

Do you suffer from fraud syndrome?

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It all started with my acceptance to law school – I didn't have straight As or a really high LSAT score, so I couldn't understand how I got in. I attributed it to good references and copying my friend's personal statement about the Dalhousie Law School Weldon Tradition. Well, sort of copying. After all, I hadn't been head girl at a prestigious private school in Toronto.

There began my long suffering lawyer fraud syndrome. It's been a roller coaster – days of feeling sick walking into a discovery, thinking I wouldn't know when to object to questions from the other side; at times feeling foolish for not knowing the answer immediately when a client asked a complex question, and the like. Of course there were good days too – but then I could attribute some of those to my co-counsel, my assistant or a particularly cooperative witness. It wasn't my skill and experience that got results, after all.

Alas I am not alone. Thousands of high achievers suffer from the 'impostor syndrome,' the term coined by psychology professor Pauline Clance and psychologist Suzanne Imes. Their report "The Impostor Phenomenon Among High Achieving Women" was released in 1978; their findings still find roots in our psyche today.

Do you wonder when you'll be "found out" by your colleagues, clients or boss – discovered for what you are: not qualified, not smart enough, not what you appear? Chances are you suffer some measure of fraud syndrome. (Dr. Valerie Young's website www.ImpostorSyndrome.com has a fraud syndrome quiz if you're left with any doubt). It's a common theme for professionals with the level of responsibility we lawyers carry each day. The more you take on, the more it seems like you're faking it, and the more scared you get that someone's going to figure you out.

If you attribute your success to outside events and other people, while only finding evidence of your faults, chances are you're well practiced in feeling like a fraud.

So how can you tackle this common phenomenon? Here are a few ideas to get you started:

Discover the truth. Most everyone feels this way at some point, no matter how much confidence they project. That fact alone should help.

Talk about it. When you know that others feel this way too, it may be easier to talk about it. Tell others how you're feeling. Ask how they manage the self-doubt that comes up for them. Sharing these feelings will help you and others.

Acknowledge when it's legit. Is this your first time at the partner's table, or a client luncheon? Do a reality check. Is this a situation where it's normal for you to feel some discomfort? Cut yourself some slack then. You are not inept, you're just new at this game.

Focus on your strengths, eradicate your weaknesses. If you're a great writer, volunteer to write more. If you have trouble thinking on your feet, find ways to buy time. Maybe your assistant can screen client calls – this gives you time to check for an answer before calling back the client.

Acknowledge your accomplishments. Rather than thanking your lucky stars each night, keep a success journal. Write down what you did well, and how you can learn from your mistakes.

Accept your mistakes. Yes, you will make mistakes. Stop looking for perfection. Work at doing your best. I remember leaving court one day and feeling like the whole thing was a bad dream. A good friend helped me work through what I learned and how I could do things differently the next time.

Accept help. Know that you don't always have to have the answer. You can call on others to celebrate your successes and ask them for help when you need it. A supportive network will see you through the good and bad times.

