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COMMENTARY

## How to Recognize and Fight Imposter Syndrome as a New Lawyer

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YoungProfessionals

ByChristinaB.Raton | April 04, 2024 at 11:34 AM



Merriam Webster defines "imposter syndrome" as a psychological condition that is characterized by persistent doubt concerning one's abilities or accomplishments accompanied by the fear of being exposed as a fraud despite evidence of one's ongoing success. For us general liability attorneys, the emphasis in that definition is "condition." It is often argued that a plaintiff's injuries were not causally related to the incident because the plaintiff suffered from a condition rather than sustained an injury. Like this defense theory, imposter syndrome starts from within and is often made up of ideas and opinions we have made up about ourselves. Imposter syndrome often thrives irrespective of environment or even other people's opinion.

### Imposter Syndrome in a New Territory

My experience with imposter syndrome first started when I made the decision to become a lawyer. As a first generation everything in my immediate family, creating my own path was incredibly difficult. In my case, with a family that is so heavily involved in the medical field, being the first lawyer in the entire family made it almost impossible to seek mentorship and encouragement. I often kept my challenges and failures throughout law school to myself and there were many times when my accomplishments were not celebrated, but instead, forgotten. Do not get me wrong. My family was supportive in the best way they knew how, but they could not offer much advice in an area that was completely foreign to them. I know this now, but just a few years ago, the encouragement could have meant a lot, but instead the lack of it gave birth to my imposter syndrome.

The first year of law school is already considered survival of the fittest. Your first day of classes goes from a lecture hall of over 100 students and week by week, semester by semester, the class size just decreases. Here I was with no political science background, walking into orientation with a room of 300 students, who either came from generations of lawyers or always dreamed of being lawyers. The imposter syndrome was real! I found myself always having my story exact when asked, "when did you know?" or "what lead you to law school?" Honestly, hearing myself repeat the reason probably helped my imposter syndrome more than I knew. It reminded me of my sense of purpose. Irrespective of how I was feeling in the moment, like an imposter, I had a goal.

## How Imposter Syndrome Tricked Me Into Believing I Was a Lawyer

It is now 2020. I have talked a good talk and walked the walk, or so I thought. I was in the last semester of law school, and I had already second sat and won a trial. I was the coach of the trial competition team, and we were competing in the Constance Baker Motley Competition for the Northeastern Black Law Association. I was enrolled in the Criminal Defense Course and had my own case file of misdemeanor criminal cases which meant I was in court at least four times a week. These were all great things and I have to say the imposter syndrome worked in my favor for the most part, because at this time, I was convinced I was already a lawyer.

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Whether your thoughts are negative or positive, your thoughts are not real, and I recognized that imposter syndrome can also be positive, the side of imposter syndrome that is usually left out of the conversation. I would definitely say in the beginning of 2020, my syndrome pushed me to balance an extremely busy schedule (I also had a part-time job at a law firm) because in my mind, I was lawyer. Well, that was short lived because quickly came the doom of March 2020 and COVID-19.

## The Blues of the Class of 2020

The world is completely shut down and completely virtual. The class of 2020 gets no graduation ceremony. Now, I know this was a controversial topic. To the older generation, it seemed like the graduates in 2020 were being dramatic and sensitive. You still get your diploma, what is the big deal? Honestly, it was a very big deal. For those of us like me, who needed that constant reminder, who needed my family to come together and celebrate with me, who needed to hear her name announced and walk across the stage to make it official and real. It was certainly a big deal. Instead, my name went across a computer screen and months after the last day of classes, sometime during the dreads of BAR prep, I received my diploma via mail rolled up without a frame. It just was not the same.

