

Coping With Impostor Syndrome

ECLER ERCOLE JAQUA, MD, DABLM, DABOM, FAAFP, VAN NGUYEN, DO, DABOM, FAAFP,
SOO PARK, DO, AND MARY HANNA, MD

Even accomplished physicians can experience self-doubt. These tips can help you move past it.

Although not found in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) or the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-10), impostor syndrome is “an internal experience of believing that you are not as competent as others perceive you to be.”¹ It can affect any person—including physicians—regardless of gender, social status, or success level.^{1,3} Despite being accomplished and successful, people with impostor syndrome doubt themselves, fear they won’t live up to expectations, and are often overachieving.^{1,3}

Recognizing impostor syndrome and its impact on our professional and personal lives can be difficult. Coping with it can be even more difficult.^{2,3} The following tips can help.

1. Acknowledge your feelings. The first step to overcoming impostor syndrome is to acknowledge *what* you are feeling, and *when*, so that you can figure out *why*. Journaling any feelings of self-doubt and inadequacy can help bring clarity to the etiology of these feelings, which are often unfounded.

2. Set reasonable expectations and goals. This will help build

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Drs. Jaqua and Hanna are assistant professors and core faculty, and Dr. Nguyen is an associate professor and core faculty, at Loma Linda University Health Family Medicine Residency in Loma Linda, Calif. Dr. Park is a third-year resident at Loma Linda University Health Family Medicine Residency. Author disclosures: no relevant financial affiliations disclosed.

momentum for success, whereas unreasonable goals and expectations can sabotage success. Remember that failure is part of the journey and should not cause shame. Treat it as a learning experience and building block for future success.

3. Find a mentor. Once you have defined your professional and personal goals, find a person who exemplifies them and is willing to mentor you. You may find someone in your residency program, an advocacy group, local specialty chapter, or your health system. A good mentor will provide supportive guidance to help you achieve your goals.

4. Teach others. Being a mentor yourself is another way to combat impostor syndrome. Do not be afraid to share what you have learned, especially what you have learned from your failures. No one is expected to know every nuance of medicine, because the knowledge needed to practice medicine is vast. To promote lifelong learning, each time you learn a new skill or fact, teach it to someone else. Find someone you can encourage and propel forward in their career.

5. Question the status quo. You may have learned to do something one way, and your colleagues may have learned to do it differently. Do not assume their way (or yours) is the correct way. Investigate which approach is better and adapt accordingly. See differences as learning opportunities and occasions for self-improvement, not self-flagellation.

6. Track successes to increase internal validation. Creating a log of successes can remind us of our abilities when self-doubt rears its ugly head. The log can be a detailed

curriculum vitae, a folder with kind sentiments from patients, or a collection of positive peer evaluations. For those of us with high-achieving personalities, tracking our successes can serve as objective documentation of our abilities and provide needed validation.

7. Practice self-compassion. When negative thoughts arise, make a concerted effort to replace them with positive thoughts rooted in self-compassion and kindness. Forgive yourself for mistakes, and accept that knowledge gaps are a part of the lifelong learning journey. This mindset will lead to a more constructive evaluation and more accurate view of your abilities.

As physicians, we have the immense responsibility of caring for our communities, and for most of us this will give rise to feelings of self-doubt and inadequacy at some point in our careers. Family medicine’s broad knowledge requirements easily feed into impostor syndrome. So, let us support each other in overcoming impostor syndrome and achieving our potential. May we all become reformed impostors. **FPM**

1. Cuncic A. What is imposter syndrome? Verywell Mind. May 1, 2020. Updated Feb. 26, 2021. Accessed April 5, 2021. <https://www.verywellmind.com/imposter-syndrome-and-social-anxiety-disorder-4156469>

2. Bravata DM, Watts SA, Keefer AL, et al. Prevalence, predictors, and treatment of impostor syndrome: a systematic review. *J Gen Intern Med*. 2019;35(4):1252-1275.

3. Chandra S, Huebert CA, Crowley E, Das AM. Impostor syndrome: could it be holding you or your mentees back? *Chest*. 2019;156(1):26-32.

Send comments to fpmedit@aafp.org, or add your comments to the article online.