

Duncan Green

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## Imposter Syndrome? Do you have it? When is that a problem? What can you do about it?

*Duncan Green reflects on a recent conversation on imposter syndrome with LSE students, discussing the origins and evolution of the term, the difference between imposter syndrome based on exclusion and inequality v that based on understanding the complexity and unknowability of many contexts. He then has a discussion with ChatGPT about the causes, ways to manage and potential benefits of the syndrome.*

I was recently on a careers panel for students on the LSE's amazing [Programme for African Leadership](#) (PfAL). It was great fun, with other panelists discussing everything from setting up a Nigerian bakery as a side hustle ([Puff Puff Ministry](#) – wonderful brandname!) to working in public health, education and the UK government. I gave a few thoughts on the [state of the aid sector](#), but what really got a response was a brief mention of imposter syndrome, which seemed to strike a chord with the 50 students in the room.

Where did the term come from? According to a [handy overview in Psychology Today by Marwa Azab](#), the genesis of imposter syndrome can be traced back to 1978, when psychologists Pauline Rose Clance and Suzanne Imes introduced the term.

Azab asks 'Does this constant self-doubt propel us toward greater success, pushing us to excel?' The evidence shows the answer is more mixed:

'Scientific studies show the toll of imposter syndrome is considerable. It is associated with [anxiety](#), [depression](#), and somatic symptoms. At work, imposter syndrome is associated with decreased job performance and an increased risk of burnout.'

Clance and Imes initially traced the causes to gender inequality. Dr. Clance came from the Appalachian region of Virginia, growing up as the youngest of six siblings. Despite her consistent

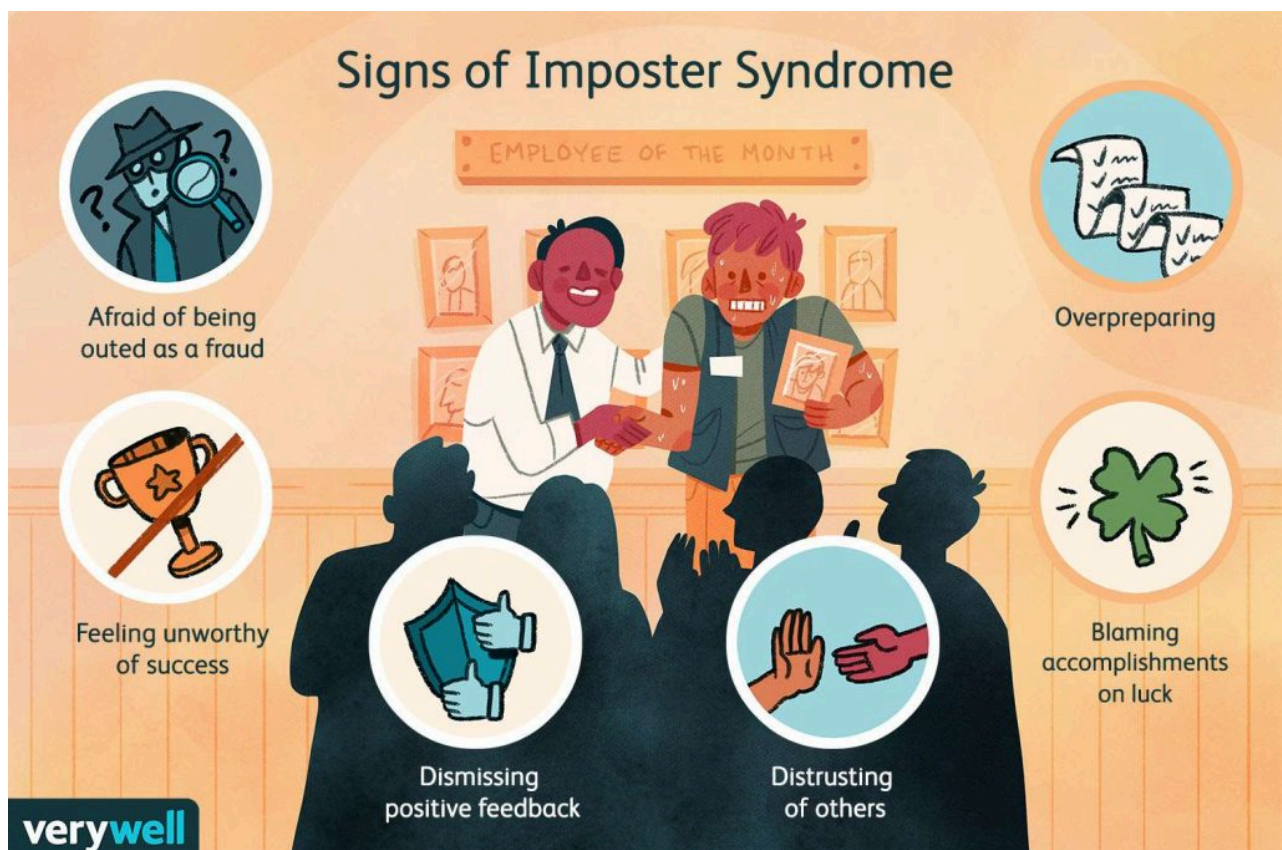
academic triumphs, she grappled with relentless self-doubt, convinced she had failed after every exam.

