Science Societies

I don’t belong here: Life with impostor syndrome

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Illustration courtesy of Pablo Stanley.

Impostor syndrome is defined by the Oxford Dictionary as, “the persistent inability to believe that one’s success is deserved or has been legitimately achieved as a result of one’s own efforts or skills.” Often, graduate students and faculty feel unqualified and/or

feel that they do not deserve to be in their current position. Even after working tirelessly to meet the goal of post-graduate achievements and landing a faculty job, those suffering from impostor syndrome can feel inadequate and struggle to believe that they can successfully do the job for which they have been training.

When I graduated with my Ph.D., I remember experiencing a strange feeling of both relief and extreme fear. I thought, "Wait…I am done? I can't be done, I am not ready! I am not good enough!" I spent years working towards my goal of completing a Ph.D., and when it was over, I felt anxious that it had come to an end. I felt that I didn't deserve to have those letters at the end of my name.

Who else out there can relate?

Since these symptoms are being discussed more openly, they can easily be dismissed as common and not worrisome because everyone is going through it. But dismissing them isn't helpful. Understanding and examining why many of us feel this way is validating and can lead to a more whole mindset and greater overall wellness.

Ways to Cope

Here are few ways to cope with and overcome living with impostor syndrome.

1. Admit that you are dealing with these feelings of not being good enough or earning your chosen position. In the academic world, we can be looked at as weak if we admit that we are feeling some doubt about our skills. It is a cut-throat atmosphere where we are expected to perform at a certain level. Many feel as though we are supposed to know everything because we are now considered an expert in our field. One of the hardest things for me to realize when I first started out was that it was OK to admit that I didn't know everything, which made me feel like more of an impostor. This would especially hit home when I met with senior scholars or higher-

ups in my industry—those people I had looked up to during my graduate years were now my peers. I was constantly under the impression that I shouldn't be in the same room with them and that I had no business being in my current role. Nevertheless, admitting and acknowledging those feelings was cathartic and helped me work through them.

2. Find an outlet. This may be as simple as finding a colleague that you can trust to talk with about these feelings. You might find that you are both feeling the same way and can support each other through some of the tougher aspects of your chosen career. I know from experience that being able to confide in a trusted colleague can be a lifesaver. This could also include journaling, meditating, working out, or any other contemplative practice to help you work through the feelings.
3. Try and figure out why you feel the way you feel. Was there a specific episode in the past that made you feel like a phony? Was there a situation where you felt you asked a "stupid question" in front of peers? What has happened to make you feel like you haven't earned your degree or position? The immense pressure that is put on faculty to win large federal grants and publish peer-reviewed research in high-impact journals—all while participating in services activities—can lead anyone to feel this way. There are a lot of reasons why you could feel like an impostor. Figure out the cause of these thoughts and work to change the narrative. This is hard work, but remember, you are not alone, and you will likely feel better after working through these issues.

Take Care of Yourself—You Are Worthy

If you're not feeling impostor syndrome, THAT'S OK! Everyone experiences life differently and finding ourselves completely happy and deserving in our role as a graduate student or faculty member is amazing! That is the goal, right? However, you may find that you are feeling like an impostor due to not feeling the typical impostor

syndrome. (Ummm…what?? You mean that I can be an impostor by not feeling like an impostor in academia? YES. But that is a whole other situation to unpack…)

Whether feeling like an impostor or not, taking care of your mental health and/or supporting others is vital. Although feelings of unworthiness or inadequateness may be common in our field, this could be a sign of depression and anxiety. I would encourage you to seek help from a professional to find healing.

You and I are here because we are passionate about our fields and have worked hard in various ways to earn our positions. Take a moment to sit in that to find gratitude. Know that you are worthy. All of us are worthy. You are worthy.

> This column is brought to you by the Early Career Members Committee (ECMC), which serves members beginning their careers—new professionals and graduate students in agronomy, crop, soil, and environmental sciences. The ECMC consists of members from each of the three Societies who serve three-year terms. Learn more at **www.crops.org/membership/early-career**.

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