

Imposter Syndrome

Lori Kogan, PhD

What is it?

How can you recognize it in yourself or others?

How can you manage it?

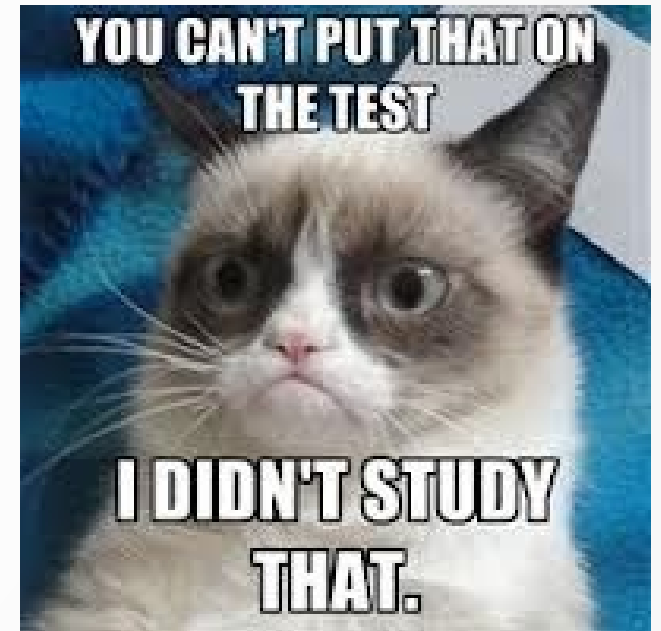



Self-care

- Step away and do something for self-care
- Talk with a trusted person in your social network
- Talk with a professional counsellor or therapist. Call your Employee Family Assistance Plan provided by your provincial VMA to set up an appointment. Anonymous, confidential, helpful and normalizing
- Free counselling and mental health resources for all Canadians <https://ca.portal.gs/> Trained counsellors at www.crisisservicescanada.ca/ or call 1-833-456-4566 or text 45645

Clance IP Scale


- ▶ Take Assessment
 - ▶ Write down on a piece of paper, numbers 1-20
 - ▶ Read the following statements and write down the best answer
 - ▶ Add together the numbers of the responses to each statement.





1	2	3	4	5
(not at all true)	(rarely)	(sometimes)	(often)	(very true)

1. I have often succeeded on a test or task even though I was afraid that I would not do well before I undertook the task.
2. I can give the impression that I'm more competent than I really am.
3. I avoid evaluations if possible and have a dread of others evaluating me.
4. When people praise me for something I've accomplished, I'm afraid I won't be able to live up to their expectations of me in the future.
5. I sometimes think I obtained my present position or gained my present success because I happened to be in the right place at the right time or knew the right people.
6. I'm afraid people important to me may find out that I'm not as capable as they think I am.
7. I tend to remember the incidents in which I have not done my best more than those times I have done my best.
8. I rarely do a project or task as well as I'd like to do it.
9. Sometimes I feel or believe that my success in my life or in my job has been the result of some kind of error.
10. It's hard for me to accept compliments or praise about my intelligence or accomplishments.



1 (not at all true) 2 (rarely) 3 (sometimes) 4 (often) 5 (very true)

11. At times, I feel my success has been due to some kind of luck.
12. I'm disappointed at times in my present accomplishments and think I should have accomplished much more.
13. Sometimes I'm afraid others will discover how much knowledge or ability I really lack
14. I'm often afraid that I may fail at a new assignment or undertaking even though I generally do well at what I attempt.
15. When I've succeeded at something and received recognition for my accomplishments, I have doubts that I can keep repeating that success.
16. If I receive a great deal of praise and recognition for something I've accomplished, I tend to discount the importance of what I've done.
17. I often compare my ability to those around me and think they may be more intelligent than I am.
18. I often worry about not succeeding with a project or examination, even though others around me have considerable confidence that I will do well.
19. If I'm going to receive a promotion or gain recognition of some kind, I hesitate to tell others until it is an accomplished fact.
20. I feel bad and discouraged if I'm not "the best" or at least "very special" in situations that involve achievement.

Assessment

- ▶ 40 or less - few impostor characteristics
- ▶ 41-60 - moderate impostor experiences
- ▶ 61-80 - frequent impostor feelings
- ▶ > 80 - intense IP experiences
- ▶ The higher the score - more frequently and seriously Impostor Phenomenon interferes in your life.

