

# We are a never-ending work in progress



Following their study, **Brett Best, Jules Dickinson and Jill Henshaw** outline strategies to combat IS

In *Newsli's* July 2022 edition, we outlined the findings of our small-scale research project on the prevalence of Imposter Syndrome (IS) in the BSL/English interpreting and translation field. In this issue, we follow up by focusing on practical strategies for combating feelings of IS and offer you ways of coping if you experience those feelings.

Our IS survey opened in February 2021 and we received 339 responses from people in our field. The majority of respondents (84.7%) said they had experienced feelings of IS at some point, so, if you have ever felt like an imposter, knowing that you are definitely not alone is helpful. Of all the respondents who identified with feelings of IS, only 27 had no strategies to manage those feelings. The lengthy list of strategies offered means it's not a one-size-fits-all approach, so it's important to find what works for you. The diverse strategies suggested ranged from wellbeing approaches such as breathing exercises and meditation, to applying Dean & Pollard's (2011) demand control schema, journaling, avoidance tactics and 'faking it until you make it'.

In this article we discuss the number one strategy reported by survey respondents, namely peer support/supervision. We also provide you

with some strategies which we, as recovering imposters, or IS-experiencers, have found useful. Finally, we signpost you to some important takeaways from best practices in the literature. However, before we walk you through any strategies, it is important to consider if what you are experiencing is actually IS, and so we start with a look at the difference between IS and levels of competency.

## Imposter Syndrome or Conscious Incompetence?

Feelings of self-doubt and inadequacy are common in many situations. IS, however, goes deeper, to the extent that you feel a fraud in your professional role and fear being 'found out' as not deserving the position you hold. This feeling persists – and this next part is key – *despite outward appearances of competence*. In our previous article, we reported individuals as identifying fluctuating feelings of IS when newly qualified, when entering new domains or when not adequately prepared for an assignment. This led us to wonder if people's self-reported experiences of IS are an awareness of not yet being ready for specific assignments or work in certain domains.

We may consider the Four Stages of Competence Model, widely accepted as a framework to envisage the stages of learning. It begins with the individual being unconsciously incompetent (you don't know what you don't know); the second stage is conscious incompetence (you become aware of the gaps in your knowledge/skillset); the third stage is conscious competence (you know the stuff/can do the stuff, but it takes a lot of effort). The final stage is where you reach unconscious competence (mastery, you can do it without any real effort). Using this framework, we can see where feelings of IS might be conflated with not being ready for certain jobs and/or genuinely not being good enough yet. Although we need to explore this further, we feel that some cases of self-reported IS may be the insecurities which are part of a normal learning and growth process, ie, an awareness of a lack of full competence in certain areas. Recognising that we are out of our depth in a particular job or setting is a crucial skill and a vital aspect of maintaining standards in the field. However, if we have the requisite skills, knowledge and experience but fail to put ourselves forward for assignments because we feel fraudulent or unworthy, we ultimately stifle our development and career progress. It is, therefore, essential that we can differentiate between IS and the discomfort which is a part of a natural growth process where we may not be ready for a particular domain, or are out of our comfort zone.

### Talking – your key strategy

Talking about IS is one of the factors that drove us to undertake this research, as the more we talk about these feelings, the less isolated we feel in the experience and the more options we have to manage how we feel. Interestingly, the number one strategy mentioned by our survey participants was seeking support and talking through feelings of IS. Some survey participants mentioned speaking

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with family members, but most respondents said they reach out to trusted colleagues, peer support groups and Professional Supervisors. The use of professional discussion to analyse our work can help us to distinguish between our thoughts and feelings and our skills and knowledge. Discussing our work, goals and achievements in a more de-personalised manner means we can become less consumed by our feelings and more focused on tasks and outcomes.

