

# THE IMPOSTOR SYNDROME AND ACADEMIC LIFE

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**ABSTRACT.** The Impostor Syndrome is a psychopathology in which the consciousness considers that their accomplishments are less than what they actually are, and experiences the fear of discovering that their supposed strongtraits are not real. This Syndrome can be responsible for anxiety, depression, stress and an underperformance in academic life. This article intends to present the Impostor Syndrome and discuss the paradox of this psychopathology, which is based on beliefs commonly encountered among scientists. Possible pathogeneses and techniques to self-overcome the pathology are also presented.

**Keywords:** academia; anxiety; depression; impostor; syndrome.

## INTRODUCTION

**Origin.** The need for this author to accept clearly evident strongtraits (positive components of a personality able to boost their evolution) was the motivating factor for research of the *Impostor Syndrome*. The difficulty of assuming ones' intellectual ability and other qualities, results in a lack of confidence, anxiety and, consequently, an escape from professional life in Academia.

**Definition.** The *Impostor Syndrome* is the condition of a conscin (*intraphysical consciousness* – human personality), man or woman, who, in opposition to the facts and views of others, considers themselves undeserving of success, imagining themselves below their real ability to perform, not assuming their strongtraits, and living an unrealistic fear of being discovered as “undeserving” of consciential achievements.

**Etymology.** The term *syndrome* comes from the Greek idiom, *syndromé*, “competition; action of gathering tumultuously”. It emerged in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The word *impostor* appeared in the 17<sup>th</sup> century (KAUATI, 2012, p.1364-1369).

**Objective.** This article aims to present the *Impostor Syndrome* and its reflection in academic life, exploring probable origins and a method for one to overcome the syndrome. It also discusses the paradox of highly scientific researchers carrying this pathology as a result of not performing Self-research and applying the Disbelief Principle.

**Self-researchology.** “Self-researchology is the Science applied to the study of research by a consciousness, on itself, simultaneously employing every research instrument available in the consciential microuniverse and in the Cosmos.” (Vieira, 2012, p. 1897-1900).

**Disbelief Principle.** “The *disbelief principle* is the fundamental and irreplaceable proposition in conscientiological approach to realities in general, in any dimension of the Cosmos, rejecting and refuting the researcher consciousness that uses any or every

concept aprioristically or dogmatically, who does so without practical demonstration or lengthy reflection and without confronting the causation, logic and fullness of personal rationalization.” (VIEIRA, 2012, p. 8798-8800).

**Method.** The study was conducted using four different methods, mentioned below, in alphabetical order:

1. Retrospective self-research;
2. Experimental methods;
3. Literature review;
4. Use of evaluation tests.

## I. SELF-RESEARCHOLOGY AND THE DISBELIEF PRINCIPLE

**Academia.** According to Laursen (2008), within the academic community it is very common for students of post-graduation courses, strict and lato sensu, to express the *Impostor Syndrome*, either temporarily or permanently.

**Surprising.** Considering the high degree of scientificity and intellectuality in the academic community the incidence of the *Impostor Syndrome* is startling, given that the pathology has beliefs at its base, and not the facts experienced.

**Principle.** The *Disbelief Principle* should be the guide of every researcher, as the basis of science is anti-dogmatism and disbelief. However, in practice, we see that this principle only directs academic research, as the researcher does not consider it for the personal life.

**Self-researchology.** The conscientiological speciality Self-researchology fills precisely this vacuum between the scientific posture in research and the dogmatism related to the researcher’s self-knowledge.

**Self-belief.** A human being bases many attitudes and decisions on beliefs acquired over their lifetime and questions this very little in the day-to-day. The problem is that many beliefs are dysfunctional and restrict one’s ability in personal and professional spheres. Not always is a consciousness grounded on facts, or considers a hypothesis, normally they conclude without even going through a self-investigative process.

