

Surviving Imposter Phenomenon: One Psychological Scientist's Story

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Sidebar: [Taking Aim at Workplace Culture](#)



Vicki Gier

In 1992, I was a 38-year-old, first-generation/low-income freshman starting college alongside my oldest son. “Who do you think you are?” I asked myself over and over during that first semester of college. “What makes you think you will survive a semester, let alone earn a college degree?” That would not be the last time I repeated those words to myself. I had nightmares that someone would call me out of class to inform me that there had been an error in my acceptance as an undergraduate psychology major.

Today I can tell those voices that I was not the impostor I believed myself to be during my first semester, along with all the other semesters leading to earning a PhD in experimental psychology. A sense of pride now replaces those overwhelming, negative, self-defeating attitudes associated with impostor phenomenon (also called imposter syndrome), which I have learned plenty of other high-achieving people have also experienced, from Michelle Obama, who said as much to the BBC News (2018), to Daniel Lau, a student at Harvard University who described his personal experience as “a constant feeling of inadequacy and self-doubt towards oneself despite having legitimate proof of skill and merit” (2022). Anyone suffering from impostor phenomenon has their own unique story.

Decades-long journey

My parents grew up during the Great Depression. My father, the youngest of seven children, had to drop

out of high school to help his father's business as a confectioner. My mother lived more than 3 hours from the closest high school but was forced to end her schooling after the eighth grade. I would not find out that my parents did not have high school degrees until I was an adult. My parents were embarrassed about their limited education and feared friends and neighbors would look at them in a different way. (In fact, I saw their life story as an example of the American dream, because my father parlayed his 10th grade education into a career as a well-known building contractor in Florida during the late 1950s and early 1960s.)

I hated high school. I struggled particularly with math and science, and my parents, with their limited education, did not know how to help me. As I struggled, I had one dream: Meet someone, get married, and have children, just as my parents had done when my mother was 17 and my father was 25. My dream came true in that sense: I married a week before my 18th birthday and had two children 3 years apart. But there the dream ended. We were extremely poor and divorced 7 years later, in 1980. I remarried the same year. Again, money was always tight, and I was not encouraged to pursue a college degree. Over the years, I was told, "You quit everything you start" and "Why do you think you will succeed in college when you squeaked through high school?"



Author Vicki Gier with her sons Stephen and Danny in 1982, 10 years before she began college.

In fact, I had two very good reasons to apply to college, and their names are Stephen and Danny. My sons excelled in every class they ever took, and both went on to receive scholarships to the university in our city, Central Missouri State University (now the University of Central Missouri). Similarly, both were overjoyed when I asked them whether I should apply to college as well. My sons inspired me to keep going.

Throughout my journey over the next 11 years, from freshman year to earning my PhD, I suffered from impostor phenomenon. Every semester from the first year until.... well... today, I feared someone would tell me there had been a mistake and I was not worthy of my degrees. This constant fear made me work

hard.

As an undergraduate at Central Missouri, I was on campus five days a week. I would come home from classes and rewrite my notes again and again until I could close my eyes at night and see the outline and definitions in the pages of my notebooks. Even though I spent countless hours studying for every test, I was certain I would fail (to me, failing was a C). After exams I would invariably come home and cry my eyes out, remembering only the question or two I had missed, not the many I answered correctly. One would think that after a semester or two of being a successful student—high GPA, scholarships, president of Psi Chi and the psychology club—the voice inside my head would stop telling me I was still “pulling a fast one” on everyone. It did not stop.

Taking Aim at Workplace Culture

The term “imposter phenomenon,” wrote APS Fellow Pauline Rose Clance (Georgia State University) and clinical psychologist Suzanne Imes, “is used to designate an internal experience of intellectual phonies, which appears to be particularly prevalent and intense among a select sample of high achieving women.” Their study, published in *Psychotherapy Theory, Research and Practice* in 1978, was based on individual and group psychotherapy sessions and college classes with more than 150 objectively successful women, including PhDs and students, who still found “innumerable means of negating any external evidence that contradicts their belief that they are, in reality, unintelligent” ([Clance and Imes, 1978](#)).

“We have been amazed at the self-perpetuating nature of the imposter phenomenon—with the pervasiveness and longevity of the imposter feelings of our high achieving women, with their continual discounting of their own abilities and persistent fear of failure,” Clance and Imes wrote. “We have not found repeated successes alone sufficient to break the cycle.”

In the decades since, imposter phenomenon has been the topic of countless articles and programs aimed at helping women overcome it. “What’s less explored is why imposter syndrome exists in the first place and what role workplace systems play in fostering and exacerbating it in women,” wrote [Ruchika Tulshyan and Jodi-Ann Burey in the Harvard Business Review](#). “We think there’s room to question imposter syndrome as the reason women may be inclined to distrust their success.”

In their article, Tulshyan and Burey argued that attention around imposter phenomenon, especially as it affects women in the workplace, is misdirected because it puts the blame on individuals. Citing research on workplace systems that unfairly reward confidence in male leaders and treat influential women of color as threats, they noted that popular conceptions of imposter syndrome fail to consider the disadvantages facing many professional women, such as the impact of systemic biases and the frequent absence of role models.

The real solution? Inclusive workplaces where everyone can thrive, according to Tulshyan and Burey. “Leaders must create a culture for women and people of color that addresses systemic bias and racism. Only by doing so can we reduce the experiences that culminate in so-called imposter syndrome among employees from marginalized communities—or at the very least, help those employees channel healthy self-doubt into positive motivation, which is best fostered within a supportive work culture.”

