LIFEHACK

Expand your toolbox of life skills and strengthen your mental wellbeing

Optional Module

Impostor syndrome, begone!

Contents

How to Use this Workbook

LifeHack is a self-help programme in which you learn various life skills for all sorts of situations you might encounter in life. This program is based on Cognitive Behavioural Therapy and consists of reading material and interactive exercises. Four domains are covered: your emotional well-being, your studies, your social life and your self-esteem.

Each domain consists of one main module and two related optional modules. The best way to do the programme is to complete one domain per week by doing the main module and any of the optional modules that seem relevant to you. Therefore, the whole programme will take approximately 4 to 6 weeks.

You can find a list of resources in the community <u>here</u> when you need support. Counselling and Psychological services are available at HKU for current students. It is free-of-charge, professional and confidential. Don't hesitate to seek help if needed.

Enquiries and Feedback
CEDARS – Counselling and Person Enrichment Section (CoPE)
Tel: 3917-8388 | Email: cedars-cope@hku.hk

Impostor syndrome, begone!

Introduction

There's this little voice you might be familiar with. The one that tells you that you don't know what you're doing. That you just got lucky. That sooner or later people will realise this and everything will fall apart. This is the voice of impostor syndrome. If you struggle with this, you're in the right place.

In this module, you'll learn...

- What impostor syndrome really is
- What causes it and how it affects your life
- 3 ways to overcome impostor syndrome

Before we get into it: describe your personal goal(s) with regards to impostor syndrome. What would you like to achieve after doing this module? (answer A)

Let's go!

What is impostor syndrome?

In recent years, impostor syndrome has become pretty well-known. And it's not a disease or an abnormality: research has found that up to 82% of people suffer from impostor syndrome! Watch the video below to know more. <u>(The video transcript is available on p.17)</u>

Impostor syndrome is unique to each person. Describe your personal experience with impostor syndrome. When do you feel like an impostor and how does that influence your life?
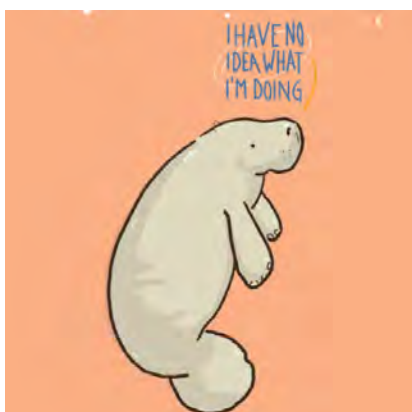
'Impostor' thoughts

Impostor syndrome is characterized by certain negative thoughts about the self.

Here are some common thoughts that are often experienced by people with impostor syndrome. Which of these thoughts do you also have? Check all that apply:

- ☐ Others are better at this than I am
- ☐ Others know more than I do
- ☐ I don't know what I'm doing, I just wing it
- ☐ Sooner or later people are going to find out that I'm just winging it
- ☐ I don't deserve to be where I am, I didn't earn it
- ☐ I just got lucky
- ☐ I only succeeded because of <external reason>
- ☐ I don't belong

Think back to (recent) situations in which you felt like an impostor. What kinds of thoughts did you have that aren't in the list above?

It's not all bad!

Like many other psychological mechanisms, impostor syndrome can have its purpose or benefits: it can have a positive effect on motivation as it pushes us to work harder to achieve that thing that we might be feeling insecure or afraid of.

View your impostor syndrome in a positive light. How have you benefited from it?

However, it's all about moderation. It's important to reach a level in which you can use the essence of impostor syndrome to your advantage and not have it take advantage of you.

So here are **3 steps** you can take to overcome the negative effects of impostor syndrome.

1. Talk about it

People tend to 'hide' their insecurities because they don't want others to 'know their little secret', namely that they're impostors. They might be afraid that if they talk about their doubts and insecurities, these will be confirmed by others. But this makes you feel even more insecure and lonely!

By talking about it, you realise you're not the only one and you might even receive a bonus and you'll get lots of confirmation that you **ARE** skilled and that helps. Here are some tips to start a conversation:

Have a think about what you want to share
It can sometimes feel overwhelming to share your thoughts and insecurities, so it can help to think about it prior to the conversation or put some thoughts into paper.

Talk to someone you trust deeply first
You might discover that they can relate to your feelings. As it becomes more and more 'normal' to talk about these things, you can start opening up to more people.

Trust it will get better
It can sometimes feel a bit nerve-wracking to start these conversations, but trust that it will get better as the talk continues.

Now let's make an action plan more specific to you.

First, what would you like to share exactly? Write down the thoughts and feelings you'd like to talk about, and how these affect you.

Who could you talk about impostor syndrome with? And when/where can you have this talk? (And make sure to follow through!)

While talking about it is a great first step, it's also necessary to take action to be able to create a better relationship with yourself. So let's move on to step 2!

2. Move the goal post on competence

The most important thing to understand about impostor syndrome, is that it has to do with how you define and measure **'competence'.**

Competence can be explained as your ability to do something. But everyone sets different standards for themselves.