**Examples.** Examples of 5 self-limiting beliefs are presented here:

1. The doctoral (PhD) student, who believes they do not have enough knowledge about their thesis, can delay or escape from defending their thesis.
2. The Doctor, who thinks themselves unworthy of the title of doctor, can hide their title in their social life as much as possible.
3. The teacher, who presumes they are unable to present at conferences, can send their students to scientific events, thus always escaping from exposure.
4. The Doctor, who thinks themselves unable to be devoted to academic life, can self-sabotage and never pass official examinations for positions, even though they have considerable knowledge and a high-quality curriculum.

5. The researcher, who assumes they are not very intelligent, and cannot do more innovative research to ensure they are always producing something, even if of lesser relevance.

**Beliefs.** Self-beliefs, for example, are results of:

1. Lack of scientificity in self-study.
2. Lack of systematic, theoretical and practical self-knowledge.
3. Lack of continuous self-investigation with a rigorous methodology.

**Incongruence.** This incongruent posture, scientific in academic life and dogmatic in personal life, can lead to a constant mode of subliminal crisis. For example, how can a scientist hold a religion, whose bases are dogmatic? How can a researcher have beliefs?

**Pressure.** Academic life requires a lot from a professor-researcher, as he must act in various activities: administration, teaching, extension and research, which require knowledge and diverse strongtraits. Furthermore, there is a requirement to produce research in order to have financial resources for new research.

**Society.** In addition to the normally stressful work, there is society that imagines that a Doctor teacher is “*a very wise consciousness that knows a lot about everything*”. If the Doctor accepts this as truth, there is a large chance of becoming a bearer of the *Impostor Syndrome*, because they will never know enough to meet the expectations.

## II. PATHOLOGY

**Impostor.** A consciousness bearing the *Impostor Syndrome* has an intense feeling of a lack of authenticity in relation to the image of competence passed to other consciousnesses, even if they have attained real success. (CLANCE, 1986).

**Research.** Statistical research has been conducted in relation to the incidence and correlations of the *Impostor Syndrome* (Cozzarelli & MAJOR, 1990; NAMYNIUK et al., 1994; FUNK et al., 2000 & Krukowski Ross, 2003), as well as on scales to measure it (CLANCE, 1986; KOWALSKI et al., 1987; CLANCE et al., 1993; GLICKAUF-Hughes et al., 1995). However, the most important concerns self-diagnosis.

**Self-diagnosis:** Here, in alphabetical order, are 10 auxiliary questions to perform a self-diagnosis of the *Impostor Syndrome*:

1. **Self-confidence.** Am I unable to trust my strongtraits?
2. **Self-performance.** Am I dissatisfied with my self-performance, even with quantitative data demonstrating above average results?
3. **Unworthiness.** Do I feel unworthy of the success I have achieved?
4. **Concealment.** Do I conceal personal achievements from others in order to not increase expectations on me?
5. **Avoidance.** Do I avoid evaluations as much as possible, even though once evaluated the results are quantitatively good?
6. **Expectancy.** Do I consider other’s expectations of me as being exaggerated?

7. **Failure-mania.** Am I continuously certain of imminent failure?
8. **Imposture.** Do I feel I do not have the strongtraits mentioned by others?
9. **Dissatisfaction.** Do I consider the positive results achieved unsatisfactory, regardless of other's opinions?
10. **Success.** Do I attribute the success achieved to luck or some superior being?

**Distortion.** The bearer of the *Impostor Syndrome* distorts reality itself, amplifying and creating weaktraits (burdening traits – negative components of the person, impediments of evolution, weak points of the individual), and continuously minimizes their strongtraits.

**Subterfuge.** Fear of failure makes the person try to appear incompetent (CLANCE & IMES, 1978), as they will be acting below what others expect from them.

**Reinforcement.** Operating below capacity can cause dissatisfaction and strengthen the feeling of being an impostor, because the person does not manage to perform a great feat proportional to their strongtraits. In general, the instinctive methods of self-protection reinforce the pathology.

