

Grad School Confidential, Episode 1  
“Who Am I To Talk About Impostor Syndrome?”

Episode Transcript

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Rob Desjardins 0:00

It's the first day of seminar, and the prof asks a tough question. You struggle to think of something to say, but before you can get it together, a classmate's already talking. She's citing studies you haven't read. Theorists you haven't even heard of. Everybody's nodding. Everybody's chiming in. And you can't help but wonder...do I belong here? Sound familiar? This is Grad School Confidential.

Grad School Confidential. A podcast about the unglamorous and sometimes bewildering life of the graduate student. I'm Rob Desjardins. And today, in Episode One, we're focusing on something just about everyone feels, but no one talks about. Imposter syndrome. When it seems like everyone else has their mojo together, but you don't have a clue what you're doing.

Now, I have to confess right up front, I'm not sure I'm up to the task of hosting this show. I mean, who am I to talk about imposter syndrome? I'm sure other people could do it better. And that's why I'm happy to be joined by our advisor and guide in this podcast series, Suman Varghese. Hi, Suman!

Suman Varghese 1:28

Hi there.

Rob Desjardins 1:28

Start by telling us a little bit about yourself. You're a psychologist?

Suman Varghese 1:32

Yeah. So a big part of my role here at the University of Alberta is just providing therapy to students. So it's given me a lot of chances to kind of hear about some of the issues grad students are dealing with firsthand. And then I've done a couple of stints in grad school, so most recently in psych, but before that in journalism, so this is kind of a fun project for me to bring both of those ideas together.

Rob Desjardins 1:54

I'm kind of bringing the same career strands together myself. I too was a journalist, and I was a grad student. And I spent the past 10 years as a writing advisor working with thesis writers. We've both seen a lot of the ups and downs of graduate student life.

Suman Varghese 2:10

Yeah, absolutely.

Rob Desjardins 2:11

And speaking of those ups and downs, I'd like you to listen to a bit of tape. It's a personal story from one grad student.

Dylan Ashley 2:19

So I'm Dylan Ashley. I'm a master's student in the Department of Computing Science here. So this happened when I attended my first academic conference. And this was quite early in my career. I remember I walked into -- at the conference, I walked into a busy room. It was filled with all these posters, and all these people all talking about their research. And so I did the obvious thing, I walked up to a poster and I started to read the poster. And I had absolutely no idea what was going on. So I walked up to a second poster, and I started to read that

one, and again, I had absolutely no clue what was going on. And I kept going poster to poster to poster, and I kept getting more and more and more panicked. And I eventually had to sort of step outside and take a bit of a few deep breaths to try to sort of calm myself. And when I was standing outside there, all I could think about was that I should not be at this conference, that I should not be in this position. All my senior colleagues at the conference, they seemed totally fine going through these posters and chatting with all of the presenters. So obviously, I had somehow tricked everybody and tricked my supervisor and snuck my way into my MSc program. It's a bit of a sad reality, but I kind of realized that, Okay, I guess I'm an imposter here. So let's just pretend to be an imposter. And let's just believe that I can pull off being an imposter.

Rob Desjardins 3:43

So that's Dylan Ashley, the Vice President Academic of the Grad Students' Association. And Suman, what a story. Is that it? Is that the essence of what impostor syndrome is?

Suman Varghese 3:55

Yeah, I think it's a big part of it. Like some of the common thoughts would be: I don't belong here. I'm a fraud and a phony. I'll be exposed. Everyone's gonna find out that I don't know everything or what I don't know. The thing to remember is it doesn't mean people are actually an imposter. It doesn't mean they somehow snuck their way into their program. What it just means is there's a mismatch between how they're thinking and feeling about themselves, their skills, their abilities, their knowledge, and objectively what they know. But I thought it was interesting, the research never actually uses the term "imposter syndrome." Because we don't want to make it sound like it's some kind of disease. It's not something we would diagnose or anything like that. And we don't want to pathologize normal experiences. But sometimes we just use the term "imposter syndrome" to refer to it, but the literature often uses the term "imposter phenomenon."

