

Chatterbox #268 – Imposter syndrome

Episode description

Have you ever felt like you don't really belong? Or perhaps that, somehow, you've fooled people into believing that you're more successful or intelligent than you really are? That's called imposter syndrome. In this episode, Andrew and Kassy explain imposter syndrome and share their experiences dealing with it.

In this Chatterbox episode, you'll hear two native English speakers discuss a common issue that many people face. Chatterbox episodes help you become fluent in English. The natural, conversational language is designed for intermediate to advanced learners so that you can improve your vocabulary and listening skills. While you listen, you might even discover tips on how to deal with your own imposter syndrome!

Fun fact

The term imposter syndrome was first used by Suzanne Imes and Pauline Rose Clance in the 1970s. These psychologists wanted to explain a feeling experienced by many high-achieving women in the workforce.

Expressions included in the study guide

- Imposter syndrome
- Work out
- [One's] cohort
- Black sheep
- Fake it till you make it
- [Something] is key



Transcript

Note: The words and expressions that appear in **bold text** within the transcript are discussed in more detail in the Detailed Explanations section that follows the transcript. The transcript has been edited for clarity.

Andrew: Hello there, everyone. My name's Andrew.

Kassy: And I'm Kassy.

Andrew: And this is the Culips English Podcast.

Hey, friends, welcome back to Culips. This is Chatterbox, the Culips series for intermediate and advanced English learners. Today's topic is **imposter syndrome**. And I'm joined for this conversation by my cohost, Kassy. Hey, Kassy. How's it going?

Kassy: I am excellent.

Andrew: Awesome. Now, everyone, there's a transcript and study guide for this episode that's available for all Culips members. If you're not Culips member yet, we highly recommend it. When you sign up to become a member, you'll get unlimited access to our study guide library. We make a study guide for each episode, everyone. Plus you'll get an invitation to our monthly livestream events and exclusive access to our Fluency Files series. So to sign up and become a member, just visit Culips.com.

Kassy, speaking of livestreams, what was the topic for our last livestream that we did?

Kassy: Well, it's the same as this episode, **imposter syndrome**.

Andrew: **Imposter syndrome**. Yeah. So our original plan was to take the audio from last month's livestream and to make it into a Culips episode. We wanted to take that audio, edit it down, maybe take out some parts because the livestream is an hour long. And usually our Culips episodes are like 20 minutes long. So we wanted to do some editing and tighten it up, but turned out to be more difficult than expected. And we couldn't actually turn that audio into a good Culips episode. So we decided that we shouldn't let this nice topic go to waste. And instead we'll just talk about it again here, so that all of the people who missed the livestream last time can hear about what we have to say about **imposter syndrome**.

Kassy: Yeah, so let's get to it.

Andrew: Let's get to it. Let's start with a definition. It's always good to start with a definition, right? We have two words that are difficult in this topic, imposter and syndrome. Individually, they're a little bit difficult. And then when you put them together, you get kind of a totally different meaning. So we should break it down. Let's break it down and simplify it. Imposter, what does this mean? Who is an imposter, Kassy?

Kassy: An imposter is someone who is pretending to be something they're not.

Andrew: A person who is pretending to be someone they're not. Yeah, I like that. That's a good, clear definition.

Kassy: Yes. During our livestream, I related this word to a famous game these days, an online game. It's called Among Us. And in that game, there's a bunch of little space cadets in a spaceship and they're trying to fix their ship. And one or two cadets among them are actually imposters, who are pretending to be innocent, but their actual goal is to kill all of the other members on this ship. So they are imposters. And the good guys, it's their job to find out who these imposters are and eject them from the spaceship.

Andrew: Right. So an imposter is almost like an undercover spy, right? They're pretending to be somebody or something, so that they can really do something else. And, yeah, this is the key concept here. Now what about this other word, syndrome? What is a syndrome?

Kassy: A syndrome is kind of like an illness. But when I think of syndrome, I think more psychological rather than physical.

Andrew: Yeah, so a syndrome, I think the easiest way to think about it is a medical condition, right? And there are a lot of well-known medical conditions in English that have this word syndrome in it, right? I think we talked about some of these before on the livestream as well, like AIDS is auto-immune deficiency syndrome. And there is Down's syndrome, for example. Just some very well-known medical conditions in English have this word syndrome inside of it.

So then if we put these two words together, imposter, syndrome, what do we get? What does this mean?

Kassy: **Imposter syndrome** is more of a psychological problem where it's feeling like you are a fraud or that you don't belong in some situation or among some people.