Where we put the bar | Where the bar **actually** is

- If you hold unrealistic standards for 'being competent', you will constantly feel like an impostor because those standards are very difficult or even impossible to meet.
- But if you think the bare minimum suffices, you will quickly feel competent, confident and consequently not like an impostor.

So the first step to overcoming impostor syndrome is to understand your personal definition of 'competence'. Below are different definitions of when someone is competent, check the ones you recognise in yourself or agree with.

Being competent means...

☐ making no mistakes

☐ doing something perfectly

☐ doing something quickly and easily (without a lot of effort)

☐ doing something alone, without help from others

☐ being an expert in something

☐ being able to handle a hundred different tasks and responsibilities

☐ meeting all the requirements

☐ being able to do everything well, to have a plethora of skills

☐ Otherwise, namely

After seeing them on paper, you might realise that these expectations are quite unattainable and unrealistic. So given that impostor syndrome has to do with feeling incompetent, the next step is to redefine 'competence' to make it more realistic.

Here are some examples of how you can redefine 'competence'

Thoughts:	Redefine 'competence':
"I am only competent when I make no mistakes"	"Making mistakes is a way of learning and that actually makes me more competent"
"I am competent when I can complete a task with no help"	"Sometimes I will need help. Allowing others to help me is not a sign of weakness but a chance for growth and a sign of my motivation to learn"
"I am only competent when I can successfully handle a lot of responsibilities at once"	"Handling a couple of responsibilities is already enough, I am not less competent if I don't perform as well in one of them"

Your turn! First, choose an expectation that you often hold when you are feeling like an impostor. Select one from the list above, or write your own:

How can you make it more realistic? If it helps, think of what you would say to a close friend if they told you that this was their expectation.

NEXT LEVEL HACK

Set realistic goals for yourself. Imagine you have to write a 5,000 word assignment. You might tell yourself: "I need to finish this assignment by tonight". But that's not too realistic after a long day of uni. Instead, say "I am going to work on the assignment for two hours tonight". Focusing on the effort you put in rather than the result, leaves room to actually do better than you set out - giving you a lovely boost to your self-esteem.

3. Learn to attribute rightly

Last step! People who experience impostor syndrome think **THEY** caused their failures, but **EXTERNAL** stuff caused their success. In reality however, this is usually not the case! This misattribution of responsibility tends to keep our impostor syndrome alive, even if we do the previous 2 steps.

So how do we learn to attribute 'rightly'?

(i) Redefine the source of 'failure'

People with impostor syndrome often blame themselves if something didn't go as planned. Most of these 'blame' thoughts are really inaccurate, so here's a simple 2-step process to correct them and focus on the actual source of 'failure'.

First, uncover your thoughts

The first step is to become aware of our negative thoughts regarding failure, and to realise they're not actually that accurate.

To start, write down some thoughts you had in a situation in which you 'failed'. What did you attribute the failure to? What kinds of negative thought did you have about yourself?

Many of our thoughts are riddled with inaccuracies, so check out these examples of common thinking errors people make:

Labeling	Labeling yourself based on your shortcomings, instead of separating the situation from your identity. An example of this thinking error is going "I'm such an idiot!" instead of "I made a mistake".
Fortune telling	Assuming you know what's going to happen in the future. This thinking error pops up when your thoughts include predictions like "I'm going to do horribly on this next assignment".
Mind reading	Assuming you know what's other people are thinking. "They're probably thinking that I have no idea what I'm doing..."
Personalization	Believing that you are responsible for a situation you had no or limited control over. "We failed the group assignment because my part wasn't good enough!"
Emotional reasoning	Assuming that because we feel something, it must be true (even though our feelings can be wildly inaccurate). I feel stupid, which means I AM stupid.
Jumping to conclusions	You perceive things negatively even though there is no evidence to support this. "My classmate acts weird around me, they must think I'm dumb."
Mental filter	You ignore the positive things about the situation and focus only on the negative ones. You gave a presentation and got both positive and constructive feedback, but can only think about the latter.

Which of these thinking errors do you recognise in the thought(s) you wrote above, or do you generally have in your way of thinking?

☐ Labeling ☐ Emotional reasoning

☐ Fortune telling ☐ Jumping to conclusions

☐ Mind reading ☐ Mental filter

☐ Personalization

Then gather the evidence and rethink

The second step is to fact-check these thoughts to see if they hold up. Put the thought on trial, look at the evidence and see what's true and what isn't. For example: was it really because you are stupid? Or were there other things that could have contributed to the outcome?

Take another look at the thoughts you wrote above and ask yourself questions like:

- What else contributed to the failure?
- Is the thought exaggerated?
- What assumptions is the thought based on?
- Does it include predictions about the future?
- Does the thought draw premature conclusions?
- What would I say to a close friend if they had this thought?

Now use the answers to these questions to paint a more realistic, nuanced and factual picture of the 'failure'.

