

'Just' A GP Vet: Overcoming Imposterism Proceedings VMX 2024

Dr Dave Nicol
BVMS Cert Mgmt MRCVS
www.drdavenicol.com

Part 1: The Psychology of Imposterism

What is Imposterism, and Why Does it Happen

Imposterism, commonly known as imposter syndrome, is a psychological phenomenon where individuals doubt their accomplishments and have a persistent fear of being exposed as a "fraud" despite evidence of their competence. These feelings are self-generated, often disregarding actual skill, competence, and achievements. This phenomenon is not officially recognized in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), but it is acknowledged by psychologists and has been the subject of numerous studies.

As is often the case with Psychology, there are many different and, at times, conflicting descriptions of imposter syndrome. Based on both my research on the topic and my observation as a mentor to hundreds of young and experienced veterinarians over the past decade, I will discuss two different ways I have come to understand the issue as it relates to veterinary professionals specifically. To this end I believe there to be two types of imposterism at work in the workforce.

It is also vital to note that imposterism is not a physical thing but an internally generated feeling. A story we tell ourselves, if you will.

1. Type 1 Imposterism: This form is experienced by almost everyone when undertaking new tasks or learning new skills. It's the realization of not being proficient in something new, which is a natural part of the learning process. As such, this type shouldn't be viewed as abnormal; it's a regular facet of personal and professional development. The difficulty of the skill correlates with the intensity of these feelings. In veterinary practice, where continuous learning and adaptation are required, Type 1 Imposterism is a common experience, especially among new graduates or those transitioning to new roles or specializations.

2. Type 2 Imposterism: This type stems from long-standing perfectionist tendencies. In veterinary medicine, perfectionism is often a trait that helps individuals excel academically and gain entry into competitive university programs. However, this trait becomes less advantageous in the unpredictable and complex world of real-world veterinary practice. The contrast between the controlled environment of academic learning and the myriad uncertainties of real-life medical practice can intensify feelings of imposterism. The perfect presentation, let alone the perfect outcome in clinical medicine, rarely exists, a fact that many vets are utterly unprepared for

Veterinarians with high perfectionist tendencies (along with the exceedingly high standards that

accompany such thought patterns) and a lack of exposure to previous failure are, therefore, inevitably going to be challenged when placed into this environment.

Such uncertainty and failure is almost inevitably interpreted as a reflection of the individual's lack of worth, and hence the feeling of imposterism arises.

Left unchecked, this generates stress and one of two things can happen.

1. The person retreats into their comfort zone - unable to face the thought of failure. This I will call Imposterism type 2a.
2. The person powers on the treadmill of learning, but, as characterised by the Dunning-Kruger effect, they simply learn more about what they don't know and, despite gaining a huge amount of skill and knowledge, never feel like they have accomplished enough, rather like a donkey chasing a carrot dangled over its shoulder by the rider above. In this case, we are both rider and donkey. This I will refer to as imposterism type 2b.

Section 2: Impacts of Imposterism on Career Growth, Happiness, and Longevity in Veterinary Medicine

Imposterism in the veterinary profession not only affects career growth and happiness but also significantly increases the risk of burnout and premature career termination. The demanding nature of veterinary work, combined with constant self-doubt and fear of exposure, creates a perilous cocktail that can lead to severe professional and personal consequences.

Burnout as a Consequence of Imposterism: Burnout is characterized by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a diminished sense of accomplishment. Veterinarians grappling with imposterism often find themselves in a relentless pursuit of perfection, setting unattainably high standards for themselves. This relentless pursuit, coupled with the fear of making mistakes, can lead to chronic stress and eventual burnout.

Veterinarians may overcompensate for their perceived inadequacies by working longer hours, taking on more cases, or engaging in continuous learning without adequate rest. This overcompensation, ironically, often exacerbates feelings of fraudulence, as the individual attributes any success to over-preparation or sheer luck rather than competence. The chronic stress from this cycle can lead to physical and mental exhaustion, negatively impacting job performance and satisfaction and, ultimately, leading to burnout.

