Impostor Phenomenon & Female Graduate Students
A dissertation summary
By Jessamyn Perlus, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

DEFINITION
Impostor Phenomenon (IP) is "an internal experience of intellectual and professional incapability despite objective evidence to the contrary. Those with IP believe successes are due to luck or error, and they live in near constant fear of being "unmasked" as unintelligent or less capable." (Clance & Imes, 1978).

CHARACTERISTICS
✓ Deny competence
✓ Discount praise
✓ Dread evaluation
✓ Fear failure
✓ Fear/guilt about success
✓ Need to be the best

FOCUS GROUPS
19 female grad students

SURVEY
506 female grad students

INTERVIEWS
8 female grad students

RESEARCH QUESTION:
How do women describe their experiences of impostor phenomenon in graduate school?

Results

IMPOSTORISM
66% of the survey sample met the cutoff score for IP; 73% self-identified as an impostor. They shared hundreds of examples.

MENTAL HEALTH
Numerous mental health stressors were reported, particularly anxiety, lower self-esteem, and feeling isolated due to IP.

“I constantly feel as though I'm faking any knowledge or skills that I have.”

“I'm somehow fooling everyone and it's going to catch up to me.”

“I had terrible anxiety in seminars that prevented me from asking questions and sharing ideas.”

“Depressing, isolating, and stressful. Often it feels like nobody actually wants me here.”

“Even when presenting empirical data, colleagues will tell me my work is "cute" or my style is "bubbly.”

CAREER & EDUCATION
Careers were impacted in many ways such as setting low goals, staying put, not speaking up, and avoiding opportunities.

“I don't ask questions because I think I should know everything already.”

“I've tied so much of my identity to my academic self, that any academic failure is a failure at life.”

GENDER
Gender influenced ways women fit into their settings, often needing to work twice as hard while balancing work-life duties.

“If I fail, then it's a reflection on the abilities of Women in my field as a whole.”

“Whatever happened to my work is "cute" or my style is "bubbly.”

IP was associated with symptoms of anxiety ($r = 0.54$) and depression ($r = 0.57$), self-esteem ($r = -0.89$) and research self-efficacy ($r = -0.38$), all $p's < .001$.

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DISCIPLINES INCLUDE
liberal arts and sciences, engineering, agriculture, fine art, and education.

52% ages 18-25
26% ages 26-29
10% ages 30+
47% masters
50% doctorate
3% professional
21% International

What advice do students have and what are the implications? (turn over)
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Advice from Students

300+ suggestions were provided in response to "What advice would you give someone feeling like an impostor?"

Themes fell into two groups: (1) Reframing how you think about yourself and changing your behavior and (2) The importance of getting other people involved.

REFRAME

“You deserve to be there. Tell yourself that over and over again.”

TELL OTHERS

“Share these feelings with people you trust. Talking about them gives it less power over you.”

“You are not the only one feeling this way. No one has their life completely together.”

“Form a support network with people you trust.”

COMMON ADVICE THEMES

cultivate a learning mindset • develop a support network • don’t quit, just try your best • everybody is unique • fake it till you make it • increase confidence • it’s okay to feel down • reflect on motivation • seek honest feedback • self-care • share with someone • stop comparing • therapy • track accomplishments • you belong • you’re not alone

Implications

The culture of academia feeds into IP feelings therefore change will need to come from multiple sources: individuals, peers, mentors, advisors, faculty, departments, administrations and institutions.

Discovering that others may experience impostor feelings helps alleviate the isolation. Providing information about IP and offering open discussions could be part of graduate orientation and continue through one-on-one mentoring or advising.

Individuals can work to reframe expectations (e.g. loosening rules about perfection or effortless success). Increasing self-efficacy and practicing taking credit for accomplishments could also lessen IP feelings.

TAKE HOME MESSAGE:
Impostor Phenomenon is a common experience among graduate student women across discipline, degree program, age, and race. It impacts mental health and career or educational paths. However, this study suggests there are concrete steps to take to minimize negative impacts.