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

Katerina Lewinbuk

Kurstin Grady

Follow this and additional works at: https://huskiecommons.lib.niu.edu/niulr

Part of the Law Commons

Suggested Citation
Katerina Lewinbuk & Kurstin Grady, Empower the Imposters in the Legal Field: Teaching & Practicing Mindfulness for Letting Go of Unproductive Thoughts, 44 N. Ill. Univ. L. Rev. 109 (2024).

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Law at Huskie Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Northern Illinois University Law Review by an authorized editor of Huskie Commons. For more information, please contact jschumacher@niu.edu.
Empower the Imposters in the Legal Field: Teaching & Practicing Mindfulness for Letting Go of Unproductive Thoughts

KATERINA LEWINBUK* & KURSTIN GRADY**

“I still have a little [bit of] impostor syndrome, it never goes away…” Michelle Obama.¹

Imposter syndrome, initially coined “imposter phenomenon” by psychologists Pauline Clance and Suzanne Imes, refers to “a psychological experience of intellectual and professional fraudulence.”² 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.”³ 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.

---

¹ Remarks by the former first lady and graduate of Princeton University (cum laude) and Harvard Law School, at an all-girls school in London in 2018 after being asked how it felt to be a symbol of hope. David A. Grenardo, The Phantom Menace to Professional Identity Formation and Law Success: Imposter Syndrome, 47 U. DAYTON L. REV. 369, 371 (2022).


³ Grenardo, supra note 3.
“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 lifework 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

4. Valerie Young, a leading imposter syndrome expert and author of the book The Secret Thoughts of Successful Women identified and described the following five different “types of imposters” from her work in the area. Imposter Syndrome, HEADSPACE, https://www.headspace.com/articles/impostor-syndrome [https://perma.cc/GL6E-U72W].

5. The Perfectionist focuses on “how” something is being done and cannot tolerate any “minor flaw in an otherwise stellar performance.” Id.

6. The Expert represents the “knowledge version of the perfectionist.” The Expert wants to know absolutely everything and is unable to accept even a minor lack of knowledge viewing it as failure. Id.

7. The Soloist looks at who completes the task, and wants to do it alone every time, viewing needing help as failure. Id.

8. For The Natural Genius, productivity and competence are “measured in terms of ease and speed.” The Natural Genius views struggle or inability to succeed on the first attempt as failure. Id.

9. The Superwoman/Superman types believe they need to juggle various roles with perfection and ease; they perceive struggling with any aspect of the home/work/parent/partner role to be shameful. Imposter Syndrome, supra note 6.

10. Ariana Brockington, Tom Hanks opens up about having imposter syndrome around Paul Newman, TODAY (Sept. 5, 2022, 6:56 PM), https://www.today.com/popculture/movies/tom-hanks-on-feeling-imposter-syndrome-around-paul-newman-rcna46364 [https://perma.cc/MBF7-NB2R]. On an episode of the podcast Armchair Expert with Dax Shepard, Academy Award winning actor, Tom Hanks, admitted feeling like an imposter in Hollywood, at times. Discussing his role in Road to Perdition, Hanks was asked if he struggled with imposter syndrome filming with legendary actor Paul Newman, to which he responded “[a]bsolutely.” Id.


12. Grenardo, supra note 3, at 372-73 (stating that Justice Sonia Sotomayor of the United States Supreme Court, among others, experienced imposter syndrome).

Building one’s professional identity requires students to identify which of their professional competencies are subpar 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 combating 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.

I. WHAT IS IMPOSTER SYNDROME?

A. IMPOSTER SYNDROME – WHAT IS IT REALLY ABOUT?
B. DOES IT AFFECT EVERYONE?
   1. Enemy to Productivity: Academic & Business Success
   2. Struggling to Enjoy Personal Successes
   3. Obstacle to Mental Wellness
   4. Effects Based on Gender

II. IMPOSTER SYNDROME & PROFESSIONAL LEGAL IDENTITY

A. PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY & IMPOSTER SYNDROME’S ROLE IN FORMATION
B. HOW IMPOSTER SYNDROME MANIFESTS IN LEGAL REALM
   1. Legal Academia
   2. Attorneys
C. ADDRESSING THE PROBLEM: WHO BEARS THE BURDEN?

15. See id.
III. PROPOSAL: TEACH MINDFULNESS INSTITUTIONALLY, PRACTICE IT
INDIVIDUALLY .................................................................................................................. 127
A. WHAT IS MINDFULNESS MEDITATION? ................................................................. 127
B. WHY MINDFULNESS SHOULD BE TAUGHT IN LAW SCHOOLS .................. 128
   1. Improves Mental Wellness .............................................................. 129
   2. Fosters Positive Professional Identity Formation .......................... 130
C. HOW TO PRACTICE MINDFULNESS INDIVIDUALLY ........................................ 131
IV. CONCLUSION .................................................................................................................. 133

I. WHAT IS IMPOSTER SYNDROME?
A. IMPOSTER SYNDROME – WHAT IS IT REALLY ABOUT?

Initially coined “imposter phenomenon,” imposter syndrome is defined as a “psychological experience of intellectual and professional fraudulence.” It brings along a profound fear of not being as accomplished, intelligent, and successful as one’s credentials externally suggest. More specifically, people who struggle with imposter syndrome experience a daunting sensation that they “do not belong,” and thus, their work or even lives do not have a meaning.

A perfectionist’s thinking pattern, coupled with intense fear of failure and rejection that typically accompany imposter syndrome “create a perfect storm of insecurity, anxiety, and stress.”

The following six factors have been articulated to characterize the phenomena: “(1) The Impostor Cycle, (2) The need to be special or to be the very best, (3) Superman/Superwoman aspects; (4) Fear of failure, (5) Denial of competence and Discounting praise, and (6) Fear and guilt about

---

16. This concept was first identified by psychologists Pauline Clance and Suzanne Imes in 1978. Sara L. Ochs, *Imposter Syndrome & The Law School Caste System*, 42 PACE L. REV. 373, 378-79 (2022) (quoting Pauline Rose Clance & Suzanne Ament Imes, *The Imposter Phenomenon in High Achieving Women: Dynamics and Therapeutic Intervention*, 15 PSYCHOTHERAPY THEORY, RESCH. & PRAC. 1, 1 (1978)). A slightly different definition of the “Imposter Phenomenon” was offered in 1985 by Joan C. Harvey and Cynthia Katz who viewed it as “a psychological pattern rooted in intense, concealed feelings of fraudulence when faced with achievement tasks.” Jaruwan Sakulku & James Alexander, *The Imposter Phenomenon*, 6 INT’L J. BEHAV. SCI. 73, 78 (2011) (quoting Chan M. Hellman & Tonia D. Caselman, *A psychometric evaluation of the Harvey Imposter Phenomenon Scale*, 83 J. OF PERSONALITY ASSESSMENT 161 (2004)). In fact, they believed the concept included three main characteristics (“(1) the belief that he/she has fooled other people, (2) fear of being exposed as an imposter, and (3) inability to attribute own achievement to internal qualities such as ability, intelligence, or skills”), all of which had to be present for a finding of imposter syndrome. *Id.*


