

# Handout on Expectations, Transitions and Overcoming Imposter Syndrome

## Expectations

It is important that we have ideas about the future to provide motivation to engage in the challenges of life and achieve goals. It is as important that we have expectations of ourselves and our environment so we can plan for the future.

However, it is crucial that the expectations we have are based in reality rather than setting ourselves or the external environment unrealistic expectations that are impossible to live up to. This can stop us engaging with the newness and uncertainty of reality if we keep hanging on to impossible or idealised expectations.

If we have rigid expectations of how we should be, what we should be able to achieve or how things are going to be, these rigid expectations can cause problems, which could have been avoided. *“There are two ways to be happy: improve your reality, or lower your expectations.”*

People often have very rigid expectations as a way of coping with the unknown and uncertainty. Rigid expectations may also be due to something hoped or wished for, which may become idealised. This can often be the case if there has been a great deal of hard work and effort to achieve the goal that was wished for.

Having very rigid expectations can mean that if reality does not meet these expectations it can feel like a major problem or failure, rather than just being different to what you expected. *“A wonderful gift may not be wrapped as you expect”.*

## Transitions

Beginning life at university naturally generates both excitement and anxiety about the move, academic work, meeting new people. For some, this apprehension is quickly overcome as they adapt to a new environment; for others the transition takes longer and sometimes emerges as homesickness where there is a preoccupation with home-focused thoughts. There is a yearning for and grieving over the loss of what is familiar and secure: most often it is about the loss of people - family and friends - but it is also about the loss of places and routines.

There are two tasks involved in the process of transition, involving both loss and gain. Leaving familiar things, people and places can be exciting but also unsettling. This involves letting go of things that feel comfortable and secure, even if we are ready for change and new challenges.

Adapting to new things, people and places can also be exciting but also daunting and frightening. You have the opportunity to engage in new experiences and gain the rewards from these, but this may feel uncomfortable and unsettling.

Individuals have different levels of tolerance to change and have learned different ways of coping with new situations. But what can make transition so hard? In a familiar place people generally feel accepted and secure, and are therefore able to function and meet challenges successfully. Away from the familiar, they are without their usual sources of support, and in unfamiliar surroundings their tried and tested methods of coping and working are challenged; "failure" looms large and self esteem and confidence drops. Tasks which would normally have been taken in one's stride, can suddenly seem quite a challenge, or even feel impossible.

### **Strategies that could help with the process of Transition**

1. Talk to someone. If you haven't yet made friends here, then try a peer supporter, tutor, supervisor, chaplain, nurse or counsellor.
2. Keep in good contact with the people you have left behind; arrange a time to go back to see them, perhaps after a few weeks. But also give yourself time within the university to begin to get involved here. Don't let looking back actually hinder moving forward. Try to get the right balance between doing new and 'uncomfortable' things, so they can become familiar and comfortable, rather than always feeling you have to rush back to the familiar.
3. Encourage friends and family to come and see you in your new setting.
4. Remember that many other people will be sharing similar feelings, although you may assume that they are doing fine. (They may look fine from the outside but you can't read their minds - just as they can't read yours.)
5. You are allowed to feel sad about the things you miss. However, you are also allowed to enjoy yourself - it isn't being disloyal to those you miss!
6. Be realistic about what to expect from student life and from yourself. Establish a balance between work and leisure: you are NOT expected to work ALL the time - you would soon burn out. On the other hand, if you don't put in enough time on work, you can very quickly get behind, which only adds to the stresses.

7. If work is proving very difficult, can you improve your study skills or your organisation of time and work so that you gain satisfaction from what you do? There may be people in your College or Department or the Student Union who can help in this area, such as your Tutor, Supervisor or the Welfare Officer.
8. Remember to get enough food and sleep. These affect us emotionally as well as physically. This is much more important than we sometimes realise.
9. Make contacts and friends through shared activities such as sport, socialising or other interests. There are so many clubs and societies within the university and city, that you are very likely to find something that suits your particular interests. At the start of the academic year many new people will be joining - you are unlikely to be the only new person.
10. Expect and prepare yourself for frustrations, disappointments and things going wrong, as they will in life. Learn the skills and resilience to manage these situations, rather than let the overwhelm you.
11. Give yourself time to adjust: you don't have to get everything right straight away. If you don't feel happy or confident at first give yourself time and support to adjust, don't make any hasty decisions which could affect your long term future.
12. If you stop being able to do normal social and academic things, seek professional help either from your doctor or the counselling service. Don't wait until the problems have grown impossibly large.

