

Episode 2 | The Upside of Imposter Syndrome

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The Joyful DVM PODCAST

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Imposter syndrome, what it is, why it happens, and the opportunity that exists when you recognize it. That's what we're talking about today in episode two. Welcome to the Joyful DVM podcast. I'm your host, veterinarian and certified life coach Cari Wise. Whether you're dealing with the challenges of vet med, struggling with self confidence, or you're just trying to figure out how to create a life and a career that you actually enjoy, you'll find encouragement, education, and empowering concepts you can apply right away. Let's get started.

Hello there, my friends. Let's talk about imposter syndrome and more specifically about the upside of imposter syndrome. Yep. You heard me right. We're talking about the upside of imposter syndrome. In order to understand the upside, we've first got to understand what imposter syndrome is in the first place.

And for some of you, you may not have heard that term before. Imposter syndrome is really a state of believing that you're a fraud. So what I mean by that is your achievements and your accomplishments, a lot of those you're believing are just an accident and they can be explained by things outside of you. So getting into your veterinary school, for example, you might say, well, yeah, but I worked really, really hard, probably harder than other people did. Or, I knew so and so, and that's why I got in. So those kinds of sentences in your mind, that kind of justify why you were able to accomplish things and it actually kind of give credit to things that have nothing to do with you.

In addition to that, imposter syndrome also comes with sentences and beliefs that you don't really know what you're doing. So underneath it all, you just kind of believe that you don't know what you're doing. And what's worse, somebody might figure it out. They might find out that you don't know what you're doing. And as a result, there's just a lot of pressure that comes when you're suffering from imposter syndrome.

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You've put all of this pressure on yourself because underneath it, you don't really believe that you're qualified to be doing whatever it is that you're doing. And you're terrified that somebody is going to find out about it. So why does it happen? It actually makes a lot of sense. If we'll take a few minutes to step back and consider why imposter syndrome gets created.

First of all, it's anchored in low self confidence, so low self confidence being the lack of believing that you can emotionally handle anything that comes your way. Self-confidence, on the other hand, is that willingness to experience any emotion, so being willing to put yourself in situations where you might feel uncomfortable. Those of us who suffer from low self confidence are not willing to do that.

We don't believe that we can emotionally handle that, and so we avoid the things that might put us in uncomfortable situations. This is compounded by a misunderstanding of what I call Emotional Normalcy. So, emotional normalcy is not "everybody's happy", but that's what a lot of us think is normal; that if you're happy, you're doing it right. We misunderstand that a hundred percent comfortable emotions is not the goal in life.

Actually, 50% of the time we're going to feel uncomfortable and that's okay. That's the way it's supposed to be. Life, the human experience, is 50 50 comfortable and uncomfortable emotions. It's supposed to be that way. It's like the emotional homeostasis if you will. And so if we can recognize that, we can start to understand that when we feel uncomfortable, it doesn't mean that we're doing something wrong. But when we have low self confidence, we don't even understand that normal emotional state is 50% comfortable, 50% uncomfortable. We're believing that a hundred percent comfortable feeling means you're doing it right and because we aren't experiencing a hundred percent comfortable emotion, we're doing it wrong. And, therefore, anytime we identify the potential for feeling uncomfortable, we're going to avoid it.

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That just creates more and more of the lack of belief in what we are able to do, what we're capable of. And so our confidence really suffers from that. We can't grow self confidence as long as we have these construed ideas about what emotional normalcy is. Then on top of that, another thing that helps to create this imposter syndrome, or foster it, is the negative self-talk and negative self-beliefs that we have.

So what is it that we're thinking and believing about ourselves? These are the sentences that run through our minds all the time and most of them, like they're so habitual, we don't even recognize that we're saying these things to ourselves. But we can start to become aware of them if we just recognize the types of sentences that really reinforce this negative self image that we have.