Andrew: So whenever you feel, personally, like maybe you're not good enough, you're not fast enough, you're not strong enough, you're not smart enough, then that is **imposter syndrome**.

So, Kassy, let's talk about our own personal experiences here for a moment with **imposter syndrome**. And I'm wondering if you've ever felt this way before? Have you ever been in some kind of situation where you just felt like you didn't fit in or didn't belong?

Kassy: Yes, there were two main situations I remember. The first one was not severe, or the most recent one, it's when I became a teacher and entered my classroom for the first time. I think whenever you start something new, you have a little bit of **imposter syndrome**. Like, am I really qualified for this? Can I do this? Is it all gonna **work out**? So the first, you know, 5 or 10 minutes that I stood in front of my very first class, I experienced a little bit of **imposter syndrome**.

Andrew: Only for 5 or 10 minutes?

Kassy: You know, you get into the groove, get the kids laughing and it all **works out**.

Andrew: Wow. OK. So that's, that's pretty good. That's not so bad. Personally, I felt **imposter syndrome** a couple of times in my life. Also, because I'm an educator just like you, there have been situations in the classroom where I felt **imposter syndrome**. I felt like I wasn't really qualified enough to be the teacher in that situation. Specifically, when I was a newer English teacher, some students would ask me questions about grammar that I had never encountered before and I didn't know how to answer them very well. And in those moments, especially, I felt frustrated, I felt like I wasn't knowledgeable enough. And those were real moments of **imposter syndrome**.

But at the same time, they were great learning moments and learning opportunities, because they really motivated me to hit the books and find the answers to those questions that I didn't know. And I was able to learn a lot from doing research to find the answers to those questions. So, ultimately, feeling **imposter syndrome** made me a better teacher in the end.

Kassy: Yeah, I think people who experience **imposter syndrome** probably hold the most pressure against themselves. And having that feeling makes them, you know, work harder, achieve more. So it makes sense that you would feel that way. And it made you feel like a better teacher by, you know, working harder and overcoming that feeling.

Andrew: Mm-hmm. The second time I felt **imposter syndrome** was when I was a grad school student, especially for the first month or two before I really became close with the other students in **my cohort**. And that was just because, you know, I thought, oh, grad school is for smart kids and I'm not smart so what am I doing here? I would hear the other students in the class talk and they were so eloquent. And they spoke really well. And they seemed really studious. And I didn't really feel like I fit in there. I mean, I don't think I'm stupid, but I'm definitely not a genius. And I felt like some of the other students that I was studying with were really, really bright, really, really intelligent. So in that moment, I also felt **imposter syndrome**.

However, it faded away as I got closer with my classmates, and I got to know them better. And I realized they're just like me, you know, they're not too different. Everybody's kind of the same in the end, some people are a little bit brighter, or a little bit not as bright, to put it politely. But we're all around the same.

Kassy: Everybody has their own talents.

Andrew: Exactly, exactly. That's a good way to put it. So I got over that, as well. But definitely for the first couple of months of grad school, I felt **imposter syndrome**.

Kassy: Yeah, I also felt **imposter syndrome** as a student in middle school. I think being a student is really hard on its own because it's not just about the academics, there's so much of a social aspect that goes into it. You're always trying to, you know, be the best or compare yourself to your peers. And it's a lot of pressure. And you always feel like you're the **black sheep**, the odd one out, the imposter. I think everybody has this feeling at least some time in their life.

Andrew: Yeah, absolutely. And I think to an extent, I'm pretty lucky that I haven't really felt **imposter syndrome** too much in my life. Because I was watching a YouTube video with Michelle Obama talk about **imposter syndrome** before. And her experiences with this feeling were much more severe than mine. And I realized that I'm pretty lucky that I've never had to experience it on the same level as her, because she was talking about being black in America and how she felt like an imposter being in these predominantly white places, right?

So Michelle Obama attended some very high-level, Ivy League schools, Princeton and Harvard Law School. And she was saying that while she was a student and, you know, as a woman of colour, she just had to work so much harder than everyone else to feel accepted and to be successful in those places. And, yeah, that just made me reflect on my own life and realize, well, I never had that kind of experience in my life. So, yeah, it was very eye-opening to see Michelle Obama talk about **imposter syndrome** and also a little bit shocking, right? Because she's achieved so much success in her life, to see that someone as intelligent and well-spoken as her still feels that way. Also, that is kind of humanizing, right? Like, no matter what your situation in life is, sometimes we will all feel like imposters from time to time.

Now, one thing that Michelle Obama said was that when she was trying to overcome this feeling, she just doubled down and worked even harder than everyone else. She could get over **imposter syndrome** through hard work. And I guess that's the question I want to ask you, Kassy, is do you have any solutions to **imposter syndrome**? Or when you felt like this before, what did you do to get over it?

