



An Appreciative Re-frame of the Imposter Syndrome

A Cross-Cultural Collaboration in Transcending a Universal Challenge

By: [David Shaked](#) & [Vivien Hau](#)

Have you ever felt the success you have achieved is undeserved and was due to pure luck? Was it also coupled with a sense that at some point, your bubble would burst and you will be found out?

These feelings are known as ‘the imposter syndrome’.¹ It was introduced as a phenomenon more than 40 years ago and has captured the attention of many; it has been extensively studied and discussed. Often it is something we, or our clients, feel ashamed of or are uncomfortable exploring. For some, it is present only subconsciously, deeply hidden yet powerful, affecting their lives without them even knowing.

Broadly speaking there are three main themes in the imposter syndrome:

1. Not believing you deserve the success you have achieved
2. A feeling of fraudulence about that success
3. A feeling of dread that you will be found out.

If we take a moment to reflect on any of these themes, many of us can find instances from our past, or perhaps even the present, where we have felt any or all of them to some degree. These feelings often arrive when we are offered a new opportunity, a promotion or are invited to participate in a lucrative project. When intense, they can hamper our abilities and performance. In fact, even the act of writing this article and knowing it would be published widely brings some of these feelings up for us, the authors – regardless of our past achievements, publications or our actual knowledge on the topic. If we asked you to spend a few minutes reflecting on past instances where you felt the imposter syndrome and then asked how you would rate your level of confidence or energy from 0–10, chances are you would rate them lower than if you had not focused on those instances. Even if you, yourself, have never experienced the imposter syndrome, you may have seen it and its impact in other people around you.

¹The term ‘impostor syndrome’ was coined by Pauline Clance and Suzanne Imes in 1978. The three themes were also described in their article [‘The Impostor Phenomenon in High Achieving Women: Dynamics and Therapeutic Intervention’](#), published in *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research & Practice*.

What we focus on grows

As Appreciative Inquiry (AI)² enthusiasts, we believe that what we focus on grows. This belief is in fact one of the foundational guiding principles of AI, first developed by David Cooperrider and Suresh Srivastva. The poetic principle, as they named it, states that we have a choice in what we decide to focus on and study. That choice is fateful – what we choose to inquire into and study will grow.

This principle works in both ways: when we focus on a problem, we risk expanding it and ‘digging ourselves in’. When we speak about something we wish to have or to create, we can find instances where what we want already exists in some way in our lives, or we find ways to set ourselves free to achieve it. Time and again, we have seen this AI principle in action. In this context, the possible consequence is that the more we focus on, talk about, study and inquire into experiences of the imposter syndrome, the more we will see it in action and the bigger it will become.

An invitation to re-frame our inquiry

Over 40 years, many have inquired into, told stories about and tried to overcome the problem of the imposter syndrome. What has happened as a result? We see it, experience it and hear more about it more often.

Yet, there is clearly a desire to overcome the imposter ‘syndrome’, to look for a ‘solution’ to this psychological pattern. A systematic review by Mak, Kleitman and Abbott (2019)³ has shown that a Google Scholar search returned more than 1,200 scholarly publications on the imposter phenomenon since 1978. Numerous publications and offerings (e.g. TED talks and other programmes) have spotlighted how to ‘deal with’ or ‘overcome’ this psychological experience, or have provided a plethora of hot tips, most commonly in the style of ‘fake it until you make it’.

We can appreciate how the imposter syndrome has been serving successful leaders for many years. The self-talk of ‘never good enough’ and the more sugar-coated thoughts of ‘striving for excellence’ drive them to compete with themselves. These messages contribute to their achievements and success, fuelling their drive to be better. However, they and the attached sense of inner insecurity often created helps explain many other behaviours in the workplace.

As mentioned earlier, what we focus on grows. Therefore, wouldn’t it be powerful and useful to take a step back, to re-define what we actually want to see or experience more of when we think of the imposter syndrome? Can we find a new, life-giving term to the unexpressed wish behind the imposter syndrome? What might happen if we shifted our attention from the challenges of the imposter syndrome to the possibilities of a new, yet-to-be-named phenomenon?

