

Permission to Be Human: Impostor Syndrome in Early Career Professionals



By Chris Perrigan

For many early career legal professionals, success is defined by survival, a good grade is dismissed as luck, and a positive review becomes a sigh of relief, not accomplishment. In law school, I recall avoiding asking legitimate questions for fear of sounding incompetent. As a young lawyer, I've shied away from new opportunities to handle a hearing, a deposition, or cross examination of a witness. Even if you muster the strength to take on a new challenge, negative nervous energy and doubt can turn into sleepless nights of endless preparation to compensate for a perceived inadequacy. Whether it's graduating law school, passing the bar exam, or attaining some form of career success, many of us repeatedly fail to give ourselves credit. Instead, success is characterized as fraudulent, or "faking it until making it."

This psychological condition, known as impostor syndrome, is experienced by many law students and young lawyers alike. This should come as no surprise—lawyers are trained perfectionists and competitors, which happen to be two symptoms of impostor syndrome. Law school trains the brain to be an expert "issue spotter" with the ability to critically analyze and deduce fact and law. Young lawyers are then trained to become masters of detail, identifying opponent's weak arguments, and perfecting writing skills. Competitiveness intensifies perfectionist tendencies. Law school creates a competitive environment that pits students against each other through curved class rankings and competitive recruiting. Later on, young lawyers are surrounded by high performers, evaluated constantly, and often given limited feedback from partners. While perfectionism and competitiveness are indeed key traits to becoming an experienced and successful attorney, they often operate as a double-edged sword by worsening impostor syndrome tendencies. For example, in a competitive legal environment, it is easy to assume that everyone else understands more, works faster than you, or belongs more fully. Young lawyers especially become their own worst enemy by scrutinizing their own work product, second guessing creative solutions, and over-working themselves to prove worth.

Impostor syndrome symptoms left unchecked can lead to professional consequences. It can discourage asking questions or seeking clarification from partners in exchange for spending hours going down a rabbit hole. Unattainable expectations and extreme competitiveness results in poor work product, little rest and recovery, and ultimately burnout.

There are two ways legal professionals can stifle the effects of impostor syndrome—reframing negative mindsets to growth mindsets and trusted mentorship. Law students and

young lawyers should strive to reframe their mindset as to what being a successful lawyer looks like. Not knowing everything does not mean incompetence but is rather an opportunity to learn. New challenges should not be met with fear of failure, but as exciting opportunities to grow. It is important to give yourself permission to allow for this mindset. It is ok to ask "dumb" questions, or step into an uncomfortable position despite fear of the outcome. As Wayne Gretzky famously said, "You miss 100% of the shots you don't take" and having a positive growth mindset can give you the confidence to take those shots head on and avoid the impostor syndrome trap.

Law firms and experienced lawyers also play a valuable role in addressing impostor syndrome through mentorship. Mentorship is not simply demanding resilience and toughness from young lawyers without addressing the accompanying negative psychological components. Good mentorship creates space for associates to ask questions, receive meaningful feedback, and build a relationship outside of client matters. Good mentorship fosters confidence in young lawyers to continue to grow into their practice. For example, at my firm, associates are assigned a mentor, a shareholder within the firm, to meet monthly and discuss anything from formal matters to general life experiences. On many occasions, I have been surprised at how relatable my mentor's experiences felt to my own, despite our decades difference of professional experience.

Addressing impostor syndrome through these methods should not be mistaken for promoting lower standards. To the contrary, the legal profession demands confidence and tenacity, and eliminating the self-doubt and the fear of failure opens the doors for long-term growth. When we are granted permission to be human by ourselves and those more experienced—to learn openly and make mistakes within reason and without fear of exposure—we become better advocates and better colleagues.

Chris Perrigan, Esq., is an associate attorney at Lewis, Longman & Walker, P.A., in its St. Petersburg Office. He is a member of the firm's Administrative, Civil and Appellate practice group and Environmental and Natural Resources Law practice group. Chris is a graduate of Florida State University College of Law and is a member of the St. Pete Bar Young Lawyers Section. In his pastime he enjoys playing tennis and exploring St. Pete with his wife, Katharine Perrigan, and miniature dachshund, Roger.