

## IMPOSTER SYNDROME



**Many students worry that they will be exposed as a “fraud”**

### WHAT IS “IMPOSTER SYNDROME”?

"Impostor Syndrome" is the worry people have about being perceived as more competent than they believe they actually are, and the fear of being exposed as "a fraud" who does not actually belong in the program. Many medical students, surrounded by talented and motivated peers, experience impostor syndrome. Students may find themselves wondering if they were accidentally accepted into their medical training program, if their faculty or peers are going to suddenly realize that they are a fraud and do not belong in the program, or if they have no chance of succeeding in the program. They may perceive their peers as smarter, more qualified, or better prepared than they are. Ultimately, these fears give rise to serious doubts about their ability to complete their medical training.

Impostor syndrome can be triggered by negative feedback such as a low grade on an exam, or even not knowing the answer that a professor is asking. For some students, this feeling lasts only a short while; for others, self-doubt can be present for weeks on end, a constant sense of insecurity and fear of being exposed as inadequate.

Negative feedback, such as poor performance on an exam or feeling unprepared for an exercise, can be an important source of information. It can help a student realize that her study strategy isn't working, or that additional practice is required. While it is important for students to treat such feedback as important information, the development of severe self-doubt is counter-productive, as it can harm the student's well being and future performance.

### HOW DO MEDICAL STUDENTS EXPERIENCE IMPOSTER SYNDROME?

Many students experience impostor syndrome at one point or another. While uncomfortable, students often feel better after a short while, once they receive positive feedback about their performance, or after talking with their peers and realizing that their experience is common.

When students are unable to shake off the feeling of inadequacy, imposter syndrome can lead to negative consequences. If Sam seriously doubts her ability to complete her medical training, this may have a significant negative impact on her well being as well as on her performance. Doubt can give rise to avoidance, and avoidance (of studying, of challenging herself, of taking risks) can lead to poor performance. This pattern can form a vicious cycle, in which doubt leads to avoidance which leads to poor performance which leads to doubt. Self-doubt can also push Sam to over-study, leaving Sam with little time to attend to other important needs such as sleeping, eating, exercising, socializing, or engaging in spiritual practice. Some students may intentionally isolate themselves, out of shame (about their inadequacy) or out of fear (of facing additional proof that they are inadequate). This self-imposed isolation makes it hard for students to realize that their experience is shared by many others, and that their sense of inadequacy is not unique to them.

## **HOW CAN I SUPPORT SAM REGARDING IMPOSTER SYNDROME?**

- When Sam expresses frustration or despair about medical training, take her concerns seriously. Do NOT dismiss her concerns (for example, don't say "Oh, Sam, I'm sure this isn't as big a deal as you think" or "of course you are qualified to be there!"). Dismissing Sam's concerns may make her feel more alone and misunderstood. While you don't need to agree with Sam, it's important that you show Sam that you understand her self-doubt and find it understandable, given her circumstances.
- Ask Sam explicitly if she believes she is experiencing imposter syndrome. Sam will be familiar with the term, and it may help Sam put things in perspective.
- Encourage Sam to speak with friends she trusts, especially her peers in medical school. Hearing from others that they are experiencing difficulties and self-doubt can help Sam recognize that she is not uniquely inadequate.
- Encourage Sam to speak with her mentor or another faculty member that she feels safe with.
- Ask Sam if there were times in the past when she felt discouraged, especially as she was applying to medical school. Ask Sam how things turned out, and what helped her feel better at the time.
- Tell Sam how you feel about her. Are you proud of Sam? Does Sam inspire you? Are you impressed by Sam? Tell her, and be as specific as you can about why you feel that way.
- In future conversations, ask Sam how she is feeling about medical school, and about the experience that caused her to feel self-doubt. Following up is a way of showing that you remember what's important for Sam and care about her.

## **LEARN MORE ABOUT IMPOSTER SYNDROME**

- [The Effect of Imposter Syndrome on Medical Students](#) / KevinMD.com
- [How do I overcome Imposter Syndrome as a medical student?](#) / Dr. Gary Larson (Quora.com)
- [This Physician Talks About Imposter Syndrome and Her Journey](#) / MedicalSchoolHQ.net (Article & podcast)