**Characteristics.** The bearer of psychopathologies, generally, presents an operating cycle which, in the case of Impostor Syndrome, can occur as follows (CLANCE & IMES, 1978; CLANCE, 1985), for example:

1. Has an exam or time limit for a project.
2. Has fear or great doubt that they will succeed this time.
3. May have nightmares, experience anxiety and other psychosomatic symptoms.
4. Suffers working hard and preparing much more than is necessary, or procrastinates and then prepares frantically at the deadline.
5. Succeeds and receives positive *feedback*.
6. Thinks they are incapable, because if they were they would not need to suffer so much in order to succeed.
7. The cycle and the belief are reinforced.

**Security.** The effort to appear as what they are not, either greater or lesser than, demands a lot of energy from the person and also causes frustration, because either the person sabotages themselves and does not achieve the desired result or operates at a sublevel and is dissatisfied.

**Symptomatology.** Here, in alphabetical order, are 5 types of symptoms resulting from the continuous and pathological effort to conceal the alleged deception and the constant fear of being discovered:

1. Generalized anxiety.
2. Low self-esteem.
3. Depression.
4. Physical exhaustion.
5. Lack of self-confidence.

## II. 1. PSYCHOPATHOGENY

### II. 1. 1. Mesology

**Mesology.** An important factor to analyze in pathologies is mesology, as studies (CLANCE & IMES, 1978; LANGFORD & CLANCE, 1993; KING & COOLEY, 1995) show that bearers of the *Impostor Syndrome* had messages from the family that contradicted messages of competence.

**Subliminal.** The messages of incompetence sent by the family can be provided from direct phrases such as “*You are not able to!*” to subliminal messages. Even jokes can make the person doubt their own capacity, for example, “*Got 1<sup>st</sup> place? But tell the truth, there was only 1 competitor*”.

**Childhood.** According to Pontes (2006), the mesological influence occurs without the person being lucid to the fact, as generally happens in childhood and adolescence.

**Research.** A worldwide survey showed individuals from several cultures responding to certain personal ranges with tendencies; for example, extreme values or modesty. A tendency to extreme values is seen in Latin America. There are cultures, for example Japan and China, where individuals tend to be more modest, not only in measures of beauty (ECTOFF et al., 2005).

**Modesty.** Modesty imposed in Japanese and Chinese cultures is certainly negative, because it makes it difficult for people to feel well with achievements, always seeking unattainable models of perfection, the reason for the many suicides in Japan (O’CONNOR, 2010).

**Asians.** This posture of orientals to focus on the negative is presented in a light-hearted manner on the website *High Expectation Asian Father* (2013) which shows the level of demand Asian parents have in relation to the performance of their children in their studies, leading them to focus on what not attained, instead of valuing achievements.

**Example.** Here are three examples of phrases found on the website of things said by an Asian Father to his son:

1. **Situation:** The child scored 96 out of 100 in a maths test.  
**Asian father says:** “Only 96% in the math test? I do not have a son.”
2. **Situation:** The child gets 99.99% correct in an evaluation considered complex.  
**Asian Father says:** “What happened to the other 0.01%?”
3. **Situation:** The child scored 100 in mathematics, Portuguese and history and 90 in arts.  
**Asian Father says:** “You scored 90 in arts! You are a failure!”

**Influences.** Beyond the nuclear family, studies show the influence of other means in the *Impostor Syndrome*, for example, the university (NAMYNIUK et al., 1994).

**Maturity.** An antidote to the negative mesological influence is to be more self-critical and to base oneself on facts, not vague opinions. A mature person is less influenced by the environment, reducing the external factors and giving priority to one's own personality in their manifestation.

## II. 1.2. Dogmatism

**Dogmatism.** Not only are the religious dogmatic, but all people whose thinking originates in belief. Religiosity is a dogmatic manifestation of the person who tends to religious sentiments, but does not necessarily follow a religion or doctrine.

**Guilt.** Luz (2011) clearly shows the origin of guilt in the religious when discussing the enormous amount of energy spent on ruminating on past situations and regrets about what should not have been or have been done at some point, punishing themselves for not being perfect saints.

