

The Imposter Phenomenon: If I'm So Successful, Why Do I Feel Like A Fake ?

By Jean Rankin, BScN, MHSc

The Imposter Phenomenon is a psychological syndrome or pattern, and it is based on intense, secret feelings of fraudulence in the face of success and achievement. If you suffer from the imposter phenomenon (I.P.), you believe that you don't deserve your success and you're a phoney who has somehow "gotten away with it." You aren't the person you appear to be to the rest of the world.

But there is far more to the imposter phenomenon than that. The sense of being a fraud is only one part of it. Victims of the imposter phenomenon are caught up in a cycle of emotions, thoughts, and actions that can virtually control their lives. Although they are often people who are driven to achieve, they live in fear that each new success will reveal them as fakes. They are sure that when this happens, everything they have laboured so hard to build will be destroyed.

Although the imposter phenomenon is not a new problem, it wasn't until 1974 that the syndrome even had a name. The term "imposter phenomenon" was coined by two psychologists at the Georgia State University, Dr. Pauline Clance and Dr. Suzanne Ines. They had been observing this phenomenon for several years, studying 150 highly successful female students and career women. Despite good grades, honours, awards, advanced degrees, or promotions, these women persisted in believing that they were less qualified than their peers. They suffered from a terrible fear of being "found out" as imposters.

New situations that demand a certain level of performance from us can be quite anxiety provoking and can bring out feelings of being an imposter. Under these circumstances, the idea that someone might feel like a fraud or phony is not surprising. There is a sociological pressure to act as if you know exactly what you are doing in order to perform the functions

and meet the expectations of the role. High achievers set high standards for themselves, so they feel the additional pressure of their own expectations. Inside, they may still wonder if they can "deliver the goods."

Unfortunately, IP victims tend to assume that they should know immediately how to play a role to perfection. But everyone must endure some frustration until they can learn a new role and come to "wear" it comfortably. Often, a person who is hired for a new job or suddenly gets a promotion may suddenly feel there is a great deal riding on the situation such as their income, reputation and career plans.

I believe temporary IP experiences are far more common than we now know. How many people are so certain of their abilities and intelligence that they do not ever wonder that perhaps they "put one over" on others?

The fact that these feelings are fragile and so short lived in some cases doesn't make them any less painful for the person experiencing them. If you have experienced temporary feeling of being a fraud, you know how troubling they can be. They still rob you of the pleasure and satisfaction in meeting a challenge.

The tendency to overwork and the need to be special are characteristics that are both tied to the pursuit of perfection. Not all perfectionists have the

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imposter phenomenon, of course, but many people with IP do strive to be perfect. Such individuals want all their work or ideas to be brilliant, creative and productive all the time. These people can't distinguish between which projects require the most intelligent, intellectual output and excellence, and those which require only minimal effort and quality. For them it is necessary to be perfect at everything they do; for them, it's necessary to become super human beings.

How Do You Throw Away The Mask? Day-to-Day Solutions For The Imposter Phenomenon

Here are four steps that you can follow to help you on a daily basis:

1. Make a list of the times that the imposter 'feelings' are likely to strike.

You probably know what situations intensify your own feelings of fraudulence. So take the step for primary prevention. Instead of trying to remedy the problem after it's already happened, anticipate and plan for it ahead of time. Write down the times and the feelings of being a phony when they flare up in full force. Is it when you take on a new assignment? Does it happen when you have to make an important presentation? Consult this list weekly or monthly. This way you will recognize what you are experiencing the next time a similar event rolls around. The feeling of faking it shouldn't take you by surprise and throw you off balance.

When you've identified the circumstances that have brought on IP feelings in the past, you can be ready for those feelings the next time. When you warn yourself to expect IP feelings, you're that much closer to keeping them from overwhelming you.

2. When the feeling of being a fake starts to take hold, you need to remind yourself that this is a symptom of the imposter phenomenon, and not an objective truth.

Once you can identify your feelings of phoniness, the symptoms of the IP, you can start to do something about them. If you have objective evidence of success in what you are doing, you can see that your feelings are probably part of the IP syndrome. Accept, once and for all, that you aren't a fraud, but simply someone who feels like a fraud.