18. *Id.*

19. *Id.*

20. Grenardo, supra note 3.
success.”

A minimum of two of the listed factors must be present to consider someone an imposter. Those affected by the syndrome are “highly self-critical, fail to internalize their accomplishments, and instead attribute their achievements to external factors such as luck, help from others, or mistake, rather than to their actual competence.” They “believe others have inflated perceptions of their abilities” and are afraid of any evaluation. Additionally, “they often set unrealistically high standards, and when they fail to flawlessly achieve their exaggerated goals, they characterize themselves as failures,” while discounting their accomplishments, and focusing on negativity or criticism. In sum, the strongest evidence “of imposter syndrome is persistent self-doubt regarding intelligence and ability.” Unsurprisingly, these experiences diminish the imposter’s sense of joy in accomplishment and satisfaction with their work, all while depriving them of balance and overall lowering their quality of life. Put differently, self-doubt becomes the center of an imposter’s existence making it “about who you think you are,” which is known to be a negative perspective and not an accurate reflection of reality.

Imposter syndrome maintains itself through a vicious cycle of worrying about one’s intelligence covered up with hard work and discretion, and the need to receive positive feedback on a good performance in order to experience elation and temporary feelings of approval. Ordinarily, a person who doubts their abilities would begin to alter their concerns when they routinely achieve success. In contrast, a person suffering from imposter syndrome will attribute any and all successes to external factors, such as luck or tedious preparation, rather than their own skills. This deflection creates the self-

21. Sakulku & Alexander, supra note 18, at 75. These factors were identified in 1985 by psychologist Dr. Pauline Clance, based on her “clinical observations during therapeutic sessions with high achieving women.” Id. at 73. Subsequent research has identified two additional factors, perfectionism and family environment, that contribute to imposter syndrome. Id. at 74.

22. Id. at 77.

23. Ochs, supra note 4, at 379.

24. Id.

25. Id.

26. Id.

27. Id.


30. Id. at 241-42.

31. Id.
perpetuated cycle of imposter syndrome, one which repeated success alone cannot seem to break.\textsuperscript{32} The cycle begins with an achievement-related task that produces feelings of extreme anxiety due to the imposter’s uncontrollable fear of failure.\textsuperscript{33} To quell the fear, imposters respond in one of two ways: over-preparation or procrastination.\textsuperscript{34} An over-preparer will expend significantly more effort and energy on a given task than is reasonable, even to the point that it interferes with other priorities.\textsuperscript{35} When this excessive effort produces a positive result, helping the imposter avoid detection, the imposter falls into a trap of believing they will fail if they adopt a different method.\textsuperscript{36} On the other hand, the procrastinator exhibits certain avoidance tendencies when faced with a task that may unmask their perceived incompetence.\textsuperscript{37} The procrastinator’s fear of failure pushes them to self-sabotage by abandoning the task before it has the opportunity to expose their ineptitudes.\textsuperscript{38} When success is achieved, an over-preparer will attribute it to their burdensome efforts while a procrastinator will attribute it to pure luck.\textsuperscript{39} In either case, an imposter will not feel a sense of achievement—only of relief they have avoided detection.\textsuperscript{40} Thereafter, any positive feedback will be discounted, as the imposter’s underlying sense of professional fraudulence surmounts with the completion of every task.\textsuperscript{41} Every success reinforces the imposter loop. As such, the cycle permanently entraps the imposter in a never-ending destructive and unproductive pattern and state.

B. DOES IT AFFECT EVERYONE?

Imposter syndrome was initially believed to only affect professional women.\textsuperscript{42} However, subsequent research overwhelmingly concludes that no person, group, entity, or industry is immune from imposter syndrome,\textsuperscript{43} with 70% of the population estimated to experience the phenomenon at least at some point in their life.\textsuperscript{44} In fact, people around the world of all demographics

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{2} \textit{Id.}
\bibitem{3} Sakulku & Alexander, \textit{supra} note 18, at 86.
\bibitem{4} Ochis, \textit{supra} note 4, at 380.
\bibitem{5} Sakulku & Alexander, \textit{supra} note 18, at 76.
\bibitem{6} Clance & Imes, \textit{supra} note 31, at 244.
\bibitem{7} Ochis, \textit{supra} note 4, at 380.
\bibitem{8} \textit{Id.}
\bibitem{9} Sakulku & Alexander, \textit{supra} note 18, at 76.
\bibitem{10} \textit{Id.}
\bibitem{11} \textit{Id.}
\bibitem{12} \textit{Id}.
\bibitem{13} \textit{Id. at 73.}
\bibitem{14} \textit{Id.}
\end{thebibliography}
and occupations feel the effects of imposter syndrome. Surprisingly, self-perceived imposters even include Academy Award-winning actors, Nobel Laureates, and United States Supreme Court Justices.

Put bluntly, there are no documented positive effects of this widely experienced phenomenon. Impostors typically exhibit some combination of four autonomic stress responses that closely coincide with one’s natural, subconscious fight, flight, freeze, or fawn instinct: (1) people pleasing, (2) procrastination, (3) paralysis, and (4) perfectionism. Fighter-imposters will attempt to fight the feeling of professional fraudulence through perfectionism, overworking, and exhausting themselves to mask any concern that they are underqualified. Other impostors will exhibit a more flight-like response by procrastinating with small and meaningless projects to create the outward illusion that they are working towards a goal, while slowly burning out inside. Still, other impostors freeze when faced with large tasks, becoming paralyzed by a looming deadline until fueled by enough fear and adrenaline to complete it. Finally, fawning-impostors often try to gain the approval of their counterparts by catering to any request or need, despite it affecting their existing obligations. Regardless of which stress response an individual manifests, the impact of imposter syndrome will undoubtedly raise one’s stress level such that its effects bleed into every area of one’s life.


46. Brockington, supra note 12.

47. Caflisch, supra note 13. Nobel laureate and historically renowned scientist Albert Einstein purportedly said, “The exaggerated esteem in which my lifework is held makes me very ill at ease. I feel compelled to think of myself as an involuntary swindler.” Id.


50. Id. at 16.

51. Id.; see also Burn-out an “occupational phenomenon”: International Classification of Diseases, WORLD HEALTH ORG. (May 28, 2019), https://www.who.int/news/item/28-05-2019-burn-out-an-occupational-phenomenon-international-classification-of-diseases [https://perma.cc/DT7Y-T3MG]. Burn-out is an “occupational phenomenon,” included and defined in the ICD-11 as a “syndrome . . . resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed.” Id. The phenomenon is characterized by “three dimensions”; (1) “feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion”; (2) “increased mental distance from one’s job, or feelings of negativism or cynicism related to one’s job”; and (3) “reduced professional efficacy.” Id. People with imposter syndrome often cope with work-related stress and anxiety by overworking themselves, “which, while productive in the short term, can generate long term . . . burnout.” Ochs, supra note 4, at 380.


