



## It's the feelings of inadequacy for me: What college students need to know about Imposter Syndrome

Written by: Tida Tamedou

### BACKGROUND

"I have written 11 books, but each time I think, 'uh oh, they're going to find out now. I've run a game on everybody, and they're going to find me out.'"

Maya Angelou

#### What is Imposter Syndrome?

Imposter Syndrome is a psychological pattern in which individuals doubt their achievements and fear being exposed as a fraud. Individuals with imposter syndrome may experience feelings of incompetence, self-doubt, and anxiety. The concept of imposter syndrome was developed in 1978 by psychologists Pauline Rose Clance and Suzanne Imes. While they initially theorized that only women experience imposter syndrome, recent literature suggests that imposter syndrome can apply to anyone (Ervin, 2018). Imposter syndrome can impact the most talented, competent, and high achieving individuals. Although these individuals may appear to "have it all together," internally, they may fear being perceived as a fraud, fake or phony (Ervin, 2018).

According to Ervin (2018), high achievers often experience imposter syndrome due to a fear that they may be perceived as incompetent despite having achieved success. Individuals with imposter syndrome often overwork themselves to prove their competency. Overworking can also damage relationships because the individual is investing more time into their work than their relationships. Others experiencing imposter syndrome may avoid opportunities or challenges because they fear embarrassment or feelings of inadequacy. For instance, one example could be feeling underqualified for a position that you are otherwise prepared to fulfill. While imposter syndrome impacts individuals in every stage of life, it is becoming increasingly common among college students.



## TIPS FOR COLLEGE STUDENTS

### Imposter Syndrome in College Students

A series of highs and lows mark the college experience. Students are tasked with balancing rigorous courses, leadership roles in social organizations, jobs, family, and financial obligations. Thus, it is no surprise that college students bogged down by heightened responsibilities may experience feelings of impostorism. Many college students report feelings of impostorism when elected as a member of the executive board for a social organization. Other instances where impostorism feelings are typical include study abroad opportunities where students must communicate in a non-native language or at an internship. According to Bednar, Stewart, and Oldroyd (2019), researchers at Brigham Young University, at least 20% of college students will experience imposter syndrome during their matriculation. Students that tend to be primarily affected by imposter syndrome include low-income, underrepresented minorities, and first-generation college students.

First-generation (FG) college students are at an increased likelihood of experiencing imposter syndrome due to the pressure of being the first in their family to pursue higher education (Canning, LaCrosse, Kroeper, & Murphy, 2019). FG college students often struggle with imposter syndrome the most at highly competitive and unwelcoming institutions (Canning et al., 2019). One study examined the effect of perceived classroom competition on the daily psychological experience of FG college students (Canning et al., 2019). Findings suggest that FG college students in STEM courses tend to value community and collaboration compared to continuing generation students, given their underrepresented status. FG college students often associated classroom competition with greater feelings of imposter syndrome. Impostorism feelings have also been found to predict grades, attendance, engagement, and dropout intentions in STEM FG college students (Canning et al., 2019). This research recommends that colleges and universities encourage a culture of collaboration and partnership to combat the competitive nature of STEM departments for the betterment of FG students.



## RESOURCES

### Resources to Reduce Imposter Syndrome

Valerie Young, Ed.D., is an internationally recognized expert on imposter syndrome, has developed an exhaustive list of 10 steps that can be used to overcome imposter syndrome. For thorough explanations of each step, please visit her website: <https://impostorsyndrome.com/10-steps-overcome-impostor/>.

1. **Break the silence.** Understanding that there is a name for feelings of impostorism and that you are not alone can be tremendously freeing.
2. **Separate feelings from fact.** Realize that just because you may feel stupid doesn't mean you are.
3. **Recognize when you should feel fraudulent.** If you're one of the first or of the few women or a minority in your field or workplace, it's only natural you'd sometimes feel like you don't fit in. Instead of taking your self-doubt as a sign of your ineptness, recognize that it might be a normal response to be an outsider.
4. **Accentuate the positive.** Do a great job when it matters most, without persevering over routine tasks. Forgive yourself when the inevitable mistake happens.
5. **Develop a new response to failure and mistake making.** Instead of beating yourself up for being human and blowing the big project, glean the learning value from the mistake and move on.
6. **Right the rules.** Recognize that you have just as much right as the next person to be wrong, have an off-day, or ask for assistance.
7. **Develop a new script.** Your script is that automatic mental tape that starts playing in situations that trigger your Impostor feelings.
8. **Visualize success.** Before your presentation, picture a successful outcome.
9. **Reward yourself.** Learn to pat yourself on the back.
10. **Fake it 'til you make it.** Courage comes from taking risks. Change your behavior first and allow your confidence to build.

### Counseling for Overcoming Imposter Syndrome

While occasional feelings of inadequacy are common, it is important to be aware of such feelings and counteract them with positive affirmations. In addition to utilizing the ten steps to Overcome Imposter Syndrome developed by Dr. Young, seek counseling for additional support. According to Dr. Ervin (2018), counseling has direct benefits for reducing imposter syndrome. A counselor can work with you to increase your internal validation and decrease your reliance on external validation. When internal validation is increased, you control how you feel about yourself instead of allowing others to influence how you perceive yourself.



[www.BlackMentalWellness.com](http://www.BlackMentalWellness.com)



@BlackMentalWellness



Black Mental Wellness



@WellnessBlack



**Black Mental**  
Wellness

