

Transcript for AoC Toolbox | How to Stop Feeling Like An Imposter (Episode 670)
Full show notes found here: <https://theartofcharm.com/670/>

JORDAN: So when I got accepted to The University of Michigan Law School -- for which I just had my 10-year reunion -- my first thought was that somebody made a mistake. Now, by the time I arrived at orientation in the fall, I was pretty damn sure of that. There were just too many intelligent people who had fought to be here. While many of my peers had dreamed of getting into Michigan and completed legal internships, leadership summits, NGO rotations to earn their spot, I applied to law school mostly because it seemed like a safe and smart next step. My family and friends thought so to. "Oh you like to argue, you should become a lawyer," said my aunt Arlene, whose strongest connection to the legal industry was watching reruns of The People's Court on Saturday mornings. So, basically I just took her advice and became a lawyer because I didn't have anything else going on here.

"Somebody made a mistake. Of course they did. How else could someone like me end up in a room with all of these other high performers?" Now, that thought and the feelings of fraudulence, anxiety self-doubt -- all that came with it -- followed me throughout my first year, well into my second and third years, to some degree, and it resurfaced when I landed a job on Wall Street -- another accomplishment I couldn't really internalize, since I had basically talked my way into the job at the last minute -- that same feeling then returned once again when I started this show, AOC, The Art of Char, as a business, and began hosting a podcast with no broadcasting experience, and little more than the ability, frankly, to plug in a microphone.

And as I navigated these feelings at different phases in my life, I adopted a strategy that became my "imposter toolkit." I worked hard in law school, I put in the hours in the library to make sure I could compete. "They're smarter than me, I've got to outwork them," that's what I was thinking the whole time. And I adopted the attitudes and perspectives that I knew worked well in the classroom and in job interviews, so that I could play the

part of a successful law student and lawyer. And once I did land that job on Wall Street, and realized I'd never be able to compete with my colleagues on my legal skills alone, I focused instead on helping my bosses achieve their goals, creating value for our clients, networking, relationship development -- that was sort of my new secret third path that I would hope would turn into my competitive advantage in the legal game, and I planned to get to the top of the law game -- and you guys know how that worked out. But, as I'd later learn, these are all pretty standard ways to deal with a persistent sense of phoniness. Unfortunately, they were also the very same reasons I continued to feel like a fraud.

Now, when I speak at colleges and universities, I like to ask how many people in the audience think they slipped through the cracks and actually don't belong there. Invariably, almost every single person raises their hand. And when they do, I remember feeling the exact same way and I'm reminded that this feeling of cheating the system, of being found out, this is a secret that almost all of us share. So, what I'm describing of course, is imposter syndrome. You've heard about this on the show, we've written about this on the blog, you can even check a great post on this, based on this show, in the show notes to this episode. This term was first '78 by psychologists Pauline R. Clance and Suzanne A. Imes. An imposter syndrome describes the experience of being unable to internalize accomplishments and a persistent fear of being exposed as a fraud. Sound familiar?

Those who experience these feelings of fraudulence tend to believe that they haven't truly earned the success they've achieved, despite clear evidence of their intelligence and capability, and instead they slash we attribute their slash our success to luck, or the ability to deceive people into believing they're more competent than they actually are. And as a result, those in the grip of imposter syndrome often feel that they're going to be found out, any minute now. And surely, if they've managed to fool a boss, a partner, or a colleague into believing they're actually capable, then someone is going to discover the truth about them and this persistent belief provokes a great

deal of self-doubt and anxiety. And when I was on Wall Street, man let me tell you, I was trying to figure out ways on how to work from home and not come to the office as much, and da, da, da, I didn't want people to even see me there because then I thought, "If they forget about me, then they won't blame me for stuff that I do wrong or I won't be around when the hammer drops." Terrible strategy, of course, but I was just terrified that they'd find out I didn't belong there.