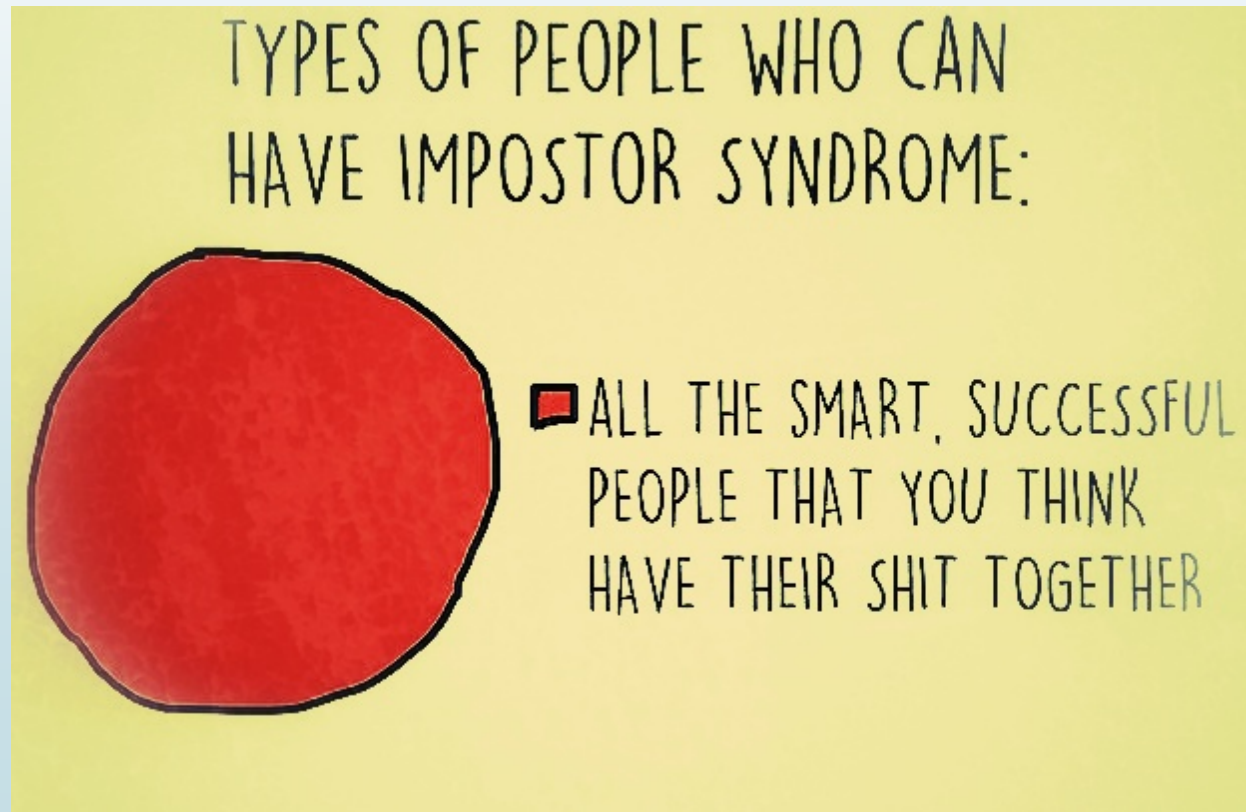
Imposter syndrome – what is it?

- ▶ An internal experience of intellectual phoniness and a persistent feeling of being a fraud.
- ▶ A nagging belief that you lack the skills, knowledge or competence to fulfill your job or role
 - ▶ Despite
 - ▶ External recognition
 - ▶ Evidence of good work



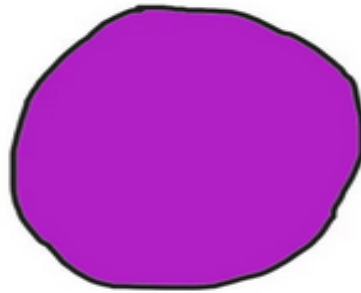
Imposter Syndrome

- ▶ ~70% of people experience Imposter Syndrome at some point during their work life



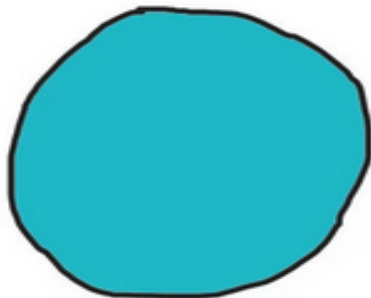
Imposter Syndrome

WHAT YOU THINK YOU ARE:



■ A HOT CRAZY
TRUCK FIRE MESS
OF A PERSON WHO
DISAPPOINTS
IMPORTANT PEOPLE

WHO OTHERS
THINK YOU ARE:



■ COOL
AND FINE

Imposter Syndrome



Prevalent among all health professionals

Students
Interns/residents
GP physicians
Specialists



Medical professionals may be particularly vulnerable

Competitive admissions process - tends to select individuals who push themselves to perform well

These top performers often find themselves surrounded by other similar high achievers

- Normalizes their own achievements as typical rather than atypical
- 'Big fish in small pond' phenomenon


Imposter Syndrome - Studies

- Medical students –
 - 50% of women and 25% of men affected (Villwock et al, 2016).
 - 47% of men and women (Ikbaal, 2018).
 - Impostor feelings do not abate with more years of training and experience.
 - Tend to increase – 4th year med students higher rates than previous years.
 - Trend continues into graduate medical education and beyond.
- Family medicine residents - 41% of women and 24% (Oriel et al, 2004).
- Internal medicine residents in Canada - 43.8% (Legassie et al, 2008).
- Compared to research librarians (15%), engineering students (35%), tech workers (58%).

