

COMMENTARY

Intellectual Self-doubt and How to Get Out of It

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When I was applying to graduate programs, I received a call from my future mentor. She said I was accepted to their program and that I would be funded through a teaching assistantship. I was informed I would be a teaching assistant for an exercise and nutrition class.

“I eat doughnuts and grape juice for breakfast,” I responded. “I know nothing about nutrition.” The voice on the other side of the phone calmly stated, “You know more than freshmen and sophomores.”

In my head I thought “No, I don’t. . . I know nothing.”

Throughout graduate school I was scared because I felt like I knew nothing and that I continually had to prove myself. Throughout this time there was this continual disconnect between what others saw in me and what I saw in myself. When I was transitioning to my faculty role, I read Parker Palmer’s *Courage to Teach*.¹ One of the stories I thought was about me. The story was about imposter syndrome.

People with imposter syndrome often feel like they are not as capable or adequate as others perceive or evaluate them to be.² The signs and symptoms are feeling of phoniness, self-doubt, and inability to take credit for one’s accomplishments.^{2,3} It is a form of intellectual self-doubt.² Those with imposter syndrome are often intelligent and high achievers – like many academics, pharmacists, and professional students. On one hand, imposter syndrome provides motivation to persevere. On the other, you overprepare and overwork. It probably helped me in graduate school and through my academic career. But it takes its toll – you can burn out.

The *Chronicle of Higher Education* had an article regarding someone I knew peripherally when she was faculty at Carolina – she is now dean at Duke University.⁴ Everything I ever heard about Dean Ashby was how great

she was – as a person, mentor, and researcher. Turns out she had imposter syndrome, too – and so did one of her mentors. In her story, she talks about how those with imposter syndrome respond to a compliment – we believe for 10 seconds, but at the 11th second the self-doubt kicks in. Or how 10 things can go right, but we focus on the one thing that went wrong. The list goes on. Dean Ashby followed 10 rules to minimize the impact of imposter syndrome, rules which I will soon list because I am going to try these out.⁵ But why now?

First, it is a new year and the symbolic time for change. Second, I think I finally feel like I have people around me who I am willing to let help me. Third, I look at the mental health crisis occurring in our students – both in our professional schools and in K-12 education. This same crisis is happening in our faculty ranks as well. Fourth, I just got promoted, so the self-doubt thoughts are rampant. And the last reason? I am tired and I cannot keep doing this to myself. Now is the best time as any. Thus, let me begin with Step 1: breaking the silence. Consider this me fessing up to having imposter syndrome.

Step 2 is separating feelings from fact. Emotions are a strong enforcer, but I need to separate fact from feeling – feeling stupid does not mean I am stupid.

Step 3 recognizes when I should feel fraudulent. There are times to have self-doubt, and it is a normal response. I need to recognize when there is an appropriate time for an appropriate amount of self-doubt – the keyword is “appropriate.”

Step 4 is to accentuate the positive. Perfectionism is a healthy driver, but I cannot obsess over everything. I need to do a great job when it matters the most and forgive myself when mistakes happen – they will happen. This fourth step, for me, I think is only possible with maturity and experience – there was no way I could do this in graduate school or as junior faculty. Everything seemed important. Now I am learning to let go and focus on quality, not quantity and realizing I cannot be all things to all people.

These next two steps may be the most challenging for me. Step 5 is developing a new response to failure and mistake making. Some people are much better at learning from their mistakes and moving on. I envy those people.

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I tend to ruminate on those mistakes and beat myself up about them. Step 6 is right the rules. These rules consist of knowing all the answers and doing everything by yourself. I have always felt I should always know the answer – after all, I teach and students ask questions – questions I think I should know the answer to. And I never or rarely ask for help because what does that say about me and my abilities? We are all allowed to be wrong and ask for help. I need to get better at this. In the very least, to model it for my students.

Step 7 seems a little easier than steps 5 and 6: Develop a new script. I need to know what the triggers are and when I am feeling off-base. If it is a new project, it is normal to feel off-base.

Step 8 is visualize success. I had to do this when I played high school soccer. We were not allowed to talk on the bus ride to an away game. We had to focus on making the plays. This is a little tricky because reality does not match this visualization, so it can put me into the self-doubt hole. But I will need to focus on the 10 things that went right versus the one thing that went wrong.

Step 9 is reward yourself. Those with imposter syndrome dismiss validation. I will have to learn to pat myself on the back occasionally and accept a compliment versus automatically dismissing it. My friends make me look them in the eye when they give me a compliment. Again, I cannot do this alone.

Finally, I need to take a lesson from the students – fake it ‘til you make it (Step 10). I cannot wait to feel confident to start putting myself out there. Courage comes from risks. I have started to do this but it is a constant struggle.

This is my current journey and maybe a journey for some of you. Thank you, Dean Ashby for coming forward. Thank you, Parker Palmer for writing the book that put a name with the face of what I felt. Thank you to all the people around me who have seen me in a better light than I have seen myself and given me the opportunities that match my skill. Thank you to those who will continue to help me manage my syndrome. Maybe one day there will be a second commentary on how successful these 10 steps are, but for now, I will try not to ruminate on whether this was an appropriate commentary to write. If you are interested in a self-assessment of imposter syndrome, try the Clance Imposter Scale (<http://paulineroseclance.com/pdf/IPscoringtest.pdf>).⁶

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