

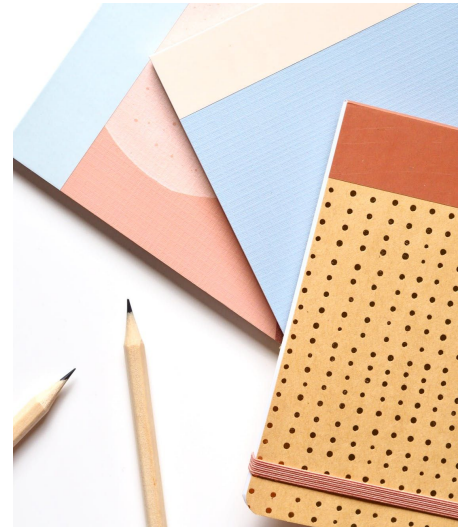


Managing Imposter Syndrome

Clement Kao
Founder of Product Teacher

Agenda

- What is imposter syndrome?
- How does imposter syndrome affect PMs?
- Techniques for addressing imposter syndrome
- Best practices for helping others through imposter syndrome
- Lecture summary



What is imposter syndrome?

Imposter syndrome is what you experience when you doubt your own abilities and feel like you're not "good enough" for the job

Factors that trigger imposter syndrome:

- High self-expectations paired with low self-forgiveness
- Hypersensitivity to judgment by others
- Perceived lack of support or resources
- Fixed mindset instead of growth mindset
- Framing failure as "bad" instead of "learning opportunities"

Thankfully, we can leverage techniques to manage imposter syndrome!



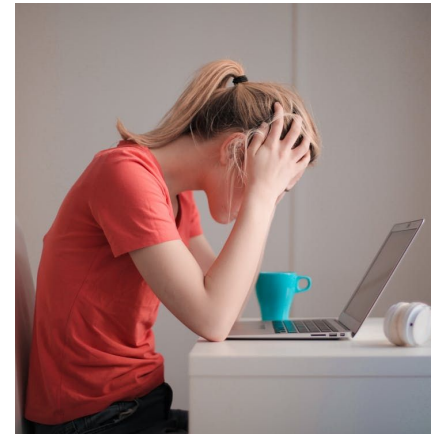
How does imposter syndrome affect PMs?

Product managers are **key decision-makers** within their orgs

Left unchecked, imposter syndrome can cause the following:

- Undermine your ability to trust your own decisions
- Hinder the effectiveness of your meetings and your proposals
- Create doubt in the minds of cross-functional stakeholders
- Bias managers to reduce access to larger scopes

Imposter syndrome is a core topic for any PM to keep track of, as it affects **personal productivity** and **interpersonal relationships**



Side bar: the trajectory of imposter syndrome

Counterintuitively, imposter syndrome typically becomes **more severe** as you establish a track record and gain new responsibilities!

Celebrities and leaders deal with significant levels of imposter syndrome (e.g. Tom Hanks, Sheryl Sandberg, Lady Gaga, Albert Einstein)

Many product leaders (i.e. CPO, head of product, VP product) have terrible imposter syndrome - much more so than most junior PMs do

We should *expect* imposter syndrome to grow over time, which is why investing in management strategies *now* is valuable



Techniques for addressing imposter syndrome

The key insight before we discuss techniques:

Imposter syndrome comes from a place of self-care.

Our goal is not to silence our inner voice.

Rather, our goal is to engage our inner voice so that it can take care of us in more productive ways.



Techniques for addressing imposter syndrome

Eight ways you can alleviate imposter syndrome:

1. Conduct self-interviews and co-create plans
2. Analyze and reframe self-talk
3. Identify your triggers
4. Manage self-expectations and perfectionism
5. Log evidence of your performance
6. Change your reaction to praise
7. Find mentors and peers to support you
8. Normalize the presence of imposter syndrome

You *don't* need to use all of these at once, by the way!



Techniques for addressing imposter syndrome

1) Conduct self-interviews and co-create plans

When imposter syndrome kicks in, many of us *flee* from it, rather than attempt to engage our inner voices in thoughtful dialogue

Imposter syndrome is a signal that you have an **unaddressed need**, so take some time to run a user interview with your inner voice:

- Empathize with their pains
- Prioritize their pains with them
- Identify a plan with their buy-in
- Check in with them regularly



Techniques for addressing imposter syndrome

2) Analyze and reframe self-talk

For people who experience imposter syndrome, their self-talk is typically **negative** in tone, and it typically speaks in **absolutes**

Rather than accept these assessments at face value, reframe them:

- Is this absolute statement true? What are some counterexamples, whether from your own life or someone else's?
- What desire is being expressed here? Is this desire really *your* desire, or is it what you *think* others want from you?
- How can we reposition this negative assessment as a positive opportunity to grow?



