Chapter 10

Impostor Syndrome as a Risk Factor in the Development of Psychiatric Symptoms in Female Doctors

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ABSTRACT

Impostor syndrome is a psychological phenomenon in which an individual lacks self-esteem and confidence in their ability to perform well in positions of responsibility and tries to make up for this inadequacy with excess effort and workload. Although it can occur in men, it is most prevalent in women. The healthcare sector, specifically the medical profession, has a number of characteristics that facilitate the appearance of this phenomenon, for example: a high number of women in intermediate positions, high professional skills, and good educational qualifications. The symptoms of this affliction can negatively affect job performance and reduce the sufferer’s quality of life.

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this chapter is to offer an overall view of impostor syndrome, which is less well-known but just as important as other conditions and can have serious repercussions for women in the medical profession, among others. As with all lesser-known clinical conditions (those not classified as disorders), it can be fairly difficult to identify. This lack of recognition and, therefore, treatment, can lead to a worse outcome and significant potential losses at both the personal and professional levels.

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The importance of gender differences in this syndrome has been studied and validated and results from a society which, despite efforts in recent years, in some ways still perpetuates the gender roles that have led to the existence of this syndrome, even more so in professions traditionally linked to men. Individuals affected by this condition, which is not classified as a mental disorder, are unable to internalize their accomplishments and have a persistent fear of being revealed as a fraud despite the existence of objective evidence to support their competence. Although it is not a mental disorder as such, it does have a strong correlation with disorders such as anxiety and depression.

BACKGROUND

The term “impostor syndrome” was coined in 1978 by two American psychologists, Pauline Rose Clance and Suzanne Imes, to describe a phenomenon initially described in women. Clance defines it as a condition in which a high achiever experiences intense feelings of being a fraud or an intellectual phony (Clance & Imes, 1978). Clance and Imes’ work was followed by others, such as If I’m So Successful, Why Do I Feel Like a Fake: The Impostor Phenomenon, published by Joan C. Harvey in 1985, which states that over 50% of successful people have experienced this syndrome. One of the reasons for the existence of this condition is that socially, men and women have always been, and continue to be, brought up to play different roles, as demonstrated by the existence of gender traits such as difficulty with delegation, self-denial and the role of nurturer and peacemaker as part of women’s maternal role. Thus, although studies have shown that impostor syndrome exists in both sexes, it is far more prevalent in women.

Clance and Imes used the term “syndrome” in their first work (1978), and it was Harvey (Kats & Harvey, 1995) and Kolligian and Sternberg (2000) who suggested that it would be more scientifically accurate to define it as a construct of the subject’s personality, since it is related to cognitive and affective personality traits (Ghorbanshirodi, S., 2012) (Holmes, Kertay, Adamson et al., 1993). However, no matter what point of view you look at it from (personality vs. syndrome), we are dealing with a concept in which gender differences marked by society are definitive, as these structure the subject’s adult personality beyond any genetic aspects.

This syndrome was first identified last century and, despite important progress in women’s rights, it continues to exist nowadays with the same degree, possibly even more so due to the amount of women who are gradually moving up to positions of greater responsibility. On the other hand, it is perhaps more silent due to the urgent need in today’s workplace to hide any possible sign of weakness, leading us to consider whether this leads to greater emotional suffering and a higher possibility of suffering different psychiatric disorders, with the price that this entails in the loss of potential.

IMPOSTOR SYNDROME, THE MEDICAL PROFESSION, AND GENDER IDENTITY

Does the medical profession facilitate the appearance of impostor syndrome as much as other professions that are more clearly dominated by men? Medicine is sometimes cited as an example of the substantial progress made by women and is often used to illustrate the integration of women in the workplace, which is backed up by the exponential increase of female medical students and doctors (recalling that it was not so long ago that they were not even allowed access to this profession). However, even now,