

## Don't Let the Impostor Fool You

By Dr. Margaret Rea

It is a rare week for me to not hear stories from students and residents about those moments when they can feel like an impostor. I too have those days especially when I am asked to perform in a setting beyond my typical comfort zone. I had to challenge my own impostor thoughts just a few weeks ago when I was speaking at Orthopedics Grand Rounds at 6:30 am in the morning. I worried that my message about Wellness might not be embraced and that led me to question my abilities.

Research has shown that up to a quarter of male medical students and nearly half of female students experience imposter syndrome. Thoughts of being an impostor also occur for nursing students, especially early in their education, or when making transitions in their responsibilities. Studies report that 30-40% of residents experience imposter syndrome. Interestingly a recent study, demonstrated that even senior academic faculty have days they feel like an impostor especially when professional disappointments occur like a rejected grant or promotion. Of concern is the impact of these impostor thoughts on well-being and rates of burnout.

It would be hard to avoid moments when you find yourself wondering if you can accomplish what is being asked of you. However, what we want to avoid is you spiraling into an episode of Imposter syndrome. This phenomenon, first described by psychologists Pauline R. Clance and Suzanne A. Imes in 1978, can occur among high achievers like yourselves and it is a form of intellectual self-doubt whereby the individual is unable to internalize and accept success. Accomplishments are attributed to luck rather than to ability. There can also be a fear that others will eventually unmask you as a fraud. Imposter syndrome also impacts learning as you can become less likely to speak up for fear of being wrong. It is typical to have self-doubt, but this is more of an all-encompassing fear of not having what it takes to succeed. The impostor phenomenon and perfectionism often go hand in hand.

I came across a power article, "What's wrong with me? I don't belong here," by Will Bynum, a physician, program director and faculty member at Duke University where he discussed his experience feeling like an impostor. "Talking about impostor

syndrome is difficult enough. Even more challenging can be sharing the intense feelings of shame that often inflame imposter syndrome. Shame is a painful emotion that typically occurs in response to a triggering event — making a medical error, for example. Rather than seeing the setback as resulting from a specific circumstance or action, the person instead blames a fundamentally, globally flawed self." Dr. Bynum's research shows that shame is associated with a host of negative outcomes in medical learners, including diminished empathy, physical health, and psychological well-being.

I echo Dr. Bynum's call to bring shame and imposter syndrome out into the open. Sharing experiences with trusted colleagues and mentors is essential for your well-being. Dr. Bynum wrote, "For me and for others like me, sharing our stories is critical to the process of healing from shame. Sharing is essential for many reasons. For one, shame is a common and normal human emotion, and there is power in that fact. As sociologist Brené Brown has famously asserted, "Shame cannot survive being spoken," and openly discussing shame and imposter syndrome can build connection and community. What's more, I strongly believe that efforts to reduce burnout, depression, and suicidality in medicine will fall short if we fail to express and address the deeper emotions that may underlie them." Challenge the impostor thoughts with a growth mindset and don't go underground with your thoughts as they will get louder and darker, don't let that impostor fool you.

- <https://www.aamc.org/news-insights/insights/what-s-wrong-me-i-don-t-belong-here>
- <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/15057614>
- <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/18612750>
- <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5116369/>
- <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/29878930>
- <https://www.nursingtimes.net/roles/nurse-educators/imposter-syndrome-why-some-of-us-doubt-our-competence-28-01-2019/>

## Wellness Events

### Work Life and Wellness Events

<http://www.ucdavis.edu/hr/wellness/index.html>

### UC Living Fit Forever

[http://intranet.ucdavis.edu/clinops/resources/living\\_fit\\_forever.shtml](http://intranet.ucdavis.edu/clinops/resources/living_fit_forever.shtml)

### The Schwartz Center Rounds

A multidisciplinary forum where clinical caregivers discuss social and emotional issues that arise in caring for patients. Occurs the 4th Tuesday of every month at the Cancer Center Auditorium:

<https://intranet.ucdavis.edu/palliativecare/schwartz.shtml>

### Wellness Canvas Site

Please take a look at the Wellness Canvas Site that contains helpful tools to support student well-being <https://canvas.ucdavis.edu/courses/288487>

### Healthy UC Davis

<https://healthy.ucdavis.edu/>

## Wellness Tip: Three steps to overcome imposter syndrome

This exercise and video in the link below from Elizabeth Cox can be a helpful tool in addressing your impostor thoughts.