53. Id.
1. Enemy to Productivity: Academic & Business Success

Imposter syndrome is a menace to productivity. Specifically, an imposter’s all-encompassing fear of failure leads them to compensate for self-perceived shortcomings, through perfectionism or procrastination, which then brings increased anxiety and self-doubt. Living in an anxious mental state decreases one’s creativity and clouds rational decision-making abilities, ultimately reducing productivity.

No business is outside of imposter syndrome’s range because no employee is immune from its psychological grip. In fact, imposter syndrome is affecting companies worldwide because imposter-employees offer less meaningful contributions, decrease morale, and damage team dynamics. In a professional setting, imposters’ characteristically high rates of anxiety manifest into physical and emotional burnout over time, contributing to an ever-dwindling sense of rationality and intrinsic motivation. Overwhelmed and trapped in this rut of negative thinking, employees report not speaking up when they have ideas. Such withholding only robs employers of business opportunities. While imposter-employees may seem isolated, the cumulative effect of these issues is estimated to cost businesses across the world millions of dollars in productivity.

54. Grenardo, supra note 3, at 373.
55. Josa, How Is Imposter Syndrome Affecting Businesses?, supra note 30, at 7. Feeling trapped in a cycle of negativity, those with imposter syndrome often stifle their own professional development due to deeply internalized feelings of professional fraudulence, which affects not only the individual employee, but also their employer. Id. at 4.
56. Id. at 4. High rates of imposter syndrome have been reported in the following professional sectors: law (74.36%), creative arts and design (86.96%), healthcare (70.73%), informational technology (68.37%), sales (62.96%), and teaching/education (61.35%). Turner, supra note 47.
58. Sakulk & Alexander, supra note 18, at 86.
59. Id.
61. Id.
62. Clare Josa, There’s a major part of the gender pay gap problem that no one is talking about, INDEP. (Apr. 5, 2019, 16:19 BST), https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/gender-pay-gap-statistics-imposter-syndrome-fiona-bruce-equal-feminism-a8856886.html [https://perma.cc/9VCM-J2ST] [hereinafter Josa, gender pay gap problem]. More specifically, employers end up with missed opportunities, lack of proper diversity in leadership, and other shortcomings caused by their employees’ struggle with Imposter Syndrome. Id. Also, some companies report that their team dynamics suffer as a result, even citing imposter syndrome as a “driving factor in star performers leaving a company” due to stalled personal development. Josa, How Is Imposter Syndrome Affecting Businesses?, supra note 30, at 4. Ultimately, imposter syndrome can “lead to subconscious self-sabotage at a personal level on projects that affect the company’s bottom line.” Id. at 5.
2. Struggling to Enjoy Personal Successes

Imposter syndrome is categorically accompanied by fear that one is not as intelligent or capable as their accomplishments and credentials suggest them to be.\textsuperscript{63} As such, imposters suffer from a unique inability to appreciate or accept the merits of their personal achievements.\textsuperscript{64} This lack of pride stems from the imposter’s perfectionist tendency to both create unrealistically high standards for themselves and to harshly criticize any singular shortcoming in their performance, no matter how small.\textsuperscript{65} In fact, when compared to people who do not experience the syndrome, imposters overestimate the number of mistakes they make on a given task and report high levels of concern about those mistakes.\textsuperscript{66} Imposters also report higher levels of dissatisfaction with their performance than non-imposters, reinforcing their internal notion that any performance that falls short of their unrealistic standard of perfection reflects failure.\textsuperscript{67} Furthermore, an imposter’s sense of accomplishment is generally overcome by the underlying “sense of phoniness,” in which the imposter thinks that they are barely skating by without their fraudulence being discovered.\textsuperscript{68} Thus, an imposter’s harsh and unrealistic self-evaluation standards, their exaggerated focus on perceived mistakes, and their inability to accept objective successes further rob them of intrinsic motivation, satisfaction, and a sense of accomplishment.

3. Obstacle to Mental Wellness

Despite being most commonly associated with one’s professional life, the phenomenon also rains havoc on an imposter’s personal life and mental health.\textsuperscript{69} The constant stress, generalized anxiety, lack of self-confidence, and negative self-reflection that coincide with imposter syndrome create the type of emotional instability that serves as a barrier to one’s personal wellness.\textsuperscript{70} Much like the imposter-employee who doubts their professional abilities, imposter syndrome may also cause one to question their abilities as a friend, parent, or family member.\textsuperscript{71} These emotions are exacerbated by the fact that imposters feel as if they are the only people to feel this way and thus,

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{63} Grenardo, supra note 3, at 371.
  \item \textsuperscript{64} Sakulku & Alexander, supra note 18, at 86.
  \item \textsuperscript{65} Id. at 86-87.
  \item \textsuperscript{66} Id. at 84.
  \item \textsuperscript{67} Id.
  \item \textsuperscript{68} Clance & Imes, supra note 31, at 244.
  \item \textsuperscript{69} Imposter Syndrome, supra note 6.
  \item \textsuperscript{70} Ochs, supra note 4, at 380.
  \item \textsuperscript{71} Imposter Syndrome, supra note 6.
\end{itemize}
they fear asking for help or reassurance because it would expose their “hidden flaws.”  

Although no official clinical diagnosis is currently available, imposter syndrome has been linked to different forms of emotional instability, including anxiety and depressive disorders, low self-esteem, and social dysfunction. The emotional symptoms that accompany these conditions have also been documented to manifest themselves physically, reportedly in the form of back pains, migraines, and even autoimmune disorders. Thus, imposter syndrome serves as a formidable impediment to an individual’s ability to lead a healthy and well-balanced life by hindering their professional and personal goals, relationships, and aspirations.

4. Effects Based on Gender

Contrary to researchers’ initial conceptions, imposter syndrome does not exclusively befall women. Men and women do, however, cope with its effects in dramatically different ways. Where women are more likely to professionally sabotage themselves by passing up promotions and opportunities for growth, men are more likely to silently endure self-doubt and adopt destructive coping mechanisms. Feeling uncomfortable asking for help, men tend to “push through” the anxiety and depression on their own. As a result, men are five times more likely than women to numb imposter syndrome’s grip with drugs and alcohol.