Examples of changing negative thoughts to more realistic thoughts:

Negative thoughts:	More realistic thoughts:
I failed because I am stupid.	I failed because I was nervous for the test. This does not say anything about my intelligence, I know the material.
My classmate acts weird around me, they must think I'm dumb.	First off, are they really acting strange or do I just 'see signs' because I'm insecure? And second, there are dozens of reasons people can act differently, such as going through something personally or having an off day. It doesn't necessarily have to do with me.
We failed the group assignment because my part wasn't good enough!	My part only made up a small part of the final grade, it's simply impossible that it was 100% the reason we failed.

You now know that the impostor voice isn't always telling the truth. That is why it's good to talk back to that voice and tell it how it actually is!

NEXT LEVEL HACK   Keep a list of positive feedback and compliments that you receive. Next time that impostor voice returns, look at the list and remember that this criticising voice is basically telling you a bunch of bullsh*t!

(ii) Start owning your accomplishments

Now you know how to attribute your 'failures' more realistically, we can move on to the second part: owning your accomplishments rather than attributing them to external factors such as luck or someone helping you. Here's 2 ways you can do this.

Focus on what YOU did well

First, start paying attention to who you give credit to when something goes well. Is it Lady Luck? A team mate? Was it because 'it was easy, anyone could do it'? Something else?

YOU GET A KUDOS!
YOU GET A KUDOS!
YOU GET A KUDOS!
EVERYBODY GETS A KUDOS!

Describe a recent situation in which you did well or succeeded at something, but still felt like an impostor:

Now write down all the external factors you attributed this success to: "It wasn't me, it was because …"

While these factors may have played a role, they are almost never 100% responsible for our successes. We ourselves, our personality, past, skills, knowledge, time and effort generally play the bigger role. It's important to learn to attribute your successes more correctly, just like your failures.

So give yourself credit where credit's due. Take a moment to write down all the big and small things you did to get to that outcome. Did you study hard? Prepare well? Develop certain skills in the past that came in handy? Have a positive trait or useful habit that helped?

For the same situation as before in which you did well or succeeded at something, write down all the things that YOU did to get to that point.

Make a conscious effort to celebrate your successes

Once you become more aware of your successes, you can celebrate them and reward yourself. This way, you show yourself that you achieved something.

There are many ways to celebrate, big and small. Here are some ideas to get the ball rolling:

- Next time someone asks how you are, mention that you're proud of yourself for <enter recent success here>.
- Try saying the positives out loud, for example 'I did a pretty good job on …!' Silly as it may feel at first, it can actually feel really nice to hear it said out loud.
- For a smaller celebration, treat yourself to your favourite meal or snack.
- For a bigger one, organise a fun activity with friends. For example: go to the movies, out to dinner, picnic in the park etc..
- Make time for whatever it is you enjoy doing, but usually feel you don't have time for.
- Buy yourself a gift.

Let's brainstorm. How do you think you could celebrate your own achievements? Come up with ways to celebrate both small and bigger successes.

Keep this list somewhere close by, so you know what to do next time you achieve something :)

Hack wrap-up

Whoop, you made it all the way to the end!

Now let's take a look back at what you said at the beginning of this module.

This is what you wanted to achieve with regards to impostor syndrome:

(refer to answer A on p.2)

How will you move forward with this goal, using the tips from this module?

This module in bullets:

- Impostor syndrome is very common and is characterised by a tendency to internalise failure but externalise success

- People with impostor syndrome have unrealistic, high expectations of themselves, and think negatively about themselves if and when they can't reach those expectations

- To break free from these impostor thoughts, talk about it with other people. You might find even the most successful person has similar thoughts!

- Redefine how you view being 'competent' at something, lowering those unrealistic expectations of yourself

- Lastly, start attributing correctly: failure is not 100% your 'fault' and a success is not 100% due to external factors such as luck or help

Hey, psst! Does the optional module 'Overcome perfectionism & fear of failure' sound useful as well? Then head over there as soon as you complete this module, since you're **on a roll** now anyway ;)

What did you think of this module? Please let us know your views here.

Supplementary Information

Video transcript of Impostor Syndrome

In simple terms, impostor syndrome is thinking and feeling that you're not as competent or qualified as you might seem, and that sooner or later, people will find out about it.

People who struggle with impostor syndrome are unable to internalize their accomplishments. They don't ascribe their achievements to their own competence, but rather to external factors such as luck or help from others. They doubt themselves no matter how experienced or successful they are. This is also how impostor syndrome differs from 'regular' insecurity. Everybody feels a bit of self-doubt now and then, especially when doing something that is new, and that's completely normal.

Usually the more we do something, the more confident we tend to get. But people who suffer from impostor syndrome don't get more confident, even if they successfully did something a dozen times over. That's because they tend to feel that it wasn't them that did well, but that their success was due to some other factors.

On the other hand, when it comes to "failure", people who experience impostor syndrome tend to attribute the negative results to themselves. They think, for example, that the failure happened because they are not smart enough, rather than: there were circumstances that prevented them from performing optimally.

And so they worry about being exposed as a fraud, that sooner or later people will find out that they're not competent after all, and everything will come crashing down.