

Imposter Syndrome:

Defined as *the psychological inability to internalize one's achievements* (also characterized as a tendency to internalize negative events & externalize positive events), Imposter Syndrome is *not* a form of mental illness; rather it can be described as a set of faulty beliefs.

Originally researched as a women's issue (women were thought to be the only ones who experienced it) by Clance and Imes (1978), Imposter Syndrome was thought to be correlated with high achievement (or the drive for high achievement). It does seem to be more prevalent in women in leadership positions.

However, in Law School genders show up pretty equally in terms of representation among students (and some sources claim also faculty!).

Is it YOU or is it CONTEXTUAL?

It's both:

Adults who have experienced betrayal, abandonment, or abuse in their childhoods are particularly vulnerable. Also law students who are "first generation" – are the first to attend HE in their family – are sometimes more vulnerable. Also, law students have to have demonstrated high achievement and academic success in the past in order to get in to Law School. You are now part of a small, very smart pool of learners. You are learning material you've never worked with before. Competition and independence are built into the fabric of the profession and the discipline.

Symptoms: Attributing success to "luck", fear of being found out (it was a mistake...) constant anxiety that you are not good enough or smart enough to be here.

Sequelae: Overwork, isolation, dropping out/withdrawal, increase in anxiety, depression.

Environments do affect psychological well-being.

Law School is the perfect incubator...

- You are working very hard, but you have no "job" and you are comparing yourself to other very smart people who want the same job. (Identity in our culture is very connected to our "work".
- If you also have a paid job, you may not be perceived as "serious" about your academic work.

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- Other people's opinions DO matter! You need references, and approval for your work is essential to finding Coop positions, summer jobs, and articling positions, let alone being successful in law school.
- In life, we grow into our self-knowledge, learning to trust what we know to be true; in Law School we are constantly receiving external feedback, constructive criticism (we are not deemed expert knowers but we think we should be). This actually continues even after graduation and can make the difference between a healthy or unhealthy work environment, depending on how the feedback is offered...
- Feedback can be highly intellectualized and critical, from both peers and professors. Even though there may be great learning opportunities buried in that feedback, students will have an emotional response! How students deal with their emotions has a significant impact on imposter syndrome coping.

What Helps?

Get support. Talking about it in a safe and supportive environment helps (Check out the Amicus Tutor Program; look for friends you can trust) You really aren't the only one...find a community where you can show up just as yourself, and be good enough. Self criticism has been shown to undermine motivation!!

Reconnect with your sense of self – get objective feedback (from trusted sources) regarding your strengths and weaknesses. (Why ARE you doing this degree? What is important to you in your life? There are important WHY questions that most deep thinkers need to answer periodically.) Connecting your “self” to your career goals can help you understand what you need more of, both professionally and personally, and help you to cope with the stresses of the path to a law degree.

Practice Self Compassion. <http://www.self-compassion.org/> Relate to yourself kindly. Three parts: treat self with kindness, as you would a good friend; recognize common humanity (different from self esteem – which says how I'm different (special) - feeling compassion for yourself and all your fellow humans in the experience of life recognizes our shared imperfection; practice mindfulness – being with what is in the present moment, without trying to change it. (from Kristin Neff, PhD, website)

Help others. Suffering can make us incredibly self-centred (e.g., depression/anxiety) Do something small for someone who needs it. Kind words, a cup of coffee, volunteering for a soup kitchen or other community organization can help us reconnect with that compassion mentioned earlier.

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Learn how to deal with your stress more effectively. Check out the counselling resources through the Amicus Program. Look for groups to help you cope with anxiety, depression, practice mindfulness. Look for yoga/pilates, meditation classes. DON'T give up your exercise! Make time for these things!!

Also look for and participate in workshops designed to help you learn about self/time management, goal setting, resilience, peak performance etc.

Get into Nature. Nature heals, period. If you are living and going to school in a strictly urban environment, you need to find ways to get out of man-made environments. In natural settings we can more easily slow down, appreciate the gift of living in this moment on this amazing planet. Practice gratitude.

While you are out there, **walk, breathe, move your body.** It is *you* – it does not exist just to carry your law student brain around! Exercise releases endorphins that have a positive effect on mood and helps your body release toxins, especially in nature.

Avoid Narcissists. They are only too happy to help you continue to be hard on yourself...

Refuse to let go of the rest of your life. (Your identity is more than 'law student'!) aka maintain perspective.