Men and women cope with imposterism differently because its development is largely shaped by early childhood family dynamics, and later

---

73. Ochs, supra note 4, at 380; Bravata et al., supra note 74.
74. Ochs, supra note 4, at 380.
77. Josa, Five Key Findings, supra note 78.
78. Id.; Josa, How Is Imposter Syndrome Affecting Businesses?, supra note 30, at 22.
79. Josa, Five Key Findings, supra note 78.
reinforced by gender stereotypes.\textsuperscript{81} Research suggests that women suffering from imposter syndrome fall into two “groups” based on their childhood experiences.\textsuperscript{82} In group one are women who were labeled within their family as the “sensitive” or “social” child, while their sibling was designated as the “smart” one.\textsuperscript{83} In group two are women who were raised to believe they could do anything they wanted to do, with ease.\textsuperscript{84} Both groups transfer these perspectives from childhood into adulthood, causing feelings of fraud in group one women when they are unable to accomplish their goals (her parents were right!) and group two women when they fail to live up to their family’s expectations (her parents were wrong—they gave her too much credit!).

The effects of the syndrome follow women into adulthood and manifest in tangible ways. Notably, the gender-based effects of imposter syndrome play a driving role in the gender pay gap and further exacerbate the existing disparity in leadership positions held by men and women.\textsuperscript{85} One study revealed that just under half of female respondents admitted to routinely not offering ideas, foregoing the lead on projects, and not demanding the pay they felt they deserved, due to the fear that doing so would expose their inabilitys.\textsuperscript{86} In sum, imposter syndrome renders women less likely to claim their individual role in a team’s success than their male counterparts, causing them to be overlooked for leadership and other important roles.\textsuperscript{87}

II. IMPOSTER SYNDROME & PROFESSIONAL LEGAL IDENTITY

A. PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY & IMPOSTER SYNDROME’S ROLE IN FORMATION

Professional identity refers to a person’s conceptual viewpoint of themselves as a professional based on their personal values, processes, and ethical
obligations to their career. Stated differently, “professional identity is a representation of self, achieved” by continually internalizing what it means to be a member of one’s profession. In the legal realm, professional identity is grounded in two tenets that lawyers and law students are required to internalize, comprehend, and demonstrate: (1) the responsibility of practicing law, and (2) a proactive commitment towards excellence in all required competencies. Development of one’s professional identity requires “an ongoing self-reflective process . . . and a lifelong commitment to continued progress.” It is grounded in the individual’s ability to conduct an assessment of their professional strengths and weaknesses in order to address the areas they need to improve.

Imposter syndrome, however, inhibits a person’s capability to accurately assess themselves, as they believe they have a hidden incompetence. In fact, even the most accomplished figures who are generally thought to have strong professional identities struggle with imposter syndrome, including Facebook Chief Operating Officer Sherly Sandberg, former Starbucks Chief Executive Officer Howard Shultz, and Nobel Laureate Maya Angelou. Thus, because it clouds one’s ability to internalize and assess their capabilities, imposter syndrome has been described as a “sinister force” that inhibits the proper and healthy formation of one’s professional identity.

88. Grenardo, supra note 3, at 371-72.
90. Id. (explaining that for “law students and lawyers, professional identity is grounded in two foundational norms and values that law students and lawyers must understand, internalize, and demonstrate: 1. a deep responsibility and commitment to serving clients, the profession, and the rule of law; 2. a commitment to pro-active continuous professional development toward excellence at all the competencies needed to serve others well in the profession’s work.”).
91. Grenardo, supra note 3, at 372.
92. Id. at 370.
93. Lacy Rakestraw, How to Stop Feeling Like a Phony in Your Library: Recognizing the Causes of the Imposter Syndrome, and How to Put a Stop to the Cycle, 109 LAW LIBR. J. 465, 473 (2017) (“Individuals who suffer from Imposter Syndrome often mistake being inexperienced with being unqualified. The first indicates a lack of familiarity and knowledge while the second denotes a lack of ability.”).
95. Id. Despite being a world-renowned civil rights activist and poet, Maya Angelou admits to a fear of being “found out.” Id. The author states that even though she has written eleven books, each time she thinks, “Uh oh, they’re going to find out now. I’ve run a game on everybody and they’re going to find me out.” Id.
96. Grenardo, supra note 3, at 370.
B. HOW IMPOSTER SYNDROME MANIFESTS IN LEGAL REALM

The ABA recognizes the importance of professional identity to a successful legal career.\(^{97}\) However, the development of many legal professionals is stalled by the high rates of imposter syndrome that plague the profession at all levels.\(^{98}\) In fact, even the most notable legal figures struggle with feelings of professional fraudulence, including United States Supreme Court Justice, Sonia Sotomayor.\(^{99}\)

Research suggests that pervasive imposterism within the legal profession is not attributable to practitioner’s individual characteristics, but rather to the overarching social structure within which they operate.\(^{100}\) Thus, it is hypothesized that law students, professors, lawyers, and judges alike all struggle with imposter syndrome due to the high-stake, adversarial, and achievement-focused nature of the practice of law.\(^{101}\) For students, imposterism often arises from the highly competitive nature of law school in which students have few benchmarks to test their knowledge against that of their classmates, but must compete with them for career opportunities.\(^{102}\) Similarly, the credential-focused culture of legal academia forces academics to view their capacities through the lens of others, rather than through their own.\(^{103}\) For lawyers, imposter syndrome anxieties are fueled by a culture of adversarial isolation and an “overwhelming sense of responsibility” to do

---

\(^{97}\) *Id.* In February of 2022, the ABA’s Council of Legal Education revised the law school curriculum standards to require each accredited law school to provide “substantial opportunities” to develop one’s professional legal identity. *Id.* Prior to such mandate, more than forty law schools already required first year law students to take a for-credit course offering that taught about professional identity. *Id.*


\(^{99}\) *Id.* “In 2019, U.S. Supreme Court Justice, Sonia Sotomayor, was quoted as saying that she ‘still feels like she does not fit in sometimes.’” *Id.* at 376. In a speech given to students at her alma mater, Princeton University, the first Latinx appointed to the nation’s highest court admits that she is “always looking over [her] shoulder, wondering if [she] measure[s] up.” Christine Bolaños, *Justice Sonia Sotomayor wasn’t always at the top of her game*, PROJECT PULSO (Sept. 23, 2019), https://projectpulso.org/2019/09/23/justice-sonia-sotomayor-wasnt-always-at-the-top-of-her-game/ [https://perma.cc/9MEK-YW3M].

\(^{100}\) Ochs, *supra* note 4, at 381 (discussing recent research showing that “social structure and context lead people to question their self-worth and their qualifications”).

\(^{101}\) Grenardo, *supra* note 3, at 376 (concluding that imposter syndrome affects all levels of the legal profession). Ochs, *supra* note 4, at 380 (discussing Anna Parkman’s research showing that imposter syndrome coincides with “highly competitive and stressful occupations”).

\(^{102}\) Grenardo, *supra* note 3, at 374.

\(^{103}\) Ochs, *supra* note 4, at 383 (describing how tenure and promotions are largely subject to student evaluations, input from one’s colleagues & other outside assessment factors).
right by the client. The pressure to deliver a desired result looms overhead, whether or not it is a realistic—or even possible—outcome in the given case. The fear of disappointing one’s client or law partners triggers self-doubt and negative thinking, thereby cementing the imposter in an inescapable loop of negativity. Thus, regardless of what level of the legal profession an individual finds themselves in, the exacting nature of the profession undoubtedly contributes to high rates of imposter syndrome.

