

## Terminology matters: it's phenomenon, not syndrome

The term 'imposter syndrome' pathologises a common human experience. Clance and Imes originally called it 'imposter phenomenon' in 1978. Using 'syndrome' suggests something is clinically wrong with the individual, adding burden to people already doubting themselves. The phenomenon isn't listed in the DSM-5 and isn't a diagnosable condition—it's a widespread experience of self-doubt despite evidence of competence.

## Gender socialisation creates different responses to imposter feelings

Research by Badawi and colleagues (2018) found that men experiencing imposter phenomenon in high-stakes situations are more likely to shut down, withdraw and avoid putting themselves forward for promotions. Women, by contrast, tend to respond with perfectionism, overwork and burnout. These differences aren't inherent to gender but result from lifelong socialisation about acceptable behaviours for men and women.

The 'boy code' creates a midlife crisis around vulnerability

Men raised on masculine norms—don't express feelings, project confidence, hide vulnerability—often reach midlife without having developed language or permission to address self-doubt. When imposter feelings surface, these men lack the tools to process or discuss them. This historical conditioning makes it particularly difficult for midlife men to seek help or even recognise their struggles as legitimate.



## Confidence is not the same as competence

One of the most dangerous myths is that feeling ready equals being ready, or that confidence indicates competence. This belief particularly affects men who've been socialised to equate assurance with ability. Buttermore emphasises that imposter feelings don't indicate inadequacy—they indicate growth, learning and stepping outside your comfort zone. The absence of anxiety might actually suggest you're not challenging yourself enough. 9. Breadth of experience drives innovation and resilience

Contrary to the belief that expertise requires exclusive focus in one domain, Buttermore argues that breadth across multiple interests enhances strategic thinking and innovation. Disparate experiences allow novel connections between fields. Having competence and confidence in areas outside work provides both cognitive diversity and emotional resilience

## Purpose is discovered through exploration, not epiphany

Rather than waiting for a sudden clarity about life purpose, Buttermore recommends the 'warmer-colder' approach—moving towards what feels authentic and energising, away from what drains you. Purpose isn't a destination to discover but a direction to explore, found through iterative experimentation rather than perfect planning. This removes the pressure of finding 'the right answer' and emphasises continuous learning.

## Imposter feelings are proof you're growing

Perhaps most importantly, Buttermore reframes imposter phenomenon from pathology to indicator. These feelings aren't evidence that you're not ready or don't belong—they're evidence that you're pushing boundaries, taking on new challenges and continuing to develop. The 75-year-old version of Buttermore would remind her present self that 'imposter feelings are the price we pay for growth' and 'their proof that I'm still learning and still growing'.

Two Experiments for Listeners



These experiments are designed to help listeners at midlife actively engage with the concepts discussed in the interview, moving from passive understanding to embodied practice.

## Experiment 1: Create Your Anti-Resumé

### **The concept**

Inspired by Buttermore's discussion of failure resumé in academia, the anti-resumé is a private document that catalogues your professional setbacks, rejections and mistakes alongside the lessons learned. Unlike a resumé that showcases successes, this tool acknowledges that growth comes through failure and that risk-taking inevitably involves rejection.

### **Why this matters at midlife**

Men at midlife often carry decades of accumulated 'near-misses'—promotions not received, ventures that failed, relationships that ended, opportunities declined out of fear. Without processing these experiences, they become evidence for imposter feelings rather than proof of courage. The anti-resumé reframes failure as data about growth, not inadequacy.

### **How to conduct the experiment**

Over the next week, dedicate 30 minutes to creating your anti-resumé. Include:

- Professional rejections (jobs not offered, pitches declined, projects that failed)
- Personal setbacks (relationships that ended, health challenges, financial losses)
- Moments you held back (opportunities not pursued, risks not taken)
- For each entry, note what you learned and how it changed your approach



- Identify patterns: Where have you been most afraid to fail? What type of rejection stings most?

### **What you're testing**

This experiment tests whether explicitly acknowledging failures reduces their power to fuel imposter feelings. You're examining whether seeing your setbacks as evidence of courage (you tried) rather than inadequacy (you failed) changes your relationship with risk-taking and self-doubt. You're also building a resource to consult during future moments of impostor anxiety.

### **Integration questions**

After completing your anti-resumé, reflect on:

- What patterns do you notice in your failures? Do certain themes repeat?
- Which failures are you most reluctant to include? What does that resistance reveal?
- Looking at your setbacks collectively, does the narrative change from 'I'm not good enough' to 'I've been brave enough to try difficult things'?
- How might you respond differently to future failures with this perspective?
- Who might benefit from hearing about your failures and the lessons learned?



## Experiment 2: The Warmer-Colder Purpose Exploration

### **The concept**

Rather than searching for a singular 'purpose' or waiting for clarity about the next chapter of life, Buttermore suggests using a 'warmer-colder' approach—moving towards what feels authentic and energising while moving away from what feels draining or inauthentic. This reframes purpose as a direction rather than a destination.

### **Why this matters at midlife**

Midlife transitions often trigger intense pressure to 'figure out' the next phase, leading to paralysis or settling for safety. Men who've spent decades meeting external expectations (career advancement, financial security, family responsibilities) may have little practice identifying what genuinely energises them versus what they 'should' want. The warmer-colder method removes the pressure of finding 'the right answer' and emphasises iterative learning.

### **How to conduct the experiment**

For two weeks, track your daily experiences using a simple warmer-colder journal:

- Each evening, list 2-3 activities or interactions from your day
- Rate each on a scale: Much Warmer (5), Warmer (4), Neutral (3), Colder (2), Much Colder (1)
- Note what specifically made something warm (energising, authentic, meaningful) or cold (draining, performative, hollow)
- At week's end, identify patterns: What types of activities consistently rate as warmer? What themes emerge?
- In week two, intentionally pursue one 'warmer' activity you've been avoiding and one experiment outside your comfort zone
- Notice whether your capacity to tolerate discomfort in other areas increases when you're regularly engaging in 'warmer' activities



### **What you're testing**

This experiment tests Buttermore's hypothesis that purpose emerges through exploration rather than revelation. You're examining whether consistent engagement with energising activities provides resilience during moments of professional doubt. You're also testing whether having competence and confidence in non-work domains creates psychological resources that neutralise imposter feelings in areas where you're less certain.

### **Integration questions**

After two weeks of tracking, reflect on:

- What patterns emerged in your 'warmer' activities? Were there surprises?
- How much of your typical week involves 'warmer' vs 'colder' activities?  
What would an ideal ratio be?
- Did engaging more with 'warmer' activities affect your experience of 'colder' but necessary tasks?
- What stops you from pursuing more 'warmer' activities? Are these real constraints or self-imposed?
- If you designed your next chapter around maximising 'warmer' activities, what would change?
- How might the breadth of experience from 'warmer' activities enhance your primary work or relationships?

Both experiments are designed to move listeners from intellectual understanding to embodied practice, creating opportunities to test Buttermore's key insights in the context of their own midlife transitions.



**DLTOMI** is a podcast brought to you by Pod O'Sullivan, where he has real and candid conversations with experts, celebrities and ordinary men about navigating midlife. The ups, the downs, the surprises, the opportunities, the secrets and how to do it on your terms, gracefully or even disgracefully!



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