****

**Imposter Syndrome in Public Safety**

April 2023

*By Missy Morris with* [*www.lexipol.com*](http://www.lexipol.com)

I can still remember the thoughts that went through my mind the first time the patrol car radio squawked my call sign after I completed the field training program. The jig was up. I was hurtling headfirst into my first solo shift, ready to handle the first call I had to figure out all on my own. My internal rationalizing and pleading were off the charts:

*Please let it be a petty theft in custody.*

*Or a vandalism case. I can handle vandalism.*

*Something I can do alone. At my own pace. With no one breathing down my neck.*

*Whatever it is, don’t let it be a*[*wobbler*](https://www.nolo.com/legal-encyclopedia/what-wobbler.html)*.*

*Or a*[*domestic violence*](https://www.lexipol.com/resources/todays-tips/dangers-of-domestic-violence-calls/)*.*

*And never, ever make it a landlord-tenant issue.*

*Please, if there is a God, let this call be something I know how to do.*

These were the thoughts swirling instantaneously through my head as I awaited the dispatcher to tell me my fate a split second later.

*Petty theft in custody at the mall? Bingo. Score one for me!*

**Putting a Name to It**

Back in 1995, I had no idea there was an official name for this fear and anxiety coursing through my body. Although the term was coined back in 1978, at the time it was mostly applied to women and the personal trepidation they felt about entering the workforce. Today, the condition is commonly referred to as [*imposter syndrome*](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/imposter-syndrome). At the time, all I knew for sure was that I was scared nearly to soiled drawers that the world, my family and my coworkers were going to discover I really had no idea what I was doing as a new police officer.

Imposter syndrome is a common psychological phenomenon; regardless of actual ability, the fear of being discovered as a fraud can affect anyone.

Intelligence, perceived or actual, has little to do with the increased anxiety a person experiences while wrapped up in the syndrome. Anyone can become a victim, with women and people of color being most susceptible. Members of these groups report the pressure to succeed right from the start in the professional arena. The desire to prove their worth and justification for their position based on merit alone often leaves individuals worried their deficiencies — no matter how slight or common for their experience level — will be exposed.

**Worried About Exposure**

Until recently, very little was known about the causes of imposter syndrome. That could be because very few, particularly those trying to hide their insecurities, were willing to talk about it. However, with understanding comes discussion. And with discussion comes identification. Michelle Obama, Tom Hanks and Maya Angelou are just [a few prominent figures](https://www.entrepreneur.com/leadership/12-leaders-entrepreneurs-and-celebrities-who-have/304273) to admit to feelings of inadequacy resulting from the phenomenon.

As the new officer, my [self-confidence](https://www.police1.com/officer-safety/articles/confidence-vs-ego-how-one-of-them-can-get-you-killed-qJ5ekMFD0hXGn3F5/) on the outside may have registered a 10. After all, wasn’t that what the police academy scenarios drummed into us? However, on the inside I was brokering deals with my nerves. “Remain calm,” I kept telling myself. “Act like this is all part of your boring routine, and you can have ice cream for dinner.”

**Drunken Brawlers and Self-Doubt**

Years later, after tackling some more intricate investigations, I became a newly promoted sergeant. I had less than a month under my [Sam Browne](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sam_Browne_belt) when I was called to a scene involving a drunken off-duty officer from my own department. The rookie cop had gotten intoxicated at a holiday party held at a local brewery. Reports were mixed regarding his involvement in the physical altercation that left one partygoer with a bloody nose, but what was absolutely certain is that the cop had told everyone he was a police officer in our town. My job was to guide the primary responding officer on how to proceed. Everyone else on scene was looking up the chain, expecting the new sarge to come up with a plan.

Imposter syndrome nagged in my thoughts while I struggled to come up with the best way to handle the situation. We were in public. The off-duty male was drunk. There was a victim. We were being videotaped. My team working the shift didn’t want to arrest their peer. In the end, they were clearly not pleased about my ultimate decision. First things first, I needed the primary officer to take a statement from the inebriated cop of what happened before deciding on a course of action. So, I directed him to conduct a preliminary interview into the events that had transpired.

I had a clear idea I needed to handle this like any other public intoxication call — fairly and without favoritism or bias. What was less clear was how to get the drunk brawler to give a coherent statement. The slurring, unsteady officer barked about how he was protected by the [Peace Officer Bill of Rights](https://porac.org/members/peace-officer-bill-of-rights/) (POBOR), which prohibits questioning on an on-duty officer without a union representative. He bullied and intimidated everyone present, making me doubt my resolve. I was sure I had every right to ask him for a statement since he wasn’t on duty when the incident occurred, a fact which made POBOR irrelevant. But he had me questioning myself, ramping up my fear of exposure. “It’s got to be obvious to everyone,” I told myself, “that I’m not competent to be a sergeant in the first place.”

**Knowing the Signs**

How can you tell the difference between occasional second-guessing and full-blown [imposter syndrome](https://www.cordico.com/2022/07/27/tackling-imposter-syndrome-mentality-in-fire-and-ems/)? Here are a few questions to consider:

* Do you fear being exposed as unworthy of your position?
* Are you experiencing fear, dread, depression, or anxiety that you’ll be discovered as a faker and thus your world will begin to crumble?
* Do you sometimes feel like you don’t deserve your success; that getting the job was all a matter of luck?
* Do you fixate on the possibility others don’t think you deserve your career?
* Have you ever minimized your accomplishments or even apologized for yourself even though you didn’t do anything wrong?

If more than two of these apply to you, you may be experiencing some level of imposter syndrome.