Rob Desjardins 4:43

"Imposter phenomenon." Well, I can relate to the fact that this is widespread. You know, so many people feel this way. It certainly sounds familiar to me; as a matter of fact, you know that scenario I referred to at the top of the podcast? You're in the seminar, somebody's speaking up, you don't feel like you can keep up with the rest of the class? That was my experience. I mean, it's very familiar to me, it was my story. As a matter of fact, it happened to me often, especially when I was in competitive environments like seminars, conferences. I wasn't alone in that either. We talked a little bit more to Dylan; here's what he had to say.

Dylan Ashley 5:19

I've had a lot of conversations with senior academics, especially early on where I would really have no idea what they were talking about, but I didn't want them to realize I had no idea what they were talking about. So I would just sort of nod and sort of try to provide that little bit of insight. And I think it derailed a lot of things for me, because I left the conversation, you know, sounding like I understood everything going on, when in reality, I only understood the first five minutes of an hour long conversation. And the rest of it was just me pretending like I did. So I think the imposter syndrome itself actually exacerbated that by turning me into more of an imposter that I was.

Rob Desjardins 5:56

So as you heard, Dylan tried to bluff his way, right, through the confusion. Well, I was one of these people who had the opposite reaction. I went like radio silent, spent whole weeks without speaking up in class. And I lost out too. The thing is, both of these reactions sort of backfire. We both miss learning opportunities, we both overlook the opportunities to ask good questions. How do grad students tend to react?

Suman Varghese 6:24

There's definitely a lot of different ways people might react. But I think in both those situations, you try not to draw attention to yourself, right, which makes sense if the theory is you're going to be exposed. So in your case, it's going silent. For Dylan, it might be just faking it till you make it kind of thing. But that withdrawing, that's a really common reaction to imposter syndrome. And it really resonated for me too, because I can think of different experiences throughout my life where that has come up. And I guess the story that jumps out the most would be way back, not a grad school story. But in high school, actually.

Every year, there was something called Alberta Honour Band, which was sort of the provincials of band. So people audition from all over the province. And then you get to play with this band for a weekend and perform, it's a pretty big thing. And I did the audition, and I just thought to myself, that was too good. I was like, somehow I sounded better than I am. I think I tricked them, I'm gonna get in and I don't feel like I really deserved to be. And then sure enough, I get in. And then not only that, I got assigned all these solos, and I'm supposed to be this head of the section. I was scared of being found out, I was scared of not being good enough. And when I got there, I turned to the people next to me, and I gave all the solos away. So looking back, I can see how imposter syndrome created a self fulfilling prophecy where it seeded all this doubt in my mind, and then it led me to underperform, to kind of slink away into the shadows rather than rise to the challenge. And I lost out.

Rob Desjardins 8:13

You did something that I've often done too, which is deferring the tasks to other people who we think maybe can handle it better than I can. I don't feel up to this, someone else ought to do it.

Suman Varghese 8:25

That's definitely what I was doing. I can relate to that feeling. And I think a lot of grad students can as well. When you're in these environments, some of the ways

you might defer, it might just be not, not giving yourself the opportunities to succeed, maybe taking yourself out of the race. So that might look like not seeking out the best mentors, it might mean not applying for certain funding. On the flip side, I would say some people -- withdrawing might not be their go to; it might be the opposite, like working extra hard, kind of that workaholicism to the point where it might not even be healthy for them, but almost like trying to learn more, know more, kind of pushing themselves. I think one of the difficult parts about this imposter feeling is that you're often living in self doubt. So that could lead to a lot of things like yes, deferring or working too hard, but also maybe isolating ourselves and not asking questions when we need to. Not wanting to show our work to other people. So a lot of things that can actually hinder our success in grad school.

Rob Desjardins 9:25

A really interesting question for me is why? I mean, no doubt people feel these feelings of imposture in different parts of their life, different places, different industries. But there's something about being a grad student and about grad students in general that seems to exacerbate it or make it more likely. What do you think that is? What's going on for people in grad programs that makes imposter phenomenon so likely?