Look, everyone experiences this. Imposter syndrome, or, as Clance and Imes later preferred to call it, the "imposter experience" or the "imposter phenomenon" -- this visits people from all walks of life. Multiple studies have shown that imposterism affects both genders, and occurs in people from all professions, all cultures, all levels of success. Clance later conducted a survey that found that about 70 percent of all people have felt like impostors for at least some part of their careers, while other researchers, like Joan Harvey, concluded that anyone can feel like an imposter if they fail to internalize their success, even if they're objectively successful. So, it's no surprise, then, that everyone from Tom Hanks to Sonia Sotomayor -- Supreme Court Justice -- Emma Watson from Harry Potter, to yours truly, have wrestled with the imposter experience -- sounds so grandiose -- at one point or another.

Now, for some strange reason, feelings of fraudulence seem to be an integral part of the human experience. So what causes imposter syndrome, exactly? The answer is complex and evolving, as more and more researchers unpack the nexus of factors that create the imposter experience. But the best explanation still comes from Clance and Imes, who explain imposter syndrome in terms of three central behaviors that result from -- and in turn reinforce -- the imposter phenomenon. The first one is diligence and hard work. Sounds weird, right? How can that possibly be? The fear of being found out by someone important often causes the imposter -- that's us -- to work even harder.

We put in longer hours, we study harder or we obsess over the quality of work, which results in strong performance and much, of course, much desired approval from authorities like your boss, your teachers, your parents -- that accomplishment validates the person and delivers a nice high and some temporary relief from the fraudulent feelings. But the accomplishment doesn't really do the trick, because it feels like a hollow victory, and once the positive feelings wear off, man, the underlying sense of fraudulence, let me tell you, that certainly remains.

The second one is true fraudulence and inauthenticity. So, this is kind of perverse, but in an attempt to avoid feelings of fraudulence, some people will work to game the system around their accomplishments by finding out other ways to satisfy their authority figures. For example, an employee might figure out the opinions her boss likes and then express those opinions in work meetings to gain validation.

And as the researchers point out, this can also work in a more subtle way: the employee might hold back on opinions she knows her boss won't like in order to keep him happy. And this happens in relationships, at work, all over the place -- and in this behavior, perceived fraudulence becomes real fraudulence as the person compromises her authentic experience -- her opinions, feelings, ways of thinking, preferences, reactions -- and starts to believe that being authentic would have been evaluated poorly, which only adds to the need for a false self.

So basically, by trying to avoid looking phony, you just become phonier. So, it makes no sense but it makes sense when you think about it like this, right?

The use of charm and observation is the third one. This one is near and dear to my heart for obvious reasons. But, this strategy focuses on using charisma and perceptiveness to win the approval and good graces of authority figures. This behavior might be a way to earn someone's personal affection or loyalty outside of the work in question, or be recognized as special in

some way. And this strategy works sometimes but it's no good in the long run. Once again, this only adds to the underlying feelings of fraudulence.

For one thing, if the authority figure does believe that the imposter -- that's you slash me -- is special, they have a hard time believing it, because that assumption of specialness is based on not our competence, but on their personal attributes. At the same time, we might also believe that if we were truly competent, then we wouldn't need someone else's approval in the first place -- which, of course, becomes even more evidence that they're actually a fraud.

So, if you've experienced imposter syndrome in your life, then the behaviors above probably sound eerily familiar. You might not have engaged in all three, but I'm willing to bet that at one point or another, you adopted some of these techniques to deal with a nagging sense of fraudulence, just as I did in the legal world and early on in this very business that you're listening to right now.

There are other elements at play in imposter syndrome, and they're worth touching on. John Kolligian Jr. and Robert J. Sternberg, for example -- they point out that in addition to fraudulent ideation, people who wrestle with imposter syndrome also tend to exhibit depressive tendencies -- that's like self-criticism, achievement pressures (ding ding ding!) -- other researchers have confirmed a correlation between imposterism and depression, and they point to the links between impostorism and perfection, distress, and anxiety. Family backgrounds, well, those play a role, too.

One team of researchers studied the links between parenting styles and imposter syndrome, and found that both lack of parental care and parental overprotection were linked with higher impostor scores. In other words, if your parents didn't pay attention to you, you might feel imposter syndrome. If they paid too much attention to you, you might feel imposter syndrome.

