

## Episode 7: Imposter Syndrome: 70% of us have it

### Shabnam 0:05

Welcome to the Psychology of Case Management podcast: the show that helps you use psychological ideas to strengthen your relationship with your catastrophically injured clients and their professional networks, so you can achieve more for your clients and feel more fulfilled in your role.

### 0:20

Hello, and welcome to today's episode. I'm Dr Shabnam Berry-Khan, and thank you for tuning in. So, I've decided to start today's solo conversation with a question. And that question is: what do all these people have in common? Ex-First Lady Michelle Obama, comedian Ricky Gervais, Facebook's Sheryl Sandberg, scientist Albert Einstein, actress Meryl Streep, businesswoman Arianna Huffington, actor Tom Hanks, one authoress, Maya Angelou: what do they all have in common, do you think? Yeah, well, they have all openly expressed feeling like they are an imposter: that they have *imposter syndrome*.

And I mean, I don't know about you, but I find this completely bonkers! Sort of a funny mix of feeling baffled, given these people's successes; fearful that if they can't even feel confident with their success, what chance do I have? And also relief that you can still rock it in spite of feeling like a complete and utter fraud. So I guess a definition of imposter syndrome is sort of self-doubt that skews your sense of reality into thinking that you're less than you are, that you're a fake who's winging it. And being convinced that everyone on the planet who you come in contact with can actually see this, too.

### 1:44

Yeah, it's a lot to carry. I have never personally been more in touch with my imposter syndrome than when I received my Bachelor's degree, my PhD and then my Clinical Psychology Doctorate qualifications. And I have battled my entire life with recognising my worth, my value in academic knowledge and skills. It means that daily I can carry great discomfort about myself, in my work and home life; it means I've missed opportunities, because I have convinced myself that I wasn't good enough. And I'm often feeling that sort of unsustainable stress of going all-out for clients and for my business, as well as my family and friends, in an attempt to prove that I am good enough, and that really rarely guaranteeing any sense of satisfaction.

But I know that I'm not alone, dear listeners, and I'm pretty sure that you are probably here listening in because you know what I'm talking about, whether consciously or unconsciously, there perhaps is something inside of you that this story resonates with. And I urge you to stick around, then, for this episode to let that intuitive voice have some space. And if I'm wrong, you will have wasted 15 minutes. But if you're right, then this episode might actually be helpful to you. So after receiving some really lovely feedback about the first solo episode, which I'm very grateful for, which happened to be on *The Inner Critic*, you can check it out on the platforms that the podcast is broadcast.

### 3:20

After that episode, and all that feedback, I wondered if there might in fact be a bit of a need for more mindset, wellbeing content in the podcast itself. And that was also reinforced by the fact that when I set up the community groups – for case managers on LinkedIn and for personal injury professionals on Facebook – one of the biggest topics that kept coming up amongst our peers was that of imposter syndrome. It seemed to stop people from posting on the group or commenting, sharing, even just simply 'liking'. It got in the way

of people wanting to engage with one another, really, because they felt that no-one wanted to listen to what they had to say.

Yet, privately, people were saying to me that it's really needed and there's loads to say. I mean, I'm working on engagement, and obviously this imposter syndrome that might be driving it but, for now, you can see how imposter syndrome might in fact be getting in the way of something that has real personal and professional and collective value. And if it is present online with interactions on, I don't know, Facebook or whatever, real-life face-to-face to face work will, I'm sure, a thousand-fold magnify those feelings. We all have to get ready for doing that again.

#### 4:39

But what does it mean, then, when it comes to living with imposter syndrome, for ourselves and our work? So this is where I put on my psychology hat, take a trip position of discomfort as an 'expert', and share with you some findings from the psychology evidence base. So, Clance and Imes were the first psychologists to coin the term imposter syndrome. And it was in the late 70s, when they noticed high-achieving women were not perceiving themselves as worthy of success, and that they lacked a sense of complete competence about their abilities and their achievements. And that was even when they were faced with evidence saying the complete opposite.

And further research has found that imposter syndrome is greater in people who are raised in homes where there was lots of criticism, but also lots of praise. It's also higher in people where upbringings focused on lots of achievement, and that was really highly valued, above all else. And it's also higher in people who were raised in home environments where support was low, but conflict was high. So not particularly unusual in some ways. But imposter syndrome has been linked to these types of upbringings.

Imposter syndrome is also known to exist in both males and females, albeit slightly higher in females, I believe. And those feelings of discomfort are usually triggered when we're trying something new. And it pushes us out of our comfort zone. But we might interpret that discomfort as a lack of confidence, meaning that perhaps we're not ready for something or that we're not up to the task. So those with imposter syndrome would say that this is the truth, whereas others might say, "Oh, it's just human," or it's part of, you know, who they are.

