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THE BOTTOM LINE

Partha Kar: Imposter syndrome is no cause for shame

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How much of a problem for doctors is imposter syndrome? Is it just a term used by those who struggle to fit in? Is it a manifestation of totally natural self-doubt? Over the years we've lived with the rhetoric that successful people "don't show weakness" or "don't cry." When interacting virtually in the online world, it's far easier to make such judgments about others without knowing them as individuals. In doing so we may be reinforcing false beliefs or perhaps even forcing someone to conform to a set opinion or view.

In the past decade or so—helped by the work of some amazing people such as Stephen Fry and Dwayne Johnson—far more of us have realised the importance of talking about self-doubt and about mental health issues such as depression. These subjects have become less taboo, less something we only speak about coyly. Here, I want to dispel the notion that there can't be any self-doubt in people occupying leadership roles, as well as reflecting on the old rhetoric around strength and whether it always has to be on show.

By luck or default, I've ended up in a position in the NHS where sometimes, in some areas, my voice is listened to. I've seen my personality evoke, in similar measure, anger and inspiration, disdain and admiration, hate and affection. Yet behind all of that, behind what can seem like bulletproof confidence, sits a shy boy who cried when made to feel like a loser by some in school; a teenager who struggled to talk and hated public speaking; and a man who has been racked with self-doubt, wondering whether he was good enough and whether he'd convinced others of his worth. Imposter syndrome is a constant Sword of Damocles—the constant querying of one's worth and value.

Time has taught me many things—most importantly that, when you're fighting to choke back those hot tears, few people will put their arm around you. But it's taught me that feeling low, or not worthy or not good enough, is actually natural. It's also taught me that it's OK to talk about these things, that you're not being weak when you feel sad or want a hug—it's simply human. Success and failure are just parameters by which others judge you, and the highs and lows of our careers and lives are just a part of who we are.

At this phase of my career, as well as saying no to racism, misogyny, and sexism, it's time to say that it's OK to feel low, OK to feel alone, OK to struggle and ask for help. If you see me or anyone else who appears to rarely crack under pressure and is laced with confidence, be aware that this is, to an extent, a front. I struggle as much as anyone else. It's only natural to be hurt or to want to say, "Give me a moment to myself." It's also fine to feel like an imposter. My tip is to have a few trusted friends and loved ones to lean on when you need to. It's OK not to fit the image of what society wants you to be.

I hope that this column helps someone somewhere who may be looking at others and thinking, "Wow, I could never be like that." If you showed my 12 year old self a glimpse of the 47 year old me, it would seem to him totally unimaginable. If there are days when you feel like an imposter, don't worry—we all do.

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