If for example, you are about to make a presentation, mentally review what you have done to prepare. Do you know what points you want to get across?

Have you looked up your facts? Write your thoughts down and rehearse them out loud. Once you acknowledge that you have indeed done what was reasonably required to prepare, you'll see that your feelings are based on unrealistic fears instead of on reality. Whenever possible, start with the easiest part of your task first. You know what aspects make you the least and most anxious. By starting out with the things you find easiest, you can see yourself accomplishing something, and you will feel more in control.

3. Try to relax.

This might sound like pretty basic advice, but it's very important. The feeling of being a fake can bring on intense anxiety. But you can't deal with that feeling when anxiety has you all wound up and frantic. You need to relax.

There are many relaxation techniques. Find one you like and use it whenever IP feelings strike. On a regular basis, you could do yoga or transcendental meditation. Some people find that sports help them ease their tension. Maybe you could get relief from a swim or a good game of tennis or squash. You might want to buy an audio tape program of exercises specifically designed to help you relax.

4. Being honest and open.

The fear of exposure brings with it a feeling of anxiety. One way to fight that anxiety is to be honest and open from the beginning about what you think, and about the things you don't know. Try to avoid falling into the trap of attempting to appear perfect, hiding any sign of nervousness, or concealing your lack of knowledge about something.

5. Practice being your own person.

If you have difficulty disagreeing with other people and expressing your own views, you have to pay attention to the times when you see this happening. Little by little, begin to practice saying what you think. If you risk being yourself, gradually, in small ways, step by step, you will find out that most people are capable of accepting expressions of individuality and disagreement.

6. Experiment with your work patterns.

If you have the habits of an IP workaholic, you should take a long hard look at how you approach new projects. Force yourself to arrange your priorities and to spend less time on those tasks that are the least important. Vary your behaviour. You will have to take

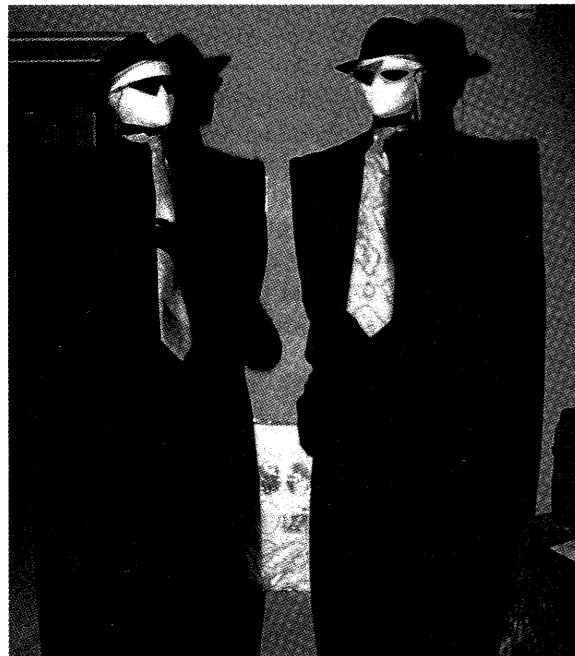
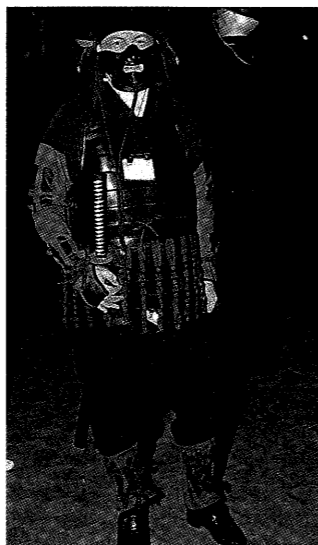
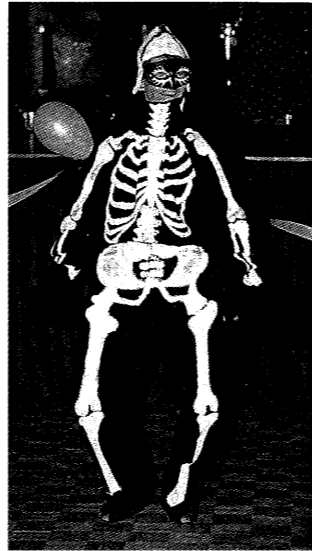
some small risks in order to find out that every task doesn't demand the same amount of your time and effort.

