supportive.
10/16/12 2:51 PM
XXXX (Science Journalist) So many thoughts, so little time. I sort of find the impostor feeling liberating in some ways, weirdly. Something like: "well, they're going to find out that I'm awful at this sooner or later, might as well just do what I want and try new weird things and be wacky!"

13 hours ago · Unlike · 1

XXXX (Assistant Prof) I am SO in line with XXXX on this – When I got to Princeton I was terrified that everyone would realize that I was the stupidest person in the room... for about a week. then I realized two important things– being the stupidest person in the room means you can learn more than anyone else, and that is super liberating. I also learned that my boss – the female chair of the Geosciences department – still feels the same way...recognizing the feeling, that women/people at every level feel this way makes it way easier to beat back the demons.

12 hours ago · Unlike · 1
Set yourself up for success

Figure 1. The Feasibility-Interest Diagram for Choosing a Project

How To Choose a Good Scientific Problem

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DOI 10.1016/j.molcel.2009.09.013
Take your time

- MA students especially feel pressure to finish quickly
- However take the time to be thoughtful
- “If you don’t have time to do it right the first time, you don’t have the time to do it wrong the first time”
Find your community

- Communicating is the single best way to overcome this
- Find your voice and use it regardless of the medium
- If nervous about admitting this you can do so anonymously through blogging/tweeting etc.
Assignment: Read these blogs

HTTP://SCIENTOPIA.ORG/BLOGS/SCICURIOUS/2012/04/30/DIVERSITY-IN-SCIENCE-CARNIVAL-IMPOSTER-SYNDROME-EDITION/


HTTP://WWW.NATURE.COM/SPOTON/2012/10/WOMEN-SCIENTISTS-HOW-TO-GET-ONLINE-AND-GET-OVER-YOUR-IMPOSTOR-SYNDROME/?WT.MC_ID=TWT_NATUREBLOGS