1. Legal Academia

Even the most seemingly accomplished law students routinely battle feelings of professional fraudulence. In fact, a survey administered to its students by Harvard Law School revealed that more than 60% of their students “had frequent imposter syndrome experiences.” One explanation that has been offered is that those who enter the legal field often have distinctive attributes of “Type A” perfectionists. Having excelled in their undergraduate studies, law students often lose the confidence they spent years accumulating when met with the “pressures, uncertainties, and challenges of obtaining a legal education.” The perfectionist’s fear of failure will lead to the “constant self-vigilance” and “sense of anxiety” that are the hallmarks of imposter syndrome. Forced to compare themselves to their equally talented peers, a perfectionist law student is susceptible to feeling inadequate and out of place.

While the personality predisposition undoubtedly contributes to alarming rates of imposter syndrome amongst law students, the competitive nature


105. Grenardo, supra note 3, at 374 (“Even law students who make the Dean’s List first semester can suffer from imposter syndrome and may feel like they need to achieve the same every semester, or others will believe they do not belong in law school and their accomplishment was a fluke.”).

106. Grenardo, supra note 3, at 373-74 (showing that 61.8% of Harvard Law students at all levels frequently experience imposter syndrome).


110. Mannion, supra note 109.
of law school also intensifies pre-existing self-doubt. To that end, one professor suggests that the grading curve used at most law schools “likely exacerbates imposter syndrome” because it forces students to compete against and compare themselves to their classmates, whom they are vying against for “grades, class rankings, and—in some instances—jobs.”\footnote{111} In order to compete, some law students will go so far as to take prescription stimulants to gain an advantage or to “prevent other[s] . . . from having an edge over [them].”\footnote{112}

Another structural component of law school that leads students to feel inadequate in comparison to their classmates is the Socratic method.\footnote{113} When called upon at random to recite cases in front of their peers, students often feel as though their responses sound less intelligent than those of their classmates, making all of their burdensome studies pointless.\footnote{114} In addition, students often feel that “they will never be able to arrive at a correct answer or gain a firm understanding of what law applies in what situation and when” throughout the semester due to the plethora of “‘it depends on’ scenarios.”\footnote{115} This insecurity in their knowledge is further compounded by the limited opportunities for feedback offered in law school, where students’ performance is frequently assessed only on their Socratic “cold calls” and one final exam.\footnote{116}

Notably, imposter syndrome is especially common among minority student populations, leading to increased rates of “poor psychological well-being, depression, and anxiety.”\footnote{117} Research suggests minority students may be predisposed to imposter-like stress due to multiple factors entirely outside of their control, including lack of financial aid/support, racial discrimination, and being a first-generation graduate.\footnote{118}

\footnote{111. Grenardo, supra note 3, at 374 (discussing the perspective of Professor Grenardo at the University of St. Thomas School of Law).

112. Jerome M. Organ, David B. Jaffe & Katherine M. Bender, Suffering in Silence: The Survey of Law Student Well-Being and the Reluctance of Law Students to Seek Help for Substance Use and Mental Health Concerns, 66 J. LEGAL EDUC. 116, 135 (2016). A survey conducted on the overall well-being of law students across the country revealed that 13% of respondents admitted to the use of non-prescription stimulants over the prior twelve-month period for the following reasons: to concentrate better while studying (67%), to increase alertness to study longer (64%), to enhance academic performance (49%), to increase alertness to work longer (46%), to concentrate better while working (45%). \textit{Id.}

113. Goins, supra note 110.

114. \textit{Id.}

115. \textit{Id.}

116. \textit{Id.} (discussing the fact that student’s only feedback coming at the end of the course “leav[es] them floundering to develop a sense of where they are” throughout the semester).

117. Bravata, supra note 74 (providing the summary of eleven studies about the imposter syndrome being “common among African-, Asian- and Latino-/American students”).

118. \textit{Id.}
Legal academia also creates a ripe environment for imposter syndrome amongst law professors because “the appearance of intelligence is vital to success.” Many professors’ career tracks are largely dependent on the evaluations and opinions of others, including faculty colleagues, publishers, and students, leaving professors to grapple with alarming rates of self-doubt regarding how they are perceived by others. Further, the “publish or perish culture” of legal academia leaves professors with little guidance or support while competing against their counterparts for scarce resources, like funding and job security. As a result, the professors who have normalized this inner imposter experience inevitably project it back upon their students, continuing the cycle.

2. Attorneys

After law school, attorneys are thrust into increasingly aggressive and adversarial environments, further compounding the anxieties in which imposter thoughts thrive. Attorneys generally strive for perfection because they feel an “overwhelming sense of responsibility” to obtain positive outcomes for their clients. The culture of the practice of law is described as one “favor[ing] skepticism over trust and aggressiveness over vulnerability,” leading attorneys to isolate themselves from others. Thus, an attorney’s strenuous and tedious work takes place in private, while it is “judged publicly” and compared to the work of their opponent, and sometimes measured against their clients’ unrealistic expectations. Unable to see the hours of grueling work put in by their adversary on the same task, the attorney may be led to feel “inadequate in [their] efforts,” feeding their inner notion that

119. Ochs, supra note 4, at 383.
120. Id.
121. Id. For decades, legal academia has been structured around a hierarchical caste system, with tenured and tenure-track doctrinal law professors . . . occupying the highest caste, and professors of legal skills courses . . . relegated to the lower castes. The status of these “lower caste” professors is routinely reinforced through weaker job security, less respect, and lower pay than received by their doctrinal, “upper caste” colleagues. Given this inequality, imposter syndrome plays a pervasive role in the lives and careers of professors of legal skills courses.
122. Id. at 373-74.
123. Id. at 373.
124. Id. at 373.
125. Id. at 373.
126. Id. (noting that “[i]mposter syndrome is especially common in fields where work is done privately and then released (and judged) publicly, like writing, computer programming, academic research and the law.”).
they are a well-disguised imposter within the profession. The constant anxiety about whether they have done enough for their client combined with the culture of adversarial isolation creates the “perfect cocktail” that fuels imposter syndrome in lawyers.

That “cocktail” in turn disparately affects the practice of law. More specifically, the syndrome is “particularly pronounced among . . . women, racial minorities, LGBT, disabled, [and] first-generation professionals.” Additionally, the psychological effects can be debilitating for lawyers in solo practices or small firms. The susceptibility of these populations has extensive consequences for the advancement of the legal profession as a whole.

