

Imposter syndrome: When you feel like you're faking it

By Rose O. Sherman, EdD, RN, NEA-BC, FAAN

COLLEEN JACKSON recently was promoted to a clinical manager position on her unit. At first, she was thrilled with the opportunity to advance her leadership skills, but now she's having second thoughts. She doesn't feel confident in her new role and worries how her team views her. She confesses to her manager, "I keep thinking someone will figure out how much I really don't know and question whether I should've been given the position. Sometimes I feel like an imposter. When I mention this to my friends, they tell me to 'fake it until you make it.' But I'm not so sure about that!"

Colleen isn't alone in feeling like an imposter. In imposter syndrome, a person doesn't feel good enough, is unsure of what she's doing, and feels she can't live up to others' expectations. She may be afraid she'll be found out as an imposter at any moment. The syndrome is most common among women leaders who feel they don't deserve the success they've achieved despite external evidence of their competence. It's more likely in perfectionists who constantly compare themselves to others.

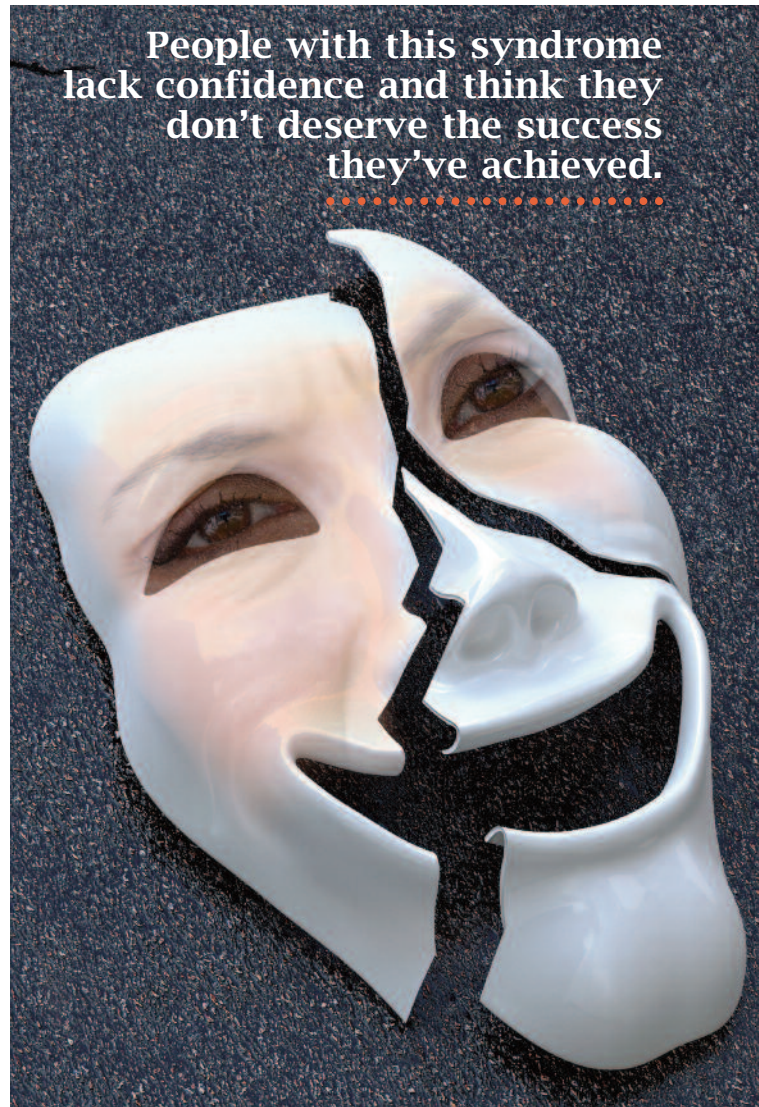
Certain situations, such as taking on a new role, can lead to imposter syndrome. For instance, Colleen may think that because she was deemed qualified for her new role, others expect her to immediately have expert knowledge. If, like Colleen, you feel you don't deserve the career success you've had, you may experience deep feelings of inauthenticity and fear you'll be found out as a fake. (See *Inside the imposter syndrome.*)

In small doses, feelings of inadequacy may not be a bad thing, because they remind us to work on building our competency. But people with imposter syndrome feel a level of self-doubt that can lead to overwork and a paralyzing fear of failure. The fear of being unmasked causes incredible stress. Colleen and others like her may have unrealistic expectations of themselves in a new role—expectations that can compromise their success.