These sentences usually include phrases like I can't or I don't know how or I shouldn't. They could also include phrases like they know better than I do, how to whatever it is or they are better at and then whatever it is, so it's any kind of sentences that really paint yourself as less able than somebody else. That's the negative self talk and the negative self-belief and many of us just have these sentences in our minds that we just accept as truth.

You take that, you can see how that actually contributes, then, to low self confidence. The third component here that also contributes to the overall fostering of this imposter syndrome is just a normal neurologic function that we don't even know, like most of us don't even know occurs, and this function this neuroscientific principle if you will, is that your brain, when it's doing its normal brain thing, it's always looking for evidence to prove your thoughts true.

So your brain by design, just by the way that it works, it's always looking for the evidence of the things that you're thinking about. Now take a second and consider like maybe the last time you bought like a new car or a new

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pair of shoes or something like that and then all of a sudden you see those things everywhere. Why is that?

It's because you focused on those things with your mind and now your brain is bringing it into your reality. Those things were always there, but because you put focus on it, your brain is showing it to you. It's looking for evidence to prove your thoughts true. This was a great pair of shoes and now you see everybody's got them. That's evidence.

Yup. Those are great shoes. Look how many people have bought them. So it's very fascinating though because at the same time it only doesn't work, it doesn't only work in the positive for us. Our brain does this exact same thing with the not so helpful thoughts that we think. And so how this shows up is that we compare ourselves with others when we're believing that we're not enough.

When we're believing that we can't, we don't know how or that somebody else knows better. We compare ourselves with others and our brain will point out to us where the other people are better than we are, where they can do what we can't. This also gets reinforced by negative feedback, either real negative feedback like where you actually get some kind of performance evaluation, if from a work perspective. Or maybe you know, if you get a grade in a class, you look at that grade or that performance evaluation and if it's not positive, if it's not something that you can take pride in, then that becomes evidence that you're less than, that the negative self talk is true. Right? But also it's not just the tangible.

Quite honest because when those negative thoughts about yourself are so deeply seated, when you really are believing that you're less than, then even things that weren't very concrete as far as negative feedback become implied negative feedback. We literally start to interpret the words and actions of other people and things around us as if it is more evidence that we are less than and that we aren't doing it right.

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So you take those three things together, you take low self confidence, you take this history of negative self talk and negative self belief and then you couple those with the normal brain function of seeking evidence to prove your thoughts true; it makes perfect sense that you've created an amazing environment for imposter syndrome to grow. Once you get into veterinary practice, it's like on super speed and here's what's real:

The imposter syndrome that you identify once you get into veterinary practice did not start in veterinary practice. It started way before that except your coping mechanisms for it were better and so it didn't have as much of an emotional consequence. Looking back, if we think about how you were able to cope before, let's look at really going through school. So, I don't care if you want to look at veterinary school, tech school or you want to look even earlier than that high school, grade school, whatever.

If you have low self confidence and negative self belief, which you likely did and it was there, you also had like some tangible evidence of doing things right or doing it good enough that kept you going. Even though you might be believing that you're not a great student or that you're not as good as so and so at that subject you had your own assignments and tests that you completed and then you got a grade back, right? And the grade that you got was likely enough to keep you going because let's face it, many of us are overachievers and so we're working our tails off academically to get those A's to get those B's.

And so when we got that tangible evidence, even though we didn't really believe that we were good enough, we had the number or the letter grade to tell us that we were, and so it was a coping mechanism. We also had the ability to hide, so as embarrassed as we were, as bad as we felt about ourselves, we didn't ever have to share our achievements from an academic perspective, like we didn't have to show everybody else what grade we got.

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So even when we got those grades that weren't so wonderful, the ones that were just getting by, the ones that we believe weren't good enough, we didn't have to then paste them on our foreheads and show them to everybody else in our class. Like we could kind of like hide that and suffer with it on our own, shame ourselves about getting a C when we should have gotten an A, where if we were doing it right, we would've gotten an A where so-and-so got an A, but because you're just probably just believing, I may not even know that for sure.

