

SUPERVISION

JIM HOLLOWAY

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Paradoxically, I'm not faking anything when I know, and my supervisor knows, that I'm making myself up as I go along



Jim Holloway is a senior accredited counsellor and supervisor, a Cambridge Supervision Training Associate, a co-author of *Practical Supervision: how to become a supervisor for the helping professions* (JKP 2014) and a member of the Independent Supervisors Network.

jim@cambridgecounselling.co.uk

What does 'imposter syndrome' mean to you? It's a phrase I hear from time to time in supervision, usually spoken with a knowing smile or a wry laugh, as if we're all very familiar with it and no further comment is needed. Well, I'm not so sure. I think there's something valuable wrapped up in the throwaway remark – something tricky, perhaps, but important to get hold of.

I've watched a couple of TED talks about imposter syndrome and there were odd ripples of laughter coming from the audience. People were presumably recognising aspects of themselves in the description of the syndrome's make-up, and probably experiencing relief – like I was – that others were finding some humour in it too. But, as the psychological literature* shows, feeling like a fraud really isn't funny. In fact, chronic sufferers of the condition don't actually feel like a fraud, they sincerely believe they *are* fraudulent, and live in dread of being found out and publicly exposed. And here's the painful irony: they suffer the internal torment of this private fear while being seen by colleagues as highly competent, accomplished and successful. All evidence of being well regarded only adds to the hidden shame of the individual in the grip of the syndrome.

The 'imposter' phenomenon manifests in supervision in different ways. Not all of us experience its emotional impact as strongly as described above, and some of us might even believe ourselves psychologically immune to the syndrome's embrace. But, in practice, I reckon almost everybody dances around its edges – nimbly or clumsily (or both, in my case, I think). How can we detect and discuss these various moves we make as we encounter the imposter within? Whether you're sitting in the supervisee's or the supervisor's chair, the supervisory frame is surely the best place to catch yourself in the act, so to speak.

What's helpful in this respect is to engage with the notion of 'pseudocompetency'. You might find the word rather provocative, but it needn't be used judgmentally. The essence of the concept is this: when you or I are consciously pseudocompetent in the role of supervisee or supervisor, we're acting as if we are competent in order to become more competent. That's the most lenient interpretation of the notorious 'fake it to make it' strategy. I see it this way: paradoxically, I'm not faking anything when I know, and my supervisor knows, that I'm making myself up as I go along. Honest competence is acquired through the experience of being honestly

pseudocompetent. So far, so good, you might think – it sounds OK to be a transparent imposter. But there are snags.

We can imagine all kinds of impostering that could cause unwanted trouble. I'd say there are three that seem typical: the 'Complacent Imposter' – the one who knowingly keeps on pretending to be competent without feeling the crucial urge to become genuinely competent; the 'High Status Imposter' – the one who believes they will never become as competent as their peers but has too much to lose to admit it; and the 'False Imposter' – the one who has become truly competent without realising it. In all three cases, with the last being perhaps the most common and the least excruciating, the practitioner could become permanently stuck in an awkward state of pseudocompetency.

In the context of supervision, it's important to note that reflecting on what type of imposter you might be is not simply about identifying a lack of competence in certain areas. That's a different exercise. Likewise, you're not merely pointing out your known skills gaps or learning edges. What you're doing is naming, claiming and boldly welcoming the part of you who knows themselves to be a professional fake. If it's embarrassed at first to emerge from the wings, then so be it – you won't die of shame. Let's respectfully invite this phoney part to dare to take centre stage, demonstrate its clever actor's tricks, and hear what it has to say. We can be pretty certain there's a vital energetic charge around it that wants expression.

To embrace your secret imposter openly in supervision, you might need to call up some extra courage – or perhaps just make sure your sense of humour is alive and kicking. The nervous laughter that seems to flicker around any mention of imposter syndrome is there for a good reason. If we can let that deepen into a belly laugh, we're doing great work. ●

**The text I've found most useful is Petrūska Clarkson's The Achilles Syndrome (Element Books, 1994). As the title suggests, the ancient Greek tale of the godlike hero and his famously vulnerable heel is a recurrent theme in the book, but Clarkson keeps things down to earth and explanatory, addressing the reader throughout and offering practical, therapeutic suggestions to undo and overcome the syndrome – and she makes specific references to counselling and supervision too. (The Achilles Syndrome was republished by Vega in 2003 as How to Overcome Your Secret Fear of Failure.)*