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Becoming a More Confident Librarian: Practical and Spiritual Steps for Battling Imposter Phenomenon



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ABSTRACT

New librarians often feel as though they have something to prove. This desire can lead to feelings of inadequacy and failure in the workplace that manifest as anxiety and fear. The idea that someone is a fraud or only succeeding by luck is called Imposter Phenomenon or Imposter Syndrome. As early career instruction librarians, the authors set out to find tools for dealing with their Imposter Phenomenon. This paper outlines faith-based tools like exercise, counseling, and prayer for managing Imposter Phenomenon. Practical tools such as professional development, mentoring, and communities of practice are explained as solutions for lessening the effects of Imposter Phenomenon.

Keywords: Imposter Syndrome, Imposter Phenomenon, failure, instruction librarian, counseling, exercise, mentoring, prayer, professional development, communities of practice

Have you ever felt inadequate as a librarian? Librarians are often required to fulfill many roles for which they are not trained, which can lead to emotions like anxiety, fear, and stress. These emotions may be associated with Imposter Phenomenon. Imposter Phenomenon (IP), often called Imposter Syndrome (IS), was initially discovered by Pauline Rose Clance and Suzanne Imes in 1978. In simplest terms, IP is “a condition in which people believe they are not worthy of success and have a persistent belief in their lack of intelligence, skills or competence” (Hibberd, 2019,

p. 29). In addition, IP is typically exhibited as either overworking or procrastination (Clance & Imes, 1978; see also Clark et al., 2014; Hutchins & Rainbolt, 2017; Rakestraw, 2017; Slank, 2019). Since those with IP feel like they are (a) imposters, (b) fooling everyone, or (c) attributing success to external factors, they tend to work more than necessary, or they will put off doing work because they can then blame failure on time (Rakestraw, 2017).

Early in their careers, the authors of this article found themselves experiencing fear and anxiety related to impostorism. In an attempt to lessen the thoughts and emotions of IP, they began researching and found they were not alone. In the research, they found mainly secular solutions and explanations for IP. However, as Christian librarians, there is a need to work through thoughts and emotions related to impostorism with a faith-based lens. Thus a discussion on faith-based tools for battling IP arose. Although the Bible does not specifically address IP, Paul tells us in Philippians 4:6-8, “don’t worry about anything, but in everything through prayer and petition with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God... whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable – if there is any moral excellence and if there is any praise – dwell on these things” (*Holman Christian Standard Bible [HCSB]*, 2003).¹ Christians are also admonished to think on godly things because out of the heart and mind our actions flow (Proverbs 4:23). The authors concluded that by taking their thoughts captive and focusing on Christ through practices like exercise, counseling, and prayer, they could minimize the effects of IP with a faith-based lens. On a practical note, the authors also found it beneficial to deal with combat IP and anxiety by building confidence in their skills as librarians through professional development, mentorship, and communities of practice.

Faith-Based Tools

Caring for the Body – Amber’s Perspective

Our body and mind are inseparable; what happens in our mind will affect our body and vice versa. As Strain (2019) explains, “that which occupies your mind is what shapes who you are and how you live” (p. 90). The things we focus on impact our bodies and our actions. This section describes how we can use exercise to refocus our minds on godly truths and replace the lies of IP.

Those with IP often believe they are not good enough or that they are failures. However, the Bible teaches that God is sovereign and “works together all things for the good of those who love God” (Romans 8:28). Thus, one way I (Amber) challenge the negative thoughts and feelings of IP is through applying Philippians 4:6-8 and thinking on true, honorable, and right things. Morning workouts or any

1 Unless otherwise noted, all biblical citations will be from the Holman Christian Standard Bible.

physical activity is a place to meditate and think on godly things. Exercising allows space to be mindful of our God-given bodies and all that they can do. I also use exercise as an opportunity to pray and be thankful for all things. Each morning I commit my anxieties of the day to Christ and remind myself of truths such as God's sovereignty and love found in Jeremiah 29:11 and Jesus' encouragement that God cares for His people in Luke 12:22-34.