Clance, P. O., & Imes, S. (1978). The imposter phenomenon in high achieving women: Dynamics and therapeutic intervention. *Psychotherapy Theory, Research and Practice*, 15(3), 241–247.
<https://doi.org/10.1037/h0086006>

Tulshyan, R., & Burey, J. (2021, February 11). Stop telling women they have imposter syndrome. *Harvard Business Review*. <https://hbr.org/2021/02/stop-telling-women-they-have-imposter-syndrome>

One very important part of my academic experience was having an amazing mentor. Dr. David Kreiner was my general psychology professor. The first day of class he shocked us by explaining that earning a PhD in psychology could take 10 years or longer. He also emphasized the importance of having a good mentor and getting involved in research. At 38 years old, I panicked and went to his office after the second day of class, asking him to be my mentor. From then on, he guided me through the process of developing ideas for research, allowing me to pick the topics for the studies we conducted together. I still consider him a mentor today.

As for research, I grew to love it so much that when I was a junior, I applied to the [McNair Scholars Program](#), a U.S. Department of Education program designed to prepare undergraduate students for doctoral studies through involvement in research and other scholarly activities. Dave Kreiner remained my research mentor, and I had departmental and library mentors as well. The program was amazing, and I swore if I ever earned a PhD I would give back. But although the McNair Program helped to increase my confidence, I still fought the imposter demon inside.

When I completed my bachelor's degree, I was accepted into the psychology master's program and offered a teaching assistantship. I loved graduate school and, despite fear beyond belief of not getting into a PhD program, was eventually accepted by the University of Nevada, Reno. After 2 years, I had my courses completed and only my dissertation to conduct, write, and defend. In August 2003 I earned my PhD and the next month accepted an offer as the McNair Scholars academic coordinator, in the same program that had provided mentoring and encouragement to me as an undergraduate. Paying it forward is common with nontraditional college students, who often realize how fortunate we were to have help in our corner, and I spent 3 years doing just that with McNair while also teaching college classes.

In 2007 I accepted a tenure-track position at Mississippi State University-Meridian, where I have been ever since. By then I had been teaching at the college level for 12 years, so one would think the impostor phenomenon would have dissipated, but little did I know the worst was yet to come: the tenure process. Even though I had nine publications when I went up for tenure and excellent teaching evaluations, the impostor phenomenon *almost* won: A challenging work environment at the time, combined with my insecurity, contributed to my experiencing a Takotsubo cardiomyopathy heart attack (also known as broken-heart syndrome) in 2013. But I persisted, motivated in part by my commitment to be a role model and mentor to students who may have faced the same struggles as I faced.

In support of students

Today, in virtually every class I teach, I use my life experiences to reach out to first-generation college

students in particular. We are a unique group, I believe, and even though many of us suffer from impostor phenomenon, once a faculty member has assured us that we not only belong in college but should continue to graduate school, we tend to excel in our classes, become leaders among our peers, graduate with honors, and then give back to others.

My experiences have contributed to working hard at becoming a college professor that students admire, respect, and seek out for help and mentoring. All of us who teach likely have students suffering from impostor phenomenon. Most try to hide their secret, but as the first exams approach, we may notice a change in their behaviors. They may report being ill on exam day or make up an excuse for not being able to study for the exam—anything to take the focus off them. Their fear of being called out as an impostor is so real that it can cloud their ability to realize how much they have really learned and retained. They may take an exam filled with terror and anxiety, expecting it to be the test they'll fail, showing everyone they are not deserving of being in college. As a result, they live in fear until they find out their score, which is often quite high. This is one reason I return exams to my students the very next class period.



Gier with her sons in 2011

At the beginning of every semester, I also talk about impostor phenomenon with each of my classes. I encourage students to talk to me and their other instructors to help them overcome this horrible experience. (I also recommend a TED Talk and other work by Dr. Valerie Young on “[thinking your way out of imposter phenomenon](#).”) Just as my former professor, Dave Kreiner, took the time to mentor, advise, and encourage me, I invite students with impostor phenomenon to work with me on research studies, present at professional conferences, and sometimes coauthor articles in peer-reviewed journals.

I am particularly concerned about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on students. I have seen an increase in the number of students with imposter phenomenon due to the perception among some that they perhaps have not learned as much as they needed to be successful. I am also concerned for new graduate students who spent their junior and senior years online, if not under quarantine or facing other

circumstances that were not optimal for learning. I won't be surprised if more PhD students remain stuck in the "all but dissertation" stage for extended periods, or drop out of their programs, because of feelings of inadequacy.

The good news is that research is being conducted on how students' academic performance and psychological well-being relate to pandemic conditions. In fact, Dave Kreiner and I are comparing groups of students in first-generation/low-income and minority students' programs, such as the TRIO Student Support Services program and the McNair Scholars Program, with similar students who are not in such programs as well as with students whose parents have college degrees and who are not from low-income or minority groups. We are examining whether programs that support first-generation students are important in reducing their fear of failure and experience of imposter phenomenon, looking at eight measures of psychological well-being, including those associated with optimism and resilience.

We're now looking to expand our participant pool to universities outside of the United States and to students in PhD programs, and hopeful about sharing the results with the wider scientific community. If your university may be interested in participating, I encourage you to contact me directly.

Vicki S. Gier joined the faculty of Mississippi State University in 2007. In early March, 2022, she learned that she had been appointed full professor of psychology. She welcomes others to contact her at vsg16@msstate.edu.

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