Suman Varghese 9:55

I think there's a combination of factors like there's some personal factors and there's also things in the social context of grad school that make it harder. So the research shows that there are certain traits that correlate with imposter syndrome. So being a high achiever, being a perfectionist, growing up in an achievement-oriented context. So we know there's these personal factors. On top of that, think about what it's like to go from undergrad to grad school, it's actually a pretty big transition. And it's not often really talked about how different it is. So it becomes a far more unstructured process, there's a lot more uncertainty, there's a lot more ambiguity, students are often working on things that have never been done before. And they're also working with experts in the field. You see all these superstar researchers, you see a lot of high achievement around you.

Rob Desjardins 10:47

Nothing but superstars to compare yourself to.

Suman Varghese 10:49

Yeah, so it really skews what's what's normal. And then, of course, that can cause you to question yourself.

Rob Desjardins 10:55

Can we drill down too on that point about the lack of structure? What is it about this, you know, suddenly shifting into a completely new pace, a new lifestyle that can make it so hard to sort of retain your confidence or your sense of momentum?

Suman Varghese 11:09

One of the things with the lack of structure is it creates more uncertainty. So when you're an undergrad, and maybe you're taking this number of courses, you kind of know when midterms are, when papers are due, then it's your final, then the course is over. In grad school, you don't have those markers that can give you a bit of certainty. So even if it's really busy in undergrad, at least you know what to expect. When there's a lack of structure, when there's more uncertainty, it's just easier for anxiety to breed and reside in there. So if anxiety is up, that can also correlate with more feelings of self doubt, just feeling unsure of ourselves. And then I think the work also can become more isolating in a lot of ways. Often they're working on projects that...well, they're the only ones working on that project, and people have a hard time understanding what they're doing, because it might be very specialized or very specific. So yeah, I think when they're left on their own, that potential for isolation becomes greater, the potential for anxiety becomes greater with with the lack of structure.

Rob Desjardins 12:07

So message number one, you may be on your own, but you're not alone in feeling this way.

Suman Varghese 12:13

Yes, absolutely.

Rob Desjardins 12:15

All right. So let's take a break. And when we come back, we'll go back to Dylan's story, and we'll hear about how he responded and the steps he took to work his way through imposter syndrome. So stay with us! Grad School Confidential will be right back.

Chantal Labonte 12:32

Hey, this is Chantal from the Graduate Students' Association, or GSA. The GSA advocates on behalf of graduate students to the university and to government and supports you throughout your graduate student experience. If you're a grad student at the U of A, you are a GSA member and pay an annual membership fee that gives you access to all the GSA's services and benefits, including a health and dental plan, the Graduate Student Assistance Program, and over \$950,000 in grants, bursaries and awards.

Rob Desjardins 13:12

Welcome back to Grad School Confidential on imposter syndrome. Okay, Suman, so Dylan Ashley has told us about the day that he went into a poster conference, and he saw a lot of bewildering research and felt...well, panic probably isn't too strong a word. So now let's listen to what happened to him, listen to the rest of the story.



Dylan Ashley 13:38

When I eventually did calm myself down, and I went back, I did see find some posters that I could understand. But I still secretly lived with that feeling of being that imposter for several months afterwards. And it was only when I ended up coming across my bachelor's parchment just lying around my apartment, and I finally decided to actually frame and put it on a wall that I remembered how many years I'd spent working towards graduate studies. It was only then that I realized that I hadn't actually fooled the admissions committee. No, what had convinced them to admit me was the amount of time and the tangible work I'd done towards earning my place in that program. So I sort of lowered my standards, not expecting to be a master of everything in my field the second I arrived in my field. But now I realized that the entire point of me being this program was to be able to hopefully understand all those posters one day.

Rob Desjardins 14:35

Dylan pushed his way through the imposter syndrome. How did he do it? And what did he do right?

Suman Varghese 14:41

So the immediate response was to actually manage the anxiety. He stepped out of the room, he calmed himself down, and probably he had to do that a few times throughout those next few months. But I think over time, what changed for him, it sounds like, is that he really started to own his accomplishments and see things a little more objectively. So he could recognize his hard work, he had gotten this bachelor and there was a reason he was in the program. And then he just lowered his standards to be more realistic. He realized you don't start grad school to be the expert, to be the supervisor, you start as a learning process. So just kind of understanding his place and this is a process of learning, I think was a huge thing. And then the lack of knowledge is no longer a failing, but just a normal part of learning.