² Appreciative Inquiry has been defined as the search for the best in people, their organizations, and the strengths-filled, opportunity-rich world around them by Stavros, Godwin & Cooperrider.

³ Karina K. L. Mak, Sabina Kleitman and Maree J. Abbott (2019). [‘Impostor Phenomenon Measurement Scales: A Systematic Review’](#). *Frontiers in Psychology*.

As a starter, we have attempted to identify what we would like to see more of for each one of the three themes mentioned above in the following table:

Original theme – undesirable	Re-framed themes – what we wish to have instead
Not believing you deserve the success you have achieved.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● I am worthy. ● I deserve the success I have achieved. (Past). ● I deserve my place. (Present). ● I deserve the seen and unseen opportunities. (Future). ● I have actually done it in some ways or forms already.
A feeling of fraudulence about that success.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● I am qualified. (I know). ● I am credible and capable. ● I have past success/ track records of success (at least in the relevant areas). ● I am capable of doing this. ● I have the learning ability, curiosity and motivation/ drive to figure it out.
A feeling of dread that you will be found out.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● People will discover (will be amazed) that I know, I can and I am credible in this area. ● I am real and authentic. ● I am appreciated. ● I am confident. ● I am grounded in what I know and what I can do.

We choose to believe that each of you, our readers, has experienced some situations in the past or are currently experiencing them in the present where some of the themes from the right column were/are experienced. They may not be the same as the experiences that come to mind when we think of the themes in the left column, but they are still part of our life journey and we risk missing them and what they can teach us if we do not pay as much attention to them as we pay to the themes associated with the imposter syndrome.



Naming the ‘newly born’ phenomenon

The imposter syndrome is a catchy name. It has both the word ‘imposter’ and ‘syndrome’, each carrying some weight and generating strong images – one of a disingenuous person who pretends and plays tricks to cover over their weak points, the other a disease – where a collection of symptoms indicates the presence of a real illness.⁴ While the two words create a powerful and easily recognisable term, we hasten to say that neither word, nor the two together, can inspire us or enable us to move forward with what we actually want to create for ourselves. At best, the term creates a clearer image in our minds of a certain reality that looks like a big wall to break through or a cloud-covered mountain we must climb.

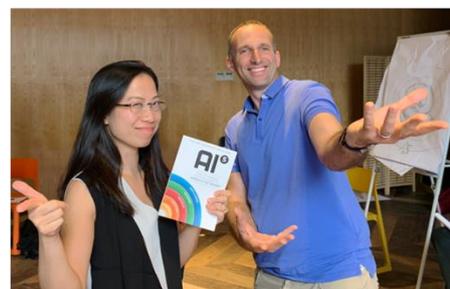
We need a new term, one more empowering that would signify the themes we would like to have and to grow in ourselves and in others, a term that inspires us to discover and bring out our authentically stronger and shinier parts. We need a term that makes us feel more empowered in our professional lives and will help us grow into our true fullest potential. To the best of our knowledge, a specific term for this collection of desirable themes has not yet been identified. We therefore decided to reflect on the terms we use in our respective languages and cultures to signify positive, shiny moments and hidden talents being revealed to the world.

We explored many possible terms in the languages we speak (we are both fluent in English as well as other languages – Cantonese and Mandarin Chinese for Vivien and Hebrew and French for David). We thought we could possibly identify some useful terms in these languages to provide us with interesting options.

In addition to our own self-reflection, we invited a group of leaders and professionals around the world to co-create a dialogue about this topic at the ODNE⁵ Carnival of Disruption in September 2020 as a way to bring to light what we want more of. We collected their authentic and thought-provoking insights in the naming process of the phenomenon.

You may already be curious about the newly named phenomenon! We will share more about this ‘newly born’ name and its attributes in the second part of this article.

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⁴ In fact, we cannot really call the imposter syndrome an illness. It is an experience that occurs in an individual, not a mental disorder. Impostor phenomenon is not recognized as an official diagnosis listed in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 5th ed. (DSM-5) or the *International Classification of Diseases*, 11th Revision (ICD-11), which serve as the principal authorities for psychiatric diagnoses across the world.

⁵ ODNE is an abbreviated name for the Organisational Development Network Europe.