You're in a crowded courtroom and realize it's filled with senior partners and seasoned attorneys with decades of experience in your practice area. What's worse, none of them “look like you.” You're asked to stand and announce yourself to the judge and court reporter. As find your voice, you can't help but feel like an imposter: Do I belong here? Is this really happening?

If you've felt something like that, you're not alone. The “imposter syndrome” has been called a secret epidemic in the legal profession and is a common phenomenon among attorneys who are young, women, and/or of a minority. The phenomenon describes the experiences of high-achieving individuals who feel fraudulent and have difficulty internalizing their successes and achievements. Oregon State Bar Bulletin 36, Sept. 2017. Differing in any way from your peers—whether by race, gender, age, sexual orientation, or some other characteristic—can fuel the sense of being a fraud. How can we shake that imposter feeling that sneaks into our subconscious? I offer four suggestions.

Don't Deflect Praise—Embrace It

Studies have shown that when receiving compliments, women or minorities will often deflect and say they “got lucky,” or even point to what they could have done better, instead of simply saying “thank you” or owning the praise. In my experience as a Chinese American, graciously receiving praise is surprisingly difficult because many Asian cultures emphasize humility. But owning your accomplishments will help you internalize your own abilities and strengths. Deflecting praise and writing it off as “luck” reinforces feelings that you don't belong and aren't worthy of acknowledgements. Instead, consider keeping an electronic or physical folder of the praise you receive and revisit it periodically to remember the good work you have done and the recognition you got for that hard work.
If You're There, You Deserve a Seat at the Table

Women and minorities often feel they need to “work harder” than their counterparts to fit in or prove their capabilities—feelings that may be deep-rooted in their upbringings, if in fact they did have to put in harder work, more hours, and later nights to get to the same point as their peers. This mentality can become a hindrance as they think their efforts will never be enough to show that they truly belong. However, find comfort in the fact that if you are called into an important meeting, asked to go to court, or are accepted to work at your law firm, then you are worthy of a seat at the table. You earned that spot and are valued as a contributor, or you wouldn’t have been asked to take on that role, right? Resist the urge to compare yourself to the most accomplished person in the room—you have your own strengths to offer. Remind yourself what you can contribute and have already contributed, and remember: If you’re in the room, it’s because you deserve to be!

Diversify the Room

Some of you reading this article will have the opportunity to provide needed diversity to a meeting, law firm, or court hearing. Maybe that means bringing along a junior associate, summer associate, or intern as you head off to court, or participating in hiring and staffing decisions. Don’t underestimate the impact this small action can have on a younger attorney’s development and understanding of what a lawyer leader looks like. Pay it forward and be the mentor/leader you always wanted. Mentoring younger, diverse attorneys can also help you realize how far you’ve come and how much knowledge you have to impart—further reinforcing that you are not an imposter at all.

Spread the Message That the Imposter Syndrome is Common

By definition, most people with imposter syndrome suffer in silence because part of the syndrome is the fear that they will be outed as an imposter. But talking about your insecurities normalizes and deflates the feelings, particularly as those you talk to reinforce your value and contributions. Lawyers are known for their anxiety, stress, and self-doubt, and, younger lawyers especially, they live in a sea of worry. If you mentor or work with other attorneys who express or imply that they feel like an imposter and doubt their abilities, don’t be afraid to share your own experiences. Conversely, cultivate a relationship with a mentor whom you trust and create a safe space to share your doubts. Having someone who can offer a reality check helps keep things in perspective. Personally, I have found comfort in the surprising number of peers and colleagues who have shared their own experiences where they felt as if they didn’t belong. Ultimately, we did fit in and were valued members of the team all along—sharing how we had all privately felt helped explode the imposter myth and show that each of us did deserve to be here.
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