

Overcoming imposter syndrome

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Abstract

Feeling like an imposter is commonly reported by veterinary students and new graduates. In fact, this phenomenon is frequently reported by high-achievers in many professions. Several characteristics have been attributed to this complex syndrome, including self-criticism, feelings of insecurity, and the overwhelming surety that one does not really belong in this profession. The imposter syndrome is also a predictor of psychological distress and can negatively impact career advancement. Understanding how this syndrome arises can help to develop strategies that can be useful in overcoming it. This paper introduces some of the causes of imposter syndrome as well as some approaches that can be utilized by veterinarians to increase their resilience and coping skills in order to overcome feeling like an imposter.

Key words: imposter syndrome, wellbeing, emotional wellbeing

Introduction

Imposter syndrome, also known as imposter phenomenon, affects high achieving individuals. This manifests as a pattern of beliefs that result in them feeling they are less competent than others perceive them to be despite the measurable success that has been determined by external standards.¹ In fact, they often attribute their success to luck or good timing rather than to their own abilities and intelligence.¹ This can cause them to believe their success is not really theirs, and therefore results in them feeling they are a fraud and they do not belong.⁷

Individuals who experience imposter syndrome do not have a psychological disorder, but these beliefs can cause psychological distress. People affected by imposter syndrome may experience generalized anxiety, lack of self-confidence, depression, perfectionism, cynicism, depersonalization and burnout.^{2,3} Many clinicians have reported feeling paralyzed, which interfered with their ability to make decisions or ask for opportunities or promotions and ultimately led to meaningful career setbacks.⁵ Ironically, the more successful an individual becomes, the more symptoms of imposter syndrome they may experience. However, their external appearance of success may also decrease the likelihood that others will identify their distress and those suffering from imposter syndrome often do so alone.

Causes

Imposter syndrome can feel like an internal problem or a self-inflicted wound. This may be why historical research wrongly associated personality characteristics, such as introversion, and demographic information, such as being a woman or from a minority group, as the causal reasons for why the syndrome occurs.⁵ More recently, imposter syndrome has been studied as a reaction to external situations.⁴ Under this interpretation, imposter syndrome is seen as a response to a situation that has prompted the generation of fraudulent feelings.⁴

There are reasons to believe that the experience of being educated in a medical school – with either human or animal patients – can actually elicit the response that is interpreted as

imposter syndrome. Work completed at Colorado State University showed that veterinary students' levels of personal distress increased during the first 3 years of their training while their levels of empathy decreased over the same time period.⁶ Other work has shown that medical students have a similar drop in wellness indices and a concurrent increase in imposter phenomenon scores during their time in school.² Thus, the psychological impact of the experiences endured while training to become a veterinarian may very well be part of the reason we see such large proportion of people in our profession affected by this syndrome.

How to overcome imposter syndrome

There are individual techniques that can help to increase your resilience and coping skills. A brief list of some of these techniques follows:

Recognize this is not a “you” problem

Veterinarians are trained in a way that may increase the likelihood of feeling like a fraud. Reframing these fraudulent feelings as symptoms of a stressful educational experience might help you to better identify them as inaccurate thoughts rather than internalizing them as truthful.

Talk to others

Peer support has been shown to be an effective way to help normalize the feelings of insecurity and self-doubt experienced by clinicians. Openly and vulnerably talking to others at similar points in their career can increase your comfort with both admitting what you do not know and asking for help from others.

Talk to yourself

Imposter syndrome can manifest as an internalized dialogue that is typically negative and irrational. Disable this negative self-talk by tapping into your rational mind. Remember that only successful, highly-achieving people experience imposter syndrome in the first place.

Align your work with your values

Integration of personal ideals with professional values has been shown to promote personal growth and improve wellness in medical professionals. This helps to build your professional identity and can reduce the feelings associated with the imposter syndrome.

Get comfortable with failure

Because you will experience failure over and over again in your career. It is truly unavoidable. Reframing these failure events as learning opportunities can help you to grow more fully into your professional role.

Conclusion

Increasing resilience and coping skills can help individuals to overcome imposter syndrome and function more like the professional they were trained to be. It is important to recognize, however, that these practices treat symptoms of a systemic problem, which we should address as a profession in order to decrease the occurrence of imposter syndrome in our new graduates.

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