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You're Not Fooling Anyone

By JOHN GRAVOIS

Holden Caulfield used to hunt phonies a few blocks from here, but times have changed. Now the phonies — or people who think they are, anyway — hunt themselves.

Case in point: On a recent evening, Columbia University held a well-attended workshop for young academics who feel like frauds.

These were duly vetted, highly successful scholars who nonetheless live in creeping fear of being found out. Exposed. Sent packing.

If that sounds familiar, you may have the impostor syndrome. In psychological terms, that's a cognitive distortion that prevents a person from internalizing any sense of accomplishment.

"It's like we have this trick scale," says Valerie Young, a traveling expert on the syndrome who gave the workshop at Columbia. Here's how that scale works: Self-doubt and negative feedback weigh heavily on the mind, but praise barely registers. You attribute your failures to a stable, inner core of ineptness. Meanwhile, you discount your successes as accidental or, worse, as just so many confidence jobs. Every positive is a false positive.

By many accounts, academics — graduate students, junior professors, and even some full professors — relate to this only a little less than they relate to eye strain.

The condition was first identified in 1978 by the psychologists Pauline Rose Clance and Suzanne Imes, who initially thought it was an anxiety unique to women. They avoided the word "syndrome," calling it instead the "impostor phenomenon."

"I didn't want it to be seen as one more thing people could see as wrong with women," says Ms. Clance.

She need not have worried.

The idea quickly struck a chord with scholars from the working class, along with other beneficiaries of the social mobility that infused higher education in the 1960s and 1970s. Those new academics bristled at the old guard's sense of entitlement. But they found themselves crippled by a stubborn inability to feel the same.

Meanwhile, scholars who came from academic legacies — the children of the old guard — had feelings of unearned privilege to contend with.

In the mid-1980s, Ms. Clance teamed up with Gail Matthews, now a professor of psychology at Dominican University of California, to conduct a survey on the phenomenon. They found that about 70 percent of people from all walks of life — men and women — have felt like impostors for at least some part of their careers. "We had no idea it was this widespread," says Ms. Matthews.

In other words, we have come so far in the American postindustrial meritocracy that everyone has equal access to guilt-ridden feelings of fraudulence.

According to Ms. Matthews, a person with impostor syndrome typically experiences a cycle of distress when faced with a new task: self-doubt, followed by perfectionism, then — sometimes but not always — procrastination.

"The next step is often overwork," Ms. Matthews says. "It has a driven quality — a lot of anxiety, a lot of suffering.

"Then comes success," she says. "So you do well!"

(Pause for a brief sigh of relief.)

"Then you discount your success," she says. "Success reinforces the whole cycle."

Ms. Young, the proprietor of <http://www.impostorsyndrome.com>, is a trim, businesslike woman who calls herself a "recovering impostor." After learning about the syndrome in graduate school — and identifying strongly with it — she left academe with a Ph.D. in education and hit the lecture circuit.

She has delivered her talk, "How to Feel as Bright and Capable as Everyone Seems to Think You Are," at dozens of campuses. The University of Texas at Austin alone has had her out four times. Other universities, like Stanford and the University of Michigan, conduct their own in-house workshops on the syndrome.

Ms. Young's recent lecture at Columbia, delivered to a group of mostly graduate students, had a waiting list of 60 for a 190-person auditorium.

Ms. Young recommends various strategies to help her audiences attribute success to their intelligence and not to flukes or fakery. She suggests getting comfortable with a skill that rhymes with "woolfitting" and means something like "winging it." It is a skill, she says, that many old-fashioned males treat as such, but that people with the impostor syndrome regard as a character flaw.

The students at Columbia seemed reluctant to let go of their feelings of fraudulence, however. At one point, some of them interrupted the lecture with a flurry of cross talk.

"What if somebody's parents did go here — did get them in?" asked a concerned undergraduate in the first row. "It's a good question!" said a young man in the middle of the auditorium, craning his neck to scan the room, as if waiting for someone to fess up.

A young woman blurted: "I went to New York City public schools."

Finally, a graduate student in the back row — a husky-voiced woman with a few piercings — brought an end to the squirm-inducing exchange.

"Yes," she said, "It is possible that there is someone in this room who really is an impostor. But look at how many of us there are."

Then she surveyed the audience of overachievers and said, "We couldn't have all gotten here for crap reasons."