Other researchers that family expectations around say, intelligence and competence, seem to profoundly affect imposters, who tend to develop a strong need to please. That's ringing some bells, I know it. That need to please might cause children -- and adults, for that matter -- to change their behavior in order to win validation from their parents. That creates a false-self that carries over into adulthood as insecurity, which high achievers then experience as feelings of fraudulence.

So, the etiology -- that means cause, by the way. I feel fancy using words like that, forgive me -- the etiology of the imposter syndrome is fascinating and complex. But more important than the science of imposterism is the *feeling* of it -- the gnawing, insidious, frightening sense -- that our accomplishments are unearned, that we really aren't as good as people think, and that we'll be found out at just about any moment. That's the experience we need to overcome, and that's what we'll talk about next.

To work through the experience of fraudulence, we need to explore the beliefs, the mindsets, and the patterns and behaviors that comprise it. There is no one cure for imposterism, in fact, most people will deal with the imposter phenomenon multiple times over their lives, but by attacking it from multiple angles, we can start to unpack this strange experience, and help resolve its underlying causes. Most of us have been in touch, to some degree, with our feelings of fraudulence. But in many cases, we suppress those feelings, either out of fear, anxiety, or ignorance. Whenever a feeling of fraudulence comes up -- whether it appears as crushing anxiety or a subtle feeling of not truly belonging -- take a moment to notice it. As we've seen, fraudulence festers the more we try to ignore or compensate for it. Acknowledging our insecurities for what they are is the first step in overcoming them.

The next step is to be just radically honest about our fraudulence. In some cases, this means acknowledging -- to

ourselves, at first -- that we are not always as competent, intelligent or confident as we'd like to be. As soon as we own our shortcomings, we strike a blow to that false self that wants to step in and save the day. If we have nothing to hide, there's no reason to fake our way through it. But as we've seen, the feeling of imposterism isn't always accurate. We can feel like frauds even -- and sometimes especially -- when we're successful and competent. So as you assess those feelings of fraudulence, also ask yourself if they accurately reflect reality.

Given the information available to you, are your achievements really undeserved? Is it actually possible that you have conned your superiors into getting to this point? Is your personality really the only thing that explains your achievements? Can you point to specific pieces of genuine positive feedback that you've doubted or denied? As you really investigate those thoughts, you'll often find that your fraudulence is just a fiction spun from the conditioning of your mind.

So we already have two very concrete techniques to deal with the imposter experience. First, acknowledge your weaknesses, insecurities, gaps, whatever, and embrace them. This will reduce the need for a fraudulent self to step in and protect you from them. At the same time, take a moment to really investigate those beliefs about your perceived weaknesses. Often, they just don't reflect reality. Either way, you'll quickly find that your imposterism might not be as necessary as you once thought.

One of the most debilitating aspects of imposter syndrome is the sense that we're the only ones experiencing it. When I arrived at law school, I was convinced I was the only one who had slipped through the cracks, and everyone else had earned their spot. If I had stopped to ask a few of my classmates how they felt, I would have learned that the vast majority of them felt some degree of fraudulence, too, which would have transformed my experience.

So when these feelings creep in, acknowledge the imposter experience, own any feelings of shame or inadequacy, and consider sharing them with trusted friends, colleagues, and partners. What you'll find is that most people can relate to what you are feeling. Most are probably feeling a similar way, often at the same time as you. We see this phenomenon all the time in our live residential programs, where our students open up on day one about what they think are unique insecurities, only to discover that every single person in the room is experiencing pretty much the same thing as well. That sets the stage for major transformations to take place during the program.

Discussing our shameful experiences is hands-down the best way to overcome them. Talking openly about imposter syndrome has a cleansing effect: the false self falls apart the moment we acknowledge it with another person. When we hide these feelings, however, the need to pretend gets stronger, and we feel even more alone in our experience. As Brene Brown writes, "If we can share our story with someone who responds with empathy and understanding, shame can't survive." Of course, we have to choose the right people to share this experience with. It wouldn't have been a good move for me to tell the dean of Michigan Law that he made a mistake (although, being friends with the current dean, I have it on good authority that they've heard it a million times before). It might not have also been such a great idea to confess to the partners at my law firm that, "Hey guys, I have no idea what I'm doing. I probably shouldn't even be here."