### 1) First, start a conversation.

The only surefire way to quiet your inner critic is to talk about what's going on in your mind. While this may sound simple, Cox explains that many people hesitate to share how they feel as they fear the feedback they receive from others will only confirm their concerns. However, often when people discuss their experience of feeling like they don't belong, they learn others around them have felt the same way in the past. According to Cox, learning a mentor or trusted friend has also gone through the same thing can provide clarity and relief to those with imposter syndrome.

### 2) Then, collect your positive experiences.

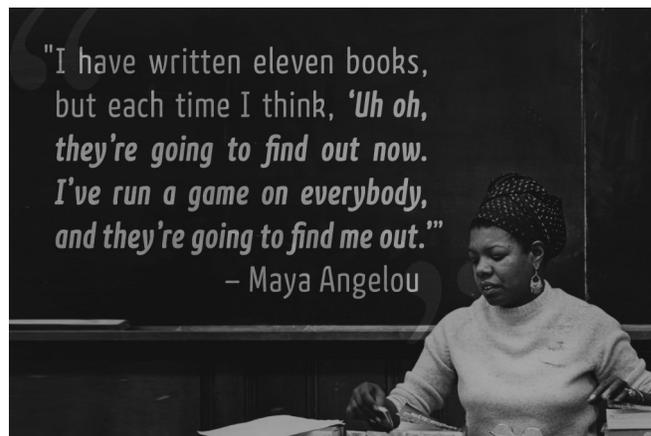
Many of us toss off the compliments we receive for our work, and only remember the criticism. The next time someone starts to sing your praises, allow yourself to truly appreciate what is being said. "Once you're aware of the phenomenon, you can combat your own imposter syndrome by collecting and revisiting positive feedback," Cox says. Making a concentrated effort to listen to and reflect on words of encouragement can help soothe anxieties the next time self-doubt pops up.

### 3) Finally, realize you're not alone.

Cox suggests having open conversations about challenges is another way we can undercut feelings of imposterism — which may never

entirely fade — because those common experiences can help us realize we're not as alone in our insecurities as we feel. For instance, developing awareness around academic and professional challenges — where mistakes can come from equipment failure as opposed to competence — is essential for thriving and building confidence.

<https://www.mindful.org/how-to-overcome-impostor-syndrome/>



## Community Recipe

This month's community recipe comes from Lori Nicolaysen. "I'm the Director for Student Services and Success at the Betty Irene Moore School of Nursing. I moved to this area in 2017 after living ½ my life in New York and ½ in Virginia. I joined the SON to work with Elizabeth Rice and others on supporting student academic success. The SON students, faculty, and staff are amazing! I am grateful for the chance to work with all of them. My favorite cookbook of all time is "Moosewood Restaurant Cooks at Home: Fast and Easy Recipes for Any Day," full of incredibly easy, healthy, inexpensive vegetarian recipes. Here's one of my favorites, Gingered Greens and Tofu."

<http://whatscookinern-dog.blogspot.com/2009/04/gingered-greens-with-tofu.html>



## Wellness App: Sanvello

Sanvello can be helpful managing anxiety or depression, dealing with stress, or improving your overall mental well-being:

**Daily Mood Tracking:** Swipe the mood tracker to rate how you're feeling, add a note about why, and spot patterns

**Guided Journeys:** "Master classes" where an expert walks you through how techniques like meditation, journaling, and thought reframing can help you feel better

**Tools:** When difficult times arise, leverage this anytime, anywhere menu of coping tools to find useful techniques to calm your mind, change your outlook, or redirect negative thoughts.

**Assessments:** These short weekly interactive quizzes give you clinically validated, objective scores for stress, depression, anxiety, and resiliency to quantify your progress over time.

**Community:** You're not alone on this journey. Join group conversations to share your personal stories and chat with other users who often feel just like you..

**FREE MEDITATION FOR EDU:**

Free access to our guided meditations to everyone with a valid .edu email address. Simply create your account with your .edu

<https://apps.apple.com/us/app/pacifica-for-stress-anxiety/id922968861>