

Impostor Syndrome in the Legal Profession: Breaking the Cycle of Self-Sabotage

Perfectionism is the head honcho of the inner critic for lawyers. Impostor syndrome is the “inner critic on steroids.”

BY JULIE BONASSO

From the first-year associate to the seasoned partner at a top-10 law firm, impostor syndrome rears its ugly head.¹

Exacting standards, a lack of tolerance for errors, and aversion to risk define the legal profession. Given that impostor syndrome frequently affects ambitious overachievers, it's no surprise that many lawyers grapple with self-doubt and fear their intellectual “façade” will be uncovered at any moment.

No One Is Immune

Of late, I had been feeling pretty cocky that I had kicked impostor syndrome to the curb years ago, moved on, and found a new love in my growth mindset. But my ex came back in fierce fashion.

Recently, I attended a training session with a small group of coaches. Having spent the past decade immersed in my flow of coaching, honing my skills, and seeing results with my clients, I felt confident walking into the training. Yet, I noticed a creeping sense of self-doubt from the very first day. Thoughts like, “you’re not as smart as them,” “your questions s*ck,” “you need more training,” and other critical comments began to swirl in my mind. These thoughts continued day after day throughout the training, and by the end of the week, my body felt constricted, I became withdrawn, and I had a general sense of unease. I noticed these thoughts, feelings, and sensations, so I used all the tools from my coaching experience to push through these doubts, but they kept coming back.

On the last day of training, we were required to conduct a mock coaching session. I volunteered to go first and started strong. Then, about five minutes in, I started to think, “Wait, we were supposed to follow their framework and I didn’t ask ANY of those questions. Oh, okay, but I have

my notes next to me. I’ll just glance at those. But wait, I can’t read those because my handwriting is so bad, and I don’t want them to see me reading. Oh my gosh, so much time has passed, and I haven’t said anything. Oh no, I feel so stupid. What are THEY thinking?? They’re just waiting for me. How much time do I have left? Do I stop? Do I continue? Can they tell my face is on fire? What do I do? UGHHHH!! I’m such a loser.”

And no surprise, with all this nonsense going through my mind, I moved out of the present moment, my fears kicked in, my cognitive functioning became halting, and I froze – my mind went blank and so did my ability to speak.

The Union of Self-Sabotage and Impostor Syndrome

What got in my way that day?

My saboteurs – the hyper-vigilant, the pleaser, and the stickler (also known as the perfectionist).²

These saboteurs are not just fleeting doubts but persistent, automated mental patterns that



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instigate stress, anxiety, and unhappiness. They begin in childhood to protect us but become counterproductive in adulthood, lingering as unseen forces that affect our professional and personal lives.³

Shirzad Chamine, in his book *Positive Intelligence*, identifies these disruptors – the master one is the judge (ironic, no?) and nine “accomplices.” Saboteurs foster chronic self-doubt and hinder professional success. Constant self-criticism creates a cycle of negative thinking, undermining confidence and inhibiting ability to thrive in a high-pressure environment. As these negative patterns persist, they can sabotage not only individual performance but also professional relationships, career growth, and health.⁴

Among these saboteurs, the stickler can fuel impostor syndrome by pushing individuals to seek flawless results and setting unrealistically ambitious standards for themselves and others. The link between perfectionism and impostor syndrome is rooted in the fear of failure

and a chronic sense of inadequacy that many lawyers often experience. When you constantly strive for perfection, any small mistake or failure can feel like a catastrophic letdown, reinforcing the feeling that you are not truly capable or talented but merely faking it.⁵ This dynamic is especially prominent in the legal profession, in which the stakes are high, the pressure to perform is intense, and competition is the culture.

Many of us think that unless we “were absolutely perfect, [we] could have done better.”⁶

Sound familiar?

