





TOSSING OUT THE MIND TRASH

Replacing imposter syndrome through mindfulness

by Chris Linville

By almost any measure, Chichi Ilonzo Momah, PharmD, has been a professional success story. She graduated from the Temple University School of Pharmacy in 2006, and her career started a steady upward climb. She managed an independent pharmacy for four years and for the last 13 years has owned her own business, Springfield Pharmacy, in Springfield, Pa.

Yet at the same time she has grappled with bouts of self-doubt and insecurity.

At a continuing education session at last fall's NCPA Annual Convention in Columbus, Ohio, Chichi shared with attendees what she has experienced. The session was titled "Embracing Mindfulness to Combat Imposter Syndrome," and was supported by an educational grant from the Cardinal Health Foundation.

"Have you ever walked into your pharmacy, surrounded by your team and patients who trust you very much, but you have this nagging voice, like a whisper, saying, 'I'm not good enough. I don't belong here?'" she said. "If so, you're not alone."

Chichi says it doesn't matter how accomplished a person is – community pharmacy leaders, high achievers, innovators, uber-talented health care professionals – it can affect anyone.

"We carry this hidden weight of self-doubt," she says. "Inside me, I'm like, 'Why in the world would NCPA pick me to do this session? If only they knew a list that is growing in my head about things that I probably did wrong — probably forgot to pay the light bill, or I'm robbing Peter to pay Paul, so why would they do this?'"

Chichi says that shortly before her presentation, a friend of hers asked, "Chichi, what's your talk about?"

"I said, 'Imposter syndrome.'"

"What is that?"

"If you don't know what it is, you don't have it."

WHAT'S IMPOSTER SYNDROME?

Imposter syndrome has been defined by researchers 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.

"Imposter syndrome is real," Chichi says. "It's a varying experience that can affect not only our confidence, but our ability to fully show up, for ourselves, for our team, for this business, for our patients, for our families."

Chichi says she sometimes calls imposter syndrome "head trash."

"It's trash in your mind. Imposter syndrome is a thought, a feeling, but it's not a fact. It's that persistent inability to believe that success – or my success – is deserved," she says. "It's that persistent inability to believe that I'm not good enough. Or, that

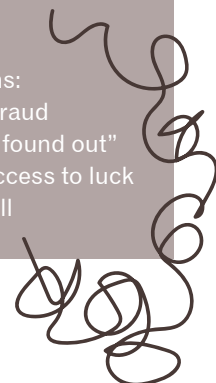


IMPOSTER SYNDROME

Imposter syndrome is 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. Seventy percent of individuals experience imposter syndrome at some point.

Common symptoms:

- Feeling like a fraud
- Fear of being "found out"
- Attributing success to luck rather than skill



the success that I've had, it's not due to my skill, or my hard work. It was just luck. Or the fear of being found out, right?"

Chichi says imposter syndrome is fairly common in the pharmacy universe.

"Because every day we're learning and conquering new things and trying to figure out how to stay in business, stepping out of our comfort zone," she says. "And we're not stopping to take a list of all the things that we did right. We always focus on the things that we did not do well. So when you tell yourself you're not ready, when you tell yourself you don't belong, I want to ask, why does imposter syndrome even happen?"

Chichi also says personal upbringing can play a role. "For me I'm from a Nigerian family, where you can only be a doctor, lawyer, or engineer. Everything else is out the door. So the pressure is there," she says.

Chichi says that there are times when she achieves a goal or objective, and instead of appreciating it, she starts second guessing herself.

"I'll be thinking I should have done better. Or I could have gotten into this sooner," she says. "Instead of stopping, and congratulating yourself, and patting yourself on the back, and saying 'Good job girl, you killed it,' instead I start analyzing myself and highlighting the things I didn't do right."

Chichi doesn't claim to be a neuroscientist or neurobiologist, but she has learned how hormonal changes affect individuals and can cause imposter syndrome.

"That's a part of our existence that we don't even know. The brain can actually rewire itself," she says. "It's called neuroplasticity. The prefrontal cortex is the part of the brain that handles thinking, decision-making and self-evaluation. When imposter syndrome kicks in, what does it do to the prefrontal cortex? It downplays your accomplishments. It overestimates your mistakes. It highlights your weaknesses. The amygdala is part of the brain that processes emotions, like fear and anxiety. I had to learn how to control my emotions. When imposter syndrome kicks in, it heightens the anxiety. It increases it."

SELF-SABOTAGE

One way to avoid failure is to simply avoid challenges or tackling difficult situations. Not exactly the recipe for success, but Chichi says with imposter syndrome it can become a default option.

"My leadership style is that I'm a visionary, but when I get into my own head, it causes me not to be able to grow," she says. "If I fear being exposed as incompetent, it prevents me from learning. There's something called the voice of the saboteur. That nagging voice that tells you that you aren't good enough."