**Limitation.** Religiosity generates repressions causing difficulties for people to assume their strongtraits, as this assumption is considered synonymous to arrogance and prepotence. Most religions preach values still based on the evolutionary model of suffering.

**Unnoticed.** Some mechanisms are so automatic that the person does not realize the religious manifestation. For example, they do something well and get satisfied with the result; then immediately comes the idea that they cannot have pride, leading them to not managing to be happy with the positive result.

**Postures.** Here are 5 postures suggestive of possible religiosity, in alphabetical order:

1. **Abstention.** Leaving things for a superior being or life to resolve.
2. **Guilt.** Feeling guilty for not making all that supposedly should.
2. **Demerit.** Not feeling deserving of material benefits, for example, having a good car.
3. **Guilt.** Feeling guilty for not doing everything that you supposedly should.
4. **Idolatry.** Idolizing personalities considered more evolved.
5. **Modesty.** Not assuming personal strongtraits due to considering to be arrogant.

**Responsibility.** Religions generally collaborate in the transference of responsibility, as in the case of Catholics whose confession is performed so the priest can give comfort and forgiveness, thus relieving guilt and not always leading to reflection and learning, as Duburgras (1997) emphasizes in his article.

**Origin.** Religiosity is one of the major causes of the *Impostor Syndrome*, especially because of the appreciation of humility, in the sense of being inferior to others.

## METHODOLOGY

**Self-healing.** Regardless of the causes of the *Impostor Syndrome* it is possible to apply researchable techniques to promote self-cure.

**Conscientiology.** There are techniques published in the scientific journals of Conscientiology (*Conscientia, Journal of Conscientiology* and *Saúde Conscencial*) and Cognitive Psychology (Beck, Freeman and Davis, 2005; Beck et al., 1997; YOUNG, 2003), for synaptic restructuring and changing of behavior.

**Personality.** The choice of techniques to be used depends on the objective, the temperament, and the researcher's strong and weaktraits.

**Casuistry.** Research methods for self-overcoming should be based on the strongtraits one has, as they are tools that exist. The following are examples of scientists who used intellectual strongtraits for perform self-overcoming:

1. **Taylor.** In the book *My Stroke of Insight* (TAYLOR, 2009), the neuroscientist showed how her self-research and rational posture assisting her at the time of the stroke and in overcoming the consequences.

2. **Nash.** John Nash, mathematician, Nobel Prize winner in economics in 1994, intelligently overcame schizophrenia, replacing drugs that cause various side effects, through logic (NASAR, 2002).

3. **Servan-Schreiber.** Using determination and knowledge the physician and neuroscientist, Servan-Schreiber (2011) managed to heal cancer through innovative methods, in addition to assisting by publicizing the methods.

**Method.** A method proposed to self-overcome the *Impostor Syndrome* is composed by three stages:

1. Identification and recognition of strongtraits.
2. Conscious use of strongtraits.
3. Self-overcoming.

### Step 1: Identification and recognition of strongtraits

**Reinforcement.** The main difficulty for a bearer of the *Impostor Syndrome* is to recognize their strongtraits, and as such more than one technique to identify them will probably be needed, in addition it is necessary to be sure that your information is not wrong.

**Identification.** Identification of strongtraits through the following 4 techniques, presented in the preferred order of application:

1. Personal list of strongtraits.
2. Autobiographical analysis of strongtraits.
3. Heterocriticism.
4. Rapid Analysis of Consciousness.

**List.** The first step is to make a list of recognized strongtraits, that have truly been manifest. Starting with this technique helps to measure how the consciousness sees themselves, in that moment, without external interference.

**Inventory.** The Autobiographical Analysis of Strongtraits technique consists of writing a self-biography, starting from early childhood, and analyzing the events and strongtraits in use. For example, the strongtrait of leadership manifested in group play.

**Criticality.** When carrying out the self-biography is important to be careful, base your research on facts and do not solely rely on your memory, because the brain confuses information and even creates non-existent memories (STEIN *et al.* 2009). Seek information from several family members to verify that the information is a resource that improves the data reliability.