An Important PSA

While impostor syndrome is a pervasive issue affecting many within the legal profession, it is essential to recognize that its effects are not uniformly felt. In the work environment, conversations about overcoming impostor syndrome can sometimes inadvertently place the burden of change on individuals. This is particularly true for women and people of color, who are often told (directly or indirectly) that overcoming their impostor feelings is the key to professional success. Such perspectives, while well intentioned, overlook the systemic barriers – such as discrimination, microaggressions, and structural biases – that contribute to these feelings in the first place. Recognizing this, it’s crucial for everyone in the legal community to not only foster an environment where personal resilience is supported but also actively engage in dismantling these barriers.

As we strive to support ourselves and others in combating inner saboteurs, let’s also consider advocating for systemic changes that address the root causes of these doubts.

Neuroplasticity of the Brain

Okay, ready for some good news?

We *can* change the mental habits that are no longer serving us. But how? Through a nifty little scientific concept called neuroplasticity.

The human brain is composed of approximately 100 billion neurons.⁷ GULP.

Neuroplasticity refers to “the brain’s ability to change and adapt due to experience.”⁸ Human brains can change and rewire themselves in response to certain stimulation, such as learning and experience (structural plasticity).⁹ This brain adaptability is key to overcoming impostor syndrome because it allows us to reshape our thought patterns, replacing self-doubt with a growth mindset (that is, taking saboteurs out of the driver’s seat and putting them in the trunk).¹⁰

How cool is this?! We don’t have to be bullied by our saboteurs for the rest of our lives. And the data is there to back this up. Abundant research supports the idea that changing thought patterns and behaviors can improve mental well-being. Studies show that practicing mindfulness-based techniques can lead to a decrease in stress and anxiety while promoting better emotional regulation and cognitive control. For example, even brief periods of mindfulness can reduce stress-related brain activity, indicating that positive interventions can effectively shift the balance toward a healthier mental state.¹¹

Recognizing and mitigating the influence of saboteurs involves developing what Chamine refers to as the “sage” perspective. This mental framework focuses on more positive, empathetic, and exploratory responses to challenges. Shifting from a saboteur-led mindset to a sage mindset involves exercises that can rewire the brain through principles of neuroplasticity to reduce the effects of impostor syndrome.¹²

Chamine’s insights suggest that by understanding and addressing these internal critics, lawyers can achieve greater success and well-being by shifting away from self-doubt and embracing a healthier, more constructive approach to their work.

So how do we do this?

Strategies for Overcoming Self-Sabotage

Engage in “PQ Reps.” According to Chamine, one of the best ways to quiet

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those pesky saboteurs is to engage in “PQ reps” (positive intelligence quotient repetitions).¹³ These small, focused exercises are designed to help shift your mind from negative and self-defeating thoughts to a positive and more productive perspective. Think of them as pull-ups for your brain.

Here’s how you do it:

- Select a physical sensation to focus on, such as the feeling of your breath moving in and out, the sensations in your toes, or the feel of your fingers rubbing together.
- Focus all your attention on this sensation for about 10 seconds. The goal is to be fully present in the moment, tune out distractions, and quiet the mind’s chatter.
- Whenever you notice your mind wandering, slowly bring your focus back to the physical sensation.¹⁴

Regularly doing PQ reps throughout the day can help you build up your mental muscles, making it easier to resist negative thoughts and quiet the saboteur influences.¹⁵

Look at the Evidence. As lawyers, we’re experts in making compelling arguments. When you feel the saboteurs start to rear their heads, look back at all your big and small wins in your career. Write them down. Create an inventory of the facts that support how far you’ve come in your career. Save, print, and re-read thank-you notes from clients, praise from coworkers, or verdicts in

your favor. Put these everywhere – on your car visor, your mirror, your computer. When you are having a crisis of confidence, turn to this tangible feedback, remember how you felt in your body, and notice your thoughts when you accomplished that task.

Practice Self-Love. Before you dismiss this strategy as more life coach rhetoric, stay with me. There’s some data to back this up – one study indicates that self-compassion is a “resilience factor” against impostor syndrome.¹⁶ Another study found that students who practiced self-compassion felt less anxious and more motivated after receiving poor grades compared to those who didn’t practice self-compassion.¹⁷

Kristin Neff, a leading researcher in self-compassion, defines it as consisting of three main components: “self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness.”¹⁸ Each component is crucial in combatting the harsh self-criticism that fuels impostor syndrome.