Kassy: I found out a little bit later in life than I wanted to, but eventually that **imposter syndrome** is really related to confidence. And I found out that the more easily I was able to laugh at myself, the more confident I felt. You know, like, I had to stop taking everything so seriously and once I realized that, you know, nobody really cares if I make a mistake or two now and again, it's only me that's putting that pressure upon myself, then when I was able to let that go, I gained a lot more confidence and that feeling of, you know, self-doubt, of **imposter syndrome**, really, you know, vanished.

Andrew: Yeah. An expression that came up during the livestream event, Kassy, was **fake it till you make it, fake it till you make it**. And what that expression means is just that even if you are not the most qualified person in the room, or even if you are not an expert, you can pretend like you are, and often other people won't even notice that maybe you are not as qualified as you are pretending to be and that acting like this can help you be successful in the future. And I think I clued into this as well.

You know, I don't think I've ever faked my credentials in any situation. But in situations where I feel like an imposter or I feel maybe not 100% confident, acting like I'm confident, acting like I know exactly what I'm talking about can really be beneficial. So I agree with you that having confidence in yourself, even when you know you're not like a perfect fit for this situation, can be very, very useful, and something that I've used as well to get over the feeling of **imposter syndrome**.

Kassy: Yeah. When you talked about that, **fake it till you make it**, one other phrase popped into my mind, which is **confidence is key**.

Andrew: **Confidence is key**, K-E-Y.

Kassy: Yes. The key to success is confidence. So **fake it till you make it, confidence is key**, learning to laugh at yourself. All of these things are great ways to overcome **imposter syndrome**.

Andrew: So we'll wrap it up here, Kassy, but just before we do, let's break down that last expression that you used, learning to laugh at yourself. What do you mean by that, laugh at yourself? What exactly does that mean?

Kassy: That means, kind of like what I mentioned before, if you make a mistake, don't beat yourself up. Don't keep thinking about it and stressing over it. You know, just laugh it off. Act like it's not a big deal.

Andrew: Don't take yourself so seriously, right? Learn to be kind and gentle to yourself. And that can go a long way in your success.

Kassy: Yup, that's exactly right.

Andrew: Excellent. Well, that brings us to the end of this episode, everyone. Thank you for tuning in. We hope you enjoyed this conversation. And if you would like to join Kassy and I for the next Culips livestream, we would love to have you join us. Now it is only for Culips members, but once you're a member, you are invited to join us. We make an announcement on our website every month about when we will be doing it. It's usually towards the end of the month. But we make the announcement in advance so you can find when we'll be going live and you can join us for that cool video livestream. So we hope to see you there.

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We'll be back soon with another brand-new episode and we'll talk to you then. Goodbye, everyone.

Kassy: Catch you later.

Detailed Explanations

Imposter syndrome

Noun

Imposter syndrome is the feeling that you're a phony or a fraud. It's the belief that you don't deserve your success. The belief is that you haven't actually succeeded, but that you've just convinced others that you're a success. It also applies to confidence and intelligence, as well as your sense of belonging. When you have **imposter syndrome**, you believe that you are not as competent as others think you are. You also don't feel like you belong.

Imposter syndrome can affect anyone. Someone with **imposter syndrome** constantly doubts their skills, talent, or accomplishments. This causes anxiety, stress, and fear of being exposed. They believe they are lucky or that they have managed to fool everyone. People with **imposter syndrome** are actually talented, skilled, and smart. They have worked hard for their success.

You can also say **impostor phenomenon**, **impostorism**, **fraud syndrome**, or **the impostor experience**.

Here are a couple more examples with **imposter syndrome**:

Helena: Have you ever felt like you were going to throw up before a presentation?

Millie: Yeah. Like, every time I had to do one in school. Why? Are you feeling sick?

Helena: Uh huh. I honestly don't know why the CEO put me in charge of this project. I'm not experienced.

Millie: He put you in charge because you're good at your job, Helena. What you're feeling right now is **imposter syndrome** and it's lying to you. You've got this, OK?

Jae: How's your son doing at his new school?

Young-Ho: He's doing OK, I think. He's getting good grades, but he's not making many friends. And he seems more stressed than he used to be at his old school.

Jae: Ah, my daughter had the same reaction when she switched. She had **imposter syndrome** being around all those wealthy kids. If that's what your boy is going through, I'd suggest reassuring him that he belongs at the school. Talk to him about it.