But later research showed it affected men too. And that was fully borne out in the conversation at PfAL. One male former government minister said he felt like an imposter a lot of the time, including at LSE. A government minister! Other students commented on how cowed they felt by apparently confident, articulate young white students, even when they knew they had far more real world experience than them.

This got me thinking about at least two contrasting causes of the syndrome. One is inequality-based (race, caste, gender, age), reflecting the discussions by Clance, Imes and our PfAL students.

There, I would say inequality is not destiny. Activists need to support each other to build confidence and prevent the syndrome from harming their ability to change the world. What can we learn from others? After all, we all know people who are full of self confidence, despite belonging to a supposedly subordinate group. What do they know that we don't? In some cases they may be **faking it 'til they make it** (see also, feel the fear and do it anyway), and that's actually quite a good response. I think it probably describes how I've felt over much of my career (and still do, on occasion). I also loved this graphic btw.

But there is another variety, which I would call reality-based imposter syndrome, which reflects a proper understanding that in complex, unpredictable systems – aka the worlds most of us live in, anything other than some kind of 'evidence-based humility' is unwarranted. That has big implications for how we work:



- As leaders (this was the PfAL after all), achieving the difficult balancing act of knowing what you don't know, while being able to inspire and motivate others.
- As researchers and activists, always maintaining the 'lateral vision' to spot and consider new ideas, events or actors that weren't in your initial thinking, but may need to be incorporated as you review, adapt and improve your plans – a process without end.

Back to the causes of imposter syndrome? As ever, I consulted my favourite research assistant, ChatGPT, and got some good additional ideas.

**'Social comparison:** Constant exposure to curated successes on social media can make people feel inferior, fostering imposter feelings.

Some individuals depend heavily on external validation (praise, promotions, etc.) rather than trusting their own assessment of their abilities. When external validation is absent, they may feel like a fraud.'

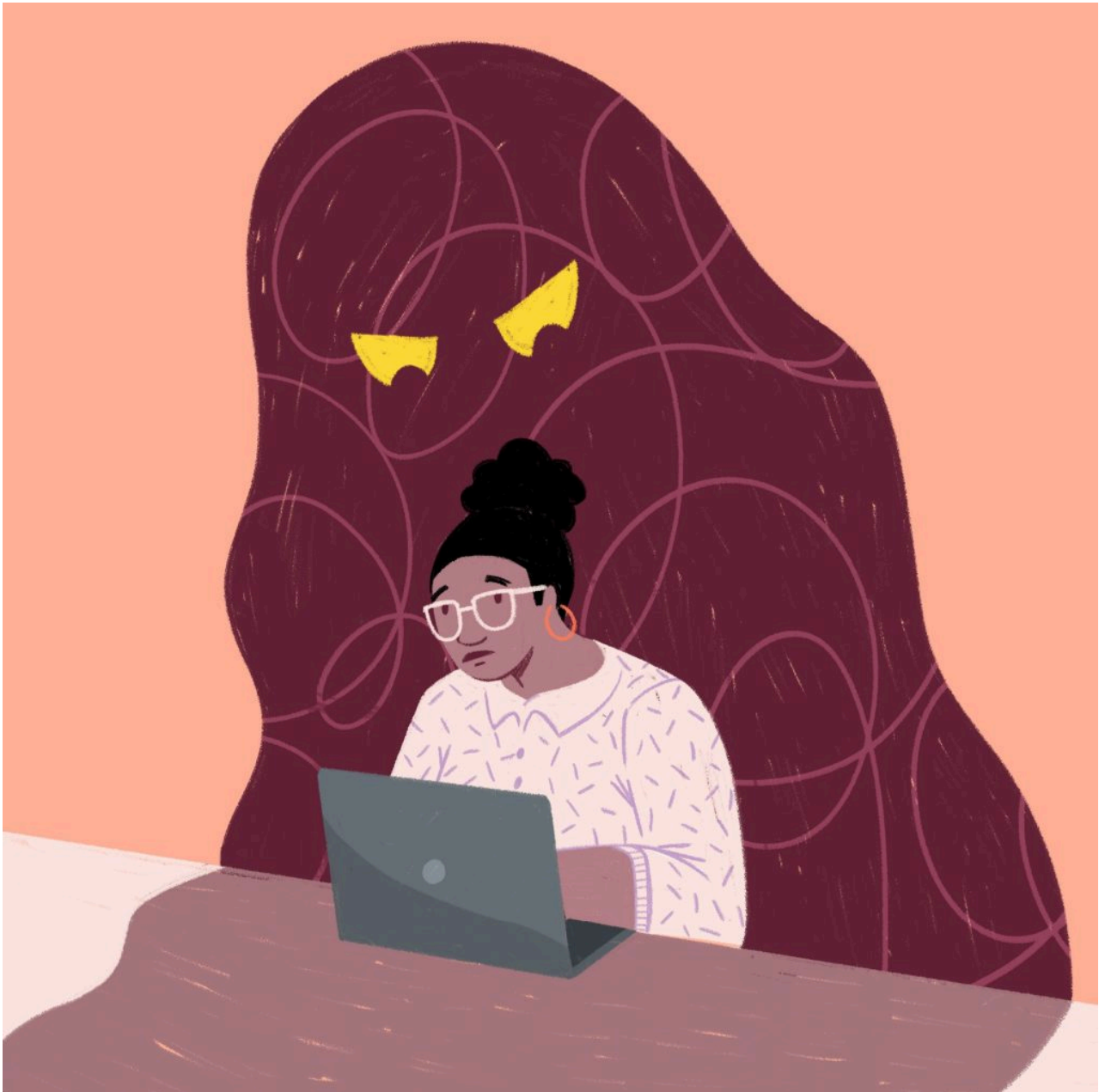
I then asked it for ideas on the best ways to manage imposter syndrome. Answers included:

**Keep a "Wins" Journal:** Write down your achievements, positive feedback, and compliments. Review it regularly to remind yourself of your capabilities and successes.

**Share with Trusted People:** Opening up to a mentor, colleague, or friend can normalize the experience and provide reassurance. Joining groups where people discuss imposter syndrome can reduce feelings of isolation.

**Set Realistic Expectations:** Avoid perfectionism. Strive for excellence, but accept that making mistakes or not knowing everything is part of growth. Recognize that learning is ongoing and that no one has all the answers.

Overcoming imposter syndrome is not about eliminating self-doubt entirely but learning to manage it and build self-compassion.



Finally, I asked the AI gods when imposter syndrome might be helpful:

**It Can Drive Growth and Improvement:** Feeling like an imposter can push you to work harder and prepare more thoroughly. Because you may doubt your abilities, you might over-prepare or strive for excellence, which can lead to better performance. This can be especially useful in high-stakes situations like job interviews, presentations, or new challenges. (Yup, recognize that)

**It Can Promote Humility and Openness to Feedback:** People with imposter syndrome tend to be more self-aware and open to constructive criticism. Since they don't assume they have everything figured out, they're often more willing to learn, collaborate, and improve—traits that can foster personal and professional growth.

**It Can Increase Empathy and Relatability:** Feeling like an imposter makes you more aware of your own vulnerabilities, which can make you more empathetic toward others. This can enhance your leadership and mentoring skills, as you're more likely to understand and support others who experience self-doubt.



Finally, I asked my free online therapist 'are there problems with not having imposter syndrome?

**ChatGPT replied:**

That's an interesting question! 🤔 (Unbelievably, that bit of validation made me feel quite chuffed – I had to remind myself that this was not a real person talking!)

**Overconfidence or Dunning-Kruger Effect:** People without imposter syndrome may overestimate their competence, especially in areas where they actually lack expertise. This can lead to poor decision-making or mistakes due to misplaced confidence.

**Reduced Self-Awareness or Growth:** A bit of self-doubt can drive self-improvement. People without imposter syndrome might be less inclined to question their abilities or seek feedback, potentially stalling their growth.

**Lack of Empathy or Relatability:** People with imposter syndrome tend to empathize more with others who feel self-doubt. Without it, someone may struggle to relate to colleagues or peers who experience those feelings. This could result in being perceived as aloof or unsympathetic.

Thanks for the pep-talk ChatGPT, now back to me – I'd love to know if this resonates with your own experience, and what you would add to this short intro.

### About the author

#### Duncan Green

Duncan Green is a Co-Director (with Tom Kirk) of the LSE's Activism, Change and Influence programme and website. He is a Professor in Practice in the LSE's International Development department. He can be reached at [d.j.green@lse.ac.uk](mailto:d.j.green@lse.ac.uk), or on [@duncangreenlse.bsky.social](https://bsky.app/profile/@duncangreenlse.bsky.social). He doesn't look at twitter any more.

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