

Imposter Syndrome



Meet Our Student Spotlights: Aditya Lakhani, MS4 and Christina Melian, MS3!

Aditya Lakhani, MS4



1) Your past: Where did you grow up? What were you interested in while growing up? Was medicine always the field for you?

I was born in Massachusetts, lived in India for a few years, then grew up in Queens, New York, and moved to New Hyde Park in 8th grade, where I finished up high school. Growing up, medicine was the last thing I thought I would end up doing. My parents tried encouraging me that medicine was the career choice for me despite themselves not having any experience with the field, so going against medicine was my way of rebelling I guess. During college, I realized I found meaning in working with people individually and helping them become the best version of themselves, found that I was good at science, and could see myself doing the work of a physician after a shadowing experience. That's when I decided upon medical school.

2) Your present: What are your hobbies? What activities do you do to help you relax and cope with the stress of medical school and life in general? How have they helped you deal with these stressors?

I love reading all kinds of bookos, hiking and being outdoors when it's nice out, listening to podcasts, and spending time with friends and family. Apart from those hobbies, which I've made an effort to maintain throughout medical school (but is much easier to do in 4th year), I realized how important it was to find ways to cope with the stressors that come along with med school and life. I meditate regularly using Headspace- that has been central to maintaining balance when life gets hectic. It gives me a sense of calm to handle life's challenges with a greater sense of ease, to accept things and move past them more easily. Working out a few times a week helps me stay somewhat physically active, and journaling even a little allows me to put my thoughts on paper and see them more clearly. Incorporating a balance of both activities I enjoy and activities that ground me have allowed me to get through the stressors that inevitably come up a little better.

3) Your future: What are you looking forward to in the near-future? What specialty are you interested in pursuing?

I'm looking forward to finally getting to (hopefully) do some international travel and backpacking before graduation! It's something I had the opportunity to do during my gap year before starting med school and would love to do again. Being able to spend more time with friends and family has been a great part of the past few months and I'm excited to keep doing that. I applied to psychiatry. I'm grateful to be graduating soon and to have found a field in medicine that I am so passionate about, that I get to practice and grow within for hopefully a long time.

4) What does imposter syndrome mean to you? How can medical students overcome and work through imposter syndrome?

For me, imposter syndrome is feeling like you don't belong where you are professionally, and it can end up bleeding into your personal life. You feel like you don't know how you got there, and that you don't deserve it. Someone made a mistake, and somehow you are in a position which you can't handle. I faced this at the beginning of medical school. I think it was a result of a combination of my first time being surrounded by what were to me as such high-achieving

individuals and the comparison that comes with that, and not knowing what I needed in terms of self-care. There are so many different kinds of imposter syndrome and there is not an easy solution for everyone. If I had one piece of advice, it would be to make time for self-care and to try spending some time outside of medical school with people not in the medical field, as great as medical school friends are.

5) General Words of Encouragement for medical school?

You can do this! I remember a time when I wanted to drop out on nearly a daily basis and felt overwhelmed, like I made a wrong choice that I could not take back. Don't be afraid to reach out to peers, mental health, or coaching resources for support, as it can help ease your journey a little bit. Now that I'm almost at the end, I'm so grateful that I was able to persevere past those feelings and look at the bigger picture. Everyone has their own path through school, and taking it one step at a time and remembering why you started is sometimes the best way forward.

Christina Melian, MS3



1) Your past: Where did you grow up? What were you interested in while growing up? Was medicine always the field for you?

I grew up in Staten Island, NY (yes, it's one of the 5 boroughs!) but have been living on Long Island for the past 10 years. I guess I'm what people would call a Stony Brook lifer - I went to undergrad here, got my masters here, and now med school! I've always been interested in medicine but actually planned on running professionally before medical school. Long story short, I got injured which kickstarted my career in medicine.

2) Your present: What are your hobbies? What activities do you do to help you relax and cope with the stress of medical school and life in general? How have they helped you deal with these stressors?

I'm very active, whether it be running, cycling, swimming, or yoga, I always make time for some exercise. I've been a runner for most of my life (I ran in college for SBU) so that has always been a huge outlet for stress. Recently I bought a road bike and it's been fun getting to explore Long Island from that point of view. I also enjoy hanging out with friends and trying new recipes in the kitchen.

3) Your future: What are you looking forward to in the near-future? What specialty are you interested in pursuing?

I've been studying for Step 1 for the past 6 weeks so I'm really looking forward to some downtime with friends and family. I'm also looking forward to getting back to working in the hospital and for upcoming away rotations.

4) What does imposter syndrome mean to you? How can medical students overcome and work through imposter syndrome?

