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## Imposter! The Basics of Imposter Syndrome And How to Handle It

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**T**he other week, I was feeling rather troubled. I got a 98% on an exam for research methods. I was told by my editor at *The Oberlin Review* that I had written one of the best article openers she had ever seen. I was told that my screenplay for my cinematic storytelling workshop class was going pretty well. However, none of it felt that real to me, no matter how amazing my mom said it was. To me, it felt like anyone could have done what I did, and soon, everyone was going to realize how wrong they were. In my mind, what I had done was something anyone could have done, and everyone was going to realize sooner or later that was the truth. These people would know that I was not who they thought I was, and that I was a complete and utter fake. I was having a problem with impostor syndrome, and if what I described sounds familiar, you might have it too.

According to the American Psychological Association (APA), impostor syndrome, also referred to as the imposter phenomenon, is a mental condition that occurs when high-achieving people attribute their success to luck rather than their own hard work and talents. Psychologists Pauline Clance and Suzzane Imes first coined the term in 1978. According to Clance and Imes, people with the condition tend to fear of being exposed as impostors. As of the fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5), impostor syndrome is not a recognized diagnosis, but often coincides with anxiety and depressive disorders.

There are multiple risks that are said to contribute to the development of impostor syndrome. Originally, it was thought that impostor syndrome only occurred in high-achieving women. However, research has



found that impostor syndrome can occur in people of any gender, but people from minority communities are more likely to develop the condition. Generally, people who are the only minority in their field are more likely to have impostor syndrome than people who are in fields full of their peers. According to a paper by researchers Kevin Cokley, Shannon McClain, Alicia Enciso, and Mercedes Martinez, Asian Americans reported higher impostor syndrome feelings than either Latinx Americans or African Americans. Also, impostor feelings predicted mental health better than minority stress status for all groups. Another risk factor for impostor syndrome is a high level of perfectionism. It can lead someone to either procrastinate on a project because they are not sure if they will reach their high goals for themselves, or someone may end up over-preparing because they feel like they do not know enough. Another factor is societal or parental expectations. In their original research, Clance and Imes noticed the study participants were expected to do well in school beginning at a young age. The higher the

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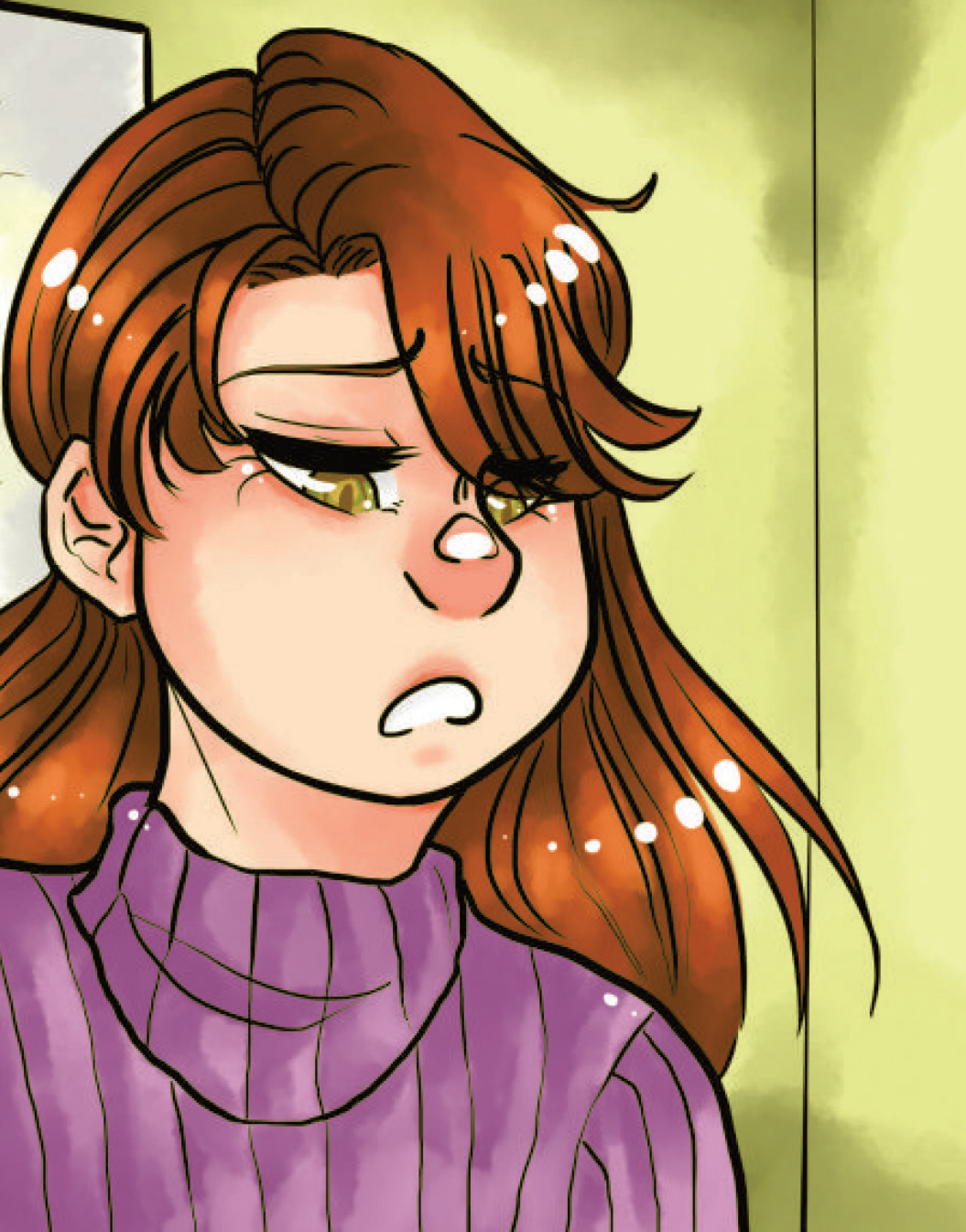
## Impo