Veterinarians and impostor syndrome: an exploratory study

- Method - Online, anonymous, cross-sectional survey
- Clance Impostor Phenomenon Scale (CIPS)
- Sample: 941 - primarily female (90.7%), working in private practice (83.6%).
- (68%) met or exceeded the clinical cut-off for frequent impostor feelings CIPS.
- This proportion is higher than the 20–50% reported by medical professionals

Kogan LR, Schoenfeld-Tacher R, Hellyer P, Grigg EK, Kramer E. Veterinarians and impostor syndrome: an exploratory study. *Vet Rec.* 2020 Oct 3;187(7):271. doi: 10.1136/vr.105914. Epub 2020 Jun 22. PMID: 32571984.



Veterinarians and impostor syndrome: an exploratory study

- Males were only half as likely to score the same score or higher on the CIPS as females.
- Participants in practice less than five years had double the odds of scoring higher on the CIPS than the reference group of more experienced practitioners
- Greater likelihood of scoring higher on CIPS for those from New Zealand and UK compared to US
- Veterinarians have an alarmingly high rate of prevalence for this disorder



Imposter Syndrome and Interns/Residents

- Individuals with Imposter Syndrome -
- High achievers
 - Seem to be doing well but struggling internally
- Interns can be particularly vulnerable
 - Fail to internalize positive feedback
 - Believe that others have a falsely high impression of their abilities
 - Imposter Syndrome can be an unrecognized problem affecting
 - Intern wellness
 - Learning and growth

Imposter Syndrome

- ▶ Most people with impostor feelings suffer in silence
- ▶ At the core is a fear of being “found out”
- ▶ The essential initial step in dealing with Imposter Syndrome is:
 - ▶ Recognizing it
 - ▶ Naming the impostor-like feelings for what they are



Core characteristics



1. Denial of competence and inability to internalize success

- Difficulty receiving praise or recognition for their accomplishments
 - Feel they don't deserve it
- Attribute success to external factors (e.g., luck, a charming personality, knowing the right people) instead of internal factors (e.g., skills, knowledge, and expertise)
- When they perform something with ease (because of their training and experience), they assume the task is easy for everyone
- Set very high expectations for themselves
- Make unreasonably low assessments of their performance

Core characteristics

2. Feelings of phoniness

- Feel as if they are pretending to know what they know (even when they really do know).
- Feel they are just fooling everyone into believing that they are competent at what they do.



Core characteristics

3. Fear of being exposed as a fraud

- ▶ They succeed but 'know' it was just luck or hard work
- ▶ "I fooled them again!"
- ▶ Only a matter of time until their incompetence is revealed.

"I still believe that at any time the no-talent police will come and arrest me."

Mike Myers - actor, comedian, screenwriter, composer, producer



Contributing factors

- Need to always be competent/perfect
- Mindset
- Early childhood and school experiences
 - Focus on performance
 - High achiever



Competency types

- Perfectionist
- Natural genius
- Expert
- Soloist
- Superwoman/man or super-student, super-intern



Competence types:

- Identify your primary competence type
- Pick one of the new realistic rules for your competence type
 - The one that would give your confidence the biggest boost
 - Create new habit - consciously look for opportunities to put your new rule into action



Competence
type:
Perfectionist

A single
focus and
one way to
do
something

- Thoughts:
 - I should deliver a perfect performance 100% of the time.
 - Every aspect of my work must be exemplary.
 - Nothing short of perfect is acceptable.

Recognition:

- Have you ever been accused of being a micromanager?
- Do you have difficulty delegating? When you do, you feel frustrated and disappointed in the results?
- When you make a mistake, do you accuse yourself of “not being cut out” for your job and ruminate on it for days?
- Do you feel like your work must be 100% perfect, 100% of the time?



Perfectionist tendencies

- ▶ People with Imposter Syndrome tend to be perfectionists.
- ▶ Perfectionism: “personality disposition characterized by striving for flawlessness and setting exceedingly high standards for performance, accompanied by tendencies for overly critical evaluations” (Stroeber, 2014)
- ▶ A perfectionist typically sets unrealistically high standards, constantly driving for perfection
 - ▶ Self-worth measured by productivity and success



