

Imposter Syndrome

Category: New Voices

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with a grade
of 47 percent...

According to a 2020 study, up to 82 percent of people experience imposter syndrome at some point in their lives. For some, the experience is fleeting; for others, it may hover in the background for a long time without ever being identified. That was the case with me.

Not many girls living in Pakistan get the opportunity to chase their ambitions as I have done. I was fortunate that my parents were more progressive than many: They always emphasized the importance of a woman's financial independence and made sure I embraced every learning opportunity. When I decided to pursue medicine, though, they were hesitant, knowing that it would be a long, bumpy road.

They weren't the only doubters: For as long as I could remember, everyone around me had questioned whether I was smart enough to pursue medicine. I'd never spent hours locked in my room studying. Nor was I the top student in class; that place was reserved for my (prodigy) best friend. I liked living a balanced life and pursuing other interests outside of class—a laid-back approach that people mistook for lack of discipline.

Despite their misgivings, I was determined to make it. I knew that medicine was my calling. I wanted to be remembered as someone who'd dedicated her life to this work, which I consider very noble. I wanted to touch other people's lives in a meaningful, positive way.

And so, to prepare properly for the MDCAT (Pakistan's Medical and Dental College Admission Test), I took a gap year.

It was tough going. All my friends had started their freshman year at college, while I was stuck at home studying, day in and day out. So many times, I wanted to quit.

I should just give up, an inner voice would say. Then I'd think about all the time and energy I'd spent to get to this point.

I can't give up now that I'm so close; I need to keep going, I'd tell myself. *It's like climbing a treacherous mountain: The only way out is forward.*

My acceptance letter, when it finally arrived, came as a big shock.

In Pakistan's rolling admission system, students are admitted throughout the semester. Fall classes had already begun, and December was nearly over, with one last group of acceptances still to be sent out.

I will never forget that New Year's Eve. Returning home from a party, I spotted a new email in my inbox: "Admission Offer Letter for MBBS Program." I did a double-take.

Is this happening? Somebody pinch me! Does this mean I'll never have to solve another math problem on an exam? Just kidding—that's not why I chose medicine! Well, not the only reason....

Eager for parental validation, I ran to my parents to tell them the news. I could swear I heard their sigh of relief that the long nightmare of my gap year was finally over.

Like many, I believed that getting into medical school is the hardest part of the process. I soon learned that it's merely a warm-up.

On my first day in class, I was lucky to be seated next to a bubbly, confident girl who was eager to show me the ropes. She told me all the dos and don'ts and gave me an overview of the subjects we were learning and the professors to watch out for.

We had our very first *viva voce* (oral exam) two weeks later. The students were divided into four groups, each assigned to a different teacher. My heart sank when I saw that my group had drawn a very strict professor, notorious for failing students.

We had four days to prepare. On the night before the test, I slept only twenty-five minutes and spent the rest of the time memorizing facts, forgetting them and doing it all over again. I knew that this test wouldn't count toward my final grade, but the thought of failing scared me to death. I'd never failed an exam and was determined not to start now.

Despite my best efforts, I emerged with a grade of 47 percent. I had failed.

I felt heartbroken—especially since I'd answered all the professor's questions.

How will I pass my finals if I couldn't even pass this tiny, inconsequential

test? I wondered, anguished.

What made it worse was that my new friends, who were in other groups, had passed. I felt so embarrassed.

Do they think I'm dumb? Maybe everyone who doubted my abilities was right: I don't belong here....

Once those voices started, it was hard to shut them out.

I spent the next two months studying almost nonstop, leaving minimal time to sleep and eat. I lost so much weight that I barely recognized my reflection in the mirror. Nothing mattered more to me than being at the top of my class.

Forget all the things that used to make me happy; there was no time for them. I stopped going out with friends or spending time with my family; I even stopped writing, my lifelong passion. On nights before tests, I suffered from panic attacks.

No matter what I did, I never felt good enough. Even while stressing out about every single test, large or small, I couldn't score in the top 10 percent of my class. Meanwhile, the excruciating thoughts continued: *How did I manage to make it into medical school? Was it all a big fluke?*

I spent a significant part of my first year in this state. Finally, a severe stress-induced migraine landed me in bed for a week—and I finally realized what I'd been doing to myself.

I'd been so fixated on being "the best" that I'd completely lost sight of what I was *actually* aiming to be the best at. Being the best was not about scoring the highest or memorizing my textbooks word for word. I was here to learn to be the most capable physician I could be for my patients.

My struggles had stemmed from misguidedly comparing myself with the people around me—each with their own strengths and weaknesses.

I decided to shift my focus from my class ranking to learning about and loving medicine. I promised myself that I would do the things I enjoy and celebrate every single accomplishment, no matter how small.

Since then, I've been actively posting on my blog; I've also taken up new hobbies like singing (I participated in my college's singing competition!) and cooking (I often invite my school friends over for home-cooked meals). When I do well on a test, I treat myself to a manicure; when I don't, I order my favorite takeout to lift my mood.

I'm now in my fourth year of medical school—and I would like to share some pearls with incoming students.

First: Take one day at a time.

Second: Make friends. Looking back, I realize again just how crucial it is to have a solid-support network as you navigate the first year.

Third: Validate yourself. Before going to bed at night, write in a journal all the things you accomplished, learned or did well—even something as small as getting a diagnosis correct on the first attempt, or barely passing a difficult course. Write it down. Celebrate it. Celebrate yourself! Change the narrative in your mind. Instead of focusing on all that you aren't, focus on all that you are: *Absolutely brilliant.*

When your mind and emotions are healthy, you'll learn more easily and have a much better chance of excelling at whatever you attempt.

Fourth: Remember that your classmates, like you, are high achievers. Academically, some may rank higher than you, but that doesn't diminish the fact that you've worked just as hard as they have.

Finally: You deserve to be here. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise.