

Imposter Syndrome

BY ROBYNN MORAITES

Think everybody else has figured out a special something that you have yet to discover? They haven't. Worried secretly that you are, at best, deficient, at worst, a fraud that has no business practicing law, sitting on the bench, or holding your current position? You aren't. And you are not alone.



In fact, if I had to identify the most consistent complaint or issue that attorneys and judges struggle with, it is imposter syndrome. It comes up every week in our support group meetings across the state and cuts across age, race, gender, practice area, practice setting, whatever law school you hail from, and class rank. It can range in severity from mildly irritating to outright debilitating. And it usually starts in law school.

According to the research, theoretically at least, imposter syndrome is usually more prevalent in the earlier years of law practice and tends to diminish with time as one gains confidence and skill in one's legal practice. We have found, however, with the lawyers we work with, that the feeling of imposter syndrome does not gradually go away with time in the field, but persists unless outright addressed with some sort of support or action.

There is growing research about the correlation to ongoing, unresolved imposter syndrome for women and minorities due to systemic gender and race implicit biases and the micro (and sometimes not-so-micro) aggressions these populations experience.¹ In those cases, individual intervention and attention will not resolve the issue and likely a scenic change is needed. In addition, the adversarial nature of law practice does not

provide the positive mirroring and validation needed to quell imposter syndrome.

If anything, the practice of law perpetually reinforces this feeling, with steel girders. While imposter syndrome was not the sole focus of a recent Sidebar podcast episode, we touched on the issue. You can listen to that episode, entitled, "Validation," at nclap.org/podcast-sidebar/12-validation. As our Sidebar podcast guest points out in that episode, the profession is filled with never-ending external messages of, "You are wrong and stupid," that start in law school and continue into practice. With such overwhelming external reinforcement, it can make it that much harder to overcome negative internal messages.

But imposter syndrome in the legal profession is not confined to women and minority populations. To be clear, white men also struggle with imposter syndrome. For a chilling examination of imposter syndrome in the extreme that ultimately led to a white male lawyer's suicide, see the article, "Big Law Killed My Husband."² So this is not a phenomenon from which white men are exempt.

But the focus of this article is on what we see at the Lawyer Assistance Program across the board and to provide tools at the individual level for increased self-awareness, self-actualization, and self-compassion. And what

we have seen is that imposter syndrome is prevalent across the profession and can rear its ugly head especially upon taking a new position, changing practice areas, or moving to a new practice setting (including being elected or appointed to the bench).

Imposter syndrome is not a psychological diagnosis. It is a term of art used to describe the phenomenon people experience when they doubt their accomplishments and abilities and feel like a phony or a fraud. It can lead to anxiety based on a free-floating, unnamed fear of somehow being found out or exposed as deficient. And research shows a high correlation with depression. It is well documented that this phenomenon disproportionately affects high-achieving people, which makes sense when you consider what often propelled high-achieving people to become high achieving in the first place. It frequently originates out of that same place, that same voice or feeling.

You know that voice in your head that ranges from a quiet whisper to a booming shout that reminds you incessantly all the myriad ways in which you are failing to measure up? Or maybe you experience it as a dread in the pit of your stomach, or a tightness in your chest, and you just know you are lacking in some fundamental way. Say hello to

my little friend, the inner critic.

The inner critic helped to shape who we each are. From an early age, we begin to internalize the messages we get from our parents, family, teachers, mentors, and other influential adults about how to succeed, meet expectations, and play well with others. In our earliest development and education, we are learning to differentiate what we want to do from what we “should” or “should not” do. This behavioral conditioning bleeds over (or we may have received overt messages) from what we should or should not “do,” to what we should or should not “feel,” “think,” and “be.”

Eventually we internalize these messages and sprout our own delightful inner critic that knows precisely how to push our buttons, even when we aren't doing anything wrong. Or so you thought! The inner critic finds all kind of fault, even where there is none. The inner critic says, “Jump,” and we unconsciously, automatically respond, “How high?” And then we jump. Of course we jump! Everything in our being, down to our bones, knows we must jump! We must! Right? It never occurs to us to question this process, or learn to differentiate ourselves from the inner critic, until something isn't working—then it becomes imperative.

Various types of inner critic structures have been identified by psychologists: the perfectionist, the taskmaster, the inner controller, the guilt tripper, the destroyer, the underminer, and the moldier. Some of us, particularly those of us from traumatic backgrounds, may feel like we went through the cafeteria line of life more than once and somehow ended up with a whole inner critic pie with a slice of each flavor! Each form comes with its own special twist on how to make us conform to what it is we think we should be doing (/being/feeling) or should be doing (/being/feeling) better. But you don't have to come from a traumatic background to have a harsh inner critic voice.