We have that ability to hide is the point here. And so that's another coping mechanism. So when you quote unquote failed, you didn't fail publicly when you didn't meet your own expectations, you didn't do it in a public forum. And so those two things, the getting the tangible evidence through things like grades and then the ability to hide when you didn't, those were the coping mechanisms by which you were able to balance out that really low self confidence that was underlying and all those negative sentences that just kept going on and on and on in your mind.

But now you get into veterinary practice and guess what? There is no tangible means of success once you get out there, right? When you get out into veterinary practice, your brain though it doesn't know that it's still seeking evidence to prove whatever your thoughts are true. And it starts to feel really miserable in veterinary practice because we don't have any counterbalance mechanisms. We don't have those grades, if you will; those tangible success points to balance out the negative thoughts that we have about ourselves. So we try to create it. Like the brain is creative.

I have to give you that. Like the brain is going to get pretty scrappy on how it's going to try to maintain survival and so it's going to give you a mechanism by which to measure yourself. And what it does in veterinary practice is it takes the concept of happy clients and patients who respond to treatment, and it uses those as your tangible evidence of success.

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It uses those things to boost your confidence. It uses those things to create happy or positive emotions, but here's the deal. The downside of that is worse than what you experienced back in school. It's worse than getting a grade that you weren't happy with because the downside, which would be a patient that didn't respond to the treatment that you prescribed or that you assisted with or a client who was angry, the downside to that means that you fail. It means that you didn't do it right.

When you've used those things as your evidence of success, your markers of success, then if you don't achieve them, then not only have you failed you, you've also failed a client and you failed a patient, so the suffering is actually much worse than what we experienced on the negative side of this when we were in school because it's not just about us anymore.

When we have made our markers of success be things outside of us, then our failures, quote unquote failures, impact people beyond just us. You take that in a head space that is filled with all of that negative self talk and then you try to balance it, it's no wonder that we feel miserable. This is the height of imposter syndrome and from that comes more and more of the sentences of, you're not cut out to do this job. You shouldn't be doing this. You don't know what you're doing. Somebody's going to find out how unqualified you are.

All of those sentences are going to keep coming up and you're just going to see more evidence of it because that's just the neuroscience. Now, I didn't start this by telling you there is an upside to imposter syndrome and for us to be able to get there, we have to understand four basic neuroscientific principles. We've actually covered two of them already. The first one, just as a reminder, is that whole idea of emotional normalcy. Where normal is 50% uncomfortable emotion and 50% comfortable emotion. That is how it's supposed to work: 50% comfortable, 50% uncomfortable emotional homeostasis, if you will. We'd need both sides of it.

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The reason we need both sides of it is if we didn't know the opposite, we couldn't experience either one. If you didn't know sad, you wouldn't know happy. If you didn't know grief, then you wouldn't know love. In order to experience all of humanity and what we're supposed to as part of our human experience, we have to be able to experience both of those. By design that's why we do. And so just understanding emotional normalcy is the first neuroscientific principle.

The second neuroscientific principle is just that idea that your mind will go to work seeking evidence to prove your thoughts true. That's just how it works. That's just what the brain does, so it doesn't really matter whether you believe you're right or whether you believe you're wrong, you're going to find evidence either way. And so just seeing that and believing that concept, that'll give you a little bit of a freedom around why you've been so easily able to prove whatever it is that you're thinking. The brain is very good at that. Now we know.

The third one is really understanding where emotions come from in the first place. Emotions are not created by the things that happen around us or to us. They're not caused by the actions and words of other people. They're not created by things like work schedules and money in the bank and even patient outcomes. Emotions aren't created by any of those things. Emotions are only created by thoughts. Thoughts are just sentences in your mind. That's the only place that emotions are created a hundred percent of the time.