### *The Basics of Impostor Syna*

Written by K  
Illustrated by J

expectations of achievement, the more likely impostor feelings are to emerge. This is especially true in households that switch between giving extreme praise and giving extreme criticism. However, the cause of impostor syndrome is unknown, so there is still ongoing research to identify the sources.

Feelings of impostor syndrome can also be triggered by certain events. For instance, if someone is attempting a new project, career, or other endeavor, they are more likely to experience impostor feelings because they feel unready for what comes next. Many people who have impostor syndrome are graduate students.



# Impostor!

## *Syndrome and How to Handle It*

Erin Heuring  
Athina Apazidis

According to psychiatrist Carole Lieberman, it is because grad students are in an “in-between” state of their professional lives; they are not quite out of school, but they are doing more than they did in undergrad.

Despite the problems that impostor syndrome causes, there are ways to combat it. First, one must recognize their impostor feelings. If you notice you are having impostor feelings, try writing them down or changing your thought process. For example, instead of thinking “I am not qualified at all for a lab position,” a person can refuse the first

statement and correct it by thinking “I might not be completely qualified, but that is okay since no one can be completely prepared for everything.” This helps take the mental pressure off of a person’s thoughts. If someone with the syndrome focuses on noticing their impostor thoughts and modifying them, eventually their feelings about themselves will change. However, this needs to be done gradually over a period of

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time since many of these thoughts tend to be ingrained into one’s thought processes. Another way someone can battle impostor syndrome is by acknowledging compliments. Instead of brushing off praise, a person can accept it

and attempt to see where the complimenter is coming from. For other people, starting to recognize when problems are not their fault could help with impostor feelings. Taking note of when things go wrong and figuring out which things can be attributed to chance or other causes besides human error may be a good step for that.

One of the best ways to fight impostor syndrome is to talk to others about it. Many people with the impostor phenomenon do not talk to others about their thoughts. However, if people discuss their performance with others, they can figure out if other people feel the same way they do. Maybe other people are just as confused or lost as they are, and knowing that can be reassuring. A person with impostor syndrome can talk to a group of friends or classmates or a single trusted person like an advisor, a professor, a best friend, or a psychologist. Any trusted person who knows your strengths and weaknesses can help to lessen the feelings. For people who are worried about talking to other people about their impostor feelings, there are relatively anonymous online communities where people can explain their impostor feelings and help each other sort through them.

For those who have impostor syndrome, know you are not alone. In an interview with *The New York Times*, Maya Angelou admitted that despite her success, she still worries that people will discover she has “run a game on everybody.” Even Oberlin College’s own Professor Rebecca Whelan, chair of the Chemistry and Biochemistry Department, admitted to her own problems. In her college education, she wanted to graduate summa cum laude. She worked her hardest, but as soon as she achieved her goal, she thought anyone could have done what she did, and it was not a big deal. Even the most amazing and accomplished people can have problems with impostor syndrome. Just because you have it does not mean it is a sign of failure.

For my own bouts of impostor syndrome, I tend to make jokes. When I texted my mom that I was getting to write this article on impostor syndrome, I joked that it was not a big deal and anyone could do it. (She did not get the joke until I explained it.) I have been trying to change my thoughts and be gentler on myself, correcting myself when I think I am not smart enough or I do not know enough to apply for research opportunities. Instead, I tell myself that I am still learning, and it is not bad for me to apply and learn more. It will take some work for me to ever be comfortable with myself and my abilities, but hopefully I can take the right steps from here to work on myself. ●