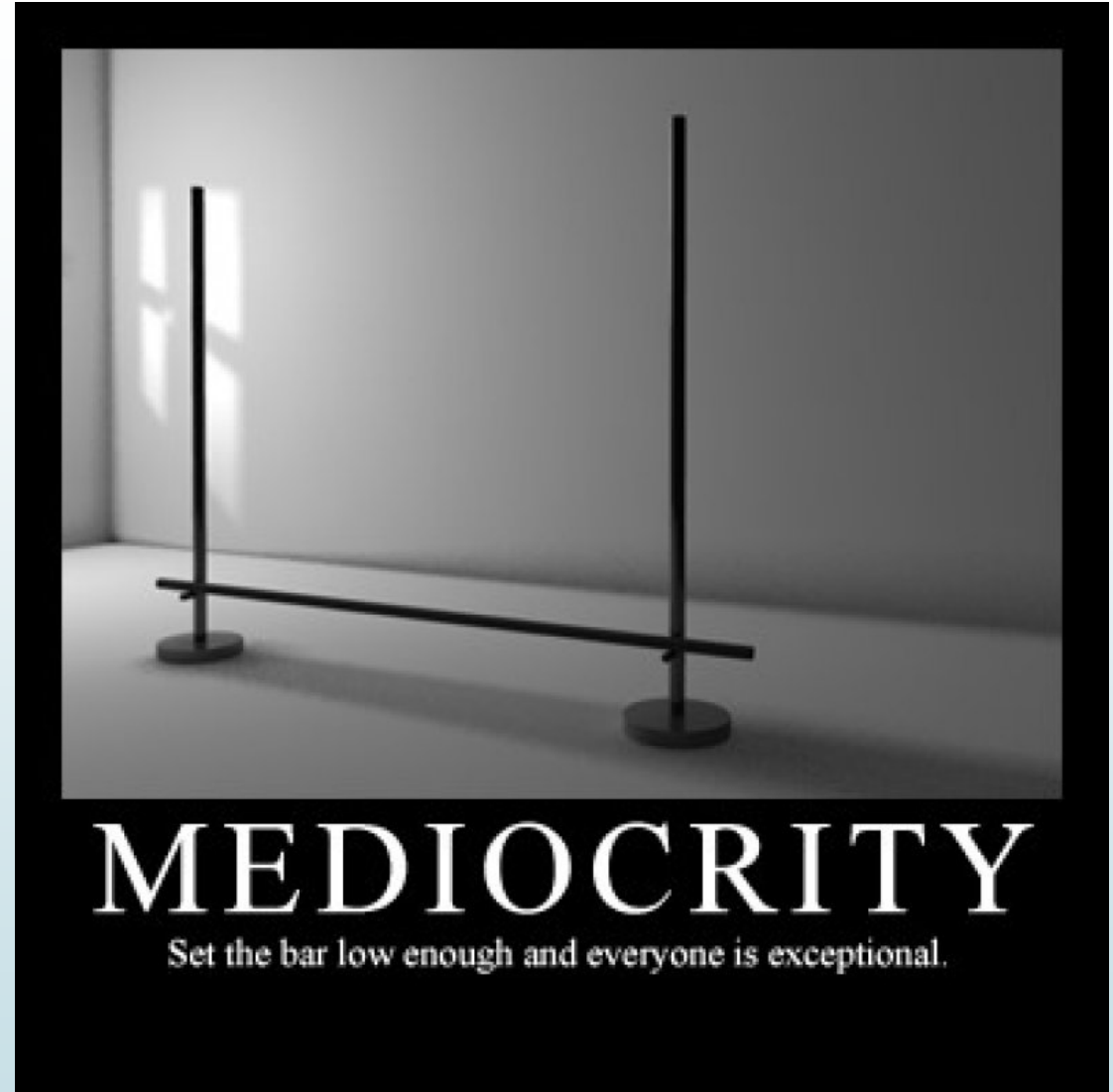
Maladaptive perfectionism

Maladaptive perfectionism associated with:

- ▶ All-or-nothing thinking
- ▶ Conditional self-acceptance
- ▶ Upset when standards are not met
- ▶ Obsessing over trivial errors
- ▶ Judgmental and intolerant of mistakes made by self and/or others
- ▶ Can't accept fallibility
- ▶ Feel inadequate
- ▶ Take constructive criticism personally

Adaptive perfectionism

- ▶ But wait, does this mean settling for mediocracy?
- ▶ Adaptive perfectionism - deriving satisfaction from achievements made from intense effort but tolerating one's imperfections without resorting to harsh self-criticism (Stoltz & Ashby, 2007)



Adaptive perfectionism

Perfectionism vs. A healthy pursuit of excellence

Perfectionism

vs.

Healthy pursuit of excellence

- 1. You feel stressed and driven and motivated by the fear of failure.
- 2. Your accomplishments never seem to satisfy you.
- 3. You feel you must impress others with your intelligence or accomplishments to get them to like and respect you.
- 4. If you make a mistake or fail to achieve an important goal, you become self-critical and feel like a failure as a human being.
- You think you must always be strong and in control of your emotions.

- 1. You feel creative and motivated by feelings of enthusiasm.
- 2. Your efforts give you feelings of joy and satisfaction.
- 3. You do not feel that you have to earn love or friendship by impressing people. You know that people will accept you as you are.
- 4. You are not afraid to make mistakes. You see failure as an opportunity for growth and learning.
- You are not afraid to be vulnerable or share your feelings with others.

New Competency Rules for the Perfectionist

- ▶ Perfectionism inhibits success.
- ▶ Sometimes good is good enough.
- ▶ Not everything deserves 100 percent.
- ▶ Your perfectionism impacts others.