**Interviews.** Interviewing people who were close to the family in childhood helps to identify unused and underutilized strongtraits. In general, strongtraits do not cease to exist, the consciousness merely stops using them.

**Heterocriticism.** To apply the technique of heterocriticism, the researcher asks people, friends and disliked, from their circle of relations, to list his or her strongtraits. This is an auxiliary technique to identify, principally, the strongtraits in use.

**Analysis.** The Rapid Analysis of Consciousness (BONASSI, 2003) method is a self-analysis technique where the consciousness responds, through notes, to the 2000 questions in the book *Conscientiogram: Technique for Evaluating the Integral Consciousness* from the author Vieira (1996)).

**Technique.** In the Rapid Analysis of Consciousness the goal is to objectively respond to the Conscientiogram, without deeply researching any question. In the end, it is possible to generate a 360° graphic (download the Conscientiogram spreadsheet from: <http://www.conscious.org.br> or <http://www.isicons.org>) for the consciousness to have a global view of themselves.

**Validity.** The greater the range and number of techniques applied in identifying strongtraits, the greater the reliability of the results compiled. However, the experiment is valid if one performs, for example, the following 3 techniques: personal list, autobiographical analysis of strongtraits, and heterocriticism.

**Grouping.** After the application of techniques, enumerate all the strongtraits listed, grouping and enumerating the number of times the same strongtrait appears.

**Johari.** From the compilation of data from several conscientiometric techniques it is possible to organize strongtraits using the Johari Window (FRITZEN, 1978) (Table 1).



Table 1 - Johari Window for Strongtraits

<p><b>A</b></p> <p>Strongtraits in accordance present in the personal list and in heterocriticism.</p>	<p><b>B</b></p> <p>Strongtraits present in the list of heterocriticism and not in the personal list.</p>
<p><b>C</b></p> <p>Strongtraits present in the personal list and not present in heterocriticism.</p>	<p><b>D</b></p> <p>Strongtraits identified by the analysis of facts, such as the Personal Inventory or by the Conscienciogram and that were not present in the personal list of in the list of others.</p>

**Use.** The strongtraits in use are probably in the quadrants A and B, the first being assumed by the person and the second not.

**Idleness.** Idle or underutilized strongtraits can be in the quadrants C or D, as they may have been assumed, but no one noticed them due to not being used, or they were used but no longer are.

**Step 2: Consciously using strongtraits.**

**Challenges.** Having a list of strongtraits, the person must make a schedule or program to use them, for example, in the 3 following ways, in alphabetic order:

1. **Intellectuality.** If the researcher recognizes that they are underutilizing their intellectual capacity, or that they do not feel secure regarding a strongtrait, they need to get out of their comfort zone. Teaching new subjects requires further study; or investing in new and more advanced research, with greater intellectual challenges, are examples of how to test their capacity.
2. **Leadership.** In the case where leadership is an underutilized strongtrait, assuming the coordination, for example, of a collective or research group, is a way of exercising the use of this capacity.
3. **Self-exposure.** For the researcher to exercise communicability, they should be present and ask questions in scientific events. This is needed to increase self-exposure outside of their sphere of control, away from the classroom. The researcher will find that nothing bad will happen and their synaptic network will reorganize with the new information.
4. **Adaption.** The challenges each researcher needs will depend on which strongtraits are idle or underutilized. Adjusting the coping level depends on self-experimentation, and there is no known formula to determine which is the best for each individual.

**Step 3: Self-overcoming.**

**Process.** Self-overcoming is a process, not something that happens in one day. What is important is continuous self-research and in the case of the bearer of the *Impostor Syndrome* the need to always verify one's satisfaction with self-performances.

**Challenges.** Determining new challenges, continuously realizing self-experiments to verify the limit of your capacity can be a prophylaxis against this psychopathology relapsing.

## **SELF-EXPERIMENT**

**Self-experimentation.** In the process of researching herself, the author, after performing literature researches and preparing techniques, started the practical process. In the case of the *Impostor Syndrome* self-experiments it is important to reframe beliefs and, based on facts, allow synaptic reorganization to occur.