In addition to grounding yourself through PQ reps to build mindfulness, you can also practice self-compassion by doing the following:

- Write yourself a letter. When feeling overwhelmed by impostor feelings, write a letter to yourself from the viewpoint of a compassionate friend. This exercise can help shift your perspective from criticism to compassion.

- Set realistic expectations. Remind yourself that it’s okay not to know everything and that mistakes are part of growth. (Oof! So hard.) Adjusting your expectations helps prevent feelings of inadequacy when challenges eventually occur.

By engaging in any of these strategies, you’re not just coping with impostor syndrome; you’re also fundamentally changing the way you relate to yourself.

Embracing Our Shared Humanity

As we navigate the complexities of the legal profession, it becomes clear that overcoming impostor syndrome is not merely about individual resilience; it is about cultivating an environment in which every lawyer, regardless of background or level of experience, can thrive. The journey involves understanding our inner critics and the pervasive effects of perfectionism, but we don’t have to be bullied by these unhelpful dynamics.

By embracing the principles of neuroplasticity, we have the tools to rewire our responses to the pressures of our demanding careers. Each step we take toward self-awareness and self-care not only enhances our well-being but contributes to a culture that values genuine support and growth over mere performance.

We all have a role to play in transforming ourselves, our work, and our culture. What is yours? **WL**

ENDNOTES

¹See Clare Josa, *The Imposter Syndrome Iceberg: Meet Your Inner Critic – On Steroids*, <https://ditchingimpostersyndrome.com/what-is-imposter-syndrome/imposter-syndrome-iceberg-meet-your-inner-critic-on-steroids/> (last visited June 5, 2024).

²Positive Intelligence, *How We Self-Sabotage*, <https://www.positiveintelligence.com/saboteurs/?mwr=392e5c48> (last visited June 5, 2024).

³*Id.*

⁴Shirzad Chamine, *Positive Intelligence* (Greenleaf Book Group Press 2012).

⁵Based on the work of Dr. Valerie Young of the Impostor Syndrome Institute, <https://impostorsyndrome.com/>.

⁶Arlin Cuncic, *Imposter Syndrome: Why You May Feel Like a Fraud*, Verywell Mind (updated Jan. 19, 2024), <https://www.verywellmind.com/imposter-syndrome-and-social-anxiety-disorder-4156469>.

⁷Kendra Cherry, *How Neuroplasticity Works*, Verywell Mind (updated May 17, 2024), <https://www.verywellmind.com/what-is-brain-plasticity-2794886>.

⁸*Id.*

⁹Human brains can move functions from a damaged area of the brain to other, undamaged areas. This is known as functional plasticity. See *id.*

¹⁰Scott Frey, *The Neuroscience of Positive Intelligence*, Positive Intelligence Whitepaper Series (2022), <https://www.positiveintelligence.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/neuroscience-of-positive-intelligence-2022-v1-0.pdf>.

¹¹*Id.*

¹²Shirzad Chamine, *Positive Intelligence* (ebook).

¹³Frey, *supra* note 10.

¹⁴*Id.*; Chamine, *supra* note 12.

¹⁵Frey, *supra* note 10; Chamine, *supra* note 12.

¹⁶Alexandra Patzak, Marlene Kollmayer & Barbara Schober, *Buffering Impostor Feelings with Kindness: The Mediating Role of Self-Compassion Between Gender-Role Orientation and the Impostor Phenomenon*, *Frontiers in Psych.* (July 25, 2017), <http://journal.frontiersin.org/article/10.3389/fpsyg.2017.01289/abstract>.

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¹⁸Kristin Neff, *Self-Compassion: An Alternative Conceptualization of a Healthy Attitude Toward Oneself*, *Psych. Press* (2003), <https://self-compassion.org/wp-content/uploads/publications/SCtheoryarticle.pdf>. **WL**