

Imposter Syndrome: the Monkey on our Backs

We've all had that feeling... you're in the middle of doing something quite challenging or maybe for the first time. You're engrossed, concentrating hard, working through it... and from nowhere a little voice says "what do you think you're doing? You don't know how to do that?"

You give yourself a mental shake and re-focus but the voice is still there, sometimes scornful, sometimes mocking, laughing at you; how could *you* ever think you were qualified or capable enough to do the job in hand?

Maybe you've walked into a meeting, on to a farm or into a consulting room and felt like the other person can see right through you – at every mistake you've ever made, every qualification you don't have, every insecurity you've ever had about who you and what you're doing in life.

At best, Imposter Syndrome is a familiar but unwelcome irritation as we go about our job. At worst it can be crippling. In those moments we feel naked, exposed and stripped bare of our self-confidence and self-worth. We find ourselves paralysed, fighting our urge to run, to hide, to escape. The voice is right, we shouldn't be here. Who do we think we are?

If this sounds all too familiar then you are not alone and more importantly, there is hope. Imposter Syndrome doesn't discriminate; it affects both men and women in all industries, in all walks of life. It's there in our practices, our businesses and on our sports fields.

The challenge with Imposter Syndrome is that its effect isn't just in the moment. Left unchecked, the proverbial monkey on our back (or chimp in our head, for those that have read Prof Steve Peters book "The Chimp Paradox") gets stronger. We move away from the gut-wrenching feeling of fear itself, sticking to what's safe and not stretching ourselves. We no longer see our potential, instead we focus on our lack of ability. We become afraid to stretch ourselves not so much for the fear of failing, but for the fear of trying in itself. We feel paralysed, stuck and our mindset becomes fixed, not only limiting ourselves in the present but limiting our chances of becoming all that we could be.

If you know your own monkey is quietly reading this over your shoulder, then here are some strategies that will help both in the moment and day-to-day to help keep it in check

Breathe

Imposter Syndrome is fed by our stress response. Taking some slow, deep breaths engages our parasympathetic system and helps to decrease sympathetic tone. This allows our rational frontal cortex to come back online and to respond from a place of logic, rather than one of emotion.

Acknowledge

In the moment, mentally shine a light on your fear so it can't hide away in a dark corner of your mind. Name the emotions that you're feeling, the thoughts that you're thinking. If you can, say

them aloud or write them down. By voicing them, even to yourself, they start to become less compelling as your rational mind can see them for what they are.

Allow

We know from experience that trying to wrestle with our inner chimp only makes it stronger. Instead of fighting it, create space for it. It's uncomfortable to sit with those feelings but the more we do so, the less hold they have. If we accept that our brain is, in its own primitive way, trying to keep us safe then we can allow the fear to be there... and then deal with it.

Be evidence-based

What evidence is there to support those feelings of inadequacy? Have you done the necessary preparation? Have you thought things through? What would someone else say to you if you were to voice your fears? Would you think someone else with your level of experience and skill was competent? Think about your skills and strengths – what do you bring to this? Get into the habit of asking for evidence-based feedback from people whose opinion you value and paying attention to it, rather than potentially dismissing it as “they were just being nice”

Be present

Being mindful literally means staying in the moment, not letting your brain ruminate on what it could have or should have done differently, nor running forwards and thinking about all the things that could go possibly wrong. Direct your focus to right here, right now – to what your hands are doing, to the person or the task in front of you. What does this moment need from you?

Be open

Share your thoughts and concerns with trusted colleagues and friends or family. The more we talk about our fears, the less alone we feel and the less hold they have; we can also learn from others about how they deal with similar thoughts. Hearing that a more senior colleague also has doubts and worries can be incredibly empowering for a younger member of the team – be brave and fuel the courage of others.

Our drive to achieve and to do the best job we can means that there will be always be times when we feel like a fraud – surely we can't know enough or be enough? That fear is also, when managed, the same thing that makes us careful and keeps our patients safe. By learning to acknowledge and work with our thoughts and emotions, we can face them with both compassion and logic. We become mentally stronger and more flexible, allowing ourselves to stretch, to thrive and to reach our potential.