Apart from refocusing the mind on godly thoughts, research on the connection between exercise and mental health shows that exercise increases mood and energy while lessening anxiety (Amen, 2009). Additional research from Phillips and Sime's (2021) book indicates physically active people are less reactive to stress. I have experienced these benefits from exercise by being more alert and focused at work. Although stress is not eliminated by exercising, researchers have found that "regular aerobic exercise attenuates cortisol, epinephrine, and norepinephrine responses and modulates other stress correlates" (Phillips & Sime, 2021, p. 608); in short, exercise improves the ability to handle stress.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2018) recommends adults participate in 150 to 300 minutes of moderate physical activity per week (p. 3). Physical activity and exercise can come in many forms including group classes or primarily self-led activities like running. The key is finding an activity you enjoy, so you will stay active. Try different types of activities and times of day until you find one or more that you enjoy. An important thought to keep in mind in the context of exercise is showing ourselves grace; the IP tendencies toward perfection may lead to comparing yourself to others or being too hard on yourself if you miss a workout. Thus, remembering to focus on the godly truth that we are all made in the image of God for unique purposes can help you let go of perfectionism and comparison in exercise routines.

Our bodies were created in the image of God and to do the good works He has called us to do, so we need to take care of our earthly bodies. Our care for them is an act of worship and gratitude to God. Physical activity provides time to refocus your thoughts on "whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable" (Philippians 4:8), as well as providing a boost in mood which will help manage feelings of IP.

Caring for the Mind - Savannah's Perspective

Coming into a new position can be overwhelming and intimidating, especially if we do not have any previous experience in that type of position. However thrilling and exciting a new position can seem, there can be a sense of overwhelming anxiety that comes with it. This can lead to experiencing stress that can manifest in a multitude of ways such as perfectionism and automatic thoughts which are symptoms of IP.

Rather than tackling these symptoms alone, talking to a professional therapist can help an individual get to the root of the issue and deal with IP and its symptoms.

When I (Savannah) came into my current position, I was required to give instruction sessions to students and produce scholarship, though I had little experience of either. Within a year, I had found a rhythm of giving instruction sessions and began establishing relationships with professors. Yet I did not believe the sessions were good enough. Rakestraw (2017) suggests that perfectionism is a trait found in those who exhibit IP; victims of IP can also exhibit an intense fear of failure. When an individual does not feel adequate in a position outside of their comfortable skill set, they struggle to grasp a sense of confidence that allows them to do their job well (Hibberd, 2019). Hibberd (2019) also suggests that “perfectionism comes from pinning your identity on your achievements” (p. 157). Leahy and Woodruff (2021) mention that “one source of stress is comparing oneself to an unrealistic standard – often of perfection” (p. 496). Employees, especially new employees, can often compare themselves to colleagues who are more established, giving them unrealistic expectations of perfection and more stress (Leahy & Woodruff, 2021, p. 496). One way of battling IP is by talking with a mental health professional either in a one-on-one meeting or in a group setting (Rakestraw, 2017). By doing so, you can identify the issue and learn ways to fight it. A client can meet with a trained individual either in a group or individual setting to receive support and combat IP. While accomplishing achievements can be a good thing, our identity is not found in our achievements. As we read in Psalm 139:13a, “I will praise you because I have been remarkably and wonderfully made” (*Holman Christian Standard Bible*, 2003). Our identity is found in Christ, and by knowing that, we can strive to become better librarians.

Another symptom of IP that causes undue stress on librarians, or any employee, is automatic thoughts. According to Beck et al. (1979 as cited by Leahy & Woodruff, 2021), automatic thoughts are “thoughts that occur spontaneously and that are often accompanied by sadness, anger, or anxiety” (p. 498). These thoughts are sometimes called negative thoughts or anxious negative thoughts. Automatic thoughts can manifest in several ways such as mind reading (assuming what others think of you), unfair comparisons (comparing yourself to someone else and creating unrealistic expectations of yourself), and blaming (blaming another person for your negative feelings and not working to change yourself) (Leahy & Woodruff, 2021). Though there are many more, these automatic thoughts can cause a great deal of stress that can hinder a person’s ability to perform their job well. To relieve the stress that comes with these automatic thoughts, you must resist them which requires retraining thought processes. While it can be accomplished on your own, a helpful way to do so is by getting help from a trained professional who will use a wide range of techniques to help (Leahy & Woodruff, 2021).