C. ADDRESSING THE PROBLEM: WHO BEARS THE BURDEN?

The pervasive impact of imposter syndrome on the legal profession cannot be ignored. In fact, “[w]ithout dealing with [their] impostorism, [attorneys] won’t be able to fully enjoy the fruits of [their] labors because [they] will be so focused on worrying that the other shoe is about to drop and that it’s just been a façade.” Moreover, attorneys struggling with imposter syndrome are “hold[ing] back their careers” and “negatively impact[ing] their clients” because their tangible lack of confidence is felt by clients, opposing counsel, and the courts alike.

Ultimately, the question is upon whose shoulders should the burdens of addressing and averting imposter syndrome land. The proposed answer is two-fold: the burden of addressing imposter syndrome lies within the
institutions that perpetuate it, but it may also be mitigated by individual efforts. Although the syndrome is often “stigmatized as an individual problem,” institutions must consider assessing the environments they create that lead participants to question their qualifications and abilities. Individuals functioning within these institutions should not solely bear the burden of “overcom[ing] their feelings” or be expected to “fake it [until] [they] make it.” Rather, institutions must equip their members with the knowledge and tools needed to overcome imposter syndrome. After all, organizations will not operate at maximum capacity without addressing this issue, leaving no choice but to allocate time and resources to create institutional solutions.

People who suffer from imposter syndrome should also adopt individualized practices to combat the psychological toll, such as attending therapy or practicing meditation. More specifically, experts suggest the practice of mindfulness meditation because “[o]ne of the most powerful techniques in combatting imposter syndrome is to reframe [one’s] thought process.” Mindfulness meditation teaches participants to “shift from an external locus [sic] of self-worth to an internal one” through self-compassion, ultimately changing one’s relationship with their thoughts. This practice begins with inner work on awareness to learn that one’s thoughts are not factual and their accuracy must at least be questioned. By offering tools to first recognize when a thought is imposter-based, then to consciously examine it, and finally to choose whether to reframe it or distance oneself from the thought.

134. Ochs, supra note 4, at 376-77.
135. Id. at 376 (“those who are treated as less valuable or ‘worthy’ of accolades than their peers and especially those who are subjected to discrimination by their institution—whether by their employer, educational institution, or community in general—are often more susceptible to imposter syndrome.”).
136. Id. at 414; see also id. at 381 (discussing that social structure may lead people to question their qualifications).
137. Id. at 414 (alteration in original).
138. Clance & Imes, supra note 31, at 245 (suggesting that a group therapy approach is the most effective in reducing impostorism, as it enables each imposter to share their feelings and empowers them in knowing they are not alone in their feelings of fraudulence).
139. Imposter Syndrome, supra note 6. It is important to note that meditation practices, among many other benefits, have been found to assist people in countering the “stress response” that arises alongside imposter-based anxiety. See id.
140. Aronowitz, supra note 106, at 37. Clinical psychologist Audrey Ervin suggests that mindfulness meditation assists a person in shifting their mindset away from the subconscious state that fuels imposter thinking. Ashley Abramson, How to overcome impostor phenomenon, AM. PSYCH. ASS’N (June 1, 2021), https://www.apa.org/monitor/2021/06/cover-impostor-phenomenon [https://perma.cc/77CF-E9BS]. “Whereas impostor phenomenon is unconscious and mindless, mindfulness can help you move in a different direction,” Ervin said. “It’s about learning to recognize those feelings of fear and learning to truly be OK as you are, without your accomplishments.” Id.
141. Abramson, supra note 142.
mindfulness meditation can prevent imposter syndrome from negatively impacting individuals’ self-perception and overall wellness.¹⁴²

III. PROPOSAL: TEACH MINDFULNESS INSTITUTIONALLY, PRACTICE IT INDIVIDUALLY

A. WHAT IS MINDFULNESS MEDITATION?

“Mindfulness is a meditation practice used to dispel negative thoughts, judgments, and other self-defeating tendencies by concentrating on one’s breathing to cultivate a non-judgmental awareness of the present moment.”¹⁴³ Mindfulness takes on a variety of definitions, each of which focuses on “present moment awareness,”¹⁴⁴ which refers to the practices’ focus on “observing and acknowledging thoughts and emotions” without issuing a judgment on the thoughts or themselves.¹⁴⁵ Mindfulness instructs its observers to respond to negative emotions by recognizing that thoughts are subject to change and only reflect how one feels, not who they are.¹⁴⁶ A frequent comparison is made to clouds in the sky, which come and go as one observes them nonjudgmentally and without attachment. In sum, by focusing on being presently aware as to the content of one’s thoughts, the practice can free individuals from cyclical, habitual, negative emotional patterns, and replace an imposter’s self-criticism with compassion and understanding.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴². See generally Aronowitz, supra note 106, at 37.
¹⁴⁴. Dianna Mejia, Mindfulness for Legal Professionals: An Appeal for Positive Change (Jan. 15, 2021) (Graduate school thesis, Graduate School of Arts and Social Sciences), available at https://digitalcommons.lesley.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1035&context=mindfulness_theses [https://perma.cc/K93E-CXZB]. [Professor] Rhonda Magee . . . provided a notable explanation of mindfulness as “paying attention in a particular way with an attitude of compassionate or friendly nonjudgment with the intention of increasing one’s capacity for awareness in the present moment” (Magee, 2016, p. 1). Another definition for mindfulness is “a state of nonjudgmental attentiveness to and awareness of moment to moment experiences” (Bishop et al, 2006). Lastly, mindfulness is “an open and receptive awareness and attention, or quality of consciousness characterized by a clear awareness in the present” (Brown & Ryan, 2003).
¹⁴⁶. Id.
¹⁴⁷. See id.
Mindfulness meditation is becoming an increasingly mainstream practice in a variety of highly demanding professions because it has been proven to “significantly reduce stress, negative moods and rumination,” resulting in greater productivity and better overall well-being of the practitioner. Notably, the practice has even found its way into the U.S. Army, where soldiers who completed a four-week program were “better able to discern important information under chaotic circumstances and made fewer cognitive errors than those who did not undergo the training.” Likewise, the legal community can benefit from the integration of mindfulness practices into legal education and the profession.

B. WHY MINDFULNESS SHOULD BE TAUGHT IN LAW SCHOOLS

Mindfulness meditation has been recognized as a powerful “vehicle for restoring civility, decreasing stress, and enhancing the fundamental fabric of the legal community” by lawyers, law students, and judges alike. In fact, in response to its finding that lawyers and law students are “generally unwell,” the National Task Force on Lawyer Well-Being recommended that lawyers utilize mindfulness meditation as a tool to “manage stress, reduce burnout, and promote ethical decision-making.” Many ABA-accredited law schools already include mindfulness-based course offerings, including the University of California, Berkeley, Columbia, Georgetown, University of

148. Grady, supra note 145. World-renowned corporations facilitate and encourage the practice of mindfulness meditation by their employees, such as Google, Nike, Goldman Sachs, Intel, and Aetna Insurance, just to name a few. Id. Intel found that after its “ten-week mindfulness program, . . . ‘Awake @ Intel,’ . . . participants reported a two-point decrease in overall stress, a three-point increase in overall happiness and well-being, and a two-point increase in mental clarity, ability to focus and creativity” - as judged on a ten-point scale. Id. at 421-22. Similarly, Aetna’s ten-week mindfulness program revealed a “twenty-eight percent decrease in stress levels, a twenty-percent increase in sleep quality, and a twenty-eight percent reduction in pain.” Id. at 422.


