

Impostor syndrome: When self-doubt gets the upper hand

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People who systematically underestimate themselves and their own performance suffer from so-called impostor phenomenon. They think that any success is due to external circumstances or just luck and chance.

Those people live in constant fear that their "deception" will be exposed. In a new study in *Personality and Individual Differences* psychologists from Martin Luther University Halle-Wittenberg (MLU) show for the first time that even under real-life conditions the phenomenon appears regardless of age, gender, and intelligence. Up until now it had only been investigated on the basis of surveys or individual cases.

It is common for people to question their abilities now and again. "A healthy amount of reflection and [self-doubt](#) can protect a person from acting rash," explains Kay Brauer from the Institute of Psychology at MLU. However, there are people who are permanently plagued by a massive amount of self-doubt despite delivering a good performance, such as getting good grades or getting [positive feedback](#) at work. "They think that all of their successes are not a product of their skill or hard work, instead they attribute their own successes to external circumstances, for example to luck and chance, or believe that their performance is massively overestimated by others. Failures, on the other hand, are always internalized, as the result of their own shortcomings," Brauer adds. These people suffer from so-called impostor [phenomenon](#).

This [personality trait](#) has so far only been investigated in so-called vignette studies. "These studies determine how strongly the participants agree with various theoretical statements, such as that they find it difficult to accept praise or that they are afraid of not being able to repeat what they have achieved," Brauer explains. The psychologists from Halle examined the topic for the first time under real-life conditions. Seventy-six participants completed a range of intelligence tests and received positive feedback on them, regardless of their actual performance. They were then asked why they think they did so well.

The study showed two things: First, the self-reported degree of impostor phenomenon is not related to actual measured intelligence or performance. Secondly, the test supported the assumption that people

with a tendency to the impostor phenomenon devalue their objectively measured performance and attribute positive results to external causes such as luck and chance, but not to their own abilities. "These results are also completely unrelated to age and gender," says Kay Brauer.

A permanent underestimation of one's own abilities is often accompanied by the fear that this supposed intellectual deception will be exposed sooner or later and that people will pay the price for this. The impostor phenomenon was first described in 1978 by US psychologists Pauline Clance and Suzanne Imes. They observed that there is a particularly high number of successful women who do not think they are very intelligent. "The impostor phenomenon is not defined as a mental illness. However, people who suffer from it show a higher susceptibility to depression," says Brauer, who hopes that the new study will pave the way for possible interventions. Customized training programs, for example, could help improve [self-esteem](#), [job satisfaction](#), and the general well-being of those affected.

More information: Kay Brauer et al, The Impostor Phenomenon and causal attributions of positive feedback on intelligence tests, *Personality and Individual Differences* (2022). [DOI: 10.1016/j.paid.2022.111663](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2022.111663)

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