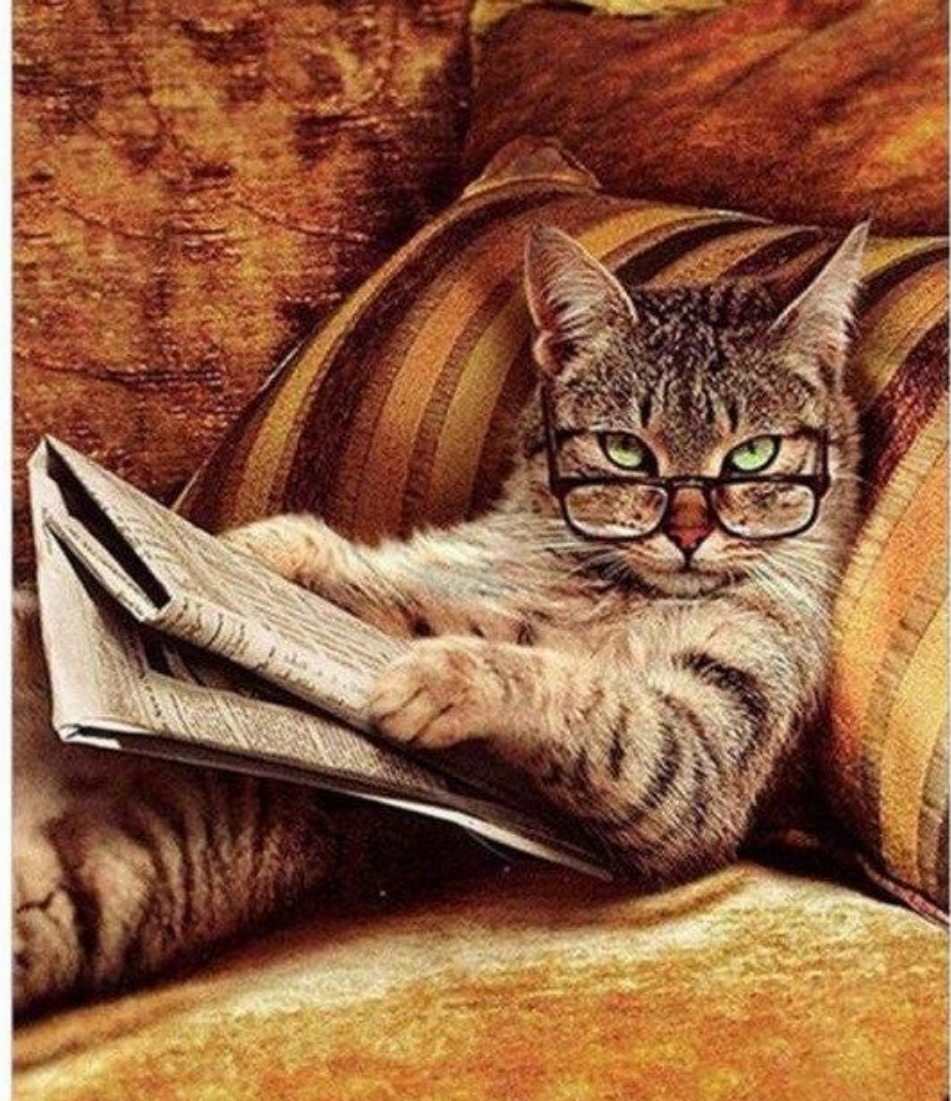


Competence type- Natural Genius

- ▶ Sets the internal bar impossibly high
- ▶ Expectation that you will know everything without being taught, excel without effort, and get it right on the first attempt, understand everything the first time you hear or see or try it
- ▶ Recognition:
 - ▶ Do you have a track record of getting “straight A’s” in school?
 - ▶ Were you the “smart one” in your family or peer group?
 - ▶ Do you dislike the idea of having a mentor, because you can handle things on your own?
 - ▶ When you don’t perform the way you want, you feel a sense of shame?
 - ▶ Do you avoid challenges because it’s so uncomfortable to try something you’re not great at?

New Competency Rules for the Natural Genius

- Effort matters more than ability.
- Challenges are often opportunities in disguise.
- Real success always takes time.