“Isn't this just having a conscience?” you may ask. No. A conscience is more like a guidance system based on empathy and compassion for others, and it matures as we mature. So, we may reflect on something we said or did in our younger years that we would not say or do today; in fact, we may cringe when we think of that thing we said or did with impunity back then. An inner critic does not mature, and its message stays surprisingly consistent across the decades. It is a one-trick pony—the proverbial hammer to which everything looks like a nail, namely us.

Carl Jung observed, “There are, indeed, not a few people who are well aware that they possess a sort of inner critic or judge who immediately comments on everything they say or do....[P]eople..., if their inner life is fairly well developed, are able to reproduce this inaudible voice without difficulty, though as it is notoriously irritating and refractory, it is almost always repressed.” Many people experience their inner critic, not so much as a voice, but as an uncomfortable feeling that arises in the body. It is as if the message occurs in the unconscious or subconscious, and the only thing that floats to the surface is the uncomfortable or bad feeling.

The inner critic is usually what propelled us to become high achieving students. For some of us it may have propelled us to go to law school. How we got to law school does not matter as much as recognizing that for a majority of law students, the forced-curve, highly-competitive nature of law school throws our inner critic into overdrive.

The stage is now set. Dim the lights. Raise the curtain. Making its grand entrance, stage left: imposter syndrome. It is the nagging feeling that we are out of our league. That somehow everybody else has it together and we don't. Or that they have it together in a way we have not yet figured out. And if we don't make law review or (insert honor/award/accolade of choice, the possibilities are endless), our deepest fears are fueled, if not confirmed. It never occurs to us that all these other students feel the same way we do. Guess what...they do. Trust me. They do. Except for that one guy. But I digress.

There is a slogan in recovery circles: “Never compare your insides to someone else's outsides.” Law school sets up the big Comparison Marathon. True confession here. When I would walk through an open study area in law school and see someone, say with his or her contracts book open, I felt like such a loser because I was still reading for property class. It never even crossed my mind that while I had not yet gotten to contracts, maybe that other student had not yet gotten to property. A few years ago, I finally realized that that scenario, which was most likely the situation, had never occurred to me. I simply defaulted to the belief that I was just deficient, and it propelled me to work harder. As if I wasn't already working hard.

Have you ever seen the backside of a needlepoint design? It's all a jumble of threads and knots and craziness that looks like

something a sewing kit barfed up. Meanwhile the front is this smooth, beautiful, finished work. We all are like the needlepoint. Our insides are like the backside of a needlepoint. Meanwhile, while we are staring at our colorful, jumble-of-a-catastrophe insides, we see everyone else's fine, finished-work outsides. And while we cannot believe anyone could mistake our hot-mess insides for finished-work outsides, guess what...they do. Trust me. They do.

And trust me on this, too. You're more of the finished-work outsides than you realize.

So, what's the first step in overcoming imposter syndrome? First, recognize what is happening. And do a reality check with someone to see if you are in a toxic workplace that is giving you overt messages that you are deficient. If so, the solution may be a change in workplace environment. This can be hard in the legal profession because we are swimming in a sea of messages that we are deficient, especially from opposing counsel. And because of the way the profession is structured, we are not receiving the necessary, counteracting, positive messages that typical corporate, team-based environments provide. Acknowledging the very real limitations of your practice environment can be an important step in helping to quell imposter syndrome. And if you can't change your work environment right then for whatever reason, acknowledging the limitations of your current situation and working to seek out what you need from another outside source can be really helpful. Find a professional mentor that works elsewhere, join a networking group, or seek a career counselor.

Next, see if you can identify the messages your inner critic is whispering to you or shouting at you, and differentiate the external messages you receive (say, a judge's comment) from the internal messages that are triggered in response (usually something no one in the world would actually say to you like, “you idiot” or “stupid”). Put the messages or thoughts on paper. This exercise will probably make your toes curl in your shoes the first time you do it, because it is bringing to light the underlying fear, secret shame, or feeling of inherent badness/wrongness that has motivated you your entire life. It is really helpful to do this exercise with a therapist. Multiple times. The more often we can pull back the curtain to expose the little wizard behind the scenes, the less identified we become with that voice, and ultimately the less

power it has over us to dictate our behavior. It gives us more agency of choice. With the inner critic, knowledge really is power.

As we mindfully acknowledge the inner critic, try not to attach to it, and directly think of the counterpoint. Take this example, courtesy of Nicki Ellington, our LAP counselor based in our Raleigh office. Let's say you draft an article on imposter syndrome and send it to your LAP counselors for comments. You then get the article back with suggestions and feedback and your inner critic says, "You are so stupid, why didn't you think of that?" Notice that thought and then tell yourself instead, "This is a rough draft, and the feedback is not about my intelligence, but another person bringing her experience to the article." The more that we practice this, the faster our brain will access the counterpoint, with the hope that eventually the inner critic will not be as critical in general.