Fast forward, I have taken the bar, virtually of course, and now I am working as a public defender, pending results. Thankfully, in New York, you can work under the student practice order so long as a licensed attorney is present in the courtroom with you. This was how I got my trial experience as a law student, but I was now a law graduate/lawyer hybrid, but not yet an attorney. It was a weird place to be in, especially when I was meeting my clients via telephone. Yes, I was calling my clients and introducing myself in preparation for their upcoming virtual arraignments. The hurdles I had to overcome just to gain any trust during these initial calls are indescribable. There was no difference between me and a telemarketer. Not to mention my work phone number was screened as “block caller ID.” Starting my practice virtually was like an out of body experience. As someone who formerly enjoyed styling my court outfits, I was now in a world where I did not even need to wear pants, let alone a suit jacket. I vividly remember when a client was taking an allocution virtually and she was asked by the judge if she had enough time to speak to her attorney and she responded, “No, I just had her.” Indicating me. Talk about a blow to the ego. Thankfully, the late great Judge David Fried of Staten Island defended my honor on the record and explained to the client that I was indeed her attorney. Yet, the imposter syndrome was there again. I was literally playing an attorney on a computer screen.

## Egos in the Legal Field and How It Affects Imposter Syndrome

No one wants to say it, but a lot of this is about egos. In order to be the best, you have to believe you are the best. You have the best client, you have the best case law, you have the best argument, you have the best defense. However, nobody talks about how the ego can affect the imposter syndrome. I think of little scenarios, like being confused about the process in a courtroom, where simply asking could have made life a lot easier, but because I would not dare looking like a confused attorney in the courtroom, I would go out of my way to figure it out on my own. Like the person who tries a million ways to put something together, instead of reading the directions.

## Transparency

So, the ego works against combating imposter syndrome, but what helps is transparency. Along this bumpy ride, I have been fortunate enough to have had many open and transparent conversations with senior attorneys and mentors which has helped me push past the imposter syndrome. While it is still very much there, especially when I make any mistake at work, I also try to remember that a lot of people deal with it. Irrespective of experience, background, and value, sometimes we are just our own toughest critics. This includes convincing ourselves that we are frauds. In my case, it is being a lawyer, but it may be something for you. The truth is when you find the space to talk those thoughts/feelings, you realize you are not the only one who has felt this way or who is feeling this way. You may also find yourself exploring why you feel like an imposter in this particular aspect of your life. For me, not having anyone at home similarly situated made it difficult to express my feelings or confide in anyone.

## Write Down Your Thoughts

Maybe you don't have that safe space to talk about your imposter syndrome, which is understandable. It is not like there is a support group out there, although I feel like it would be a great idea for a Facebook group. Until someone starts that, try writing your thoughts down when you are particularly feeling the imposter syndrome. Whether that be in your notes on your phone, or if you are like me and prefer pen to paper, write down all the things that you are doubting about yourself that you fear will be exposed. An exercise like this can help you realize that your thoughts are not real. Seeing them written in real time has a completely different effect than when your thoughts are all jumbled in your mind. When you write your thoughts down and read them back, it will likely occur to you that your negative thoughts are so far-fetched and exaggerated that only you could think of them. Now your list may include some feedback or critiques you received from someone else which make it harder to debunk because they are someone else's opinion. Yet again, the formula is full proof. In the workplace, remember the number one rule I learned, "Don't take it personal!" Whether it is constructive criticism or just an over generalized opinion. Take what is important and useful from the critique/feedback, use it to your advantage for progression, but do not allow it to define you. This will only feed the beast that is imposter syndrome.

Imposter syndrome still happens for me. In fact, I now wear my imposter syndrome mask in unfamiliar professional spaces and in areas where I feel like I should know more even in my very fresh career. The reality is I am trying to prove to myself that I am who I purport to be and is mostly an internal battle. The first step is recognizing it. So, does it go away? For me as a first-generation Black woman attorney, probably not. It comes with the territory of being in a space/profession where not many people who look like me have made it. This means sometimes playing the imposter in both my professional life and my personal life. However, we make room for these feelings, we learn more about these feelings, and we do not allow them to be our Achilles heel.

I am Christina B. Raton, a licensed New York attorney with a concentration in general liability defense. I do not just play an attorney on a computer screen anymore; I actually am one in real life.

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