And this one, if you haven't heard this concept before, just give yourself a moment and I like to think back to the experience of getting a driver's license. So if you think back to that and consider like just really put yourself in that place and give yourself a minute to think back over that. Think about like the time you spent studying and then like when it got to be test day, you're going to do your driver's actual driving test day.

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Think about like that nervous anticipation that you had as you were going to the testing facility and then maybe like the sheer terror that you experienced when you were actually taking the test with that stranger sitting beside you, making little marks on a clipboard and then just like that worry that you probably experienced when you were waiting for the result.

And then when you found out that you passed how excited you were. If you give yourself just a minute to think back through that you can physiologically feel all of those different things right now. The only way that that is possible is if emotion is created by your thoughts and not by the experience itself. So we really can grip onto that as reality, what we can then realize is that we can actually change the way that we feel emotionally by changing or adjusting what we're thinking about.

And then the fourth neuroscientific principle that we need to kind of consider and embrace as well start to look at the upside of imposter syndrome is the physiologic response to the emotion. So when you feel the physiologic response, like how your body feels when you're experiencing an emotion, that intensity, the worst of it dissipates in about 90 seconds.

So just think about like when somebody jumps out from behind a door and scares you, like you're terrified and your heart races and all of that and you have a big physiologic reaction that's pretty immediate. But then in about 90 seconds it goes away. I think about like when you trip and you fall in public, heart rate goes up, your face is flushed, you're feeling terribly embarrassed, feels awful for about 90 seconds, and then it starts to go away.

And you think about it and it like still feels kind of awful, but by tomorrow you're probably laughing about it, right? So it takes about 90 seconds for the physiologic reaction to go away. If we can just wrap our mind around that, then what we can actually recognize is the worst of the worst of an emotion. It was over in about 90 seconds and we can stop trying to avoid it.

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So here's the upside that I keep talking about. Remember, imposter syndrome is caused by the combination of low self confidence, which is just the resistance of experiencing uncomfortable emotion. Low self confidence is the resistance to experiencing any uncomfortable emotion. Imposter syndrome is also caused by negative self talk repeated over time. So those sentences in our minds over time, we take those two things we recognize that's what causes imposter syndrome.

Now what we can see is that every time we're in the thick of it, every time our mind offers us the sentences, you're not good enough, you're not cut out to do this job, so and so's doing it better than you. We can actually use that as an alert, as an internal alert to remind us, no, no, those are just sentences.

Those are just thoughts. I only feel bad about this right now because of those thoughts and we can really start to embrace our opportunity to outgrow or grow beyond the imposter syndrome itself. We do this by becoming aware, becoming aware of what we are thinking and believing and then recognizing the impact of that. We do that by becoming willing, willing to experience the uncomfortable emotion on purpose.

Sometimes we do that by becoming determined, so determined to create what we believe about ourselves on purpose and ultimately we learn to manage our mindset because when we become curious students of our own thought patterns and we start to embrace our lives and our emotional state and realize that what we've created in our lives, what we have right now is not at the effect of the things that happen around us.

It's not at the effect of the things that people say and do and the way that patients respond to treatment. When we start to recognize that our emotional state is not dependent on any of those things and that truly our emotions are only created by our own thought patterns, then all of the opportunity in the world opens up. Then we can see the path to feeling

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better and better than that to creating a better life on the other side.

That is why I say imposter syndrome has an upside because once you understand what's happening, then as it happens again and it will happen again, you can use that not as evidence to prove that you're a failure, that you're not cut out for this, that you're a fraud, but rather as an indicator that it's an opportunity to become curious and to learn to believe new things about yourself, on purpose and ultimately create the future that you want intentionally.

To learn even more about how you can create the life you want on purpose, check out my free webinar@joyfuldvm.com forward slash webinar I'll go ahead and drop that link for you in the show notes. That's going to wrap it up for this episode. See you next time. Thanks for listening to the Joyful DVM podcast.

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