## **Overcoming Imposter Syndrome**

Imposter Syndrome is not a medical or clinical condition and was defined by Social Psychologists in the 1970's. It is very common in most people, especially when faced with new and challenging situations or cultures. Imposter Syndrome is a 'fear of being a fraud'.

A common definition of Imposter Syndrome: being consistently anxious you'll be 'found out' and convinced you don't really deserve success.

People with a propensity for perfectionism often suffer from IS, as they are in constant need to prove themselves and can never achieve the impossible task of achieving perfection. (Being perfect is mutually exclusive from being human!)

People often use it as an (unconscious) social strategy – "if I play down my strengths, people will not expect too much of me". It can be used to protect us against delusions of grandiosity – modesty is valued in certain societies (self deprecation) –we play down our strengths to take off pressure.

Imposter Syndrome can cause significant stress and can lead to 'burn out'. It can inhibit achieving through procrastination. It can prevent you making valuable contributions if you believe that whatever you do is never going to be good enough and deprive you of your full potential.

## Key features of Imposter Syndrome

- 1. Feeling that other people have an inflated perception of your abilities.** Others think you're better than you think you really are: "if people only knew the real me they would know how useless I was".
- 2. A fear that your 'true' (reduced) abilities will be found out.** You feel a fraud – you will be shamed (a negative emotion that combines feelings of dishonour, unworthiness, and embarrassment) and humiliated (the feeling or condition of being lessened in dignity or pride). No matter how much you have achieved and succeeded the next time you try to achieve something you have the feeling that "this time I will finally be 'found out'".
- 3. An inability to internalize success, despite external and objective evidence.** External credits/accolades, positions, feedback is not digested appropriately. All success is attributed to external factors. One can look for external success and validation to pacify internal self doubt. "This is the final academic achievement that will make everything alright".
- 4. A persistent tendency to attribute successes to external factors, such as luck or accident.** Unable to accept personal responsibility for your own achievements, which can be undermined by statements such as: "It's because she liked me"; "they muddled me with someone else". All previous achievements are perceived as accidental, easy, lucky, etc.
- 5. Persistent anxiety about standards.** Perfectionism: unable to accurately self assess; any constructive criticism is seen as attack; comparisons with others; or sloppiness – if I don't try my best then I can blame that on my poor performance, rather than have my 'real' (perceived) inadequacy revealed.
- 6. Dread and avoidance of evaluation.** Not seeking support, delaying or avoiding submitting work, not arranging meetings with tutors/supervisors.
- 7. Inability to enjoy accomplishments.** Low mood, withdrawing, limited laughing/smiling, reduced self care, minimal celebrations of successes.

Underestimating the value of your successes and overestimating the importance of things you get wrong.

- 8. Self sabotaging behaviours.** Procrastination; poor time management; not relaxing – over stressing; not dealing with priorities; distracting avoidance behaviours.

## **Strategies to interrupt patterns of Imposter Syndrome**

**Break the silence** – talk to others about your concerns to help you get a sense of perspective. Talk to friends, family, colleagues or Peer Supporters. You are not alone!

**Separate feelings from fact** – ‘just because you feel stupid doesn’t mean you are’; ask yourself a simple question ‘is it true or is it false’ – about your beliefs/ideas/thoughts. Ask someone else if you’re really not sure; decrease the distance between self image and an objective view. How you see yourself contrasted with how others see you.

**Self doubt** – part of process of learning is not knowing and then going down avenues of exploration to find out. Realistically where should you be at specific stage of learning and where do you realistically aim to be. Reframe ‘failure’ or not knowing as an opportunity to learn. Henry Ford said “failure is only the opportunity to begin again more intelligently”. Believe in yourself as much as you do in your best friend.

**Perfectionism**– aim to do well and attempt to achieve excellence, but that is very different from perfection, which is usually impossible and often delusional. Do a good job when it matters but often the perfect solution for routine tasks is just to get it done.

**Set Targets** - Consider what **SMART** (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-measured) tasks you can set for yourself to help manage your Imposter Syndrome. Write them out and have a **REALISTIC** and flexible plan.

*“Aim for success, not perfection. Never give up your right to be wrong, because then you will lose the ability to learn new things and move forward with your life.*

*Remember that fear always lurks behind perfectionism. Confronting your fears and allowing yourself the right to be human can, paradoxically, make you a far happier and more productive person”.*

*~ **David Burns, Professor in the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioural Sciences at the Stanford University School of Medicine.***