So, it's important to be authentic, but it's also important to be prudent. Trusted colleagues, close friends, understanding family members, good therapists are ideal people to share your experience with, and each can offer a new perspective, and allow you to safely articulate how you're feeling.

Imposterism researchers have identified two dominant beliefs in people who wrestle with fraudulence. First, they tend to believe that intelligence -- and competence more broadly -- is a stable, binary trait. In other words, they think that they either

have intelligence or they don't, and that intelligence exists in some sort of fixed quantity.

Second, they tend to believe that mistakes indicate a personal failure and inadequacy. When they stumble, they interpret that struggle as a personal deficiency, which turns a mistake into some kind of highly personalized attack on their sense of self. So, another powerful approach to overcoming imposter syndrome is rewriting these two core beliefs. Rather than thinking about intelligence as fixed, notice that your competence is actually a dynamic, malleable, and fluid concept. It grows and it develops, like a muscle, in response to challenges. It doesn't need to be perfect or "on" every single moment.

There will be moments when your competence functions at a high caliber, and there will be others when it operates at a moderate level. And if you're like me, there will be times when you can't even freaking tie your own shoes, and it doesn't mean that your competence comes and goes, exists or doesn't exist, only that it functions differently depending on the context. The fact is, we don't need to be perfectly competent every moment of every day, we only believe that we need to be that way.

This also reframes the meaning of our mistakes. Most of us treat our missteps as grave errors, which we then have to work to hide or compensate for. The reason, of course, is that we believe they reflect poorly on us, that our mistakes are highly personal faults, that are about us as humans. To make up for them, we have to win people's approval in other ways. And that's another opportunity for the fraudulence to creep on in.

But, these mistakes are rarely personal. If they serve to teach us something we didn't know, or help us become better people, then they're actually gifts in disguise. If we stop thinking about mistakes as personal failures, we open ourselves up to thinking about them as opportunities to learn and ways to improve. By reframing our conception of mistakes, we reduce the need for a false self to make sure we always look good -- another way of

banishing the fraudulence that tries, and ultimately fails, to protect our sense of self.

As we know from the science of imposterism, one of the key drivers of fraudulence is the desire to please and the need for other people's approval. That need is a fundamental human trait written into our DNA, and we all possess it to some degree. But when the need to please becomes too great, we tend to overvalue the validation of other people, and find clever ways to earn it -- which, as we've seen, is a recipe for fraudulence.

One of the best ways to overcome that fraudulence, then, is to shift the source of our self-worth from others to ourselves. Researchers call this source of self-concept a locus of evaluation -- the place from which we derive our sense of self. If that locus -- which basically means location in Latin, by the way -- is entirely outside ourselves, then we're at the whim of other people's opinions, and will constantly try to win their validation using whatever means necessary -- charm, wit, humor, fifty cent words like 'locus,' observation -- even if those attempts leave us feeling like phonies.

If that locus is within us, however, then *we* get to dictate our sense of self-worth. And when we lead with an internal locus of evaluation, then it's *our* standards, it's *our* beliefs, and *our* opinion of the quality of our work that decides how we feel about our place in the world, including how we internalize our accomplishments. You can see how much harder it is for imposterism to take root with an internal locus of evaluation.

Ideally, our locus of evaluation should fall somewhere between the two -- a sense of self that incorporates the expectations of others while remaining firmly anchored in our own experience. That way, we don't insulate ourselves from valuable feedback, but we also don't compromise our true selves, either. The two are compatible, and when they coexist, then imposterism has a much harder time taking root. So how do we make that shift, exactly?

First, notice when, and how much, we care -- or you care -- about what other people think of you. Does other people's praise, or validation, or criticism dwarf our own? Do other people's opinions take precedence over our inner voice? Does how we feel about ourselves depend mostly on how other people feel? And how do we behave when we care about those opinions, authentically or inauthentically? As we've discussed, just recognizing the early signs of imposterism is a huge step in combatting it.