Chichi says women and minorities in leadership roles often feel imposter syndrome more acutely.

"Me for example, I've owned my pharmacy 13 years now, and I always tell myself, if I was a man, I would be better," she says. "I would be rolling in money right now. Instead of telling myself, 'Do you know you are the first to do this? That you opened up this pharmacy from zero and this is

where you are now?' Is it easy for me to say those things to myself? No. [It's much harder than when] I look at ways to diminish who I am."

FIGHTING INTERNAL CONFLICTS

Social media has long been a way to promote a brand or a business, and independent pharmacy in particular. Chichi is well aware of that, but still battles internal conflicts.

"When I open TikTok and see a pharmacy owner talk about supplements and all of this stuff and marketing their pharmacy, I say I can do it too," she says. "But then at the same time I'm telling myself, 'But I don't sound like him. I have an accent.' Or, 'I want to talk about products for weight loss, but I'm not even skinny.' But I know I can crush what he's saying better than him. I know the clinical facts better than him, but I tell myself I'm not good enough."

Chichi says she has a tendency to compare herself to people who she thinks are more successful pharmacy owners.

"And then I start making a list of things I'm not doing that I THINK that they are doing," she says.

"They are probably drowning in their business too, but on social media they look good, right? They know how to post it on social media. I can walk out of this meeting today, and try to post on LinkedIn about this amazing talk at NCPA, and then all of a sudden I stop. I say, 'You're bragging.' And then I don't post it."

Imposter syndrome can interfere with difficult decisions that need to be made, such as dismissing an underperforming staff person.

"I tell myself, 'That person was probably not good in the job because I wasn't a good leader,'" Chichi says. "And that decision, that delay in letting that person go, is going to hurt my business because I'm stuck in my head."

Eventually it starts to affect the business' bottom line.

"The combined effect of self-doubt and fear of failure results in missed opportunities, delayed opportunities for new programs or partnerships, and in turn affects cash flow," she says. "Overwork contributes to increased operational costs due to inefficiencies, and that puts a strain on profits."

Chichi says everything starts to pile up.

"Because in your brain you're stuck, and it's like a movie on replay, and time doesn't just stop because you're having imposter syndrome," she says. "Time keeps rolling, and you still have to do business, you have to take care of your team, and you have to make money. And then you start overcompensating and getting burnt out."

TURNING IT AROUND

Recognizing the need to address imposter syndrome and rid herself of "head trash," Chichi has adopted a number of strategies. One is to simply change her mindset, replacing "I don't deserve this" with "I've earned this."

It's important to celebrate achievements, Chichi says, including keeping a record of accomplishments to remind yourself of your abilities.

"I remember during COVID-19 when we first hit more than 100,000 COVID vaccines, I recall someone at the time saying, 'Chichi, how would you celebrate yourself?' I said, 'Celebrate? For what?' But you need to

WHY DOES IMPOSTER SYNDROME HAPPEN?

ORIGINS

- Perfectionism: High personal standards
- Upbringing: Family or societal pressures
- Workplace culture: Competitive environments like health care

Cognitive bias: Tendency to underestimate abilities while overestimating other people's abilities.

THE NEUROSCIENCE BEHIND IMPOSTER SYNDROME

- Increased cortisol (stress hormone) levels
- Activation of the brain's "fight-or-flight" response
- Overactivation of the amygdala prefrontal cortex suppression, affecting critical thinking and decision-making, problem solving

GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT CHALLENGES

- Self-sabotage: Avoiding challenges to avoid failure, resulting in stagnation
- Fear of exposure: Fear of being "exposed" as incompetent can prevent learning.
- Under-representation: Women and minorities in leadership roles often feel imposter syndrome more acutely.



PROVING SHE BELONGS

One day last year, Chichi Ilonzo Momah received a call from NCPA CEO Douglas Hoey.

"He said, 'Chichi, we need you in D.C. for a roundtable discussion at the White House to talk about PBM reform.'"

After hanging up the phone she told a colleague about it, who said she should definitely do it.

"In my head, I'm thinking, is he nuts?" she recalled. "The White House? PBMs? I could name 10 people in this country in the pharmacy world who should be at that meeting, not me. Of course I know about PBMs, but I don't know if I'm the best person to go fight."

Chichi called Douglas back, asking "Why me?"

Douglas replied, "Why not?"

Chichi again asked, "Why me? I'm a black woman, I have an accent, I only have one pharmacy, there are people with 25 pharmacies. Why me?"

Douglas told her that he had heard her speak at a conference and was impressed.

"Sometimes it's the thing that people see in you that you don't see in yourself," Chichi says.

