The Impostor Phenomenon

The impostor phenomenon is the experience of doubting our own abilities and fearing that we will be exposed as a fraud, even though we have real achievements. The psychologists Pauline Rose Clance and Suzanne Imes described it in 1978, after studying high-achieving women. Later work shows that men and women from many backgrounds can feel it. It is not a medical diagnosis, but it can cause stress and hold people back. We follow Mazen, a newly promoted team leader, as he learns to manage it.

1. What It Is

People who feel like impostors often believe that their success comes from luck, timing or other people's mistakes, and not from their own skill. They fear that a colleague or manager will soon discover that they are not as capable as they seem. Praise does not help much, because it is quickly explained away. The feeling can be common among high performers, who often set very high standards for themselves.

Example: A singer with many awards still thinks that the audience applauds only out of kindness. She shows the impostor feeling: she explains every award as luck, even though she practises hard every day. Her doubt is real, but it does not match the facts.

At work: Mazen has just been promoted. He tells a friend that it was luck and that soon everyone will see he is not ready, which is the impostor feeling in action. His record, however, shows three projects delivered on time.

2. The Impostor Cycle

Clance described a repeating cycle that keeps the feeling alive. A new task brings anxiety and self-doubt. We then either over-prepare, working far more than needed, or procrastinate and rush at the end. When the task succeeds, we feel relief, but we credit the result to the extra effort or to luck, and not to ability. So the doubt returns with the next task, and the cycle repeats.

Example: A student with an exam spends every night over-preparing, and then credits the good grade to the extra hours, not to ability. This is the impostor cycle: task, doubt, extra effort and a success that is explained away. Before the next exam, the doubt returns.

At work: Before a presentation, Mazen rewrites his slides six times, and then credits the success to his hard work alone. He sees the impostor cycle: task, anxiety, over-preparation, relief and discounting. He realises that the cycle, not his ability, is what exhausts him.

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3. Collect the Evidence

A practical step is to separate feelings from facts. We keep a record of our achievements, the feedback we received and the skills we used, such as thank-you messages and finished projects. When doubt appears, we read the record and ask what evidence supports the doubt. Doing this regularly makes it easier to accept that success has real causes.

Example: A runner keeps a training log as an evidence record. After a bad race, the runner reads it and sees months of steady progress. The facts calm the doubt.

At work: Mazen starts an evidence folder with feedback emails and project results. Before his first team meeting, he reads it and asks what evidence supports the thought that he does not belong. The folder shows clear proof to the contrary, and he enters the meeting calmer.

4. Talk and Keep Learning

Impostor feelings grow in silence, so sharing them helps. Talking with a mentor, a friend or colleagues often shows that others have similar doubts. We can also accept praise with a simple thank you, and treat mistakes and gaps as part of learning, not as proof of fraud. If the feeling is severe or lasts a long time, a professional counsellor can help.

Example: A new university student confesses to a classmate that everyone else seems smarter. The classmate answers that he feels the same way. Sharing the doubt makes both feel less alone.

At work: Mazen tells his mentor that he feels like a fraud. She says that she felt the same after her own promotion and suggests treating gaps as learning goals. Mazen accepts a compliment from his team with a simple thank you.

Conclusion

In summary, the impostor phenomenon is the fear of being exposed as a fraud despite real achievements. Pauline Rose Clance and Suzanne Imes described it in 1978. We understand the cycle, keep evidence of our achievements, share our doubts and keep learning. These steps do not remove every doubt, but they stop doubt from controlling our decisions.

Sources

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