**Leveling the playing field with my imposter syndrome**

If my first day as a graduate student was going to symbolize how the rest of my PhD experience was going to go – then I was in for a long, anxiety ridden ride. All I had to do was sit in my lab and watch our field equipment pump hydrochloric acid through tubing to clean itself for our upcoming field day. That’s it – nothing could go wrong. I didn’t expect that my research lab was going to become the next arena for a sparring match with my imposter syndrome.

Only five minutes after my research advisor had left me in charge of cleaning this tubing, the peristaltic pump had disconnected and began spraying acid all over the place. As the acid was spraying and a pit of anxiety was building in my stomach, my imposter syndrome told me, “You aren’t cut out for this. You nearly failed chemistry. Why did you think you could handle a PhD? Do you even know how to clean up a chemical spill?” To my relief, a senior lab member and technician came to my rescue, quieting the voice of my enemy by teaching me how to neutralize the acid to clean up the spill.

This was not the first time I had fought with my imposter syndrome, but for most of my academic career, this feeling was nameless. I’m not sure when I first experienced imposter syndrome, but I always felt like my accomplishments happened by chance. When I received good grades in my classes, I chalked it up to the exams being “easy.” I believed my research was less challenging to understand than other topics, which is why I could excel in it. Never did I attribute my success to my hard work, dedication, and passion for my work. I used to tell others that I was accepted into graduate school because I enrolled in a class that guided me through the application process – not because my merits were strong enough. It was because I could make myself look good on paper – because I was excellent at fooling others.

My imposter syndrome started to become more prominent when I was accepted into graduate school, and for a while, it was winning. In the first year of my degree, I easily fell victim to the words it was spewing at me. I would leave my desk at the end of the day, and it would follow me. On my walks home from the office, it would tell me “You didn’t do enough today. Everyone was working harder than you. You should just quit now. You don’t belong here.”

It wasn’t until I was listening to a podcast in my second year of graduate school where I heard someone put a name to this feeling. I felt invigorated to know that I wasn’t alone – that this was something so many others deal with on a daily basis. That’s when I started to question why we all feel like this, and why we don’t talk about it more. I shortly began talking about this idea with others around me, soon to find out that many of my peers battle with imposter syndrome, too. I started to become candid with others about my self-doubt and decided to openly talk about my experiences.

Shortly after listening to this podcast, I decided the next time I encountered my imposter syndrome, I would finally fight back. Not to my surprise, the wait wasn’t very long. Our next sparring match happened only days later. While my imposter syndrome was droning on about my failures, I flipped the script. Instead of listening to the nagging voice, I thought about all the things that I had accomplished while in graduate school. How could I be a fraud if I was being awarded grants, if I was leading exciting side projects, or if I made it to graduate school as a first-generation college student? These thoughts began to overpower my imposter syndrome, and with time I began to realize that I wasn’t the fraud – my imposter syndrome was.

I’ve learned that the best strategy for combatting imposter syndrome comes from within myself. I used to think that external validation and big accomplishments would prove that I deserve to be in a PhD program, and the self-doubt would eventually go away. But I soon found out after passing my comprehensive exams – that these feelings won’t go away on their own. Rather, it starts with celebrating our small accomplishments and being proud of the work we put in every single day.

My battle’s not over, however, I still have bits of doubt where I am sure “this time they are going to figure me out.” At least now I know that the more we talk about these issues and vocalize them, the more these feelings will be destigmatized. Now when I start spiraling in self-doubt, I take a deep breath and take a step back. I realize how far I have come, and that every day I am learning something new. And for me, that is enough to be celebrated.