150. Grady, supra note 145.

151. Id. at 422. In 2019, Dr. Amishi Jha conducted a study on the effect of four weeks of “mindfulness training on soldiers’ resilience, focus, situational awareness, and ability to manage stress.” Id. Soldiers reported individually continuing their mindfulness techniques after completing the program. Id. Specifically, Maj. Gen. Walter Piatt, Commander of Coalition forces in Iraq, recalls mindfulness meditation as being a key component of his successful diplomatic missions, as it helped him to better understand his enemies and to reduce conflict. Id.


153. Grady, supra note 145, at 423. In 2017, the National Task Force on Lawyer Well-Being announced that lawyers and law students suffer from “high rates of chronic stress, depression, anxiety, and substance abuse.” Id.
Miami, Vanderbilt, Yale, and South Texas College of Law. One such university explains that it invested in these programs to “provide its students with the tools they need to achieve academic excellence while maintaining their emotional well-being.”

However, many corners of the legal profession remain unaware of mindfulness meditation and its efficacy at mitigating the problems plaguing the profession. This valuable tool is not currently available to all law students. Thus, to demonstrate their true concern for the well-being of their students and future professionals, law schools should adopt a mindfulness-based curriculum.

1. Improves Mental Wellness

Among its many benefits, the practice of mindfulness has been shown to increase mental wellness and academic performance, while reducing

---

154. Id.

155. South Texas College of Law Houston, https://www.stcl.edu/academics/course-offerings/ [https://perma.cc/E27C-6UYV] (choose the “view course listing” tab; then choose “spring 2024” from dropdown; then select “law” from the “subjects” tab; then type “mindful” into the “title” tab; then click “class search”).

156. Grady, supra note 145, at 424.

The University of Miami School of Law established the country’s first Mindfulness in Law program in 2011. Pioneered by mindfulness expert Scott Rogers, the program includes for-credit class offerings, titled “Jurisight for 1L’s” and “Mindful Ethics,” as well as voluntary mindfulness activities for students and faculty, such as “Mindful Spaces.” The “Jurisight for 1L’s” course, offered each fall since 2008, teaches students how to optimize academic performance and minimize stress by coupling contemplative law practices with the neuroscience underlying mindfulness meditation. “Mindful Ethics,” which satisfies the ABA’s professional responsibility requirement, harmonizes professional ethics and mindfulness by teaching students how to uphold their ethical obligations while maintaining their own well-being. The voluntary “Mindful Spaces” program seeks to equip students and faculty with practical mindfulness tools that they can use daily, including mindful walking, mindful stretching, mindful visualizations, and more.

Id. at 423-24.

157. One method would be to incorporate mindfulness-based practices as they would allow individuals to reflect on unhelpful feelings and mental state “associated with imposter syndrome and foster more compassionate, accepting ways of relating to oneself.” Audrey Ervin, Fight Back Against Imposter Syndrome, Psych. Today (Jan. 30, 2018), https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/open-and-diverse/201801/fight-back-against-imposter-syndrome. For example, “[c]ognitive-behavioral therapies can help to identify and replace maladaptive patterns of thinking, such as ‘everyone will find out I am incompetent.’”

Id.
stress. It is well known that stress and anxiety “handicap[] our abilities for learning, for holding information in working memory, for reacting flexibly and creatively, for focusing attention at will, and for planning and organizing effectively.” Practicing mindfulness meditation, allows individuals to self-regulate, as they “experience a release of physical tension that acts to oppose the stress response and creates a calm state of mind and body.” This increased ability to regulate emotions gained through mindfulness allows individuals to have a faster turnaround from their negative emotions. Additionally, mindfulness can be a tool to assist with the legal profession’s pervasive rates of substance and alcohol abuse, as well as depression. Overall, it has been shown that practicing mindfulness allows one to “improve and enhance health and quality of life, which in turn improves academic and cognitive performance.” Additionally, mindfulness may assist with the classic notion faced by many imposters that they are not as intelligent, accomplished, and successful as their credentials suggest, which leads to poor emotional health and a lack of self-confidence. In light of the documented benefits, mindfulness practice would allow the imposters to observe such a thought without judging themselves and comprehend that the thought they are wrestling with is not a reflection of reality.

Thus, because “mindfulness training is linked with helping many conditions that negatively affect law students and lawyers,” law schools should offer students the training in an effort to assist with the challenges presented by imposter syndrome.

2. Fosters Positive Professional Identity Formation

Along with presenting a historically rigorous curriculum, law schools have a responsibility to focus on students’ psychological well-being by encouraging them to “consciously consider fundamental questions about the

158. George, supra note 151, at 230-33. Research has proven that a recognized “eight-week MBSR program can significantly reduce stress, negative moods and rumination, and increase positive moods.”
159. Id. at 231-32.
160. Id. at 232.
161. Id. One study involving university students, demonstrated that “those with higher dispositional mindfulness reacted less to threatening visual stimuli, as evidenced by lower activation of the amygdala and stronger prefrontal cortex activation, indicative of better executive control.” George, supra note 151, at 232.
162. Id.
163. Id. at 230. In addition, practicing mindfulness meditation would help “people suffering from a variety of ailments, including chronic pain, fibromyalgia, cancer, heart disease, anxiety, binge eating disorder, psoriasis, borderline personality disorder, major depressive disorder, and stress.” Id. “It has also been shown to reduce anxiety and increase positive emotions,” as well as improve functioning of the immune system.
164. See generally Imposter Syndrome, supra note 6.
165. George, supra note 151, at 233.
professional identity they are assuming, and its relationship to their values."\textsuperscript{166} To do so, a close examination of the curriculum is required, “scrutiniz[ing] the values and assumptions behind what [educators] teach, as well as the impact that these values and assumptions in our curriculum have on our law students’ lives.”\textsuperscript{167} To that end, the Carnegie Report calls for a curriculum reform that would support the “moral development of practitioners,” while combining “professionalism with knowledge and skills, and which [would] provide students more opportunities for self-reflection, and allow them to develop a habit of self-assessment.”\textsuperscript{168} After all, the traditional law school curriculum design is subject to criticism for its failure to “focus on the ethical development of students in an integrated and pervasive way.”\textsuperscript{169} Integrating mindfulness training into legal curricula would allow these issues to be addressed “while simultaneously addressing the issue of the decline in attention and concentration that is affecting learning.”\textsuperscript{170} Thus, while skeptics may view mindfulness training as too “new age” for legal academia, “its acceptance and use in many other situations show that law schools are behind in the trend toward teaching mindfulness.”\textsuperscript{171}

Teaching law students to practice mindfulness meditation will equip them with faculties of awareness and self-reflection while improving their overall well-being and reducing stress. The benefits of practicing mindfulness would allow for the type of positive inner state necessary to thoughtfully develop one’s professional identity, as well. Thus, law schools should offer tools and coping mechanisms for students as they begin to navigate the challenges and realities of the legal landscape. However, each student would then bear the responsibility to adopt and use these tools for their own benefit throughout the duration of their career and possibly even life.

