

## Careers intelligence

# It is normal to feel like an academic fraud sometimes

**Hugh Kearns, author of a book on impostor syndrome, offers advice on how to overcome it**

Have you ever had the feeling that you are just one mistake away from being found out as a complete fraud? That everything you have achieved so far has been down to good luck or the help you have had from others, or to just being in the right place at the right time? Well there's a name for those feelings: impostor feelings. And you are in good company because they are very common – especially among researchers.

Impostor feelings can be defined as “the feeling that you are an impostor or fraud despite clear evidence that you are not”. It's that nagging feeling that at any moment you are going to be found out – exposed. That when they find out what you're really like, they are not going to be very impressed. And impostor feelings are very common.

About 70 per cent of people report that they occasionally feel like an impostor. And for about 30 per cent of people the feelings are not just occasional – they feel like an impostor most of the time. That is when it is described as impostor syndrome – and impostor syndrome can have a big impact on your life and mental health.

While the incidence of impostor feelings might be 70 per cent in the general population, in my experience the incidence is even higher among researchers. And there are some good reasons for this:

In research, you often don't know what you are doing. You are trying your best but you don't know the answer. There is a great deal of uncertainty. And of course the more you know about your subject area the more you realise how little you know: fertile ground for self-doubt.

In research, there are lots of setbacks, dead ends and outright rejec-



tions. While at a rational level you may accept that this is part of research, after a while you may begin to assume that these setbacks are proof that you are, in fact, an impostor.

And finally, research is a very critical environment. Researchers are trained to be rigorous, to find the flaws in arguments and to challenge assumptions. Colleagues and reviewers can be very direct, harsh even. Academic rigour means that they are very happy to point out the failings in your work – and by extension, in you. They may say: “Now don't take this personally...” But we take it personally.

For a psychologist, impostor syndrome is a fascinating subject of study, especially its occurrence among researchers. Because there is clear evidence that the person is not an impostor yet they believe they are. How can this be?

In particular, how can researchers, who are trained to focus on the

evidence, be so blind to the evidence when it relates to themselves? Well what they do, what we all do, is misattribute the evidence of our success or achievements to external factors. For example, thinking that success came only because of “luck”, or was really the work of a supervisor or principal investigator.

And of course there may an element of truth in some of these feelings – but not the whole truth. You may have been lucky – but you had to work hard too. These rationalisations help us get rid of inconvenient evidence and cling on to our self-doubts.

So how to overcome these feelings? Here are some suggestions:

- Realise that it is normal to sometimes doubt yourself. Most people do. And it doesn't mean you are an impostor. However, if doubts persist and begin to impact how you think, feel and act – impostor syndrome – it might be useful to get some professional help.

- Create a fact file or a brag file. This is a file that contains evidence of what you have achieved: awards, qualifications, feedback. When you are having one of your impostor moments you can dip into this file. This helps challenge some of the self-doubt and assumptions.
- Mind your language. When someone gives you a compliment on some achievement, note how you discount it: “It was nothing”, “I was just lucky”. The next time just say thank you. There is no need to qualify or discount.
- Be brave and take action. The self-doubts associated with impostor feelings and the syndrome can hold you back. At some point you just have to be brave and jump in.

Hugh Kearns, author of *The Impostor Syndrome: Why Successful People Often Feel Like Frauds*, lectures and researches on the subject of high performance at Flinders University.