Northern Illinois University Law Review

Volume 44 | Issue 2

5-1-2024

Vol. 44, no. 2, Spring 2024: Table of Contents

Northern Illinois University Law Review

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Empower the Imposters in the Legal Field: Teaching & Practicing Mindfulness for Letting Go of Unproductive Thoughts

Katerina Lewinbuk & Kurstin Grady

Imposter syndrome, initially coined “imposter phenomenon” by psychologists Pauline Clance and Suzanne Imes, refers to “a psychological experience of intellectual and professional fraudulence.” Those who suffer from imposter syndrome typically experience an all-encompassing fear they are not as intelligent, successful, or accomplished as their qualifications suggest, and thus are bound to ultimately be exposed as “frauds.” To counter these feelings, those who struggle with imposter syndrome set unrealistically high goals for themselves, only to be dissatisfied with any performance that is short of perfection. Over time, this ongoing psychological pressure leads to poor emotional well-being, decreased senses of self-confidence and self-worth, and increased rates of frustration, anxiety, depression, and burnout.

“Five types of imposters” have been identified: (1) The Perfectionist, (2) The Expert, (3) The Soloist, (4) The Natural Genius, and (5) The Superwoman/Superman. Although imposter syndrome was initially believed only to affect professional women, subsequent research has proven that no person, gender, or group is immune to imposter syndrome, including Academy Award-winning actors, Nobel Laureates, and United States Supreme Court Justices. Even Albert Einstein is quoted saying: “The exaggerated esteem in which my life-work is held makes me very ill at ease. I feel compelled to think of myself as an involuntary swindler.”

Not surprisingly, imposter syndrome affects law students, professors, and practicing attorneys alike. High rates of imposter syndrome are largely attributed to the adversarial nature of the profession, along with its skepticism, perfectionism, and lack of collaboration. The high-stakes nature of the profession creates a fear of making mistakes, leading to excessive self-vigilance and constant anxiety. To address the problem, the American Bar Association (ABA) revised its educational standards in February 2022, directing law schools to provide substantial opportunities for students to develop their professional identities. Building one’s professional identity requires students to identify which of their professional competencies are sub-par and develop them. Imposter syndrome, however, makes it difficult for law students to discern which competencies they excel at or fail in because they falsely believe they are failing at most but tricking everyone into believing they excel at all. Thus, to comport with the ABA’s directive on building a healthy professional identity, law schools must acknowledge the effects of imposter syndrome and shift their culture from one that fosters high rates of internalized self-doubt. Furthermore, law schools should offer guidance and coping mechanisms to students to allow them to face and confront this issue early on in their legal careers.
This Article will begin by discussing the nature and origin of imposter syndrome, citing specific effects of the condition on legal practitioners. Part II will explore the state of imposter syndrome among practicing attorneys and professors while attempting to comprehend its role in the formation of law students’ professional identities. Part III will then discuss the practice of mindfulness meditation. The authors opine that law schools should assist students in combatting imposter syndrome, developing their professional identities, and finding balance in their legal careers by integrating mindfulness meditation into the law school curriculum. Finally, this Article concludes that teaching mindfulness institutionally would offer law students the opportunity to adopt an individual practice of awareness, thereby strengthening self-confidence to defeat the imposter within.

NOTE

Anti-LGBT Legislation in Florida: A Prime Example of States Mentally Harming LGBT Youth

Kyla Tinsley

While there has been a growing societal acceptance of LGBT individuals throughout the decades, anti-LGBT bills and laws within the states are on the rise—in particular, bills against LGBT youth. The most famous anti-LGBT law currently in place is Florida’s “Parental Rights in Education” law. The prevalence and inconsistent application of such legislation raises constitutional questions surrounding the rights of LGBT youth, as well as the negative effects the legislation has had on LGBT youth’s mental health and their perception of the legal system they are supposed to trust in and rely on. This Article discusses the impact state anti-LGBT legislation will have on LGBT youth and concludes with an emphasis and the need for a federal solution that could protect LGBT youth at large.
NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

LAW REVIEW

VOLUME 44  SPRING 2024  NUMBER 2

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