

Overcoming Imposter Syndrome: Embrace Your Second Act with Confidence

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Retiring was a tough decision to make, all the financial considerations, family issues, and emotions can be suffocating. Thinking about your second act while reflecting on your previous career failures is overwhelming.

In my case, I retired from a career in nursing after 30 years. My husband required assistance daily due to medical issues, so I needed to be at home. I was fortunate that I did not need to urgently find a job.

In looking for new career opportunities, freelance writing fit my needs. Little did I know how out of touch I really was with digital advancements, software, and work culture. I completed writing courses to help me break into the field. There was so much I did not know, and the time and effort required was much more than expected.



Instructors encouraged putting yourself out there to get work during the training. “Winging it” was never a skill in my repertoire. I took more courses but still felt I was not good enough to share my work, and the risk of failure and shame paralyzed me from moving forward.

In doing research for an assignment, I discovered Imposter Syndrome. It was like I was reading about myself, not only did it apply toward my new endeavor, but also throughout my nursing career.

After 2 years, I finally recognized my shortcomings, reframing my attitude toward feedback and fighting my fear of feeling like an imposter. Finally accepting that I was a newbie to all this was a big step. I used to be the one with all the answers and respect of my colleagues. Now, I didn’t have either.

Changing my attitude was quite difficult and a huge barrier to moving forward. My copyeditor was quite detailed on reviewing and giving feedback, it felt like

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failure due to all the changes needed. It took me a while to shut off that part of my brain (perfectionism) and be open to learning.

Understanding Imposter Syndrome

National Institute of Health (NIH) describes Imposter Syndrome as a behavioral health phenomenon characterized by self-doubt of intellectual skills or accomplishments, usually occurring in high achieving individuals. Experts believe 70% of the population has these symptoms at some time in their life.

While there is no formal diagnosis in the DSM-5 manual for this syndrome, there are several personality traits which contribute to it.

Dr. Clance, an up-and-coming psychologist in the 1970's, developed the Imposter Phenomenon Scale as a tool for clinicians to identify a person with symptoms involved in this syndrome.

She identified 6 personality traits, which in concert make up her definition of Imposter Phenomenon.

1. Imposter Cycle -overpreparation or procrastination.
The person is unable to acknowledge their successes, even with proof. This leads to fear, anxiety, and feelings of being a fraud.
2. Perfectionism- hypercompetitive "need to be the best" goals are unattainable and self-imposed
3. Super heroism- acting like a "superhero" to mask perceived inadequacies and appear more capable than one feels.
4. Atychiphobia- fear of failure
5. Denial of competence
6. Achievemephobia- fear of success



The fear of others thinking you are incompetent, stupid, and unworthy of your position is nerve racking. These thoughts are not easily dissuaded. After so long, it is ingrained and is the only way you know how to function.

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Being a dinosaur in the digital world brings your Imposter Syndrome to the forefront. Trying to learn the social media expectations, along with new software, is formidable. (I still haven't figured it out)

At least before the internet, failures were only seen within a close network of colleagues, friends, and family. Now everyone knows everything about everyone. Accepting this reality can be a struggle, especially if fear of failure makes you physically ill.

Strategies to Overcome Imposter Syndrome

Accepting the mental health components is the first hurdle. Being labeled as mentally/emotionally unstable does not feel good. You really need to have an open mind and be able to be honest with yourself.

Honestly Identify your Traits

Seeing how your negative traits are intertwined and identified as Imposter Phenomenon is devastating. Realizing these are all self-defeating behaviors brings light to professional struggles. Being honest and strong enough to accept that you are not perfect is difficult.

Facts over Feelings

Take the time to write down your accomplishments. This seems easy, but acknowledging success is part of our shortcomings. Thoughts of being unworthy and just lucky vs competent can be deeply rooted. Try to focus on the facts while disconnecting from the emotion they evoke.

The results may be shocking; the list will be quite long if you are honest. When you remember all the tricky situations you successfully navigated, use them to boost your self-esteem. Review all the successes and skills you have and identify which skills will propel you into your new career path. It is not always about the awards, certifications, or degrees you have; it is about how you used that knowledge and experience to be successful. Success can feel

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uncomfortable, but we must be open to it and acknowledge we are worthy and belong.

Make Expectations Attainable

Working to show everyone you are the best at every project or task is exhausting and unattainable. Spending all your nights studying or working on a job project to show you are more dedicated than anyone else is absurd when you really think about it.

Have I been there? Of course.