Rob Desjardins 15:28

I suppose it's important to recognize that as interesting and rich as Dylan's story is, not everyone's exactly like him. People will experience imposter phenomenon in different ways. In general, what would you say? What are some of the best ways to respond to these feelings?

Suman Varghese 15:43

So I think one really important thing is just to talk about it, when we start to talk about our feelings and what's going on, we have an ability to kind of tackle the shame or feeling around it. The more we keep things hidden, the more we tend to feel shame. So what we don't really understand is that other people are also feeling this way. And it's not unusual to be feeling this way. So once you start having those conversations with the people around you, it can just become a normal part of the grad school experience, a normal part of being human, versus some failing that you're just experiencing on your own and you've somehow tricked the whole system into getting here. The other thing I would say is like one of the things we want to do is kind of change the script around the imposter syndrome feeling. So we have a tendency to attribute all the things we're doing right to external factors. So if we do well on an exam, if we do a good presentation, if we said the right thing, we might say, oh, it was just really easy that time, or they were just being nice to me, or I lucked out: those are some of the common things we might think. Whereas on the flip side, when we have a failing, so like, let's say we make a mistake, or we didn't know the answer, or we miss a deadline, it automatically becomes an individual feeling. So I've done something wrong. I'm bad at this, I don't belong here. Once again, I'm going to be exposed for not knowing anything.

Rob Desjardins 17:00

This is sounding amazingly familiar, by the way.

Suman Varghese 17:03

I bet for you and a lot of grad students. So one of the things we can do is, rather than just letting that way of thinking continue, is actually challenge it a little bit because chances are that's not true.

Rob Desjardins 17:15

So when you say challenge it, do you mean sort of in the way you talk to yourself?

Suman Varghese 17:19

Yeah, absolutely. So we all engage in something called self talk. So that's sort of the inner dialogue that's constantly running through our heads. A lot of times, it's pretty automatic and unconscious, we're not really paying attention. But oftentimes, that inner dialogue can become quite negative, especially when we're in highly competitive environments, especially if we're not maybe performing at a level we want to be performing at. What we say to ourselves, and how we think about ourselves has a huge impact on how we feel. So really paying attention to what we're saying to ourselves can make a difference, and then trying to change the what we're saying to ourselves to be more realistic. And again, that doesn't mean we're just being positive thinkers, or we're deluding ourselves into thinking, oh, we're great at everything. It just means looking at things realistically. And again, if you think back to what Dylan said, it's like, Okay, I'm gonna lower the standard to understand that I'm not supposed to know everything at this point. In the same way, I'm supposed to make mistakes. That's part of being a learner, or failure is part of the process. So being able to reframe these things versus thinking, Oh, I'm, I just don't belong here. I'm terrible at this, or I'm stupid, or whatever we might say to ourselves, when we feel like we're messing up.

Rob Desjardins 18:29

I know, you know, sometimes, we can know that we ought to be thinking about our work in a different way, we can recognize that we're approaching, you know, our idea about ourself in a kind of a distorted way. But it can be hard to change

that pattern of thinking. So if people are having trouble changing the way they're thinking about themselves, and their academic journey, what should they do?

Suman Varghese 18:54

I would just say, it is hard. If you've talked to yourself in a certain way for a long period of time, it's hard to just turn it around.

Rob Desjardins 19:01

Absolutely.

Suman Varghese 19:01

So one thing I would just say is have patience with yourself. It's a process, it doesn't change overnight. It takes time to be able to even catch the thoughts and then challenge them. And even if you only believe at 1% to begin with, that's a good starting point. Maybe the next time it'll be 5%. And you build from there. So it is a process. And one last thing I would say is just to remember that our feelings aren't facts. So just because you feel like an imposter, it doesn't mean you are an imposter. Just because you feel like you tricked everyone, it doesn't mean you actually tricked everyone. It's really easy to let our emotions kind of define our reality. But it's always a good idea to challenge that and ask ourselves, is this actually true?

Rob Desjardins 19:46

And that's it for today's episode, but not today's topic. We'll be talking more about imposter syndrome in upcoming shows. And in the meantime, you can check out some readings and resources on our website: [uab.ca/gsc](http://uab.ca/gsc). Grad School Confidential is a production of the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research at the University of Alberta.

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