Techniques for addressing imposter syndrome

3) Identify your triggers

Imposter syndrome is typically **event-driven** (e.g. upcoming presentation, upcoming performance review, etc.)

Document the events that are triggering imposter syndrome

From there:

- Remind yourself that future events may trigger similar feelings
- Determine which resources would be ideal for calming your fears
- Create a game plan to secure those resources proactively



Techniques for addressing imposter syndrome

4) Manage self-expectations and perfectionism

When self-expectations are high, imposter syndrome tends to kick in

Self-expectations focus on a **point in time** rather than a **trajectory**

Use the “iterative product mindset” on yourself to lessen the burden

- Your current initiative is just practice for a future initiative
- Your current initiative will have flaws, but you will learn from them
- Ship now to learn ASAP, rather than ship later to hope for perfection
- You will have many more opportunities to try again later



Techniques for addressing imposter syndrome

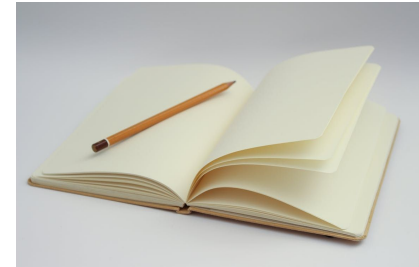
5) Log evidence of your performance

When imposter syndrome strikes, our minds **restrict access** to our past successes, so we need an external log to **level the playing field**

- Track your measurable outcomes over time
- Write down the praise that others have given you

Prevention is not the point; rather, we want to bring evidence to the table when this “internal escalation” begins

Without this evidence, our inner voices tend to spiral negatively because they can't find data that supports a more positive view of the world



Techniques for addressing imposter syndrome

6) Change your reaction to praise

Most PMs experiencing imposter syndrome have difficulty with accepting praise, which ultimately causes them to feel unsupported

Rather than deflect praise, say “thank you, I appreciate it”

- Helps you to internalize the praise
- Encourages others to continue providing positive feedback
- You can always follow up with “I’ll also pass your thanks to these other contributors”, but only after you’ve accepted the praise



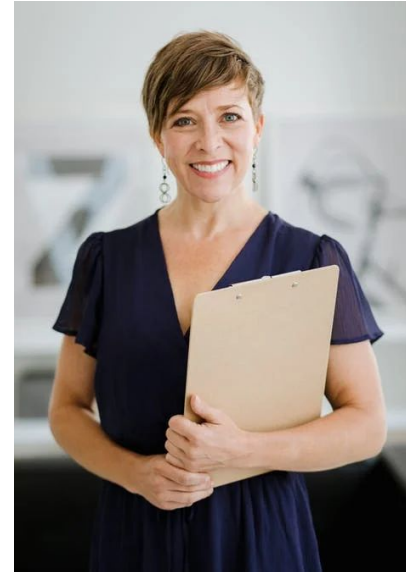
Techniques for addressing imposter syndrome

7) Find mentors and peers to support you

Imposter syndrome happens when we feel that we don't have the support or resources required to succeed

You don't have to do everything alone - let others support you!

- Provide perspectives on your proposed game plan
- Recognize your strengths and your growth opportunities
- Share their own experiences and challenges



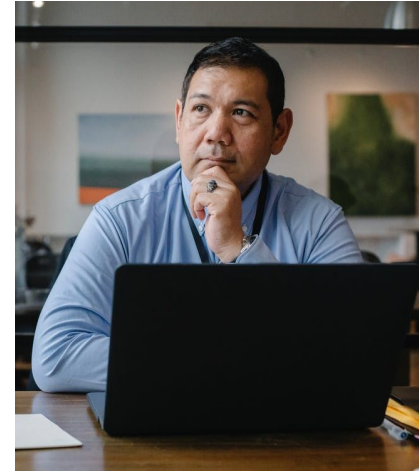
Techniques for addressing imposter syndrome

8) Normalize the presence of imposter syndrome

When people stigmatize imposter syndrome, it increases the likelihood that they will experience a more severe case of imposter syndrome

Recognizing that competent, well-respected, well-adjusted individuals also experience imposter syndrome helps to reduce anxiety

Imposter syndrome is much less scary when we treat it as a well-meaning friend who's a bit misguided with their approach



Helping others through imposter syndrome

As product managers, we need to ensure that our cross-functional partners and our direct reports perform at their best level

- Proactively recognize their contributions
- Reframe self-deflection of praise
- Document and socialize achievements
- Provide judgment-free space to talk or vent

Learning how to help others address their imposter syndrome will also help you manage yours!



Lecture summary

Many product managers experience **imposter syndrome**

Imposter syndrome gets **worse** as you become more senior

Imposter syndrome comes from a place of **self-care**, but its expression is destructive rather than productive

Leveraging techniques to **empathetically engage** with our inner voices will help us convert anxiety into energy