Career Longevity and Imposterism: The effects of imposterism can be so debilitating that they may prompt veterinarians to leave the profession prematurely. The constant internal battle between perceived incompetence and the reality of their skills and achievements can lead to a profound professional identity crisis. This crisis is compounded by the emotionally taxing nature

of veterinary work, which often involves dealing with life-and-death situations, ethical dilemmas, and managing the expectations and emotions of pet owners.

Veterinarians who cannot reconcile their feelings of imposterism may feel that leaving the profession is the only way to escape the constant fear of exposure and failure. This decision is often a loss both to the individual, who has invested significant time and effort into their training and career, and to the profession, which loses experienced and skilled practitioners.

Section 3: Overcoming Imposterism and Burnout in Veterinary Medicine

The battle against imposterism and burnout in veterinary medicine is multifaceted, requiring both personal and professional strategies. These strategies are not only crucial for overcoming imposterism but also play a significant role in preventing and managing burnout.

1. **Adopting a Growth Mindset:** Transitioning from a fixed mindset to a growth mindset is vital. This shift involves understanding that abilities and intelligence can be developed over time. It's about reframing challenges as opportunities for growth rather than as threats. This perspective helps in recognizing that making mistakes is a part of learning and does not reflect on one's worth as a veterinarian.
2. **Goal Setting and the PERMA Model:** Setting realistic goals, guided by the PERMA model of positive psychology, can greatly enhance career satisfaction. This model emphasizes Positive Emotions, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment. Aligning professional goals within this framework helps in building resilience against imposterism and burnout.
3. **Building Support Networks:** Engaging with mentors, therapists, peers, and coaches provides diverse perspectives and support. Each of these relationships contributes uniquely – mentors offer guidance based on experience, therapists help in addressing emotional challenges, and peers provide a sense of solidarity and understanding.
4. **Prioritizing Well-being and Self-Care:** Well-being practices, such as adequate rest, exercise, a balanced diet, and maintaining social connections, are foundational in managing stress and preventing burnout. Encouraging veterinarians to set boundaries between work and personal life and to engage in activities that rejuvenate them is crucial.
5. **Workplace Environment and Culture:** A supportive workplace that encourages open communication, values team achievements, and acknowledges the challenges of veterinary practice can significantly alleviate feelings of imposterism and reduce burnout. Leadership plays a key role in fostering such an environment.
6. **Continuous Professional Development with Self-Compassion:** While ongoing learning is essential, it should be approached with self-compassion. Understanding that perfection is unattainable, and that skill development is a continuous journey helps in reducing the pressure that can lead to imposterism and burnout.

7. Separating Self-Worth from Professional Role: It's important to recognize that personal value is not solely derived from professional achievements. This understanding helps in creating a healthier work-life balance and reduces the risk of identifying self-worth with career success or failures.

8. Practice and Patience: Overcoming imposterism and dealing with burnout is an ongoing process. It requires patience, practice, and the willingness to adapt and learn new coping strategies. Veterinarians should be encouraged to view this as a part of their professional journey.

Incorporating these strategies into daily practice can significantly help veterinarians overcome feelings of imposterism and prevent burnout. It's about creating a balanced approach that includes personal development, professional growth, and a supportive work environment. By addressing these areas, veterinarians can enhance their career satisfaction, resilience, and overall well-being.

References:

1. Clance, P. R., & Imes, S. A. (1978). The imposter phenomenon in high achieving women: Dynamics and therapeutic intervention. *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research & Practice*, 15(3), 241–247.
2. Dweck, C. S. (2006). *Mindset: The new psychology of success*. Random House.
3. Freudenberger, H. J. (1974). Staff Burn-Out. *Journal of Social Issues*, 30(1), 159-165.
4. Maslach, C., & Jackson, S. E. (1981). The measurement of experienced burnout. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 2(2), 99-113.
5. Seligman, M. E. P. (2011). *Flourish: A visionary new understanding of happiness and well-being*. Free Press.
6. Young, V. (2011). *The secret thoughts of successful women: Why capable people suffer from the imposter syndrome and how to thrive in spite of it*. Crown Business.