Second, by considering our sources of evaluation. When I look back at my time in the legal world, it's ridiculous how much stock I put in other people's opinions. I didn't strive to be the perfect law student, but for a couple years, it really mattered how my peers thought about me -- or, rather, what *I* thought about what *they* thought about me. I knew for sure that I didn't want to work at a law firm forever -- I could barely get through a conversation with most of my colleagues -- but I still wanted to be in their good graces.

Authority will always have a pull on us, but it's our job to ask ourselves if the people whose opinion we take seriously are people we actually trust, admire or value. In many cases, they aren't. It's only their authority that makes their opinion mean so much. Once we see those sources of approval for what they are, it becomes much less enticing to create a false self in order to win it.

Third, explore how your sense of self-worth has developed up until this point. Was your locus of evaluation always external? Was there a time when it felt more internal, but shifted for some reason? In most cases, our childhoods and family backgrounds play a huge role in seeking approval. Identify the authority figures who instilled in you that need to please -- namely parents, but also siblings, relatives and teachers -- notice how those early templates have stuck with you. Once you see that you were encouraged to win validation and approval from a young age, it becomes easier to rewrite that pattern, which in

turn makes it easier to be ourselves, and forego the fraudulent self that functions to please other people.

So, as we've seen, the imposter experience develops when we try to compensate for our perceived weaknesses by gaining approval through other means. In many cases, being kinder to ourselves about those weaknesses -- the true ones as well as the merely perceived ones -- is one of the most powerful ways of reducing feelings of fraudulence.

When I first started out in podcasting, I quickly became aware of the gaps in my hosting skills -- the cadence of my voice, my style of interviewing, filler words, the quality of my production -- that was before the Jasons, of course. Sometimes I'd catch myself papering over those weaknesses by projecting a sense of confidence, over-preparing to an absurd degree, buddying up to my guests -- both, as we've seen, are classic ways of coping with fraudulence, and both, as we now know, only end up enhancing it.

So I started doing something different. I started becoming kinder to myself about my mistakes -- which, let me tell you, wasn't easy -- and allowed myself the time and space to learn and grow, rather than just expecting myself to be perfect from the get-go. Over time, I turned this into a regular practice. And when my voice faltered, for example, I'd just stop stop, call it out, and make a joke about it. And when I dropped a question or missed an interview opportunity, I'd acknowledge my frustration, talk about it with a couple friends, and even laugh about it on future episodes. And as I upped my broadcasting game, I started sharing stories from my 10+ years of experimenting, failing and growing -- which allowed me to bring my insecurities out into the open, where the shame and frustration about them couldn't survive.

If you look at your feelings of fraudulence, you'll often notice that buried somewhere in there is a belief that you shouldn't struggle, you shouldn't make mistakes, you should never appear ignorant -- the idea that you have to be perfect, that you don't deserve the time or space to learn and grow, that's a

precursor to imposterism. If we simply rewrite that belief, we don't feel the need to compensate as strongly -- which means we don't have to be imposters in the first place.

At the end of the day, the best way to rewrite our fraudulent tendencies is to simply be ourselves, and see what happens. Beneath our imposterism is a profound fear. A fear that if we say what we think, do what we want, or express what we feel, then we'll lose the validation we've fought so hard to earn, or somehow be punished for being who we really are. But as Clance and Imes point out, these catastrophic expectations usually don't occur. They're mostly just projections of our mind.

Dropping the mask is the best way to discover that our imposter experience isn't just damaging, but unnecessary. When we stop pretending, we step into a more honest place, where we can embrace our shortcomings and internalize our successes at the same time. We can work on our weaknesses from a place of honesty, and celebrate our accomplishments from a place of humility. Once we do that, we don't need the mask any longer, and those fraudulent feelings begin to evaporate.

My struggles with imposterism over the years have always led me back to the reality of my own experience. Generally speaking, we just can't go wrong in being ourselves. Authenticity is the greatest defense against phoniness. It's also the window into our best selves. If we want to beat imposterism, then we have to embrace the one person it's designed to hide: us. Once we do that, we're relieved to discover the truth, which is that we never had to be an imposter at all.