The burden of perfectionist tendencies and negative, automatic thoughts can affect anyone in their career., It weighed heavily on me (Savannah) at the beginning of my new position. When I started seeing a professional therapist for cognitive behavioral therapy, I learned a few things that helped me acclimate to my new position and reduce IP. The therapist gave me exercises in the form of worksheets that allowed me to write down the negative thoughts and retrain my thought process. These worksheets allowed me to delve deeper into the thought process that occurred during the tough moments of my struggles and see how I could stop the thoughts. The therapist also explained the cycle of perfectionism and how it causes additional but unnecessary stress. Though there were no exercises that dealt with perfectionism, talking with a professional therapist allowed me to understand why I felt the importance of being perfect at my new job. Talking with a professional therapist has many benefits that allow people to deal with many issues in their lives such as IP. For me, the greatest benefit of talking with a therapist was that it allowed me to take care of my mind and create a healthy mental state where I can enjoy the life I was given by God.

Caring for the Soul - Ruth's Perspective

How am I (Ruth) as a librarian supposed to give 100% at work if I am exhausted spiritually? In reality, it is impossible to do a job without nourishing your soul. It is more than just going to church but actively pursuing a relationship with Christ through reading scripture, praying, receiving spiritual teachings, engaging in discipleship, and fellowshiping with the body. The feelings of IP manifest as fear of failure for me, even after being a librarian for five years. God knew before the creation of the world that humankind would struggle with their flesh to overcome doubt, fear, anxiety, and shame (Genesis 3; 1 Samuel 24). I use my intimate prayer life to fight off my fear of failure. The intertwining of our personal and spiritual journey affects our experiences. How I approach situations and circumstances stems from my faith. After Hurricane Michael hit in October 2018 and destroyed the library building where I worked, what had already been a rough situation only worsened. It became a nightmare! I went into survival mode. The stress made me physically ill, and I could not sleep at night. I prayed and prayed about (a) what to do, (b) where I would move, (c) the people I would meet, (d) finding a home church and community, and (e) leaving the current job situation. I did not want to be desperate, but I was. Always fully trusting in the sovereignty of God proved difficult at times for me.

During this time I constantly wrestled with significant symptoms of IP, such as being a fraud, feeling inadequate, battling perfectionist tendencies, and fearing failure. It was there in those times of despair that I rediscovered the importance of prayer. For it is not just a mode of communication with God, but a lifeline to hang onto through the highs and lows. I prayed for Jesus to give me strength each week and for

His guidance in making decisions. Our Father gives us lessons to learn throughout life and He has done so multiple times in the Bible with David, Elijah, Miriam, and Moses (2 Samuel 11-12:23; 1 Kings 19:1-9; Numbers 12; Exodus 4:10-17). Jesus taught His disciples how to pray using the Lord's Prayer. Prayer has always been a mode of communication for believers as memorization of the Lord's Prayer was important to first-century Christians and remains so today (Reid, 2004, p. 1121). As prayer strengthens one's relationship with God, the believer is transformed through their relationship with Christ and will see themselves spiritually different. Through biblical examples, God taught me to lean completely and solely on Him. Thus, I put my complete trust in God's sovereignty as I soon realized that nothing was in my control.

Coming to the realization that I am made in God's image dispels the lies of the enemy and combats belief in IP. Trusting in the Lord keeps my mind in perfect peace because my focus is on Him: "You will find the mind that is dependent on You in perfect peace, for it is trusting in You" (Isaiah 26:3). Howard (2010) comments on this verse saying, "trust is the defining trait of those who depend on God" (annotation to Isaiah 26:3, p. 1171). When I allow IP feelings to invade my thoughts, I dishonor Jesus by not trusting Him.

