

UNIVERSITY OF WARWICK

# BUBBLING UP: IMPOSTOR SYNDROME

Termly collection of wellbeing stories  
shared by staff and students, because we  
care

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Editors: Manpreet Kaur and Andrew Lacey





# ABOUT US

## ISSUE 1 TEAM

Faculty curators:  
Dr Ann Dixon  
Dr Dani Pearson  
Dr Bo Kelestyn

Student editors:  
Manpreet Kaur  
Andrew Lacey

If you are interested in joining the team, giving us feedback, or submitting a piece for the upcoming issues, please get in touch via a form on [warwick.ac.uk/bubblingup](http://warwick.ac.uk/bubblingup) or by emailing Dr Bo Kelestyn on [bo.kelestyn@warwick.ac.uk](mailto:bo.kelestyn@warwick.ac.uk)



# FROM THE EDITORS

**MANPREET KAUR AND ANDREW LACEY**

Impostor syndrome is an experience where one doubts their personal achievements, often associating them with luck or chance, and fails to internalise their success and celebrate it. It often leads to a fear of being perceived and outed as a fraud – someone who knows or deserves less than what they have achieved. This is a feeling that may at times affect us all against reason or logic. Not only is it known to sometimes affect the less well-represented groups in society, but it could simply be a general feeling of incompetence that anyone could have. Whilst it might feel like it is a thought one can easily dismiss, it could lead to tendencies to isolate oneself, lose self-confidence and self-respect. Impostor syndrome has the potential to develop into a vicious cycle, which has its own implications for further mental health problems. Opening up about one's fears and insecurities that get in the way and sharing with others how we might be feeling is important.

Understanding and learning to view our own selves from a different, and more justified, perspective as well as normalising conversations related to such sentiments are crucial to creating a culture where people are able to talk about mental health. In this opening issue of Bubbling Up, we bring to you blog posts written by a whole range of people within the Warwick Chemistry department.

We hope this reflects the message of openness, honesty and care that we believe is imperative for a healthy mind.

# DANI PEARSON

## CHEM TUTOR & LEAD FOR WELLBEING IN LABS

"Imposter syndrome – defined as the persistent inability to believe that one's success is deserved or has been legitimately achieved as a result of one's own efforts or skills. It has taken me a long while to

really think if I have felt this way before and if I have, then has it had any effect on the way I work, and present myself? I don't actually know the answer to this question, I do stop and wonder how I ended up here from time to time, but rather than worry that I do not deserve to be here, instead I try to feel thankful that I am here regardless, and that I can do a job which (I hope) makes a difference. This is not how I have always felt though, I entered University as a fresher having just had to go through the gruelling process that is clearing (could write a whole piece on this topic so won't divulge here!). Having not achieved my predicted grades during A levels due to the sudden loss of a close family member in the middle of my A level exams. This took a toll on my confidence, but fortunately, there were actually many others on my course who had experienced similar circumstances and ended up in the same position as me too, so I didn't feel too out of place. The only time I have been aware of imposter syndrome, is when I started my PhD. I

remember my first group meeting being the most terrifying experience! I really enjoyed doing my MChem project and thought of myself as being fairly decent at practical chemistry. When I started at a new University I had a shock though! None of the equipment was the same, people used different names for kit (hands up if you know what a Buchi is!) and it was like having to learn everything from scratch all over again. This was all a steep learning curve and at the time, the other PhD students starting at the same time as me had all been graduates from that University, I felt lesser than them and as though I must have got there by luck. For a while, I felt my inability to draw mechanisms on the spot in group meetings meant that I did not deserve to be doing my PhD. However, once I settled into the new University, group meetings became a little less scary, it didn't matter if I didn't know the answer perfectly, so long as I tried, usually my best guess was not too far off. It also turned out that I was pretty good at the practical side (once I found out what a buchi was!) and even better at the teaching side which I would not have discovered had I not done a PhD. I realised that one person is not more deserving than another, as each person is different with different strengths and weaknesses.

Wouldn't the world be a dull place if we were all the same?!

