

# Are You an Imposter in the Classroom?

## Imposter Syndrome, the Labrador and the Big Red Ball



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**I**mposter Syndrome is sweeping across the teaching profession and formerly confident individuals are now starting to question even their basic skills. Imposter Syndrome is, quite simply, the belief that you are not qualified or competent enough to do the job you have been given to do. It is more than just a case of the nerves. At best, it makes you uncertain and unsure, second guessing yourself; at worst, it can be crippling and even career-ending. The good news is that it is just a belief, a story you are telling yourself, and you CAN do something about it.

Typical responses to Imposter Syndrome lie in our fight, flight or freeze responses. The more rational and logical parts of the brain shut down at the perceived threat of the situation and instead switch into survival mode. You may find this shows up as perfectionism: redoing and repeating things until they are closer to perfect. I have heard of teachers trawling the internet and social media over and over trying to find the 'perfect lesson', scheme of work or assessment as they don't trust their own work to be valid or good enough. You may try to micro-manage situations to keep as much control as possible; you may over-plan,

trying to pre-empt every possibility. Alternatively, you may find yourself going into battle, on the defensive, blaming and reacting to situations, rather than having a measured and informed response. You may lose your temper or become emotional and struggle with perspective.

On top of this, other symptoms can manifest as decision fatigue, confusion, memory issues, stress, exhaustion, overwhelm and burnout. It can impact your physical health, causing headaches, increased blood pressure, tightness in the chest, susceptibility to illness and much more. It is no wonder that the Sunday night dread creeps in. The good news is it doesn't have to be this way and there are simple techniques you can use to challenge the imposter inside and banish it from your life for good.

### **The Labrador and the big red ball**

Your brain is on your side. It is like a faithful Labrador: it wants to protect you, so when your brain identifies a threat, it puts in defences to keep you safe. It also wants to prove you right, so if you tell yourself you're not good at something, it will look for the evidence to prove this to be true. In fact, it is very good at this. In

our analogy, your faithful Labrador has a big red ball of everything you feel you're rubbish at. No matter how far you throw it or hide it, or when you aren't in the mood to play, your faithful Labrador will bring it back to you again and again, dropping it in front of you as if to say, "Look, there you go, there's that big red ball of rubbishness again."

The good news is that, like your friendly Labrador, your brain can be retrained. The first step towards any change is awareness: now you are aware of your Labrador's bad habits, you will start to notice the times and situations when it is occurring – and that means you can do something about it.

### How to train your Labrador in two simple steps

As Imposter Syndrome triggers a protective fight, flight or freeze response, the first thing you can do is reset your brain by calming this response. Stress will activate the sympathetic nervous system, putting you into survival mode. Leading up to a situation that causes stress or fear, you may notice your breathing become shallower, maybe accompanied by clenched teeth, tension across your shoulders or a knot in your stomach etc. The parasympathetic nervous system facilitates the recovery process once the stress has passed, so as soon as you become aware of your breathing and the tension, you can take steps to trigger your parasympathetic response instead and calm that Labrador down.

#### Step 1: Calm your Labrador down

Your Labrador will be reactive rather than responsive whilst he's in survival mode. He just wants to feel safe. Start by taking three big breaths in and out. As you do this, consciously notice the tension in your body – and relax. Drop your shoulders, remove your tongue from the roof of your mouth, stretch if you can, take your breath down into your stomach so it is getting right to your diaphragm. Try to make your exhalation longer than your inhalation; you will find your body relaxing further.

Once you are feeling relaxed, you are going to use your breath to bring yourself into an optimum state. Here, both elements of your nervous system become balanced, so you will be thinking more clearly; your body and mind will be working at their best. To do this, we use something called balanced breathing. Count to four on the inhale, pause, and then four on the exhale – equal

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duration of breath in and out. It is recommended that you repeat for two or three minutes and try to increase the duration of the breath to a count of six, which is the optimum. This takes practice and, as with all breathing exercises, only take the count as far as is comfortable.

#### Step 2: Give your Labrador something better to play with

Your Labrador is fixated on that big red ball because you've been focusing on it and you keep picking it up, so he's bound to keep going back to it. Once you're relaxed, you're going to replace that big red ball with another toy, maybe this time a big blue ball. This blue ball is all the things you do well in your job, all the reasons people look up to you or come to you for help and advice. I want you to start 'catching yourself being good'. Start the day looking for the blue ball – when you get to school, look for it; when you're in class, look for it; when you're in meetings, being observed, holding your own in a staff meeting, finding solutions, look for it.

Every time something happens that shows how good you are, that shows you are a competent, capable professional, I want you to pause and make a note of it. This is a split-second action; it could be a mental shift, you may give yourself some praise, you may click your fingers or even visualise throwing the blue ball for your Labrador – whatever helps you to make that moment explicit. You will start to find that your Labrador much prefers playing with the big blue ball. If he finds the red ball again, acknowledge it, put it down, remind him how old and dirty it is, and redirect him to the blue ball. Over time, your Labrador will show less and less interest in the red ball and will much rather play with the blue ball.

One final word. As with all obedience training, these techniques take awareness and practice, but they will soon become second nature and something that will benefit all aspects of your life. ■