Overcoming imposter syndrome

For people with imposter syndrome, the response to their success may rest too heavily on others' approval, recognition, and opinions. A wise mentor once told me we can easily overestimate how much time others spend thinking about us and our behaviors. Most people, she observed, are self-absorbed. This is important to consider, because the idea that Colleen is an imposter probably has never crossed her team members' minds.

People with this syndrome lack confidence and think they don't deserve the success they've achieved.



Imposter syndrome can create performance anxiety and lead to perfectionism, burnout, and depression. So learning how to manage these feelings is important. Cathy Robinson-Walker, MBA, MCC, who coaches nurse leaders, provides advice to help cope with imposter syndrome. Her recommendations include the six actions steps below.

Discuss your feelings with a trusted mentor

Sharing your insecurities with someone you trust and



Inside the imposter syndrome

The term *imposter syndrome* was coined by researchers Pauline Clance and Suzanne Imes at Georgia State University in 1978. These psychologists observed that some high-achieving individuals have a secret sense that they can't live up to others' expectations. Instead of seeing their failures and mistakes as performance feedback, they deeply personalize them. They may think their success is based on luck or timing, not their own experience, skills, or other qualities.

In many cases, feelings of imposter syndrome can be traced to early family or school dynamics, when a child received mixed messages about competency and individual achievements. According to Clance and Imes, imposter syndrome is most likely to occur in:

- persons for whom success came quickly
- first-generation professionals
- people with high-achieving parents
- members of minority groups
- students.

respect can help you separate what's real from your perceptions of insecurity. A trusted mentor might inform Colleen she's making good progress as a beginning leader and that no one expects her to be an expert at this point. The mentor can provide guidance about specific areas where Colleen might need additional growth and how to best go about this.

Pay attention to your own self-talk and consider whether your thoughts are empowering or disabling

Do you often say to yourself, "I achieved this only because I work harder than anyone else, not because I'm more competent"? Valerie Young, author of *The Secret Thoughts of Successful Women: Why Capable People Suffer from the Impostor Syndrome and How to Thrive in Spite of It*, makes a strong case that your internal script is a well-rehearsed pattern that serves as a key to feelings of being an imposter. She cautions that individuals with imposter syndrome may sabotage themselves as a way of holding back, due to feelings of being a fraud.

Instead, choose a different script and talk yourself down during times of self-doubt. Instead of thinking, "I'm the wrong person for this job," retrain yourself to say, "I have a lot to offer in this position."

Make of list of your strengths

Take the time to make a written list your strengths and what you contribute. Ask others for input, and refer to the list in times of self-doubt. If you're in a new role, remember that you were chosen for a reason. In Colleen's case, her supervisor saw her leadership potential. Also realize that most people overestimate their abilities; people with imposter syndrome underestimate theirs.

Accept that perfection is unrealistic and costly

Trying to be perfect and feeling you need to "know it all" is unrealistic and can be costly on a personal level. Perfectionists typically believe anything short of a flawless performance all the time is unacceptable. But none of us can live a mistake-free life; we all make errors. Those with imposter syndrome hold themselves to impossibly high standards and feel shame, insecurity, and low self-esteem when they don't meet their own expectations. But progress, not perfection, is what really matters.

Know you'll need to develop your competencies at certain times in your career

Throughout your career, you'll go through periods when you're on a steep learning curve and will need to further develop your competencies. You may feel like a novice and have to work hard to build new competencies.

Be honest about what you know and don't know, and seek advice from experts on your unit or in your organization. The simple act of saying, "This is new for me, and I'm working hard to learn this role" can be empowering. Colleen, for instance, might be surprised at others' reactions to hearing this from her. They might perceive her as a more authentic leader.

Be willing to be uncomfortable and move through your fear

In *Fear of Flying*, author Erica Jong urges readers engaging in new experiences to feel the fear and do it anyway. Fear is a useful emotion, as long as it doesn't escalate to the level of paralyzing behaviors. Practice and preparation can help ease new nurse leaders' fears. The fear of new challenges will never truly go away, but it can be managed.

Building competence leads to competency

Those with imposter syndrome generally are intelligent, thoughtful, and capable but lack self-confidence. Over time, nurses like Colleen will grow out of feeling like an imposter as they build their competency and become more comfortable in their roles. Eleanor Roosevelt said, "I believe that anyone can conquer fear by doing the things he fears to do, provided he keeps doing them until he gets a record of successful experience behind him." If you feel like an imposter, this is good advice to ponder. ★

Visit www.AmericanNurseToday.com/Archives.aspx for a list of selected references.

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