The next step in the process is objectively recognizing and evaluating your accomplishments. In some ways this may be the more difficult part of the exercise. Sometimes people get confused here because a lot of times we cover up our insecurity with bravado. This is not an exercise in bravado or bragging. Rather it's an exercise in taking stock of all that you have actually accomplished. It is helpful here to also write

a list of skills that were needed to accomplish what you have. The accomplishments do not have to be only work related. Many lawyers today are juggling small children, aging parents, busy practices, single parenthood, etc. None of it is easy.

Then, connect the dots for yourself. Understand, the inner critic is not a rational process. The hope is that this exercise reveals just how irrational it is.

It can be helpful to do this with someone who understands this kind of exercise. If you have a supportive friend, colleague, or therapist, see if they would be willing to listen to you discussing your accomplishments, so that they can mirror back to you and validate your experience. If you are a regular reader of this column, you know how vital positive mirroring is to our mirror neurons and overall brain health, and consequently, our mental health.

Then, ultimately, when that inner critic voice amps up, you can stop, take a deep breath, and politely tell it something like, "Thanks for sharing. I know you helped me a lot when I was a kid. I appreciate your input." And then go on about your business (without jumping in response to its demand). There is a discussion about this phenomenon woven through another podcast episode where I interviewed a lawyer who was recovering from compassion fatigue. She

identifies her inner critic as her "inner jerk." You can listen to that episode, entitled "Self-Care vs Car Wrecks – A Compassion Fatigue Story," at nclap.org/podcast-sidebar/10-self-care-vs-car-wrecks.

I have good news and bad news. The bad news is the inner critic never really goes away. It gets quieter. Less harsh. But in my experience, it morphs over time and becomes more sophisticated as we become attuned to its tricks. It's still that one-trick pony, back again, but this time it shows up with a clown wig on and a noise maker in its mouth. I have been known to say, out loud, "You're not fooling anyone." The good news is that as we become better skilled at recognizing it and detaching from it, it stops having power over us and tormenting us. In fact, it can become quite funny. It is a great relief to stop taking ourselves (and it) so seriously.

Speaking of not taking it so seriously, Tim Urban has a funny exploration of this topic (complete with expletives) in his blog *Wait But Why*.³ If you enjoyed this column, I encourage you to check out that blog post.

Imposter syndrome is rampant in the legal profession, even for lawyers and judges who are well accomplished and greatly admired. We all have an inner critic voice. Some of us are more attuned to it than others. For some of us, it can serve as a motivator, but for some of us, it goes further and downright torments us. We at LAP find that imposter syndrome does not necessarily diminish with time and practice. It takes consciously acknowledging the issue and the unchecked inner critic voice that spurs it on and seeking out some support and tools to better deal with it. While we may find it never fully goes away, it no longer runs our lives and we become both empowered and liberated. ■

The North Carolina Lawyer Assistance Program is a confidential program of assistance for all North Carolina lawyers, judges, and law students, which helps address problems of stress, depression, alcoholism, addiction, or other problems that may impair a lawyer's ability to practice. For more information, go to nclap.org or call: Cathy Killian (Charlotte/areas west) at 704-910-2310, or Nicole Ellington (Raleigh/down east) at 919-719-9267.

Endnotes

1. See bit.ly/Spring2022LAP1.
2. See bit.ly/Spring2022LAP2.
3. See bit.ly/Spring2022LAP3.

Upcoming Appointments to Commissions and Boards

Anyone interested in being appointed to serve on any of the State Bar's boards, commissions, or committees should email lheidbrink@ncbar.gov to express that interest (being sure to attach a current resume), by April 8, 2022. The council will make the following appointments at its meeting in January:

Disciplinary Hearing Commission (3-year terms)—There are five appointments to be made by the State Bar Council. James Davis, Margit Hicks, Margaret Hunt, and Jaye Meyer are eligible for reappointment. Donald Prentiss is not eligible for reappointment.

The terms of the three public members will expire in June but all are eligible for reappointment. These appointments are

made by the governor and the senate president pro tempore. Letters will be sent to their offices to notify them of the appointments.

The Disciplinary Hearing Commission (DHC) is an independent adjudicatory body that hears all contested disciplinary cases. It is composed of 12 lawyers appointed by the State Bar Council and eight public members appointed by the governor and the General Assembly. The DHC sits in panels of three: two lawyers and one public member. In addition to disciplinary cases, the DHC hears cases involving contested allegations that a lawyer is disabled and petitions from disbarred and suspended lawyers seeking reinstatement.