Christ tells the Church not to send themselves into battle naked. By putting on the armor of God (Ephesians 6:10-18), I can defeat Satan's lies. Christians like myself come prepared daily to fight anxiety, IP, fear, guilt, shame, and a variety of other negative emotions by wearing the armor of God. Every morning on the way to work, I pray and put on the armor of God. Prayer gives me peace and lessens my anxiety about feeling inadequate because I share my thoughts, fears, worries, and hopes with Christ.

Fellowshipping with other believers nurtures the soul so Christians can pour out into those around them. My Sunday school class has provided me with special relationships and connected me to the body of Christ. My discipleship group nourishes my soul so I can pour into the lives of my students. When meeting with students I always encourages them in their studies because I do not know what is going on in their personal lives. Sometimes students share and provide me the opportunity to talk about faith, God, and prayer.

Since I am able to cope with IP and gain confidence as a librarian with daily prayer and scripture reading, I can better serve my students. The faith-based tools of exercise, counseling, and prayer can help the Christian librarian integrate faith and practice. These tools, which focus on the body, the mind, and the soul, allow the authors to tackle IP but also remind us to keep our eyes on God as we continue in our careers.

Practical Tools

Professional Development - Savannah's Perspective

Continual learning for professional development is essential for librarians to keep up with the latest trends and news in library science. Additionally, it is a way for new librarians to gain education that reduces IP (Rakestraw, 2017). While current trends and technology can advance the progress of libraries, they can also add to the stress librarians experience. Knibbe-Haanstra (2008) mentions that reference librarians have been, and still are, faced with finding innovative ways of improving reference services through new technologies. Librarians must be dedicated to lifelong learning and find opportunities for continuing education to face these challenges.

As Flatley and Weber (2004) discuss, joining professional organizations is not the only avenue of continuing education for librarians, but it is an important resource that librarians need to utilize at any stage in their career. Additional research by Garrison and Cramer (2021) indicates professional organizations are beneficial because of programming, which includes workshops and training, along with networking and presentation opportunities. These organizations vary by level (i.e., national, regional, state), size, or religious affiliation while also having different resources available. Regardless of the organization, the goal of joining a professional organization is to receive support and access opportunities for continuing education.

In my (Savannah) early career as a librarian, I joined both national and state/regional level organizations with the hope of advancing my career through access to classes, webinars, and conferences. The difference between the two organizations was the size and infrastructure of each which impacted the degree of focus on the field. In Garrison and Cramer's study (2021), librarians indicated the value of smaller, specialized (even local) organizations was greater due to the ability to have more focused and defined opportunities than national organizations. I have found both levels of organizations to be beneficial due to the varying opportunities presented.

Continuing education is an important facet of librarianship. It allows librarians like me to keep up with the constant change and new trends within the field while also networking with other librarians. Librarians must make a concentrated effort not only to join professional organizations but also to take advantage of available resources to grow as professionals.

Mentorship - Ruth's Perspective

Mentorship is more than a relationship; it is a safe space where ideas are shared and acted upon. Sometimes a mentor will not be the best fit, as starting a goal-based relationship with an individual not previously known to the mentee can be difficult. If a mentor-mentee relationship is a flop, try again and reevaluate the circumstances and environment. Other times a mentorship can grow out of another type of

relationship (i.e., employer–employee, casual acquaintance, or existing friendship). These specific relationships can last a certain predetermined length of time or develop into longer relationships. The context of the environment for mentorships can change based on many variables. These relationships are unique and built on various foundations.

While attending Asbury University as an undergraduate, I (Ruth) interacted with several librarians, both direct and indirect supervisors, and they all steered me into the librarianship field. These mentors provided a constructive environment for me to explore and work in the different departments of the library. As I neared the end of my LIS program, I approached several veteran librarians for advice on job interviews, resumes/cover letters, and navigating the library science field. These relationships had specific goals from the beginning with a clear ending in sight. Shifting from a graduate student to a professional librarian during my first year proved difficult as I found myself floundering to find my footing. As I felt inadequate and struggled to find a work-life balance, my feelings of IP heightened. During these early years, I relied on established relationships to validate myself as an early career librarian.