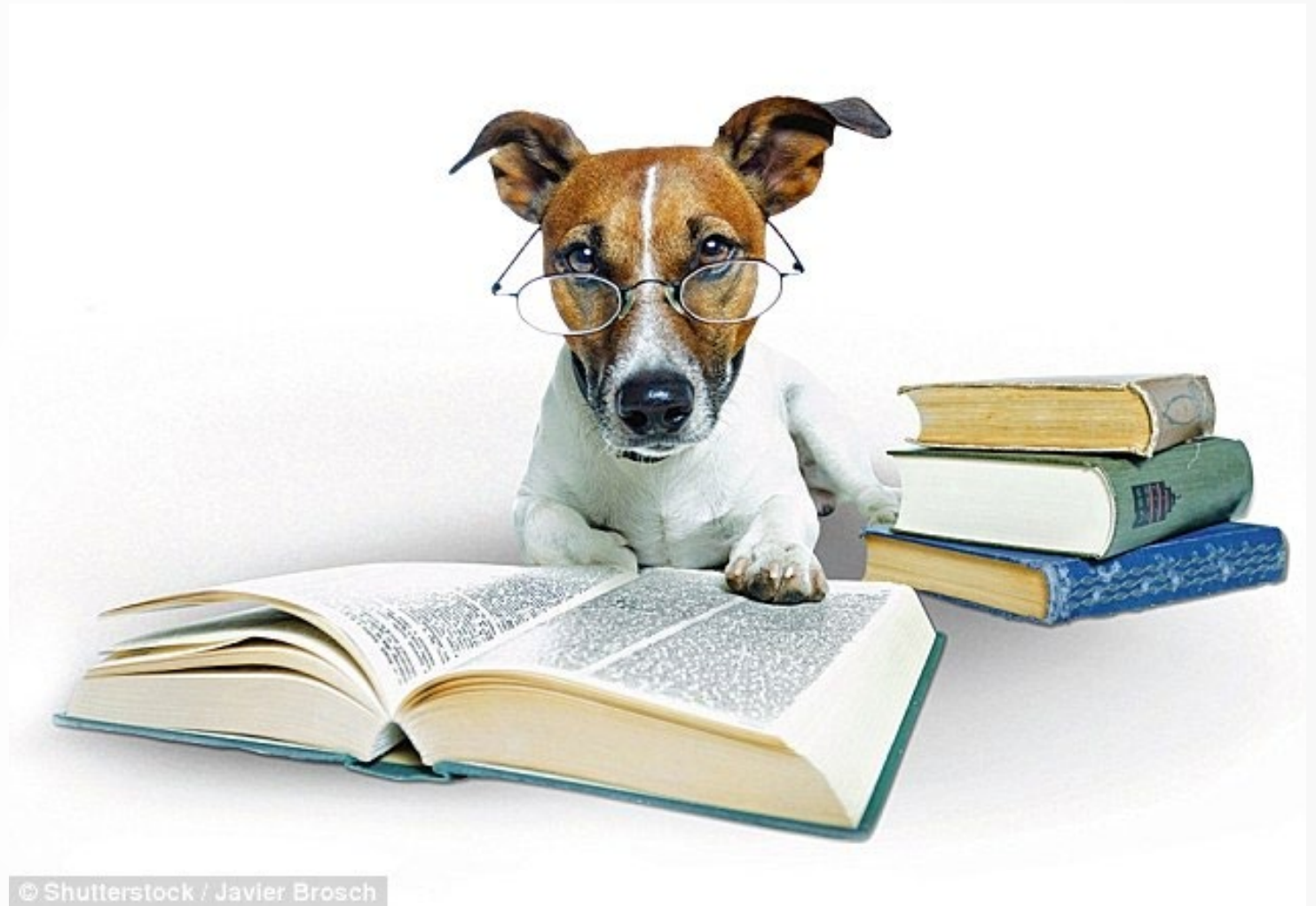


Competence type - Expert

- ▶ Primary concern is how much knowledge or skill you have.
 - ▶ You can never have enough.
- ▶ Thoughts:
 - ▶ If I was really competent, I would know everything there is to know.
 - ▶ If I was really smart, I would understand and remember everything I read.
- ▶ Recognition:
 - ▶ Do you shy away from applying for positions unless you meet every single requirement?
 - ▶ Are you constantly seeking out trainings or certifications because you think you need to improve your skills in order to succeed?
 - ▶ Even if you've been in your role for some time, do you still feel like you don't know "enough"?

New Competency Rules for the Expert

- ▶ You don't need to know everything
 - ▶ You can find someone who does.
- ▶ There are many paths to expertise.
- ▶ There is no end to knowledge.
- ▶ Competence means respecting your limitations.



Competence type - soloist

- ▶ True competence means doing it alone and unaided.
- ▶ Thoughts:
 - ▶ I should not need help.
 - ▶ If was really competent, I could do everything myself.
- ▶ Recognition:
 - ▶ Do you feel that you need to accomplish things on your own?
 - ▶ “I don’t need anyone’s help.” Does that sound like you?
 - ▶ When forced to ask for help, do you frame requests in terms of the requirements of the task/procedure, rather than your needs as a person?



New Competency Rules for soloist

- Competent people know how to ask for what they need.
- Smart people seek out people who know more than they do.
- To get the job done, you first need to identify the resources required.
- When seeking advice, it's important to ask the right people.
- Competent people know it's okay to build on the work of other competent people.

Competence type - Superwoman/Man/Student

- ▶ Must be able to juggle multiple roles – and be successful at them all.
- ▶ Do everything well
- ▶ Recognition:
 - ▶ Do you get stressed when you're not being productive?
 - ▶ Find downtime challenging because it is a 'waste of time'?
 - ▶ Hobbies or passions? Who has time for those?
 - ▶ Feel like you haven't truly earned your title, status, so feel pressed to work even harder and longer to prove your worth?

