



Coaching Notes – Week 6

Imposter Syndrome

Imposter Syndrome

*"The trouble with the world is that the stupid are cocksure and the intelligent are full of doubt."
Bertrand Russell, British Philosopher*

Phoney. Fraudster. Swindler. Yes it's only a matter of time before someone discovers that you're not all you're cracked up to be. The moment when they realise you don't have the first idea about what you're doing is literally just around the corner. You're only where you are through sheer luck - or - sssh – because of some massive blunder somewhere.

Imposter syndrome is a poisonous and virulent form of self-doubt that afflicts even the most successful and self-assured amongst us.

A couple of clinical psychologists in the US coined the term in the 70's as a result of their research into immensely clever women who secretly feared they were not as talented as people thought. It can afflict men and women and can hit at any time, but most likely strikes when we take on new responsibilities: say a new job, promotion, starting a business, becoming a parent.

The fear of being found out can actually drive people to work harder, compete more and become even more conscientious, meaning more success, more promotions and triggering increasing feelings of fraudulence.

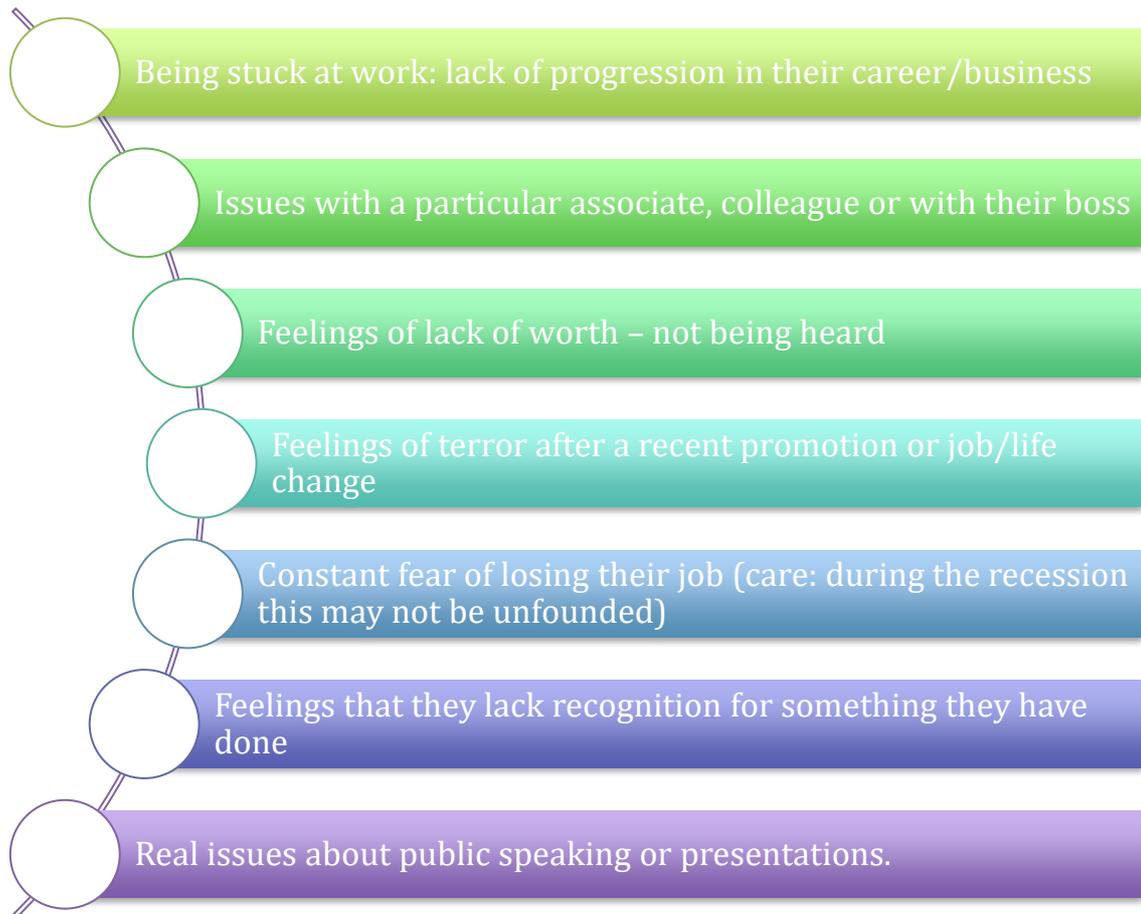
And when it's not pushing us to work like maniacs, it firmly holds us back. We won't ask questions in case colleagues spot our ineptness. We don't ask for help because people will be amazed at how useless we really are. We obsess about others' brilliance and simply sideline our own successes. We are fixated on our shortcomings.

