

PRACTISING WELL

The imposter syndrome

Some thoughts and reflections

BY **EMILY MORROW**

IN THE 1970S, WHEN I WAS IN UNIVERSITY DOING AN inter-disciplinary baccalaureate degree in psychology, sociology and anthropology, I took a psychology course taught by Dr Pauline Clance. She was a little woman (barely 5 ft tall) and from the Appalachian region of Kentucky with a strong eastern Kentucky accent. She had grown up in a low-income family and, through sheer force of will and native intelligence, worked her way through university to get a PhD in psychology. Despite being small in stature, she was forceful in personality. Of all the courses I took in university, this is the one I remember best and has had the greatest impact on my life.

Dr Clance spoke about research she was doing on what she referred to as the “imposter phenomenon” based on interviews with many high-achieving women. There was a clear gap between the empirical success of these women and their self-perceived notion of who they were. Although they had a lot of external validation for their success, the women failed to acknowledge their accomplishments and take ownership of them. Rather, the interviewees attributed their success to luck and to others perceiving the interviewees to be more competent than they really were. They felt they were imposters who would surely be “outed” over time and lived with chronic anxiety over this.

Several years later, despite having obtained a doctorate in law, I found myself plagued by exactly what Dr Clance had described. Those same anxieties continued to bother me during at least the first half of my professional career as a practising lawyer. There was a real lack of correlation



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between my professional success and my self-perception as being successful.

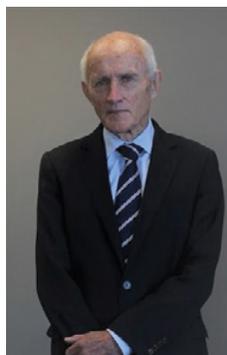
Phenomenon prevalent

I remembered my course with Dr Clance and read her now famous book, *The Imposter Phenomenon: Overcoming the Fear that Haunts Your Success* (Peachtree Publications Ltd, 1985). It gave me great insight into the psychological mechanism behind what had plagued me. I began discussing the issue with other lawyers (both men and women) and was shocked to find out how prevalent the phenomenon was. Perhaps because I realised I was not alone and that this condition was rampant in the legal profession, I found myself taking a hard, critical look at these anxieties.

In working with lawyers and law firms, I have again been struck by how common this problem is. I have also seen many lawyers who struggled with imposter syndrome anxieties move beyond these by learning about the phenomenon and gaining greater insight about themselves and how to manage their concerns. Hence this article.

Based on Dr Clance’s book, imposter syndrome symptoms include:

- feeling like you are a fraud and that others will discover this if they only get to know you better;
- lack of self-confidence in your position;
- chronic doubts about your abilities, personally, intellectually and otherwise;
- internal monologue of a negative nature that one is not



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good enough;

- ruminating on mistakes or assuming that no one else make similar mistakes.

Law perfect for syndrome

Although the imposter syndrome is not limited to lawyers, the adversarial, hierarchical and stressful nature of law creates a perfect environment for the syndrome to flourish. In fact, if one were to interview all practising lawyers and ask them whether they had ever experienced any of these symptoms, I suspect that close to 100% would agree they had at one point or another in their careers. Those who are afflicted by this phenomenon are often the highest achievers and performers.

In my experience, one is never completely “symptom free”. In fact, to this day, I still find it creeping up on me from time to time. This is true despite the fact that I have had considerable success and relatively few personal or professional failures. To be honest, I feel I have been lucky and that my life has been somewhat blessed in that way (which is a classic imposter syndrome thing to say, of course).

In dealing with the imposter syndrome, it helps to acknowledge that these intrusive thoughts are normal and one may never be entirely free of them. There is, however, a certain relief associated with this realisation. It is part of who we are so it is not necessarily something we should fight. It reminds me

of people who talk about how someone had a “courageous battle” with cancer and then subsequently died. I am a cancer survivor and I never felt I was “battling” with my cancer. Instead, I did better if I danced gracefully with my cancer as a former companion in my life, albeit it an unwelcome and uninvited one. I find the same is true in terms of the imposter syndrome.

Antidotes

Focusing on self-confidence, insight and general awareness of self as an individual and a professional are excellent antidotes to the imposter syndrome. This can include work with psychotherapists, professional coaching, honest and transparent conversations with trusted friends and mentors and the like. In each of these experiences, I have learned something about myself and, in most cases, somewhat surprisingly, I have liked what I have learned.

Some years ago, about midway through my law career, while waiting in a doctor’s surgery, I began reading a magazine that had an interview with Justice Sandra Day O’Connor, the first female judge on the US Supreme Court. In the interview, she was asked “To what do you attribute your great success in the law?” Her answer was memorable. She said two things. Firstly, that whenever she was working on something, she focused on it 100% and intentionally checked in with herself to ensure she

was doing her very best work. Secondly, after doing that, she never looked back or worried about what she had done unless some new information was brought to her attention that would have impacted her work. She said she had trained herself to do these two things.

I started intentionally incorporating these two approaches into my work and my thinking. The results were helpful and I noticed that my anxiety level dropped, my self-confidence increased and my concerns about my abilities diminished. I commend her wise words to you as well.

So, fellow travellers, be of stout heart and good faith. Although these worries may never completely disappear from your life and psyche, they are manageable and are also normal and healthy in a peculiar way. Despite creating anxiety, they also can ensure you do your very best work, even under extraordinarily difficult circumstances. In fact, you may, from time to time, want to congratulate yourself on being one of those high achievers with a non-negotiable commitment to excellent work. Well done you. Thank you Dr Pauline Clance for having been a part of my life. ■

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