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# How to shake off the 'impostor' fears that plague your PhD studies

Three strategies for fighting those insidious feelings that you don't deserve to be where you are.

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Being able to acknowledge your successes can help you to fight 'impostor syndrome'. Credit: Scott Peterson/Getty

Often, I feel like a complete fraud. As a PhD student in biomedical engineering, I realize that this feeling is irrational. But I cannot quite shake off the sense that I am just one of those lucky individuals who happened to be accepted into a PhD programme; that perhaps my two previous

degrees were awarded in error; that any minute, someone will come along and politely inform me that it's all been some big mistake.

I have been coping with what is popularly known as impostor syndrome, a recognized ailment that many researchers face down at nearly every stage of their career. When you are consistently fighting off the feeling that you simply don't deserve to be a junior researcher, and that at any moment your deception will be discovered, it can make the PhD journey exceptionally difficult to navigate.

Imagine taking steps to combat these negative thoughts over several months. You've been chipping away at the sense of 'cheating', and you finally begin to feel like a fairly competent doctoral student. Now cue a pandemic. I suspect that, for many, this scenario is one that's close to home.

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Pre-pandemic, being at university provided a supportive community of driven researchers, always available to offer advice, as well as a thriving campus of scholarly productivity. However, following the forced closure of our institutions, which temporarily cut access to laboratories and academic spaces, I found the negative feelings of 'impostorism' quickly resurfacing.

#### Collection: the PhD

Trying to maintain productivity during the pandemic, while coping with a condition that is endemic in the academic community, has been a significant challenge. A sense of isolation and exhaustion, coupled with the uncertainty of the coming months and the disruptions caused by working from home (not to mention Zoom fatigue), left me feeling both invisible and exposed. Yet, having navigated these issues, I developed three useful techniques that have helped me to feel a bit less of a fraud.

## Use the inner critic to your advantage

Instead of trying to silence those internal critical voices, I chose an objective approach: I spent a few hours critically assessing my strengths and weaknesses, and identifying areas where I could make improvements. For example, I decided to use my time at home to attend some of my university's online professional-development courses. My worries over my lack of training on how to lead a project and effectively manage my time were driving my impostor symptoms. Addressing

those worries head-on and attending those courses brought relief, and gave me the confidence to take control of my research.

These exercises also allowed me to highlight my successes, which include writing and communicating my work to diverse academic and general audiences. This boosted my confidence and resilience, and was instrumental in limiting self-sabotage and overcoming at least a bit of the impostorism.

## **Visualize your success**

One cause of anxiety is my concern that returning to the lab will involve a frenzy of experiments and analysis. I worry that my steady journey of exploration as a doctoral researcher will turn into a frenetic rush, and that the pressure to make up for more than three months of lost time will lead to errors that exacerbate the anxiety of impostor syndrome.

To counter this, I have been visualizing how I will successfully carry out my experiments, reframing the negative feelings of loss of control over my research. Reflective writing is an invaluable tool in this process. I spend a few minutes writing about a potential research problem and how I feel about it. I then outline possible solutions and, finally, I imagine myself successfully putting them into practice in the lab.

I can then combine this process with a concrete action plan that takes into account working in a socially distanced environment. For instance, I am planning how I can resume lab work with study participants. I have even thought about how I might still make progress should lockdown be reintroduced. This attention to planning has given me focus and clarity in a time of great uncertainty. I have found this strategy to be not only helpful, but also highly motivational.

## **Let go of perfectionism**

This, for me, was one of the toughest habits to change. I regularly set ambitious goals, yet, naively, I didn't factor in the disruptions of the pandemic. I wasn't acknowledging that I could not achieve nearly as much while working from home. Eventually, I had to accept that: I realized that my quest for perfection was driving impostor syndrome. The more ambitious the goals I set for myself, the less likely it was that I could achieve them. This led to feelings of failure, which in turn increased anxiety and fuelled the inner sense of being a fraud.

I have learned to accept that just like the global pandemic, impostor syndrome may be with me for some time yet. But with an adaptable and flexible approach, I am beginning to see both of these things as a positive challenge. If I can cope with them both, then I might just make a successful doctoral student after all.

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