**1<sup>st</sup> Step.** The first step of research performed led to the recognition of the following strongtraits necessary in academic life:

1. Intellectuality.
2. Written communicability.
3. Verbal communicability.
4. Determination.
5. Didacticism.
6. Versatility.

**2<sup>nd</sup> Step.** After identifying the strongtraits, the next step was the conscious use of some of them, keys in academic life and volunteering, as shown below:

1. **Communicability.** Voluntary teaching in Conscientiology was a technique used to assume the strongtrait of verbal communicability.
2. **Didacticism.** Sitting selective tests to lecture in a public university.
3. **Intellectuality.** With the objective of assuming intellectuality, the author started to expose herself in public debates and to submit more articles to scientific events.
4. **Leadership.** Assuming an area of coordination in volunteering was the way to exercise the strongtrait of leadership, which was underutilized.

**3<sup>rd</sup> Step.** The evidence of self-overcoming came when the author sat an examination to teach in a public university in an area she considered, previously, impossible to lecture due to considering it extremely difficult. In the process of this examination, and subsequent approval, use of these strongtraits became clear:

1. **Intellectuality.** A level of intellectuality was required to study a new area for the examination.
2. **Written communicability.** Success in the competition with a written examination is a fact that proves the written communicability is at a good level.

3. **Determination.** The time dedicated and the other activities that were stopped for months proved the determination of this author.
4. **Verbal communicability and didacticism.** Success in the examination process that included a didactic test is a fact that proves the possession of the strongtraits of verbal communicability and didacticism.

**Maintenance.** Maintenance of the self-overcoming of the *Impostor Syndrome* occurs by little by little, gradually accepting new challenges within the university and verifying the results.

## V. FINAL ARGUMENTS

**Optimism.** The overcoming of a pathology is a process that can take years, but it is necessary to be optimistic to overcome the *Impostor Syndrome*, as evolution does not occur in leaps. There are phases of apparent stagnation, which may only be “taking a breath” to continue investing in self-overcoming and later remission.

**Consequence.** Inner peace comes gradually, in increasingly long periods, as the result of the recognition of the proper use of strongtraits and the dedramatization of weaktraits.

**Waste.** Consciousnesses can spend a lifetime searching for external tools to evolve, when, in fact, the best and most adequate are the strongtraits they have.

**Unawareness.** Ignorance of oneself leads the consciousness to ignore the strengths they have to overcome crises. Because of this it takes too long, when it is possible to change this faster if strongtraits are used.

**Academia.** Life in Academia is very stressful, there is no need to worsen the situation with a distorted and pessimistic view due to beliefs that are not based in reality.

**Waste.** It is a waste if a scientist does not use all the scientific and methodological knowledge available to know themselves and accelerate their own evolution.

**Reflections.** In the search for self-understanding a lot of reflection must be done:

1. **Existence.** What is this life here on Planet Earth for?
2. **Mesology.** Why did I have to be born in this family?
3. **Multiexistentiality.** Where does the religiosity of people with non-religious education come from? Is it possible that a previous existence was where the religious trait was imprinted? Is there proof that previous lives did not occur?
4. **Multidimensionality.** Are there other beings in other dimensions influencing our lives? What proves that these beings or dimensions do not exist?

**Abundance.** For a scientist, who is curious by nature, self-research represents a wilderness of questions awaiting answers. In the universe of self-researchology there are many hypothesis to be raised, tested and analyzed.

**THE DOCTOR-TEACHER, ALTHOUGH HAVING A HIGH INTELLECTUAL CAPACITY, IGNORES THE ESSENTIAL: SELF-RESEARCH. THE HIGH INCIDENCE OF THE IMPOSTOR SYNDROME IN ACADEMIA IS A REFLEX OF THIS PARADOX, THE SCIENTIST DOES NOT APPLY DISBELIEF.**

**Questionology.** Do you, researcher, feel below the expectations of others? Is this feeling based on facts or on “speculations”?

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