Work out

Phrasal verb

Work out is a phrasal verb with a couple of different meanings. In this episode, Kassy talks about her experience teaching a new class. She says, “You get into the groove, get the kids laughing and it all **works out**.” In this case, she’s using **work out** to mean get better and progress in a satisfactory way.

When a thing, situation, or process **works out**, that means it’s going to be all right. Everything will end the way it should, and everyone will be happy.

In contrast, when someone **works out**, they exercise. However, if they’re **working out** a calculation, they’re doing math.

Here are a couple more examples with **work out**:

Hoshi: Well, I guess I’ll head out.

Mika: It’s so weird that I won’t see you in the office on Monday! I mean, I’m excited for you and your new job, but I’m going to miss you.

Hoshi: Thanks. I’ll miss you, too.

Mika: Hey, if it doesn’t **work out** over there, you can always come back here, OK?

Hoshi: That is very good to know! I’ll let you know if that happens.

Mika: Good, good. See you around, Hoshi!

Fletcher: Your play was so good, Russ. I couldn’t even tell you had a huge set disaster this morning!

Russ: Ha, thanks. Yeah, today was really stressful, but I’m glad everything **worked out** well in the end. The cast and crew did an amazing job.

Fletcher: I agree. And I know the audience was amazed by the fight scenes. So even though that is what broke the set earlier, it was worth it for the show.

Russ: It was, yup. I’ve warned the actors that we won’t be able to fix the set again, though, so hopefully they’ll stick to their script from now on.

[One's] cohort

Noun

[One's] cohort is a group of people with something in common, usually age. Originally, **cohort** referred only to people born during a specific period—so people of the same age or age-based generation (like millennials). Nowadays, **cohort** can also mean a group of companions, colleagues, or friends. It is also used to refer to a group of people who support someone, usually a leader.

In this episode, Andrew talks about when he was in grad school. He says, “I really became close with the other students in **my cohort**.” He means the students born around the same time as he was. Later, when they become friends, he might call them **his cohort** and instead mean friends or companions.

Here are a couple more examples with **[one's] cohort**:

Benjamin: Oh, I read in the news today that the police arrested a bunch of people last night near the corner store you go to on your way home.

Tamara: Yeah, apparently there was some violent gang activity happening. They arrested the gang leader and **his cohorts** at, like, 3:00 in the morning.

Benjamin: That's crazy. Please tell me you'll stop shopping at that store from now on?

Tamara: Why? The dangerous people are in jail now. If anything, it's safer now than it was yesterday after work.

Ayumi: You're a writer, right?

Saburo: Yup. Aspiring writer, anyways. Why do you ask?

Ayumi: I watched a video yesterday that I thought you might like. One second, I'll send you the link. It's this famous author, I can't remember her name, and she talks about the challenges facing a whole **cohort** of young writers now with self-publishing and digital books, and how it's so different from when she first started. I think you'll find it helpful.

Saburo: Cool, yeah! Send me the link, I'll watch it.

Ayumi: It's an hour long so, like, watch it while you eat dinner or something.

Saburo: For sure, I will. Thanks!

Black sheep Idiom

Black sheep refers a family member or group member who is considered a disgrace. The **black sheep** is often considered odd, weird, and out of place. **Black sheep** don't conform to what's normal for the group or family. Often, the **black sheep** does something that embarrasses or shames the rest of the group.

The term comes from how much actual **black sheep** stand out in a flock of common white sheep. Their wool was less valuable because it couldn't be dyed.

While the term has negative connotations, people labelled as **black sheep** may be proud of how they're seen. They might enjoy being different.

Here are a couple more examples with **black sheep**:

Zheng: Who is going to be at the family get-together this weekend? Do you know?

Yin: Other than you, me, Mom, and Dad? Grandma and Grandpa, of course. I think Auntie Ah and her family.

Zheng: Even Uncle Joe?

Yin: I'm pretty sure he'll come with Auntie Ah, yeah.

Zheng: Wasn't he was told not to come after the last get-together, when he and Grandma got into that fight about his hair?

Yin: I don't think anyone said he couldn't come. Though, given that we all treat him like a **black sheep**, I don't really know why he'd want to come. He'd probably have a better time at home.

Zheng: I wonder if Auntie Ah makes him come.

Pamela: I can't wait for you to meet my friend Raina. She's so fun!

Chandler: Isn't that the one who has taxidermied animals in her house?

Pamela: Yeah! Fun, right? Her old friends used to treat her like the **black sheep** because of her interests, but I think it's neat! You'll really like her.

