

Podcast #17 – The Imposter Syndrome (12 min)

You hear a lot today about something called The Imposter Syndrome in which someone feels like a fraud, a poseur—in short, an Imposter of some kind.

But what is it exactly? And what causes it?

Well, here it is: Simply put, the imposter syndrome is a collection of beliefs--usually irrational and often unconscious--that “tell” those afflicted with it that they’re not *supposed* to be strong, confident, successful, and/or ambitious, lest they suffer shame, guilt, or some other type of painful psychological consequence. For example, if I believe that I’m not supposed to be smart or talented and, therefore, that I don’t deserve my position or that I don’t deserve the esteem in which I’m held, I may, as a result, be more disposed to somehow shoot myself in the foot—before, at least, someone else does.

People with the imposter syndrome invariably undermine themselves.

Now, there are few people I know and none that I've treated in psychotherapy---who haven't at times felt like imposters or wrestled with feelings of fraudulence.

And, I mean the suffering that accompanies such feelings are certainly familiar to many in our culture. A cursory scan of self-help books on Amazon revealed well over 200 books directly or indirectly discussing some version of the Imposter Syndrome or the psychology of feelings of fraudulence. I saw everything from titles like "*How to Stop Self Sabotaging and Start Living*" to the more recent book, *Lean In*, by Sheryl Sandberg.

So, I've had occasion to treat people afflicted with this Syndrome for a long time. It shows up especially frequently in people who have reached or been

promoted to some type of leadership role or status or who have achieved great wealth or status.

But I want to be clear. People who have achieved success in any area of life—like in their love or sex lives—or who have achieved some type of popularity -- can and do suffer from feelings of fraudulence, from the Imposter Syndrome, every bit as strongly as those who have achieved the external trappings of power, status, and prestige.

Recently, I had occasion to work closely with people who had risen to prominence and power in a social change organization, for example, a union. And I found that the feelings of fraudulence that these leaders experienced were grounded in beliefs, often secret or even unconscious ones, that they *hadn't earned* what they'd achieved and that they *didn't belong* in the position they held. They felt that it was as if they'd been admitted to a club by mistake, a mistake that would soon be revealed, exposed, and that that would then result in some humiliating rejection, attack or

punishment—all of which would, of course, confirm that original feeling of illegitimacy.

People suffering from the Imposter Syndrome tend to be worried that others are envious of their success and secretly wish for them to fail, and that these imaginary “others” would relish discovering some flaw that would lead the imposter to a downfall. In this way, the imposter tends to always worry that he or she is one mistake away from disaster. They’re constantly worried about being found out. Yes, being found out...exposed...these are the dangers haunting the person feeling like an imposter.

So, that’s the Imposter Syndrome...But what are its roots? What causes this painful condition?

Well, first off--***imposters are made, not born.*** It begins in childhood. Somehow these children grow up in families in which they come to believe that confidence, self-assertion, pride, and success somehow threatens their ties to caretakers—caretakers upon whom –of course--they depend for safety and survival.

It might be that a parent puts this directly into words, getting angry or hurt when the child is strong or independent. This is more frequent than one might think. Some parents need their children to be dependent and to need THEM; in other words, they experience the child's development as threatening. Other times, the parent might be miserable for reasons unrelated to the child. But what we know is that children tend to take responsibility for more than they should. And they can-and often do—conclude falsely it turns out—that the child's own independence, or exuberance, or self-assertion is harmful and should be repressed. So there are lots of ways that someone can grow up feeling guilty or illegitimate about success.

This is the soil in which the imposter syndrome may later grow. See-if you feel guilty about success to begin with—and then achieve success—the result is a sense of fraudulence, a sense that your success is undeserved. As the child becomes an adult, any positive trait or normal developmental aim—love, power,

authority, intelligence, status, recognition, or independence—can come to feel undeserved, illegitimate—if, that is, that adult’s childhood taught him or her that success potentially threatens important relationships.

But think about it..these are normal things to want, they’re normal ambitions. So, if such a person with such conflicts manages to, in fact, progressively succeed more and more in his or her life, it stirs up ancient conflicts...Ambition—healthy ambition—itself becomes psychologically risky. They’ve learned that they’re not supposed to feel such things. They come to feel like imposters.

As Sheryl Sandberg says in her book, *Lean In*, the imposter syndrome can be a special problem for women. Not only are women held back by real-world glass ceilings, but they can hold themselves back because of beliefs that confidence and a sense of authority are traits that belongs to men; and that women will be punished as “unfeminine” if they

presume to express it. They often ARE accused of this, but such external bias often mirrors the woman's more private belief and worry. Lots of women have spoken out about this, of course—including Sonia Sotomayor, M Kate Winslet, Maya Angelou, Oprah Winfrey, and Meryl Streep to name a few.

But having said that, feelings of fraudulence are not limited to women. For example, a survey of Harvard Business School students found that 75% of both sexes believed the school had made a mistake in admitting them. Men feel this a lot, but may just not be able to admit it with the same freedom as women.

Feeling like a fraud is the source of a great deal of suffering. It makes someone motivated to undermine him or herself as well. The logic is: If I don't belong in the club, then maybe I should just stop pretending I do and accept disappointment and failure as my due.

Here are some of the more common ways that people get in their own way or snatch defeat from the

jaws or victory as expressions of their sense of being an imposter:

I've found that people in leadership role may become paralyzed by perfectionism and micro managing. One patient of mine described it this way: He said, "Suppose you're poor and sneak into an exclusive country club, pretending to be a member. You would feel that you had to be careful and observe meticulous etiquette and manners and act in just the right way. Your behavior would have to be perfect, lest you be exposed and kicked out as being illegitimate, as being an imposter, or as being a fraud. On the other hand, if you were born wealthy and grew up in such clubs, you could relax and take liberties because you took for granted that you belonged.

The patient's point was that his perfectionism was his way of insuring that he wouldn't be found out, wouldn't be exposed as an imposter. If you're constantly vulnerable to being judged and "found out", you have to be perfect.

A second manifestation of the imposter syndrome is found in people who are successful but are workaholics and are unable to take care of themselves properly. To them, too much of this “self-care” business feels self-indulgent and risky. Who are you to think that you can be successful AND be healthy and rested and have balance at the same time? These public figures often burn out. The only way that they can “prove” to the judgmental world in their heads that they aren’t fakers or slackers is to behave like workaholic martyrs, often creating around them cultures of sacrifice that are often quite dysfunctional.

A particularly insidious manifestation of the imposter syndrome that I’ve seen a lot in leaders of progressive political organizations is what I call a “self-defeating commitment to being an underdog.” Too often such leaders over-identify with the “victims” that for whom they are advocating. In these cases, it’s as if the leaders want to deny that they are better off than the folks they represent—which, if truth be known, they

often ARE. This usually comes from the guilt that such progressive activists feel about their own privilege. The result is that they can't accept their privilege and have to constantly instead pretend that they're worse off than they actually are.

Overcoming the Imposter Syndrome isn't easy, but it can be done. It first has to be identified, of course. The person has to come to face his or her irrational and destructive belief that success, that having the good things in life, has been regarded as dangerous and undeserved. The person has to develop a new relationship to success, learning to enjoy it and learning that that is safe to do.