**Five Types of “Imposters”**

People who study these types of things have noted [different categories](https://www.themuse.com/advice/5-different-types-of-imposter-syndrome-and-5-ways-to-battle-each-one) of imposter syndrome. For me, those differences look something like this:

***The All Knowing:*** Are you the type of person who berates yourself for not learning a skill fast enough? Do setbacks in mastering a task make you feel less able to do any part of the job? Officers in this category often believe they should be better at the job from the start. They see themselves as naturally smart or talented and get easily frustrated when facing an obstacle. They can only see themselves as failures and view others as achieving what they cannot master regardless of the truth behind their thoughts.

***The Valedictorian:*** This type of personality holds themselves to the highest standard. They try to put forth 110% to get the job done perfectly. When in a supervisory position, these are the people others refer to as micromanagers. They accept nothing less than what they consider perfection. Anything less is failure.

***The Doomsday Survivor:*** This rugged individual prefers to do everything themselves. They trust no one to get the job done right and try never to ask for help. The survivor profile is the worst possible personality to work with on a committee or group project. They need endless amounts of preparation time and see help from others as a sign of weakness.

***The Superhero:*** Supercop can take on all challenges at once with absolute efficiency. They volunteer to be on every board and take any position for ancillary duties. Home life for these folks tends to suffer due to being over-extended. Managers love these types since they regularly tackle overtime vacancies and dawdling projects without reservation.

***Finally, The Conqueror:***This is my personal category of shame. I wanted to have all the answers, all the experience and knowledge before stepping out into the light. However, I never believed I had enough of anything to pull off the job. People with this personality type go to every course or lecture imaginable. They must prove to themselves they are capable and ready for the job before even applying. The Conqueror will dwell on what they don’t know or a skillset they think needs improving before the thought of being good enough ever crosses their mind.

**Advancement Anxiety**

After 20 years as a police officer, I finally [achieved the rank](https://www.lexipol.com/resources/blog/career-development-in-public-safety-agencies-its-personal/) of lieutenant. The first reappearance of my imposter syndrome came from an “all hands on deck” critical incident involving a neighbor dispute and a firearm. I was questioning every decision I made — from activating the Special Operations Team to how big to make the inner and outer scene perimeters. The whole time I was staring at the map, positioning my arrest team and my backup takedown team, I was fighting the thoughts that I wasn’t capable in my position. I was so anxious the department was judging me and everyone believed I didn’t deserve my recent promotion.

Imposter syndrome can ebb and flow throughout a career. Just the idea of advancement triggers the worry so much that many cops don’t seek special assignments or higher ranks because of feelings of possible inadequacy and being exposed as a fraud.

**Coping With the Syndrome**

What can you do if you see yourself in one of these personality types? How should you react when feelings of inadequacy threaten to turn into imposter syndrome?

First of all, stop dwelling on the idea that you have to master something in order to be effective at your current job. Most cops who have at least five years’ experience in a specific area are deemed experts for the purposes of courtroom testimony. This doesn’t imply they know everything there is to know about law enforcement. The court and attorneys stipulate that the officers’ training and experience add up to knowing enough about the testimony to take their words at face value without the need for references to prove its validity. No one can know everything about everything.

Second, concede mistakes will always happen. Hindsight will sneak up and [show your flaws](https://www.cordico.com/2021/01/21/every-cop-needs-a-checkup-from-the-neck-up/). The idea that someone can slide through a police career without a misstep is false. Becoming comfortable with being uncomfortable takes time and practice. But just like the first call I went to — the petty theft at the mall — you sometimes need to remind yourself that you know most of what you need to do your best and not screw up the details.

Third, recognize that law enforcement is a community. Those of us with imposter syndrome live in constant worry that they might be exposed as fakes to the people around them. The way around this is to ask for help or clarity. Once I came up with my plan to interview the off-duty officer just like I would any regular citizen (since the incident happened while he was not in uniform), I could’ve taken the additional step of running it by my fellow sergeant or watch commander. In doing so, I would have provided myself peace of mind. My decision on execution was a sound one. But it was not one I had to shoulder alone.

Finally, embrace growth. Focused learning on specific goals can narrow a person’s perceived flaws. Tackling each thought of insufficiency can ease the pain of imposter syndrome. By looking for, and finding, positive affirmations in the skills you have not only acquired but have also expanded upon, you can boost the idea that your position and accolades are indeed justified. Everyone, even police officers, needs to continually work on becoming more self-aware. When we learn, we grow, and when we grow, we act better in the future.

The belief that you’re merely impersonating the job you currently hold won’t magically disappear just because you didn’t give voice to the fears inside your head. Facing the anxiety that comes with moving past an obstacle is the only way to clear the hurdle. Before your self-doubt sabotages your actions, becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy, exercise some of the tactics I mentioned above. You’ll eventually be able to silence the voices in your head telling you someone is going to figure out you don’t belong where you are. Chances are, you got to where you are because you had the skills, intelligence, and ability to grow taller, higher, better.

**Missy Morris** started in public safety as a juvenile probation worker after graduating from University of California Santa Barbara in 1991 with a degree in behavioral psychology. She moved to the San Francisco Bay Area to work in probation before quickly transitioning to police work. After serving three years with the Palo Alto and Mountain View police departments as a patrol officer, she spent the following 22 years of her 28-year career at the City of Roseville. Missy worked in critical incident negotiations, eventually becoming the multi-city team leader and serving seven years on the state board of hostage negotiators. Missy feels her greatest assignment was a five-year stint as a traffic motor officer riding a BMW and working fatal accidents. She held several special assignments before retiring in 2020 as a lieutenant. Missy now works with the Lexipol Professional Services Team, working closely with Cordico wellness solution.