In the fall of 2019, I signed up for the ACRL Distance & Online Learning Section (DOLS) Beta Mentorship Program. At the start of the program, I was in the process of moving to a new job and state. Although a global pandemic had begun, it was truly God’s timing as I started my new position and mentorship program, not knowing if either would be successful. The developing mentor-mentee relationship became an unexpected lifeline for me and my mentor as we both navigated new and different levels of online instruction and embedded librarianship. What started as a six-month relationship has unexpectedly transformed into a lasting friendship. My mentor’s confidence in my ability as a librarian has alleviated many of my feelings of IP. Positive mentor-mentee relationships throughout the years have equipped me to be an exceptional librarian and instructor.

Communities of Practice – Amber’s Perspective

Communities of practice (CoP) combine aspects of professional development and mentoring; however, they are distinctly different. CoP need a domain, community, and practice. In other words, CoP “are groups of people who share a concern or passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly” (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015, p. 1; see also Archer et al., 2021; Bilodeau & Carson, 2014/2015; Sobel et al., 2021). The group or community will “build relationships that enable them to learn from each other” (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015, p. 2). The group should have members who are practitioners looking to develop shared resources (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015). These groups can form organically when one person reaches out to others with

similar interests or domains, but CoP need nurturing. Members of the group need to meet regularly to share knowledge. In this way, CoP are similar to mentoring and professional development activities. CoP provide opportunities for peer-to-peer mentoring where more experienced and less experienced practitioners gain new insights and share ideas. Thus through CoP, Christian librarians can live out Proverbs 27:17, which states, “iron sharpens iron, and one man sharpens another.” Wilson (2018) explains we are all works in progress and wisdom grows in community (p. 287). Proverbs 27:17 and Wilson’s commentary show the benefits of community and support for Christian librarians participating in CoP.

Communities of practice can be helpful for everyone, especially for new librarians or those who are experiencing IP. Lundstrom et al. (2021) found many librarians with teaching anxiety will talk with colleagues about their struggles in CoP meetings. Their research noted CoP are a positive and constructive way to cope with anxiety which is often associated with IP (Lundstrom et al., 2021). CoP have no official hierarchy, which means everyone can contribute and learn from the group (Wegner et al., 2002). The trust and confidentiality of CoP make it a safe space to share challenges related to feelings of IP and seek assistance in managing it. Through the collective wisdom and experience of CoP members and the CoP support system, members with feeling of IP have a strong base for gaining confidence and handling stressful situations which can help mitigate the effects of IP. Those with IP can see their success as a by-product of the work a CoP put into solving a problem rather than attributing success to luck. I (Amber) experienced the benefits of CoP in an embedded librarian group started by Ruth. Through these meetings, I realized I was not alone in my struggles with embedded librarianship. Many librarians were “faking it till they made it;” I was not a fraud because I did not know everything. This community gave me support for handling doubt. The group shared ideas from multiple perspectives, adding to my toolkit for working with online students. The embedded librarian CoP provided support during the pandemic when more classes were online and helped me manage combat feelings of IP.

Communities of practice give new and experienced librarians a safe place to learn and grow. CoP can provide a support system for those experiencing IP through the collaborative problem-solving environment. Librarians with IP will gain confidence as they realize their peers of all experience levels are learning new things through trial and error. CoP are a great addition to a professional toolkit along with seeking out professional development opportunities and mentors and joining professional organizations.

Conclusion

Imposter Phenomenon or Imposter Syndrome does not have to be debilitating to our lives or careers. Using a faith-based worldview and practical tips, we can work

toward eliminating our feelings of impostorism, anxiety, and fear. Christ has called us to live a life free from fear, keeping our thoughts fixed on Him. As we mature in faith through exercise, counseling, and prayer, we can see ourselves as God's children and experience grace as we learn and grow. Increasing our knowledge of library science through professional development, mentorship, and communities of practice has helped us gain confidence as librarians. By implementing these faith-based and practical tools, the authors have become better librarians and reduced the grip of Imposter Phenomenon. †

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