

Impostor Syndrome: The Controversial Phenomenon of the Very Capable People

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Recently, it seems that a large amount people have been suffering from a psychological condition with a strange name: impostor syndrome.

The term refers to a set of emotions and behaviours, that are experienced by a highly or successful people, who have many doubts about their knowledge and skills. They feel somehow like «frauds» and are internally convinced that they got this position because of a random event or because those who hired them didn't realise how inadequate their skills were. The main characteristic of the phenomenon is the constant anxiety experienced by the individual and fear to disclose their inadequacy in one area, even if the probability is in fact, minimal.

The first to talk about this phenomenon was Pauline Clance [1], who identified the sense of insecurity in a group of successful women who did not feel they deserved the main role they had. Subsequently, it has been observed that the syndrome is not only spread to women, but to a large part of academically high and educated population covering roles in various fields, including education, health care, accounting, finance, law and marketing [1-3].

This controversial feeling often afflicts those who, in fact, know their limits and their limitations at a certain area, precisely because they are very prepared. The phenomenon seems to affect women more often, while doctors are among the most "affected".

Of course, gender stereotypes play an important role in the phenomenon as recent research has shown, in fact men may suffer equally, but they are more likely to keep their doubts hidden from personal pride. Also, meritocracy plays a role in the emergence and study of the phenomenon having more men in "key positions".

Numerous studies and articles have documented the prevalence of higher education: students and university teachers are particularly prone to developing imposter syndrome (McDevitt, 2006).

In addition, another factor in the appearance of the syndrome is the lack of standards at the discussed field of interest. For instance, if in a newborn field or approach there are yet no role models to inspire, then self-doubt and a sense of inadequacy will probably appear more often.

It seems that, behind the impostor syndrome there may be one personality trait: perfectionism. Those who are perfectionists always tend to believe they should or could have done better and tend to remember mistakes above all, while easily forgetting or not even recording success.

Adam Persky of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill wrote an article in the American Journal of Pharmaceutical Education specifically saying: "The feature of perfectionism is useful, but no one can be perfect at everything. It's okay to try your best, but you have to forgive yourself when you make mistakes, because mistakes are inevitable anyway. An attitude that is learned mainly through maturity and experience".

How does the phenomenon relate to performance on internal or external factors.

In the field of psychology, one of the factors studied intensely are the attributions that individuals make about the motivations and factors of success and failure. The result of a missing effort, or the failure in a task, arises emotional responses at individuals, that search a common cause, followed by attributions about the causes that brought the result.

The locus of control (Rotter, 1954), indicates the perception of the control of events that everyone has and it can be attributed to themselves or at external factors. Those who base their success at internal motivations and factors have an internal locus of control. In contrast, people who attribute their success or failure to external causes have an external locus of control.

The locus of control represents the mental attitude thanks to which you can influence your actions and the results that derive from them. Those who show an external locus of control perceive events as unpredictable, depend on others, and seem to have low self-esteem, low self-efficacy and attribute their failures to fate or others.

On the contrary, those who have an internal locus of control show knowledge and skills that allow them to better face situations and problems, think they can achieve the set goals, believe in their abilities and do not fear fatigue.

Research suggests that people who suffer more from the syndrome believe that their successes are more due to external factors and do not feel worthy of recognition and reward. For example, they attribute success to a random event, even though a whole group of people can congratulate them on their achievements or receive wide recognition.

The person who experiences this condition has a constant fear that he or she will be exposed and somehow result as inadequate.

This creates a vicious circle: the person does not feel worthy of professional recognition and, by not trying to be exposed, will increase his control and refinement at work, significantly increasing the standards to be achieved and setting unrealistic goals which are actually inaccessible [4].

Impostor syndrome: an unknown ally of the Dunning-Kruger phenomenon?

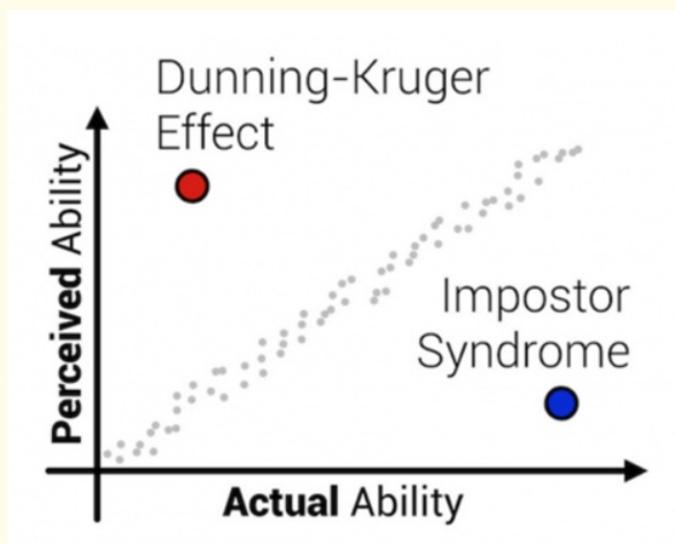


Figure 1

In recent years we have heard of the Dunning-Kruger phenomenon, or the phenomenon where many people tend to overestimate their knowledge, despite being very limited. The two researchers Dunning and Kruger [5] administered at their research groups tests that included humour, grammar and logic. They then selected people with lower scores (actual average score of 12) and asked them to evaluate the scores themselves from the tests themselves. These people greatly overestimated their results, until they received an estimated average score of 62!

Dunning and Kruger have explained this effect precisely in the light of the impotence of the subjects: The more one is incapable of a subject, the more they are unable to understand these metacognitive strategies that will allow them to become more aware of their limits.

What many may not know is that, unfortunately, there is another phenomenon that will not allow the Dunning-Kruger phenomenon to diminish: very often those who are truly competent, educated and informed are suffering from the so-called impostor syndrome.

So, one would wonder what drives a person to not have enough confidence in their abilities.

The phenomenon is related to family background [6,7]. Harvey and Katz [8] found that impostor syndrome is more common in individuals who are the first family members to reach important career or educational goals and exceed the expectations of others.

Parenting styles also appear to be influencing the phenomenon: in students with this syndrome, researchers have found an association with lack of parental care in childhood (Sannak and Towell, 2001) but also with the presence of an over-controlling father (Hughes and Thu, 2014; Sonnak and Towell, 2001; Want and Kleitman, 2006).

Is there anything I can do about it?

The feeling little or inadequate has its roots in multiple causes which appear to have an interdependent influence, reinforcing dysfunctional thinking and guilt. The first step we can take to recover is to recognise that it is happening to us. Awareness is one of the key factors that permits to individuals recognise and subsequently reshape their behavioural patterns. Realising that there are other people experiencing the phenomenon (which are apparently many), helps to a broader understanding that this is a feeling that affects a large proportion of people, thus normalising the feeling of isolation.

Beyond that, cognitive-behavioural therapy -as well as any other approach that focus on cognitive maladaptive convictions- as well as the nuclear feelings experienced by the individual are appropriate for further treatment of the phenomenon [9-19].



Figure 2

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