

# MENTAL HEALTH DURING YOUR PhD

## IMPOSTOR SYNDROME

With over half of postgraduate students meeting criteria to classify them as depressed,<sup>1</sup> this poster series explores common causes that effect PhD students during their studies.

Part of the #mentalhealth Twitter poster series by @zjayres. Free to distribute.



### WHAT EXACTLY IS IMPOSTOR SYNDROME?

A psychological phenomenon, impostor syndrome is 'intense feelings of self-doubt',<sup>2</sup> making a person feel like a fraud. These feelings can often reach boiling point during a PhD, with students feeling they have 'gamed the system' or 'fluked' their way onto their PhD program. "Someone is going to figure out I don't deserve to be here soon." - classic impostor syndrome. "Everyone here is smarter than me." - you guessed it! Impostor Syndrome. These feelings are often more heavily experienced by minority groups, due to lack of representation in academic institutions.

### SO, WHAT CAN WE DO ABOUT IT?



#### PERSONAL GROWTH

If this is the first time you have heard of impostor syndrome, consider reading around the area and find coping strategies that work for you. Even if you have heard of the syndrome, consider whether you are being impacted by it. Writing a list of all your achievements (personal and professional) to refer back to when feeling low may help. Seeking medical help/counselling to discuss how you might be feeling is a positive step towards taking control of your inner critic.



#### PEER SUPPORT

You may not suffer with Impostor Syndrome personally, but those around you might (including faculty!) Aim to be open and honest about both successes and failures (doing frontier research for a PhD studies, is more often failures). It is important to recognise that that you can be part of the support network of the researchers around you, where positivity and words of encouragement during difficult periods of research, can make the difference between a good day and a bad one. Helping build up the confidence of your peers is good practice for being a PI!



#### ROLE OF THE PI

It may seem obvious, but make sure to praise your PhD students when they do a good job. This does not mean only when they produce publishable quality work or have successes in the lab. In fact, going through a failure and learning from mistakes is in itself something that should be praised. The PI should also work towards a "collaborate not compete" group mentality to reduce cross-PhD comparisons (no two PhDs are the same so let's stop comparing them!). This also helps to increase peer-to-peer discussions.



#### THE INSTITUTION

Role models from all backgrounds are essential to help PhD students with feelings of Impostor Syndrome, yet academia is typically lacking in diversity. Commitment to ED&I from universities is thus essential. People from underrepresented groups are more likely to become become disheartened and leave academia entirely. It is also the responsibility of the university to raise awareness and support for mental health issues during PhD studies. Specific talks discussing Impostor Syndrome may be beneficial.

SELF-HARMING?  
SUICIDAL THOUGHTS?

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#### REFERENCES:

Reference: 1. Graduate Student Happiness & Well-Being Report, 2014, University of California, Berkeley.  
Reference: 2. <https://www.sciencemag.org/careers/2008/02/no-youre-not-impostor>