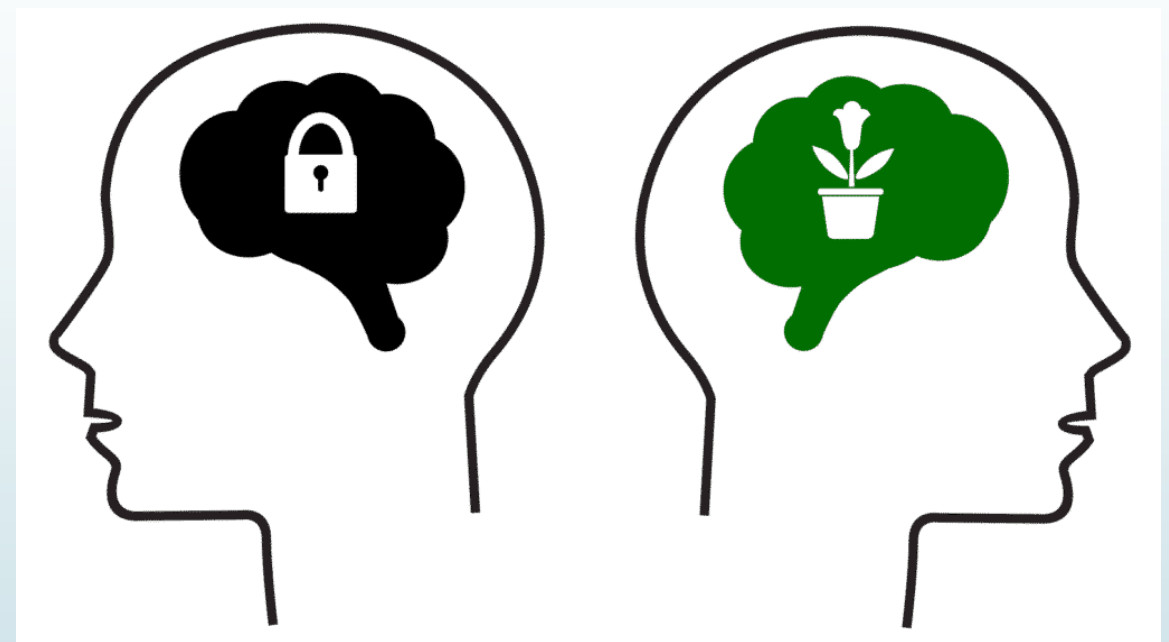
New Competency Rules for the Superwoman/Man/Student

- ▶ It's okay to say no.
- ▶ Delegating frees you up and gives others the chance to participate.
- ▶ When you slow down and cut out unnecessary tasks, you get to focus on activities that really matter.
- ▶ Striving to be a superwoman/man sets a poor example for interns/residents, daughters and sons.



Contributing factors - mindset

- ▶ A fixed mindset can contribute to Imposter Syndrome.
 - ▶ Especially when confronted with challenging tasks.
 - ▶ Feedback, even constructive feedback, taken personally,
 - ▶ Validates the belief of incompetency.
 - ▶ To prevent being exposed as fraud, people avoid tasks that could potentially expose gaps in their knowledge and skills.
 - ▶ Hard to learn and grow



Contributing factors - mindset

Fixed Mindset

Intelligence is static
Leads to a desire to LOOK SMART
and therefore a tendency to:

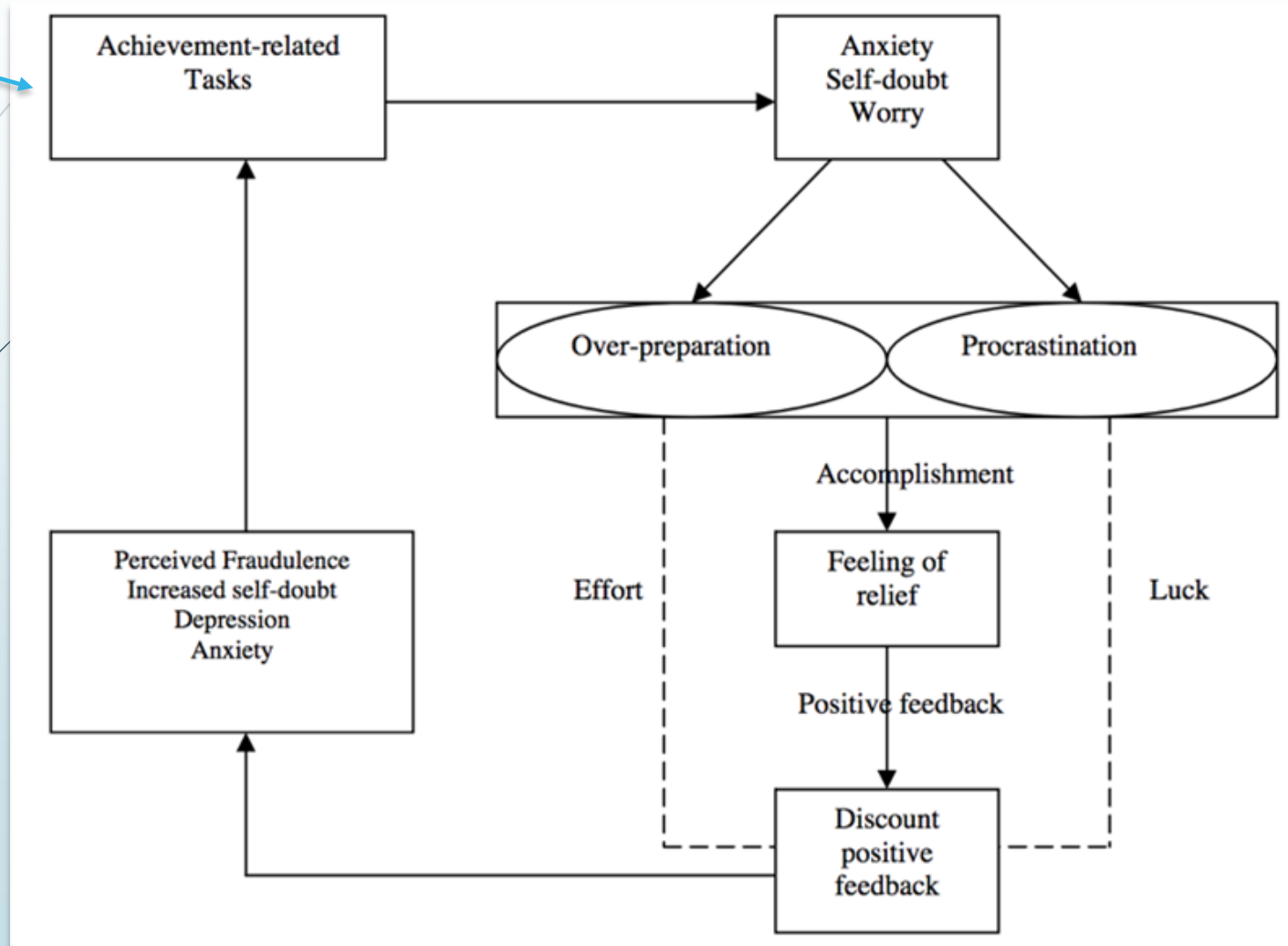
-  Avoid Challenges
-  Give Up Easily Due To Obstacles
-  See Effort As Fruitless
-  Ignore Useful Feedback
-  Be Threatened by Others' Success