C. HOW TO PRACTICE MINDFULNESS INDIVIDUALLY

Mindfulness meditation focuses on observing one’s breathing, nonjudgmentally, for a period of time, while bringing attention back to the breath when the mind wanders; thereby cultivating the faculty of awareness.\textsuperscript{172} An imposter who is constantly trapped in their own negative thoughts and fears would benefit from the practice. When they become aware of these negative thoughts and judgments, they would acknowledge them as such, and merely

\textsuperscript{167} \textit{Id.}
\textsuperscript{168} \textit{Id.}, supra note 151, at 237.
\textsuperscript{169} \textit{Id.} Moreover, critics also argue that law schools suppress creativity. \textit{Id.}
\textsuperscript{170} \textit{Id.}
\textsuperscript{171} \textit{Id.} See also Grady, supra note 145, at 422.
\textsuperscript{172} \textit{See generally} Jon KABAT-ZINN, \textit{MINDFULNESS FOR BEGINNERS} (Sounds True, 1st ed. 2012).
let them go.\textsuperscript{173} Once the imposter can acknowledge that these negative thoughts are not a reflection of reality, they cease rooting their identity in them, connecting to a more stable and compassionate sense of the self.\textsuperscript{174} Notably, the practice of mindfulness meditation should be understood as a “weekly homework” type of commitment to an ongoing work in progress.\textsuperscript{175}

In daily meditation practice, one learns to observe their thoughts and emotions and realize that they come and go.\textsuperscript{176} This is especially helpful for imposters, as they begin to realize that their low assessment of themselves and fear of failure reflect pure negative thinking and not reality. They can then let these thoughts go rather than making them a central part of self-identification.\textsuperscript{177} One author elaborates:

Compounding thoughts of inadequacy is the thought that our feelings are true in an absolute sense—that somehow, inadequate is who we are, versus merely what we’re feeling. Observing our thoughts in meditation teaches us that we are not our thoughts, and that our thoughts are subject to change. Although in the moment we may be afraid, we can take solace in the fact that our fear is simply energy arising. There’s no need to attach to it. In fact, by observing our thoughts as if from a distance, we give them the space they need to soften, dissipate and move on.\textsuperscript{178}

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{173} See generally Conway, supra note 147.
  \item \textsuperscript{174} Id. (“Honing our ability to notice when feelings of inadequacy arise, gives us an opportunity to intentionally think differently.”).
  \item \textsuperscript{175} See Clance & Imes, supra note 31, at 244 (stating that one must “become aware of the superstitious, magical aspects of her impostor belief and must consciously experiment with changing her ritualistic behaviors.”). For example, a student should study for their final exam expecting that they succeed on the exam instead of expecting that they would fail. \textit{Id.} When succeeding “without the [overwhelming] self-doubting beforehand,” one makes a breakthrough as they undo an old ritual of predicting and anticipating failure. \textit{Id}
  \item \textsuperscript{176} Conway, supra note 147 (“When nervousness or trepidation arises, for example, we notice and allow those feelings to be present without labeling them as negative or wrong. This meditation exercise can also be applied to imposter syndrome. Feelings of fear or anxiety are normal, especially in new situations. When we judge these feelings as bad, we’re likewise judging ourselves. This limits our ability to see things from a new perspective. But it’s not necessarily ‘bad’ to feel nervous in a new, high-pressure situation. Instead, our hesitancy could be a sign of humility, care and a desire to be of benefit.”).
  \item \textsuperscript{177} Id. (stating that mindfulness meditation allows one to “observe and acknowledge thoughts and emotions without judging them (or ourselves)”).
  \item \textsuperscript{178} Id.
\end{itemize}
An improved sense of self-esteem allows individuals to “let go of old stories and become more comfortable with the ever-changing nature of our own minds and the world around us.”\(^\text{179}\)

Overall, regular meditation practice allows for the development of a new relationship with oneself as it unlocks a new perspective for self-compassion and loosens perfectionist tendencies.\(^\text{180}\) More simply stated, “[w]hen imposter syndrome arises, we can more honestly answer the question, is it true?”\(^\text{181}\)

IV. CONCLUSION

Imposter syndrome is a formidable obstacle to one’s physical and emotional well-being, as well as to the development of a healthy professional identity. It has been proven that mindfulness meditation can help individuals break free of the syndrome by developing the faculty of awareness of the present moment, identifying negative thoughts and emotions for what they are and letting them go in order to connect with a new, more stable sense of self, relieve the psychological pressure of perfectionism, and develop compassion. As such, law schools should incorporate mindfulness meditation training into their curricula to equip their students and future practitioners with a necessary coping mechanism. A certain level of individual responsibility, however, also lies on law students to engage in regular meditation practice to receive these benefits and conquer their fear of being exposed as “frauds.” The realization that imposter syndrome is so common and purely psychological, however, should help in motivating law students in making the commitment to practicing mindfulness meditation on a regular basis.

To conclude, law schools bear the responsibility of empowering the next generation of legal imposters by integrating mindfulness meditation into their

\(^{179}\). \textit{Id.} (“No longer identified with our thoughts and emotions, we identify instead with the stable ground of awareness from which this mental energy arises. Our thoughts appear like clouds, passing through the sky. No matter the weather, the sky remains stable. Feelings of unworthiness may arise, but they don’t change who we are at our core. By repeatedly connecting to awareness itself we free ourselves from habitual, negative thought patterns.”).

\(^{180}\). \textit{Id.} To further explain the process, one author wrote:

“Having developed a new relationship with our thoughts and emotions, we can replace our habitual judgment and self-criticism with compassion. With a softened sense of a separate and unchanging self, we realize we are not alone in our fears. To some extent, nearly everyone has experienced imposter syndrome. With self-compassion, we turn toward our feelings of inadequacy with gentle, kind words, addressing them as we would a much-loved friend. We’d likely tell our friend there’s no need to be perfect. And by letting go of perfectionism, we further ease the grip of any feelings of fraud.”

Conway, \textit{supra} note 147.

\(^{181}\). \textit{Id.}
curriculum to help law students dismiss their plethora of unproductive thoughts and develop healthy professional identities. Once trained and educated on the subject, however, the students need to stay disciplined and practice mindfulness individually on a regular basis in order to continue being empowered to overcome the imposter within!