What if I am exposed as a fraud?

Research has shown that many students suffer from impostor syndrome during their time at university. This can make them feel anxious, depressed and isolated. What can be done about this?

A study by Dr Carina Sonnack and Dr Tony Towell found that as many as 43% of second- and third-year undergraduate students at Westminster University suffered from impostor syndrome in 2001 [1]. Research more broadly has shown that impostor syndrome affects students from all universities and in all disciplines [2].

Impostor syndrome is where a person is successful according to external measures (e.g. exam marks), but they feel that this is unwarranted and so they risk being exposed as a fraud in the future [3]. Typically, they attribute their successes to things like luck and see setbacks as evidence of their inadequacies [3].

Impostor syndrome can prevent students from making the most of their studies. Desiree Dickerson, a neuroscientist and clinical psychologist writing for Nature,
has shared her experience of feeling like an impostor when she was a student. She notes that she often dismissed new and creative ideas with negative thoughts like: “if I thought it, then it must be obvious” [4]. Although these ideas are usually rewarded in university assignments, so impostor feelings can negatively affect a student’s results.

Significantly, Dickerson also details that impostor syndrome led to her over-studying when at university [4]. However, rest is key in ensuring that studying is productive and in allowing a student to make best use of their critical reasoning and proof-reading and editing skills when it comes to reviewing their own work.

Professor Linda Tropp, a social psychologist at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, has given a similar account of her experiences as a student with impostor syndrome. In addition to Dickerson’s experiences, she notes how her impostor feelings prevented her from asking questions in class due to concern that others would think they were a waste of time and not worthy of being answered [5]. But without speaking up in lectures or tutorials, invaluable learning opportunities are missed.

These experiences demonstrate that impostor syndrome acts as a barrier to an individual’s full engagement with their studies; something which may produce ever-greater anxiety, depression and isolation.

Why do so many students suffer from impostor syndrome? A number of explanations have been suggested. One is that the worse the condition of an individual’s overall mental health (including their level of anxiety, depression and self-esteem), the more likely they are to suffer from impostor syndrome [6]. Importantly impostor syndrome can be both a cause and consequence of mental health issues.

Another explanation focuses on social background. It has been argued that working-class students may feel ‘out-of-place’ at university due to under-representation of individuals from similar backgrounds to them in higher education [7]. They may feel that they just slipped into university by accident rather than through their own effort.

Perhaps one of the first steps in overcoming impostor syndrome involves you learning to change the way you think. It may be helpful to try and put things in perspective. It takes more than just luck to get into a world-class university like
Edinburgh: being here is a signal of your intellect, effort and dedication. You could also try to think more positively about feedback on your university work. If you get a poor mark, then maybe seeing it as an opportunity to grow and improve in the future, rather than as evidence of inadequacies, would be helpful. Further self-help resources are available here:

Life Learning Skills
Self-Help Resource List

If you are struggling to manage impostor syndrome alone, then sharing how you are feeling with friends or an academic mentor may help. As Harriet Harris, Edinburgh University’s Chaplain, notes, the support of these people may help you to feel less isolated [8], and they could also help you to recognise any unfounded self-doubt by highlighting your successes and qualities as a person.

We all experience moments of self-doubt and we often struggle to credit ourselves with what we have achieved through our own merit. By working to change that, we can chip away at our impostor demons.

Reference List