Growth Mindset

Intelligence can be developed
Leads to a desire to LEARN
and therefore a tendency to:

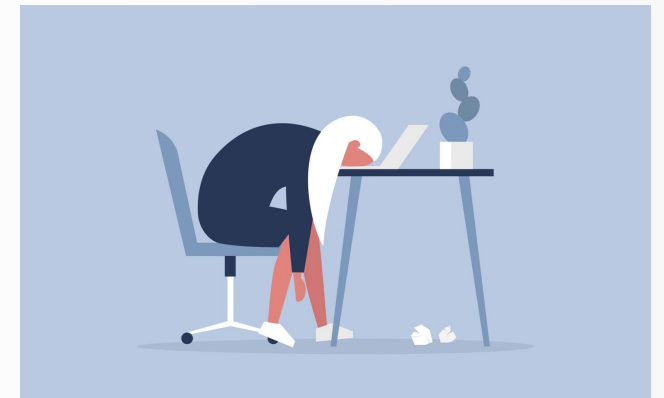
-  Embrace Challenges
-  Persist Despite Obstacles
-  See Effort As Path To Mastery
-  Learn From Criticism
-  Be Inspired By Others' Success

Imposter syndrome cycle



Negative impact

- ▶ Imposter Syndrome negatively impacts:
 - ▶ Job satisfaction
 - ▶ Work-life balance
 - ▶ Personal relationships
- ▶ Tasks cause high anxiety before, during and after completion.
 - ▶ Attributing success to luck leads to feelings of guilt and shame for the "undeserved" accomplishment.
 - ▶ Excessive hard work used to compensate for fear of failure leads to burnout, emotional exhaustion, and fatigue.





Ineffective coping mechanisms

Holding back

- Better to not have tried and failed than to have tried and THEN failed
- If you don't try, you can always claim that you *could have been* a great .. surgeon, internist, rock star —that is, if you'd really tried.

Maintain low profile

- Don't answer questions
- Don't step up

Don't finish

- Never get that paper published for board certification

Self sabotage - Ask self:

- What does my behavior help me avoid?
- What does my behavior help protect me from?

Causes career stagnation

- Risk-averse for fear of failure
- Focus on avoiding mistakes rather than embracing opportunities to learn and grow
- Fail to speak up to minimize the risk of being exposed
- Avoid new challenges based on fear that you are not good enough
- Fear of success because it will bring more responsibilities and attention



Other challenges



Imposter Syndrome strongly associated with:

- Distress, anxiety, and depression
- Burnout (emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment)
- Physical exhaustion and overwork
- Avoidance of tasks with high prominence and visibility

Tools for change

- Recognize, identify, and admit that you have imposter syndrome
- Contemplate its impact on yourself and others:
 - Your identity and self-worth
 - Your health and well-being
 - Your career and professional relationships
 - Your social and family life
 - Your relationship with your friends and family
 - Quality of life or those around you



Performance interfering thoughts

- ▶ Become familiar with your “inner critic” – voice in your head
- ▶ Recognize your Performance Interfering Thoughts - PITS
 - ▶ Automatic and not based on reason or logic
 - ▶ I will fail
 - ▶ I am scared
 - ▶ It has to be perfect
 - ▶ I’ve just been lucky before
- ▶ Ask yourself rational evaluation questions
 - ▶ Is it true?
 - ▶ Is this line of thinking rational?
 - ▶ Constructive?



Tools for change

- ▶ Insight into your personal competency type (perfectionist, natural genius, expert, soloist, superwoman/man)
- ▶ Counseling can help
- ▶ With support or alone –look at your:
 - ▶ Goals and expectations (i.e., are they too high, rigid or unrealistic?)
 - ▶ Beliefs underpinning these goals (i.e., are they true, logical or helpful?)
 - ▶ Reactions when these goals are met and when these are not (i.e., how do you respond to success and failure?)
 - ▶ Your personal Imposter Syndrome triggers

Tools for change

Have a purpose

- Focusing on your purpose can help you stay out of imposter syndrome
- Less focus on your flaws
- It's not about you
- Write it down
 - Help animals?
 - Make the world better place for people and animals?



Questions and Discussion

