Impostor syndrome

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Imposter syndrome/phenomenon:
Quick primer

• Coined by Suzanne Imes, PhD and Pauline Rose Clance, PhD in the 1970s
Imposter syndrome/phenomenon: Quick primer

• Current Definitions
  – “Individuals with the Impostor Phenomenon experience intense feelings that their achievements are undeserved and worry that they are likely to be exposed as a fraud. This causes distress and maladaptive behavior” (Sakulku & Alexander, 2011)

Imposter syndrome/phenomenon: Quick primer

• Current Definitions
  – People with IS/IP “question the validity of their own intellectual ability, attribute their success to external factors, or fear that their intellect and accomplishments will be exposed as false or fraudulent.” (Bernard et al., 2017)
Characteristics of imposter syndrome

- “Internal experience of intellectual phoniness”
- Achieves at a high level of success
- Commonly overworks/overprepares
- Make “unreasonably low assessments of their performance” (Want & Kleitman, 2006)
- Success can enhance feeling of fraudulence
- (Secret) desire to be the best
- Denial of competence/discounting praise
- Fear and guilt about success

Who experiences IS/IP?

- Undergraduate students
- Graduate students
- Nurses and other health professionals
- JDs, MDs, and PhDs
- Many humans
- Librarians?
IS/IP and students of color

• Generic stress
  – Stress related to a particular context and the expectations associated with it (e.g., meeting new people, exams, class attendance)

• Minority status stress
  – Stress related to one’s minority status in a particular context (e.g., experiences with racism, questioning of belonging)

IS/IP and students of color

• IS in emerging adults is hot research topic

• Recent findings
  – African-American women who report levels of racial discrimination experience IS/IP (Bernard et al, 2017)
  – Among African-American students, IS a better predictor of mental health than perceived discrimination and minority status stress (Cokley et al., 2017)
  – Among African-American and Latino/a undergraduates, psych. well-being and ethnic identity predict IP/IS (Peteet et al., 2015)
Deep dive: the imposter cycle

So I have a little imposter syndrome: What do I do?

• Talk to advisors and mentors!

Figure 1. Diagram illustrating the Impostor Cycle based on Clance (1985).
So I have a little imposter syndrome: What do I do?

• Talk to mentors!

• Find and focus on evidence of your success
  – Peers are great supports here!

• Tamp down desire for perfection
  – Don’t let perfection be the enemy of the good
So I have a little imposter syndrome: What do I do?

• Talk to mentors!

• Find and focus on evidence of your success

• Tamp down desire for perfection

• Sharpen up the self-talk

• If you or someone you know are still struggling, there are always more things to try
Exercise

• Identify a recent success. Write it down.
• Observe your thoughts about the success. Are you...?
  – Giving yourself full credit?
  – How much are you discounting your role? Why?
  – Are you appreciating the fullness of the success?
  – Are your focusing on the parts that were not perfect?

• NOTE: We are not trying to turn you in to this:
  – It is okay to feel pride.

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# Disclosures of Potential Conflicts

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