### Strategies that work for us

The strategies we use to deal with uncomfortable feelings depend on what causes those feelings. If, as already highlighted, your feelings stem from conscious incompetence, with practice you can recognise these as a normal part of a growth process. Action plans for learning and gaining experience – and a good dose of time to let everything sink in – will go a long way to easing these uncomfortable feelings. If you are an experienced SLI/T and are genuinely competent, then the following strategies may help.

**▲ Internalise your achievements:** One way to begin addressing feelings of IS is to look at the skills and qualities you have gained on your way to becoming an interpreter or translator and *truly appreciate* what you have achieved. If you cannot accept positive information about your abilities, skills and successes, you will struggle to overcome the fear of being found out as a fraud (Apter, 2022). For many of us, being able to say ‘yes, I’m good at that’ seems almost

impossible, but that is where we need to start. We all communicate information to other people on an unconscious level, so what are you saying when you walk into a room believing you are not up to the job? If *you* don't believe in your skills, how can you expect other people to?

Internalising your achievements means feeling comfortable about the things you do well and the skills you have – having authentic pride in your abilities and making them integral to your self-belief. If you have always harboured feelings of not being good enough, it is a big shift in your mindset. However, a simple first step we can all make is to accept compliments and accept them well. Take a minute to think about how you respond when you are offered a compliment or positive feedback. Do you brush it aside or minimise it, making excuses for why you did something so well? Do you rush right past the positive comment to draw attention to the one thing that didn't go so well? If you do, you're human. We seem to be programmed with a negativity bias. Acknowledge this tendency and actively seek to accept the positive.

Pay attention to your internal voice. When someone tells you that you did a good job, does your inner script tell you that they only said it to be nice to you, or that they didn't really mean it? If so, you are effectively devaluing both the compliment and the person who gave it. Start working on challenging that inner voice and accepting that when people tell you that you are good at something, they are being genuine.

It is hard to give up on feeling like a fraud, on feeling not good enough – these can be well-embedded patterns and self-beliefs. Sometimes it's more comfortable to hold on to these beliefs, because then you can't be expected to meet expectations (yours or other people's). It's hard to be proud of what you do – you might fear accusations of being arrogant or big-headed. But if your pride is based on fact – you *are* good at what you do, that was an excellent (or even good

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## 'If *you* don't believe in your skills, how can you expect other people to?'

enough) interpretation – then you can begin to stop worrying about how other people see you and believe in what you have to offer. It's also worth celebrating the interpretations that were simply successful, even if they weren't necessarily excellent, and we'll come to that shortly.

▲ **You be you:** Comparing ourselves to others is one of the most pointless activities we can engage in, because we are all fundamentally different. Thinking that we are only worthy if we are as skilled as or as good as someone else can be detrimental to our self-image and to our career progression. Comparison is usually the fast track to unhappiness, bringing your focus on to what you don't like about yourself (Stenvinkel, 2022). It is much more helpful and positive to measure your journey by considering where you started to where you are now. Think about all the milestones along that journey, and the highs and lows that you have experienced. Recognise the unique strengths and abilities that got you to where you are today. Acknowledge that everyone, including you, brings something different to the table and contributes something original to the profession. Celebrating your individuality will grow your self-compassion and, according to Graebner (2021), self-compassionate people not only have a more realistic perception of who they really are, they can also appreciate their potential for growth. If you can begin to move away from always seeing other people as better than you, then you can start to value what you have to offer and stop seeing your differences from others as signs that you're not good enough.

▲ **Progress not perfection:** One intrapersonal characteristic identified as a risk factor for

developing IS is a tendency towards perfectionism (Dudau 2014, Want et al. 2019). The first step in addressing a tendency towards perfectionism is to recognise if you have this tendency! Awareness is a necessary ingredient to begin any kind of growth process. Without awareness, we don't know what it is that we need to work on. The second step is thinking of ourselves as a growth process, a work in progress. We may inherently know that perfectionism is impossible, but if we nonetheless strive for it and hold it as an inner expectation, we will always find ways in which we are lacking. One of the ways a Professional Supervisor can help with feelings of IS is to encourage you to think about realistic expectations rather than impossible ones. By pausing and examining our self-expectations, we can see that the standards we set ourselves are so high we cannot possibly fulfill them. This realistic look at what is achievable helps us recognise that what we are doing is good enough, and to be okay with good enough.