Interestingly, there is another trait which is the polar opposite of imposter syndrome: the Dunning-Kruger effect, where people perform poorly but lack the ability to recognise their incompetence. As their inflated sense of capability means they don't seek self-improvement measures it's unlikely, however, you'll attract clients with Dunning-Kruger effect!

Coaches:

Have you ever experienced imposter syndrome? Do you recognise these feelings in yourself? When has this been particularly strong for you? If you have never experienced it yourself, have you ever seen a colleague or friend exhibiting signs of it? Write down examples of how and when imposter syndrome has driven your behaviour. For example, by declining an invitation to speak at a seminar.

Clients that suffer from imposter syndrome may present with:



Your job as their coach, is to help them recognise the symptoms of imposter syndrome, how this affects them (does it drive them to overwhelm or hold them back) and give them tools to help them manage it.

Powerful coaching questions to use with your client:

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| "Tell me about your career* journey up until now" What are your ambitions?" | "What do you need to do to achieve this?" | "What will stop you?" |
| "Is there anyone who gets in your way?" | "Why do they get in your way?" | "How do you feel when you compare yourself to this person?" |
| "Tell me about your relationship with your boss." | "Tell me about your greatest achievements." | "How did you accomplish those things?" |
| "If a national magazine wanted to feature you and cover the story of one of these achievements, how would you feel about that?" | "Where do you see yourself in three years' time?" | "Why?" |

* (This can be adapted to suit your client's particular situation so for 'career' you could substitute 'business' etc)

Homework and coaching tools for imposter syndrome:

- It's your job as your client's coach to help them learn to appreciate their own successes: Ask them - for at least the next month - to write down *everything* they're proud of on a daily basis. As they break the habit of focusing on their weaknesses they will become more used to acknowledging - and embracing - their achievements.
- Help them learn from their mistakes and let them go: Ask them to list key things they feel they haven't done well and then write down how they could have done them better. That done, ask them to cross them off their list and move on.
- Encourage them to be kinder to themselves: clients with imposter syndrome will often put immense pressure on themselves to achieve unrealistic goals – particularly at work. This can be from a misplaced desire to compete with a rival or from simply trying

to outrun being found out.

Help them to:

- Define a short-term goal/s
- Draw up a targeted action plan for the next 12 months that plays to their strengths and helps move them towards their goal/s.
- Encourage them to break their plan down into specific and detailed tasks that are time-specific and measurable. By crossing these tasks off their list, your client will steadily make progress towards their goal and feel more achieved. A written list will also give them hard evidence of their progress and help instil them with confidence that their progression wasn't by some bizarre fluke!
- Your client shouldn't be comparing themselves unfavourably to others: As they learn to focus on and feel good about their own successes, it will help with those noxious feelings of inadequacy they have when they observe a colleague or business rival succeeding.
- Imposter syndrome can lead us to focus on a particular individual and almost demonise them. This person could be a colleague or business rival. Whereas a certain amount of healthy competition or rivalry is OK, you may spot a problem if your client is holding someone responsible for their own lack of progress or if their name is coming up too often in your sessions. If you feel your client is obsessing too much about this person, help them understand where healthy rivalry ends and toxic feelings start. If they are to move forward, they will need to shift their focus from this person as their obsession is using up time and energy that could be spent on making progress (and this is a form of self-sabotage that feeds their imposter syndrome).
- It's unlikely someone suffering from imposter syndrome will ever conquer it entirely. And sometimes we just need to walk it. Help your client to visualise success and behave like the person they want to be. However hapless we feel on the inside most of the time people haven't the faintest idea because they're too busy worrying about us spotting their own incompetence!