At the roundtable, Chichi was joined by NCPA Board member Dared Price, PharmD, owner of Graves Drug in Kansas, along with Mark Cuban and Alex Oshmyansky of Mark Cuban Cost Plus Drug Company. Kentucky Gov. Andy Beshear (D), Federal Trade Commission Chair Lina Khan, and Health and Human Services Secretary Xavier Becerra also attended.

Having never been to the White House, Chichi admits that she was "freaking out" a bit beforehand.

"And then I met Mark Cuban, a billionaire, right?" she says. "Look at Chichi, she can barely pay her



At top, NCPA members Dared Price (far left) and Chichi Ilonzo Momah participated in a special White House roundtable discussion on lowering health care costs, with a special emphasis on addressing PBMs. Also pictured are Mark Cuban and Alex Oshmyansky, CEO of Mark Cuban Cost Plus Drug Company.

Bottom left: Momah and Price speak with Health and Human Services Secretary Xavier Becerra.

Bottom right: Momah and Price with NCPA CEO Douglas Hoey who also attended the roundtable discussion at the White House.

bills, and then Mark Cuban is here, and then you have the governor of Kentucky, you have the FTC chair in there. It's like, 'What the heck is this chick doing in this room? Is it some diversity thing, Chichi checks the minority box?'"

However, she had to remind herself that she belonged, that people believed in her and she was chosen for a reason.

"One thing I can do well is I share my story, which is what I did, and I shared about my patients passionately. But sometimes I still wonder how. I have to remind myself, over and over again."



stop, and tell yourself good job. Or however you want to celebrate yourself. But you need to acknowledge it because there's going to be a time where you make decisions that don't work out, and you need to be able to look back and say, 'I remember when I did this,' and I patted myself on the back."

Chichi says that mindfulness can be a powerful tool.

"Mindfulness can help us recognize, accept and dismantle this power of self-doubt. And in doing so we will learn to lead with confidence, resilience, and foster a culture of self-compassion," she says. "In the pharmacy world we're very good at showing compassion to our patients, sometimes to our co-workers or staff members. But we don't know how to do it for ourselves. But with self-compassion we can transform not only ourselves, or our professional lives, but we can also transform how we do pharmacy practice."

Chichi also says mindfulness can reduce "decision paralysis," which

can delay implementing new and potentially profitable initiatives.

"Or maybe there's a service that you are offering in the pharmacy that's not making you money, and it's time to cut it," she says. "These are decisions that you need to make."

Chichi adopted a policy last year where she encouraged staff to take time to go to the break room in the pharmacy to eat or just relax, even if it's just for a brief amount of time.

"Because we're used to eating on the go or not eating at all," she says. "Just being able to pause, even for five minutes, really matters."

She continues, "Implementing mindful strategies, recognizing the negative effect of this imposter syndrome, dedicating time – dedicating five minutes to focus on breathing exercises, clearing your mind – this practice can help reduce anxiety and set a positive tone for the day. It could be journaling, it could be self-compassion exercises, it could be guided meditation, mindful reflection."

While mindfulness can help improve mental health, leadership activity and financial improvement at the pharmacy, it has to be ongoing.

"When you stop, you go right back," Chichi says. "The brain is a muscle; you can't go to the gym one time and expect to have a six-pack. So you have to keep on working on your brain. Telling yourself, 'I am good enough,' telling myself, 'I am not a fraud.' And by acknowledging our strengths and our accomplishments, we gradually build confidence in our ability as pharmacists, pharmacy technicians, pharmacy interns, and pharmacy owners. And we become more willing to take risks and pursue new opportunities, which can lead to service expansion, more business, and increased revenues."

"Mindfulness is the key to breaking the cycle of self-doubt. It's the art of being fully present, accepting yourself as you are, with grace and the power that is within you." ■

Chris Linville is *America's Pharmacist*[®] managing editor.

SUPPORTING STAFF AND TEAM MEMBERS WITH IMPOSTER SYNDROME

- Encourage open dialogue: Create a supportive culture where it's okay to share vulnerabilities.
- Mentorship programs: Offer structured mentorship to boost confidence in less experienced staff.
- Recognize success publicly: Regularly highlight achievements in the workplace.
- Foster growth mindset: Emphasize learning over perfection.



NCPA, CARDINAL LAUNCH PHARMACIST MENTAL HEALTH WELLNESS WEBINARS

The NCPA Innovation Center, thanks to a grant from the Cardinal Health Foundation, is launching a four-part webinar series starting in February focusing on ways pharmacists and staff can support themselves, their teams and their patient's mental health and well-being. NCPA will be hosting three Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) trainings throughout 2025 at a reduced registration rate thanks the grant. *To register and learn more, visit ncpa.org/mental-health-first-aid.*