To me, imposter syndrome is when you doubt yourself or feel like you're not good enough (aka the unspoken reality of most medical students). I think we'd all be lying if we didn't admit to feeling like an imposter at times which is why I think the best way to overcome these feelings is to acknowledge that they exist and lean on our peers in times of stress and self-doubt. Together we can overcome imposter syndrome.

5) General Words of Encouragement for medical school?

The best piece of advice I can give is to make time for your life outside of medicine. Med school is a huge commitment and we spend so much time studying that it can be easy to skip out on the other things that really bring us joy. Don't lose who you are in this process!

What is Imposter Syndrome?

Imposter syndrome (IS) is the feeling of self-doubt and personal incompetence that persists in many individuals, especially in those who are highly accomplished and educated. You feel like a fraud, and that negative voice in your head makes you question how you got to where you are. You feel like you don't deserve to be here, that someone made a mistake to let you get this far. These kinds of problematic thoughts can have a significant impact on one's mental and physical health in a number of different ways.

Medical school, a highly competitive environment, can be a fertile breeding ground for this feeling. A 2016 article showed that almost a quarter of male medical students and almost half of female students reported experiencing IS. In this same study, IS was found to be significantly associated with factors indicating burnout in medical students. In a 2020 survey at the University of New Mexico, IS was found to be present at some point among almost half of the participating medical students. A 2013 study at UT Austin showed that imposter feelings more strongly predicted mental health problems than stress due to minority status.

IS can trigger a variety of consequences down the line. It can lead to anxiety, depression, burnout if it is not managed or addressed. It can cause a physical health decline resulting in unhealthy eating patterns, decreased exercise, and decreased healthy habits including medical checkups. The psychological pattern can create a toxic cycle that is hard to escape from. An example of this cycle is pressuring yourself to work harder to keep others from recognizing your flaws and to ease your feelings of guilt for "tricking" other people. These are just some ways in which the cycle can perpetuate itself, and highlights the importance of recognizing and dealing with this issue.

There are many different exercises that can help. Therapy or talking to someone about it can be a great place to start. We have some things you can do on your own to address this issue discussed below.

Sources:

<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/27802178/>

<https://www.acponline.org/membership/medical-students/acp-impact/archive/august-2020/imposter-syndrome-among-minority-medical-students>

<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1002/j.2161-1912.2013.00029.x>

Activity Corner

Imposter syndrome is loosely defined as an internal experience of believing one's self to not be as competent as others perceive you to be or of believing one's self to not be deserving of the successes one has achieved. Medical students are particularly susceptible to this kind of self-doubt. Thus imposter syndrome cannot be ignored and must be addressed in order to decrease suffering, psychological distress and burnout. There are effective ways to combat this negative self-talk and belief. Below are some ways in which one can tackle imposter syndrome:

1. **Share your experiences with others.** We often feel as though as we isolated in our experiences. We feel as though the polished selves other present are their true selves, forgetting that they too have an inside self that has it owns thoughts, fears and experiences. If we share our experiences as a community, we can feel more connected to others and will realize we are not isolated in our feelings.
2. **Acknowledge your success.** Take some time at the end of a month or at the end of a block to reflect on what your successes have been, both small and big. Appreciate your own contributions to yourself and to others and realize that you earned those successes.
3. **Learn to reframe your thoughts.** When we live with a negative frame of mind, we are less equipped to deal with challenges. Combining a growth mindset with positive self-talk can change your mental outlook on situations. Attached is a link to a worksheet by PositivePsychology that can help identify negative self-talk and teach us how to replace them with positive self-talk → <https://positivepsychology.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Replace-Negative-Self-Talk.pdf>

References:

1. *How to conquer imposter syndrome in Medical School and Beyond.* Invested MD. (2021, October 21). Retrieved March 2, 2022, from <https://invested.mdm.ca/md-articles/how-to-conquer-imposter-syndrome-in-medical-school-and-beyond>
2. Smoot, M. H. (2022, January 10). *How to combat imposter syndrome in Medical School.* KevinMD.com. Retrieved March 2, 2022, from <https://www.kevinmd.com/blog/2022/01/how-to-combat-imposter-syndrome-in-medical-school.html>

Other Guides for Imposter Syndrome:

<https://students-residents.aamc.org/medical-student-well-being/imposter-syndrome>
<https://impostorsyndrome.com/10-steps-overcome-impostor/>
<https://www.healthline.com/health/mental-health/imposter-syndrome#overcoming-it>

Feel free to reach out to our MeSH editors if you have any suggestions or pieces you want to be featured in our next newsletter!

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