Did my relationships suffer? Absolutely!

Did all that effort reward me in the end? No.

Others lack the desire to “be the best” nor make the effort to reach excellence. They do not share the same elevated expectations and don’t support doing more work than needed. This can cause a rift, especially when the boss does not recognize their attitude and does not seem to understand your dedication. Many times, our goals are above what the project requires.

Taking time to acknowledge and celebrate when you attain a reasonable goal is necessary. Training our brain to stop shutting down to praise and instead, allowing ourselves to enjoy the moment will not be easy. Practice. Practice.

Increase Potential through Mistakes

Imposter Syndrome sufferers feel they make mistakes daily and fear someone finding out. The self-doubt and inability to acknowledge success continues the loop of negative self-talk and further escalates the risk of failure. Reframing mistakes into learning opportunities is key.

Thomas Edison once said:

“I have not failed. I've just found 10,000 ways that won't work.”

Even geniuses fail, so we need to realize this is normal. There is no reason to feel incompetent, unintelligent, or worthless. Reminding ourselves that no one is perfect is a daily mantra to keep moving toward our goal.

Once we can admit our mistakes and are mentally ready for feedback, seek a mentor or leader to support the journey. Continued validation will help decrease self-doubt.

Empowering yourself: using fear as a catalyst

Energize your Path to Success

Use fear to motivate yourself to reach goals. For this to be effective, you will need to acknowledge the fear, understand it, then use it to push yourself to the next level.



Passion for Life-long Education

Continually learning reinforces our capabilities. New knowledge is the catalyst to begin erasing self-doubt. Applying new skills to the workforce or personal endeavors can break down the barriers of Imposter Syndrome.

Embrace Self-affirming Thoughts

Focus on positive qualities and embrace the emotions you feel. Recognize and celebrate even small victories. This may seem silly, but your brain needs positive reinforcement to keep the negative thoughts at bay. Build a cheerleading support group that will frequently remind you of your successes and abilities.

Identify Your Unique Skills to Conquer Fear

Know who you are. Know what you can do and have faith and the strength to honestly believe it. Know that you have unique skills and experience that will keep you moving forward to success.

Achieve Your Goals

Imposter Syndrome can be difficult to manage, especially when changing career paths. Emotions, such as fear, anxiety, and doubt lead to feeling worthless, but being found out as an imposter or fraud is what we dread the most.

Finding the successful path out of this syndrome can take time and effort. A lot of self-reflection, self-forgiveness, and self-compassion are needed to overcome fear. “Self” anything is not a priority and will require effort to build self-esteem.

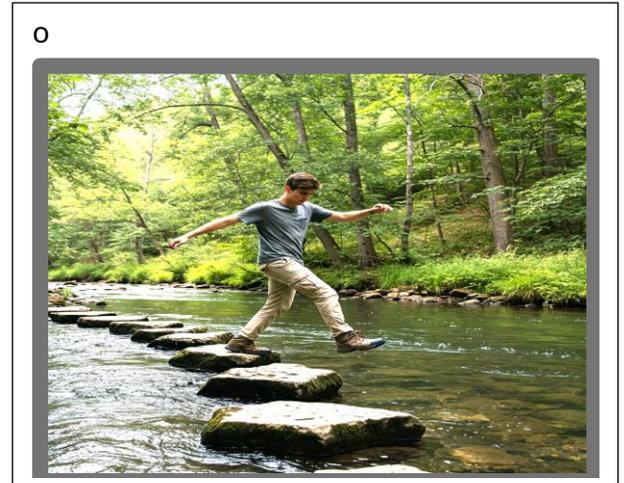
Identifying your goals, putting a timeframe on them, and honestly assessing your feelings and behaviors will take dedication and commitment. Consider reaching out to a mentor to support your transformation when you are ready.

Use fear as your motivation to accomplish your ultimate goal. Know what that goal is and take small steps for the best chance at success.

Ignore your Perfectionist Voice: Help is Available

When I started on this endeavor, I was shocked at the number of websites that addressed Imposter Syndrome. Although it is not identified as a formal diagnosis in the psychiatric community, experts have agreed it is a real condition which impacts a person’s success.

If you are feeling overwhelmed, always seek professional help. Support can be found on provider websites, with community groups, and at professional clinics.



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Do not let the perfectionist part of your brain talk you out of asking for help. Sometimes, we need others to work with us to decrease our negative thoughts and feelings to pull us out of the darkness of Imposter Syndrome.