Fake it till you make it

Idiom

Fake it till you make it means to pretend to be the person you want to be until that's who you are. It means to behave in a way that will lead to a better future. **Faking it until you make it** can be a good tool to take you out of your comfort zone and help you achieve your goals. While faking it is usually considered a bad thing, **faking it till you make it** is actually used to motivate people.

As Andrew says in this episode, "Even if you are not the most qualified person in the room, or even if you are not an expert, you can pretend like you are, and often other people won't even notice that maybe you are not as qualified as you are pretending to be and that acting like this can help you be successful in the future."

Here are a couple more examples with **fake it till you make it**:

Felix: Oh, man, I'm so nervous for my interview tomorrow. I want this job so bad.

Dae-Jung: You're going to do great, dude! Just be yourself. Be confident.

Felix: Being me and being confident are two very different ways to act!

Dae-Jung: Then fake it! **Fake it till you make it**, dude! You're totally qualified for the job and you just need to act like it. You'll get it, for sure.

Chun: All right. How's your outfit? Everything done up properly?

Jasmine: I think so. It's really tight, though. And short. Are you sure this is how it's supposed to fit?

Chun: I'm positive.

Jasmine: I feel like an over-stuffed sausage.

Chun: You look great! OK, you look uncomfortable right now. But you have to act like you're not in front of the audience. The designer is counting on you to show off her clothes.

Jasmine: Right, OK. Got it. It's all about **faking it until you make it**, right?

Chun: Right. Oh! That's your cue!

[Something] is key Expression

[Something] is key means that it is very important. It is the best or only way to achieve or do something. In this episode, for example, Andrew and Kassy say that **confidence is key** when dealing with imposter syndrome. That means that having confidence in yourself is the best way to feel like you belong.

This expression is a shortened version of the longer phrase **the key to [something]**. A common example of this longer phrase is **the key to success**. Many native English speakers will use **[something] is key** in casual settings. In more formal or professional settings, they say **the key to [something]**.

Here are a couple more examples with **[something] is key**:

Melissa: My makeup is done! Are you ready to head to the club?

Suk-Ja: No! I can't get my eyeshadow to look right. How is your makeup always so perfect and mine always makes me look like a wet racoon?

Melissa: Aw, honey. You've never looked like a wet racoon, I promise you! As for my makeup, well, **a really good setting spray is key** for getting a good look. I mean, yeah, you need to make sure you get the makeup on right in the first place, but once it's on, a setting spray keeps it all in place and you'll never have to worry about rain or sweat or anything like that. There we go! What do you think?

Suk-Ja: Oh, wow, Melissa! You're an artist, I swear. Can you teach me how you do this later? And help me find a good spray?

Melissa: Of course! But for now we're seriously late, so let's go!

Daiki: Hello, welcome. I understand you're here for some career advice.

Oliver: Yes. Thank you for meeting with me. My dad said you're the best in the industry and that I could learn a lot from you.

Daiki: OK, then. Well, first, let me say that you're off to a good start. **Networking is key** when it comes to growing a business. So meet with everyone and anyone who inspires you. Make a good impression on them and they'll remember you and support your business.

Quiz

1. Which of the following means to pretend to be who you want to be until you are that person?

- a) bake it till you take it
- b) fake it till you bake it
- c) bake it till you make it
- d) fake it till you make it

2. What is imposter syndrome?

- a) feeling like you're a phony or a fraud
- b) feeling like you're the best at what you do
- c) feeling like an international spy
- d) feeling like a superhero

3. What does "confidence is key" mean?

- a) the key is named confidence
- b) confidence is important
- c) confidence unlocks your front door
- d) you have to have confidence in the key in order for it to work

4. What would you call an embarrassing and odd family member or friend?

- a) the blue sheep
- b) the beige sheep
- c) the black sheep
- d) the brown sheep

5. Which of the following means people your age?

- a) your cousins
- b) your colleagues
- c) your chums
- d) your cohort

Writing and Discussion Questions

1. Describe a time you experienced imposter syndrome. How did it work out?
2. Who is your cohort and why?
3. Is there a black sheep in your family or friend group? If so, what makes them the black sheep?
4. Describe a time you had to fake it till you made it.
5. In your opinion, what is key for you to have a great day?

Quiz Answers

1.d 2.a 3.b 4.c 5.d

Episode credits

Hosts: Andrew Bates and Kassy White

Music: *Something Elated* by Broke For Free

Episode preparation/research: Andrew Bates

Audio editor: Kevin Moorehouse

Transcriptionist: Heather Bates

Study guide writer: Lisa Hoekstra

English editor: Stephanie MacLean

Project manager: Jessica Cox

Business manager: Tsuyoshi Kaneshima

Image: Hello I'm Nik (Unsplash.com)