

Episode 196: Imposter Syndrome in Migraine and Chronic Pain

Lindsay Weitzel, PhD:

Hello everyone, and welcome to HeadWise, the videocast and podcast of the National Headache Foundation. I'm Dr. Lindsay Weitzel. I'm the founder of Migraine Nation, and I have a history of chronic and daily migraine that began at the age of four.

I am super excited to be here today with Dr. Melissa Geraghty, PsyD. Hi Dr. Geraghty, thank you for being here.

Melissa Geraghty, PsyD:

Hello. Thank you for having me. I'm very excited about this topic.

Lindsay Weitzel, PhD:

I am too. So, Dr. Geraghty is a clinical health psychologist, and she is the Director of Mental Health and Support at the US Pain Foundation. Our topic today is imposter syndrome and the setting of chronic pain, chronic illness, chronic migraine. And this is not something that you hear talked about very often, but it has been popping up more and more.

And I wanted her to tell us what on earth it means, what it is, and what do we do about it. So I'm so excited she's here because she is so good at talking about these things. So, Dr. Geraghty, why don't you start for the people in our audience who might not know who you are. Why don't you tell them who you are. Give us a little bit about your background and why you work in this field.

Melissa Geraghty, PsyD:

So, as you stated, I'm a licensed clinical health psychologist, Director of Mental Health and Support of the US Pain Foundation. I'm also the CEO of Phoenix Rising with Dr. G and an international keynote speaker. And I work with people who have chronic pain, chronic illness, and complex medical because I understand the profound impact these conditions have on a daily life.

As a medically complex patient myself with multiple migraine and headache diseases, I know firsthand the challenges and frustrations involved in seeking proper care and understanding. And my personal experiences really drive my passion for advocating for others in similar situations because I want people to feel heard and validated and supported in their health care journey.

Lindsay Weitzel, PhD:

Okay, we want that too. So thank you for saying that. Our audience is full of many females. We have a lot of women in our audience with chronic migraine and other headache disorders. We have men too. But the topic is one that we don't hear about often. I feel it's very relevant. Again, it's imposter syndrome for those of us with chronic illness.

As women, we are often taking care of everyone but ourselves, and we tend to ignore the symptoms of our illness and especially chronic pain as much as possible. I've noticed this term imposter syndrome

popping up more and more in the chronic pain community. What do you feel this term means in the setting of chronic pain, particularly for the female community?

Melissa Geraghty, PsyD:

So in the context of chronic pain, particularly with the female community, imposter syndrome can manifest as a feeling of inadequacy or self-doubt regarding one's pain experience. So women with chronic migraine or other headache disorders may downplay their symptoms. They may attribute their symptoms to stress or fatigue, and they may struggle to advocate for themselves due to social expectations of putting other people's needs before their own.

And so this internalized doubt and minimizing of their own suffering can lead to feelings of being an imposter in the chronic pain community, and they start to question the validity of their experiences compared to others.

Lindsay Weitzel, PhD:

You and I recorded a podcast a while back on medical gaslighting. What is medical gaslighting? If you could remind us. And do you feel that feelings of imposter syndrome related to our illness can be related to experiences of medical gaslighting that we have had?

Melissa Geraghty, PsyD:

You know, I love talking about this. So, medical gaslighting occurs when health care professionals or other people dismiss or undermine a patient's symptoms, leading that patient to doubt their own experiences and perceptions. And so feelings of imposter syndrome can indeed be intertwined with experiences of medical gaslighting.

So when healthcare professionals invalidate or minimize a patient's pain and symptoms, it can contribute to self-doubt and internalized questioning of our legitimacy of our illness experience. And then this can exasperate feelings of imposter syndrome. So patients may struggle to trust their own perceptions and advocate for themselves within the medical system because they're just doubting what they're experiencing then.

Lindsay Weitzel, PhD:

There was someone in our community who just had her believe it or not, her fourth child, is a very strong woman, and she has chronic pain and she has other chronic illnesses. And she started to experience really severe fatigue. And when she would try to talk to the medical community about it, she said that the only answer she could ever get is, well you have four kids, of course you're tired. But it was really severe fatigue. It wasn't normal tired. And so, it's so common. And it can sometimes be really hard to get the symptoms taken seriously. Can you talk to us about the importance of the invisibility of our chronic illness and what that plays in imposter syndrome?

Melissa Geraghty, PsyD:

Yeah. The story you just shared is quite common with the people I talk to. And the invisibility of chronic illnesses can of course increase feelings of imposter syndrome fatigue, particularly for conditions like

chronic migraine or headache disorders. And it's because these illnesses are not always externally visible. And so individuals may struggle to validate their own experiences and then may feel pressure to prove the legitimacy of their pain to others, including health care professionals and friends and families, coworkers, bosses.

So then this sense of invisibility can lead to self-doubt and questioning whether they truly deserve support and understanding or treatment, and it can contribute to feelings of being an imposter in their own illness journey for sure.

Lindsay Weitzel, PhD:

What are some of the things we do when we're experiencing imposter syndrome related to our illness?

Melissa Geraghty, PsyD:

So we may engage in behaviors such as downplaying our symptoms or downplaying our pain levels. We might compare ourselves unfavorably to other people with similar conditions like, oh, well, they seem to have it worse. We might avoid seeking medical help or support. And also because medical burnout is a thing, as patients we get tired of not being heard or medically gaslit and so maybe we stop seeking help.

And then we can also internalize feelings of guilt or shame about our illness experience. We may also hesitate to share our struggles with others because we might fear judgment or dismissal of our experiences. And then these behaviors can perpetuate feelings of inadequacy and isolation, which then just further exasperates the imposter syndrome within the chronic illness community for sure.

Lindsay Weitzel, PhD:

So now that we've clarified that it exists, that it's a serious thing, and probably a lot of people are thinking, gosh, I felt like this before, thanks for bringing it up, thanks for talking about it.

What are some of the things we can do to alleviate these thoughts and feelings of imposter syndrome?

Melissa Geraghty, PsyD:

So it's super important to practice self-compassion and self-advocacy. So this includes validating our own experiences and acknowledging the legitimacy of our pain and symptoms. We know our bodies best. And then also seeking support from understanding healthcare professionals, understanding friends and community groups of people who get it.

What's also important is setting boundaries and prioritizing self-care. And that's really essential in managing chronic conditions while combating imposter syndrome. Additionally, cultivating a strong support network of individuals who validate and empathize with our experience can really help counteract feelings of isolation and self-doubt. And this can be done with peer led support groups like with the US Pain Foundation. And lastly, what I like to say too is what can help is educating ourselves about our condition and engaging in activities that promote empowerment, such as advocacy work.

Lindsay Weitzel, PhD:

Great idea. Yes, that always is very helpful. I'm glad you brought that up. Is there anything else you'd like to add to this topic that maybe we missed before we go today?

Melissa Geraghty, PsyD:

Yeah, I'd really like to emphasize the importance of recognizing that imposter syndrome related to chronic illness is a common experience, but it doesn't define your worth or the validity of your struggles. And it's okay to seek help and support when you need. It's okay to prioritize self-care and self-compassion in your illness journey. And just remember that you're not alone.

There are resources and community is available to provide understanding and solidarity. So take each step at your own pace and know that your experiences are valid and deserving of acknowledgment and support.

Lindsay Weitzel, PhD:

That is a great thing to say. Thank you so much for adding that. And thank you for being here today to talk to us about this topic that really, it's just sort of a term that's sort of emerging in our community. So I'm so glad that you were able to chat with us about it.

I hope everyone learned something. Please join us again on our next episode of HeadWise. Bye bye.