The Imposter Syndrome

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The university isn’t always a welcoming place for all of us. Although every academic experiences occasional self-doubt, those of us who are marked as different from our colleagues — in terms of our race, gender, sexuality, class, or ability status — sometimes receive messages that even though we produce stellar scholarship and work hard, we are not worthy of our positions in the academy. When we internalize such messages we take on something social psychologists call “the imposter syndrome,” in which high-achieving, often minoritized individuals constantly doubt that they are deserving of their successes.

If you are truly succeeding in your graduate program, but you still have doubts that you are worthy of your accomplishments — or perhaps even question whether you should have been admitted to your department in the first place — you might be fighting the imposter syndrome. Sometimes self-doubt propels us further: it lights a fire in us that stokes our inner drive and creates our successes. At other times self-doubt can be paralyzing, or even debilitating. Either scenario is simply exhausting.

So, how do you combat feelings of being an imposter?

1. Break your major tasks down into manageable steps, and cross off each step when you complete it. This might mean breaking your long-term goals (“write my dissertation prospectus”) into daily, weekly and monthly goals. Force yourself to pause each time you complete a major task. Appreciate how you are making strides with every step you accomplish. Remind yourself that you are moving through your graduate program, and that your completed tasks are proof of that.

2. Remember that although you might think that “everyone else” around you belongs here, realize that most people in your situation as a new master’s student or a doctoral student about to defend exams probably feel the same way. You can only find this out by...
3. Talking with others, particularly those with similar research interests, backgrounds and goals. Create a safe space to share your experiences and feelings, and talk through your fears. Together determine which ones are legitimate, and which ones don’t deserve the space you’re giving them in your head.

4. Once you find your ideal support network, tell them specifically what you need. For example, if you need to hear that you are brilliant and fearless right before you give a job talk, tell your friends. Their supportive texts and emailed testimonials to your amazingness will help you shine.

5. Find ways to regularly relieve stress – take cooking lessons, find a good gym or workout class, take walks, watch your favorite TV show. Engage in these activities without guilt or judgment.

6. Be professional, but remember not to take yourself too seriously. Find ways to have fun with your teaching, your research and your role as a graduate student.

7. Fake it ‘til you make it. If you still feel like an imposter, act like you own the place. Walk through your world with confidence. Practicing self-assurance is a self-fulfilling act.