If we can address the perfection that is often the root of not feeling good enough (ie, shame), we can start to manage our sense of IS. Get comfortable with the idea of viewing yourself as a work in progress. Identify ways that you can grow, but also recognise how much you have developed and the progress you have made. This is a shift from feeling like a failure to a never-ending work in progress.

## What do the books say?

While most of the literature on IS can be firmly located in what we could term 'self-help' books, we have nonetheless identified a number of useful strategies from this genre. A good starting point is to discover why you feel like an imposter or a fraud. To develop strategies for combating IS, we need to understand our journey, life experiences and the influences that have led to these feelings – in other words, 'how did we get here?'. A helpful resource for starting this process is 'Own Your

Greatness' (Orbé-Austin & Orbé-Austin, 2020). Working through this volume can support you to discover your IS journey and identify what your feelings are and where they stem from. Once you have mapped that journey, you can discuss it with peers and/or your Professional Supervisor.

In *The Imposter Cure* (2019), Hibberd refers to perfectionism and avoidance as the 'imposter twins,' and we are sure that many of you will recognise these paradoxical self-sabotaging behaviours. We have already mentioned perfectionism in the preceding section, but if you find yourself under-preparing, procrastinating or turning up late, you may be turning to avoidance due to a fear of failure or of not being perfect enough. The imposter twins may also lead you to seeing false evidence of not being good enough, as well as creating visions of how something 'should' be, ie, the 'right' way (in your mind), which is in fact unachievable. Once you notice your perfectionism or your avoidant thoughts and behaviours, you can start to address them.

Young (2011) identifies 'the soloist' as an aspect of IS some may identify with. An example of this is where seeking help from a co-worker means you believe you're not doing a good enough job. Essentially, the belief at play here is that you think you should be able to do everything without assistance. We can counter these thoughts by discussing them with a Professional Supervisor. Disclosing feelings of embarrassment or inadequacy in a relationship of trust is a revelatory way of enabling us to gain clarity about the unhelpful thoughts and behaviours that may be hindering our work and our progress. We can also reframe how we view the co-working relationship as a strategy for countering 'soloist' beliefs. Conceptualising co-working as a team effort, whereby everyone works together to produce an interpretation, is helpful, as the underpinning belief is that we do not need to take everything on alone (and it is better if we don't).

Conclusion

We hope the strategies outlined provide some paths to follow in seeking ways to combat your feelings of IS. Identifying our unhelpful thoughts and behaviours in a safe space where we can explore and challenge them is vital if we are to start to internalise our successes. We must learn to distinguish between our internal dialogue and the evidence. Seeking to understand when we are making professional decisions based on our professional code, our current skillset and knowledge base is essential. We need to identify when we are holding back for the right reasons, and when our internal thoughts are leading to self-sabotage, despite evidence that we are capable of doing a 'good enough' job, if not a great job. Being objective about your performance will help you have a more grounded appreciation of your skills and abilities. Really owning and being proud

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'Recognising that it is impossible to be perfect is key'

of what you can offer is the next step. 'Watering your own grass', ie ceasing perpetual comparison with other people's journeys and instead 'investing, creating, and caring for your own' (Stenvinkel, 2022) is crucial. Finally, recognising that it is impossible to be perfect, especially in a profession where imperfection is a given, is key. We want to do our best, and naturally, our consumers will have high expectations of what we can provide. The challenge is recalibrating our self-expectation, and that of others (deaf clients, hearing clients, colleagues and co-workers) to a realistic level, so that we do not always strive for the unobtainable.



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