7. Break the worry ritual.

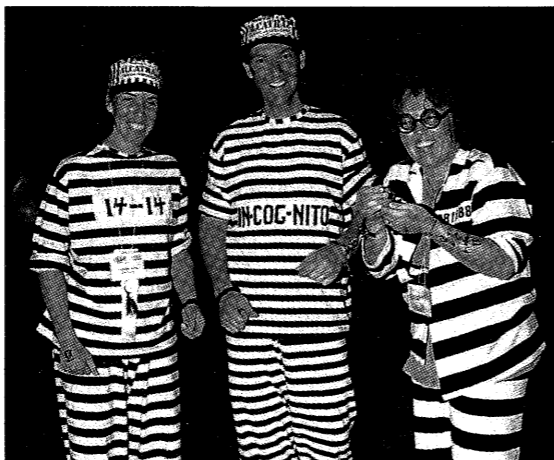
Do you have the IP magical thinker's habit of always envisioning failure? You must allow yourself to envision success instead. As you change the habit of superstitious thinking, you will learn that you can succeed without the same degree of advance worrying. Gradually you'll find that you can rely less and less on the worry ritual.

A mistake is a human error, not a fatal flaw that must be camouflaged forever. Sometimes, certain factors are just beyond our control. If you feel you must hide your mistakes out of shame, then you are trying to appear perfect - better than anyone else. Of course, you should try to do the best you're capable of in your career and in your personal life. You shouldn't stop striving to achieve, or settle for something less than you desire. But having to be number one and perfect all the time in everything is a very grandiose aim. You are setting yourself up for disappointment.

Ask yourself how you would respond if a friend told you that he or she had made the same mistake you made. Would you feel your friend was a failure? Would you even care very much about the mistake? How long would it take before you forgot about it? Chances are, it would have little effect on your overall opinion of your friend. You might even like him better for being vulnerable. Treat yourself as reasonably as you would your friend. ■



Black and White Night at the ORNAA Conference did not limit the imaginations of delegates. Some of the creative outfits photographed by Marg Ensminger.



Regina Leonard won the Johnson & Johnson Drake-Thompson Memorial Editorial Award for 1992. The \$3000 cash prize was given for her article "All the Right Moves-Positioning the Patient in the OR", published in 1992 (Vol.10,#4). Regina is Coordinator of the Licensed Practical Nurse-OR Technician Program, Royal Alexandra Hospitals, Edmonton. John Dixon of Johnson & Johnson Medical Products presented the Award at the '93 ORNAA Conference. (Photo Right) Dorothy Orr, ORNAA founding president (right) was honored at the ORNAA Conference for her outstanding contribution to the provincial OR group. Jane McClain, immediate past-president (left) presented Mrs. Orr with an inscribed clock with both



ORNAC & ORNAA gold pins. In response Dorothy acknowledged the accomplishments of ORNAA's charter executive members Sarah Doughty, Grace Thompson, Betty Armstrong and Marge Bushell. She recalled the first conference in 1978 in Edmonton, planned by the U of A charge nurses and financed by the exhibitors, whom she said had continued to support ORNAA efforts thru the years. Dorothy, recently retired from the Brooks Health Centre, offered thanks to all her colleagues, especially the OR members and leaders who came forth in the early days to form the districts. She wished her colleagues good luck in these challenging times. Thank you Dorothy! Enjoy your well earned retirement.

Operating Room Nurses Association of Alberta (ORNAA) Board - 1993-1994

(Left to right) Back row: Gloria Nemecek, Linda Smith, Donna Orton, Jackie Waisman, (ORNAC President) Dee Robinson, ORNAA President, and Marilyn Starling. Front Row: Sharon Guy, Lenore Lemire, Jane McClain (ORNAA Past Pres.), Sharon Balkan and Carol Neil.

