

# Imposter syndrome is common among high achievers in med school

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Imposter syndrome is a considerable mental health challenge to many throughout higher education. It is often associated with depression, anxiety, low self-esteem and self-sabotage and other traits. Researchers

at the Sidney Kimmel Medical College at Thomas Jefferson University wanted to learn to what extent incoming medical students displayed characteristics of imposter syndrome, and found that up to 87% of an incoming class reported a high or very high degree of imposter syndrome.

"Distress and mental health needs are critical issues among medical students," says Susan Rosenthal, MD, lead author of the study published in the journal *Family Medicine*. "This paper identifies how common imposter syndrome is, and the [personality traits](#) most associated with it, which gives us an avenue to address it."

Medical students nationwide report alarming rates of depression, anxiety and burnout. Identifying and intervening to support psychological well-being in these learners is a continuing challenge, especially among first year [medical students](#).

Dr. Rosenthal and her colleagues examined imposter syndrome, which is defined as inappropriate feelings of inadequacy among high achievers, using a validated survey tool called the Clance Imposter Phenomenon (IP) Scale. Of the 257 students who completed the survey, 87% of students who reported high levels of imposter syndrome, were more likely to show an even higher degree of imposter syndrome at the end of their first year. They also found that students' higher IP scores were associated with lower scores for self-compassion, sociability, self-esteem and higher scores on neuroticism/anxiety. Therefore, a high CIP score among entering students may be an indicator of future risk for experiencing [psychological distress](#) during medical school.

"Imposter syndrome is a malleable personality construct, and is therefore responsive to intervention," says Dr. Rosenthal, who is also the medical college's associate dean for Student Affairs. "Supportive feedback and collaborative learning, mentoring by faculty, academic support,

individual counseling and group discussions with peers are all helpful. For many students, the most powerful first step in addressing and ameliorating imposter syndrome is normalizing this distorted and maladaptive self-perception through individual sessions with faculty and mentored small-group discussions with peers."

It is of interest to note that the students in this study the medical college's Class of 2020 were exposed to the traditional medical school curriculum. The following year, Jefferson introduced an innovative new curriculum, called JeffMD. Dr. Rosenthal and colleagues plan to compare the rates of imposter syndrome in students exposed to the novel curriculum. The new JeffMD curriculum emphasizes [collaborative learning](#) with a faculty mentor and a small group of students. The researchers hope, and will test whether this change in the learning environment can ameliorate feelings of imposterism.

**More information:** Susan Rosenthal et al, Persistent Impostor Phenomenon Is Associated With Distress in Medical Students, *Family Medicine* (2021). [DOI: 10.22454/FamMed.2021.799997](https://doi.org/10.22454/FamMed.2021.799997)

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