In that sense, some psychologists say that imposter syndrome is more like a faulty belief, skewing reality. But the long and short of it is that there is almost no room in the mind of someone with imposter syndrome to feel doubt in any way, and that they would need to be 100% confident all the time. And did you know that there were five 'competency types' attached to imposter syndrome? They are the *perfectionist* – so, the person who wants to get everything right, and anything less is just not good enough; the *expert*, who needs to know everything before they start anything, otherwise they feel like they're really not going to accomplish anything; the *soloist*, who feels that everything has to be done independently, otherwise you can't really be sure of your contribution, and that's just an uncomfortable feeling. There's the *natural genius*, who feels that they need to find everything easy from the off, otherwise they just simply won't take on the task for fear of failure, I guess. And then there's the *superhuman*, the Superman/Superwoman kind of super-person. And those people feel that every area of life need they need to be kind of 'on it', otherwise that sense of failure really kicks in.

#### 7:47

Does any of this ring a bell for you? Certainly does for me, and us 'imposter syndromers' (it's a new term: you heard it here first, by the way), we tend to protect ourselves from triggering our imposter syndrome by using strategies like working hard to make up for our sense of incompetency or ineptness; holding back, or making excuses, using charm or perceptiveness of others to cover up a sense of intellectual inauthenticity; we procrastinate, so we hardly start things. Perhaps we don't finish things, to avoid fear of being judged, and we can self-sabotage. So there's always a reason in the back pocket as to why something failed or wasn't good enough.

And you'll know this if you are an imposter syndrome sufferer, that it's not just confined to just the work domain. God, I know that more than anyone and that people often find it applies in their personal lives to when they're dealing with their family and relationships, friendships, whatever... parenting. I mean, I do relate to many of these domains. I know this particularly when I first started combining the case management work and psychology service that I do into the PsychWorks Associates brand, I was completely overcome my feelings of being a total fraud and, in my true style, that I wasn't qualified to do any of this. So I'm a combination of the perfectionist and the soloist and I coped by working damn hard, and just not really asking for help. And it was a perfect recipe for burnout really, wasn't it?

And that is actually a real – jokes aside – that is a real potential outcome for people with imposter syndrome, so we do really need to understand the seriousness of what we're doing, and on a long-term basis. But it is tough for so many of us with imposter syndrome and research says that it can be especially prolific in the helping professions, including those who practice the law. So according to a 2020 interview that I read with an organizational psychology expert, there was a sense that 70% of us in the helping professions, including the law, will experience imposter syndrome regularly. 70% of us! Yikes.

## 10:02

So let's get this right: as well as working with trauma and stress that our clients bring, the pressures of managing the workload that we have, whether it's care packages, whether it's litigation, managing, monitoring the needs of our clients and their families, we as personal injury professionals are likely to also bring additional stress from our own upbringing and life experiences, too, that perhaps says that we won't be good enough in our job, or we can't handle the work that we have chosen to do.

Hm. And if this rings true in any way for you, please stick with me. Perhaps it's about needing to know that you're not the only one (and you're not, by the way), perhaps it's about recognizing the toll, this constant looking-over-your-shoulder feeling has on you – I totally hear you, by the way. Or perhaps it's just wanting a way out. And there is, by the way.

So look, I guess whatever the reason that has brought you here, I hope you'll find something to help you shift even slightly to a more balanced and healthy mindset. Because, at the risk of sounding like a *L'Oréal* advert, you *are* worth it, I promise you. And frankly, it's a good business move to have you in this work for the long haul. And to be able to hold your clients' and colleagues' needs with ease. So how do we learn to feel comfortable in the discomfort of imposter syndrome?

## 11:28

So one of the first things I would suggest is that the insecurity and self-doubt that you feel are reflections and the signs that you are, in fact, normal and human. But we have to acknowledge that what is just going on in our own heads is not likely to give us a 'normal human perspective'. So we need to get out of our heads a little bit. So offer yourself a perspective from what it's like, perhaps, in other people's heads. And what I mean by that is not necessarily what other people think of you, but to imagine that they have their own things going on, and that it's not actually necessarily about *you* specifically.

You might have seen that cartoon where the speaker is shown to have lots of imposter-syndrome-esque beliefs in his head about how people are thinking negatively about him. And everyone else has their own thought bubble. And it shows that they're having similar thoughts about themselves, and theirs. So next time you feel wobbly, consider this image and the fact that it applies to 70% of personal injury professionals that you're likely to work with.

So in that sense, talk about yourself to those you trust. And that will likely give you the chance to put into perspective beliefs about yourself with other people's beliefs about what goes on for them. And that can be hugely reassuring, and calibrating. This is where reflective supervision, mentors, and indeed therapists come into their own, in my opinion.