# MIKE WARD

## PROFESSOR & HEAD OF DEPARTMENT

I am the head of department. I am a successful professor with a leading role in one of the country's top universities: I have an international reputation for my research with several awards, hundreds of published papers, and invitations to speak at prestigious conferences. I greatly enjoy my teaching and interactions with students. I have held significant roles in the UK chemistry community in various ways such as managing journals and chairing national committees. I also, sometimes, suffer from impostor syndrome and can't shake the nagging worry that everyone around me is smarter and more successful than me, and that they belong where they are but I don't. I've had it for as long as I can remember and it recurs every time a research paper is rejected, or a grant application is not funded, or I decide that I didn't handle some issue in the department as well as I should have done. The feeling that you are faking it - that underneath you aren't as good as people think you are, and that you got to where you are by good luck that you don't really deserve, and that sooner or later you will be found out - is so common amongst intelligent people that it's almost normal. A moment's reflection shows why. We live all the time with our own limitations and shortcomings and of course we are acutely aware of them, so we assume that others must see us that way when they don't. Conversely, we can't see the limitations and shortcomings of others so easily: all we see is the public image, which they project, of someone superficially confident and managing well. Social media makes this perception gap worse. We take the merciless warts-and-all image that we have of ourselves and compare it with an unrealistic, idealised view that is all we are allowed to see of others, and come away feeling inadequate. It's a con. Smart, self-aware people tend to underestimate their own abilities, compared to less smart people who lack the ability to recognise their own shortcomings and therefore over-estimate their abilities. It follows that the student population in an institution like this one is going to contain a lot of people who have a small voice inside them saying that everyone else is cleverer, or more organised, than they are: or that everyone else better social skills, has a better handle on university life, and is having more fun than they are. Don't listen to it. You are here - in a world top-100 university and one of the best in the UK - because you deserve to be here. Everyone else is not cleverer or more worthy than you. The work is challenging for everyone and the transition from home life to independence is difficult for everyone. Relax and stop worrying: we're all in the same boat, muddling along as best we can. Even the head of department. And if you want to come and talk about it with someone, please do.



# JONAS BOUHLAL

## **MCHEM STUDENT & PRESIDENT OF CHEMSOC 2019/20**

"Have fun", "make friends" and "try a new sport" are things people told me as advice before starting my journey at Warwick a couple of years back, but no one told me to prepare myself to feel like a fraud. Having spent a year after graduating from the IB Diploma program doing the national service in Finland, I had forgot some of the most basic concepts in chemistry and looking at the maths problems made me feel like I'd never even done maths before. Being surrounded with intelligent people at uni made me feel like I did not deserve my place regardless of my hard work during the IB. Because of having forgot most of the chemistry and maths, on top of getting used to a new culture and learning environment, my first year was quite a challenge workload-wise but also mentally, but look - I've now made it to third year! After spending a few months at Warwick, it became clear to me that I was not alone with the feeling. The reality is, many, if not most of the students around you, feel just the same as you! Most of us have been used to being the 'clever kid' at school, and suddenly being surrounded with loads of other clever people might make you feel like you're less intelligent than others, which is unlikely. Have a chat with you mates and see how they probably also feel like they've become the 'dumb kid' overnight when moving to uni. I think that's not true - you've now just become part of a larger group of clever kids. Next time you doubt your place here, remind yourself of the fact that you did extremely well at A-level or equivalent to get here and that you would not be here if other people didn't think so too!






# BO KELESTYN

## SENIOR TEACHING FELLOW & DIRECTOR OF STUDENT EXPERIENCE

Culture has always played a part in how I viewed myself in whatever community I was in, especially in education. Coming to study in the UK on my own at the age of 18 I experienced a pretty steep learning curve. Everything was in English (duh!) and every class challenged me on everything I knew. From being more outspoken during class discussions, to learning how to work in diverse team, and even unlearning and then learning how to write an essay again!

Everything was different. Not to mention being in a new environment without my family. When I first decided to study in the UK many of my friends and relatives told me I will fail and come back to Ukraine within months. Back then I found it real discouraging and questioned my choice a lot, but I was adamant I wanted to do it. The agency that helped me find a school and University have also subtly mentioned I will probably fall behind native speakers and will have to work twice as hard to get into a University here. This stuck with me to this day, even after 12 years of living in the UK, having a PhD, and being one of the youngest people (and non native) at Warwick to be in the role I'm currently in. Internalising other people's perception of you and your abilities is something few are immune to. It definitely took me a long time to grow a thicker skin and there are still times when it is not thick enough. These voices made me feel like I was not good enough and my success over time felt like it was simply a fluke and nothing to do with the hard work I was putting into my education. I had to learn how to work with the voices and found the work of Tara Mohr on internal critic and mentor really helpful, as well as using Headspace at the end of each day to help silence my very busy mind and not overanalyse the day. Being new to the department made me really empathise with everyone new to Chemistry this year and also students retuning to studies after a long break. Readjusting my expectations to prioritise learning, listening, taking things in and simply being kind to myself as I adjust to the new environment is not always easy. It is also easy to think you are the only one, so surrounding myself with people that care, empathise, and will remind me of how far I've come and how much I deserve a place in this learning community is how I fight Impostor Syndrome on days when Headspace isn't enough.



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# NEXT ISSUE: EXAM STRESS

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COMING SOON

If you have been affected by this issue, please  
find out more about the support available on  
[warwick.ac.uk/bubbling](http://warwick.ac.uk/bubbling) up or by speaking to your  
Personal or Senior Tutor in the department.