12:54

Perhaps another good starting point is accepting and recognizing the discomfort in the mantra that there is no perfect method for this game called 'life'. And there is no perfect method for working in the personal injury world, in which we do. Do you remember that first time you started working as a case manager or a solicitor? When you did a meet and greet for a new client, and the discomfort you felt? Or you started at a new firm or in a new company? But you did it anyway, right? So hold on to that: that's really important.

Remind yourself of your accomplishments. If you heard my 'Inner Critic' episode, you'll know about journaling to fill the positive pot of self-belief to balance out the negative pot. It's not to say that the negative pot doesn't exist, but it's just to put things into perspective. One of those self-help strategies, especially at the end of a tough day of supporting personal injury clients' high-level needs is: can you pick out five things you did that was helpful or progressive or beneficial, because you will find five things that fit that category.

So it's really worth thinking about that strategy in challenging that imposter syndrome at times where it might be high. Think about reframing your thinking by asking yourself: What evidence do I have for this belief? What would I say to a friend in this position? What's literally the worst thing that can happen to me and is that imposter syndrome reasonable?

This is where being a mentor or a supervisor for someone else, with their challenges that might actually be similar to yours can be helpful in turning the table around on a situation that you have similarly found upsetting in the past. Hearing about the things that you would say to someone in a similarly upsetting situation can sometimes help trigger the compassion in yourself, about yourself in that similar situation.

Separating feelings from facts is really important and, as valid as your feelings are – and I would be a terrible psychologist if I said anything different – but this process can help you consider your feelings as being coloured by unhelpful thoughts. So sometimes it can be helpful to go back to the thoughts themselves and question whether they were fair or reasonable. In doing this, see if this process 'uncolours' your feelings a little bit.

And my final point, which for those who know me well is based on my '6 out of 10' theory: that if you're always striving for 100%, you need to turn it down a notch or so. As long as it's more than 50%, i.e. 6 out of 10, 60%, then you'll be good enough. Sometimes being 'good enough' is *literally* good enough. It's not perfect, but we know that 'perfect' perpetuates imposter syndrome. But being 6 out of 10 will likely mean your input is fit for purpose, and no-one will notice any difference in a higher aimed-for task. After all, 60% is still a 2.1 pass at University. It's a clear win, even if there is some variance and subjective interpretation on the outcome. And if you're anything like me, and in true imposter syndrome-style, the chances are, you'll overshoot the 6/10 mark anyway and achieve more like 7 or 8 out of 10.

16:33

So, I guess the point I'm trying to say is that by turning down the 100% goal in work is going to translate into behaviours where you are likely to find yourself being much more available, *fairly* across your caseload and *reasonably* across your caseload, with space to manage emergencies or urgent queries, space for compliance issues, reflecting, pacing the work, and balancing it with your own life. The aim cannot be for perfectionism, then, but it's for 'good enough', to allow balance and other competing priorities to also have some space. Otherwise, you really are heading for a more miserable, unfulfilling life really.

But I do appreciate that this whole concept of imposter syndrome is not a mathematical concept. Although as someone who does like numbers, it is really about recognizing that, that we are dedicated, hard-working, ambitious, and human individuals. And as such, we have to find a way to get used to living with this imposter syndrome malarkey.

And with any mindset issue, especially those listening in today, we will have probably been accidentally raised to see ourselves with too big a dollop of negativity and self-doubt. And from a very young age. So at our ripe old ages of at least middle age, it's a heck of a lot of undoing required. But I do promise you that if you start here and you start now, things will change; every little change will eventually add up.

And you don't have to have it all figured out to move forward or to start something you just need to know your truth. And all your good points are you, too. And you then need to accept and speak your truth. I think it was Ricky Gervais who said: "Look, no one else knows what they're doing either." And that that was the best advice he ever received. I'm going to run with that, you know.

So really, ultimately focus on your game, your game of 'good enough' and balance, and you'll see your productivity and self-worth absolutely soar. It really is in your, your family's and your clients' interest to do this. It's a good business move. It's a good family move. All right, so I hope you found this helpful topic as uncomfortable as it might have been – certainly it was for me. So thanks for sticking with it and listening to the end. So go and have a relax now, and I will see you next time. All the best for now. Bye-bye!

**19:21**

Before you go: if you enjoyed the episode today, I'd really appreciate it if you could rate it on whatever platform you're listening on, and share and like on your social media profiles. Word of mouth is the best way for us to grow and to be a continuous resource for all. And if there's any topic you wish for us to cover, please drop us a line on our website. Thank you so much for all your support.

Presenter: [Dr Shabnam Berry-Khan](#), Director of PsychWorks Associates

Editor: [Emily Crosby Media](#)

Transcribed by <https://otter.ai>