Using Compassion-Focused Photo Journaling to Address Impostor Phenomenon and Well-being in Clinical Supervision Courses

Impostor phenomenon (IP) is a common challenge that counselors-in-training (CITs) report during practicum and internship. Without intervention, IP has the potential to decrease effectiveness, compromise mental health, exacerbate perfectionism, and contribute to impairment and burnout. Counselor educators are uniquely positioned to support CITs with proactive strategies to address these challenges and facilitate counselor wellness and sustainability. The proposed innovative supervision strategy utilizes compassion-focused photo journaling (CFPJ) inspired by narrative therapy, self-compassion, and feminist andragogy to help CITs reauthor their relationship with IP and create alternative narratives that reduce IP through focusing on CIT strengths, wellness, and compassion satisfaction.

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Introduction

Impostor phenomenon (IP), also known as imposter syndrome, is a common experience for graduate students and for those working in the helping professions (Salari et al., 2025; Tigranyan et al., 2020). The term, introduced in a 1978 study of high-achieving women, was "...used to designate an internal experience of intellectual phonies" (Clance & Imes, 1978, p. 1). Common beliefs and feelings associated with this phenomenon include self-doubt, fear of failure, identifying success as luck rather than competence, and feeling like a fraud (Clance & Imes, 1978). The initial study conceptualized IP through internalized gender stereotypes but lacked exploration of intersecting identities, external factors (i.e., racial discrimination, culturally-isolating environments), and systemic oppression (Brown et al., 2025; Chakraverty, 2022; Cokley et al., 2024).

Counselors-in-training (CITs) are susceptible to IP. In a recent study, 65.1% of CITs reported frequent or intense IP, with 46.3% reporting symptoms of generalized anxiety (Clarke, et al., 2025). The rate of IP is even higher for high-achievers (Clance & Imes, 1978; Siddiqui et al., 2024). Other groups shown to experience high rates of IP include college students diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) (Brown et al., 2025).

IP is exacerbated when racism-related stressors are present (Bernard et al., 2017; Cokley et al., 2024). For example, experiencing microaggressions and racially isolating environments contributed to IP among Hispanic/Latine and Native American college students (Chakraverty, 2022) and the combination of minority status stress and IP among Black college students decreased mental health wellness (Bernard et al., 2017; McClain et al., 2016). Current findings indicate a prevalence of IP among racially and ethnically minoritized groups (Bravata et al., 2020; Cokley et al., 2024, Cokley et al., 2017). A primary concern related to IP is the correlation with decreased mental health wellness and increased burnout and stress. Impostor phenomenon in counselors and CITs can increase compassion fatigue (Clark et al., 2022), decrease sense of self-efficacy (Clarke et al., 2025), and negatively impact the therapeutic alliance (Langford & Clance, 1993), which in turn may negatively impact client outcomes (Lawson & Venart, 2005).

Recent research reframes IP as a logical response to systemic conditions rather than solely individual-level cognitive distortions (Chamarthi et al., 2025; Feenstra et al., 2020). CITs navigate systems built on predominantly White, cisgender norms (Mullangi & Jagsi, 2019) and evaluative supervisor-supervisee relationships (Bernard & Goodyear, 2019). Given these systemic contributors and IP's harmful effects, counselors have an ethical imperative to equip graduate students with counter-strategies during training.

STRATEGIES THAT COUNTER THE NEGATIVE EFFECTS OF IMPOSTOR PHENOMENON

Counselor education programs bear a responsibility to address IP and help CITs cultivate practices that encourage professional sustainability and resilience (Clarke et al., 2025). These practices, integral to the profession (American Counseling Association [ACA], 2014; Ellison et al., 2024; Nelson et al., 2017; Radey & Figley, 2007) can be advanced within the supportive supervision environment through a collective focus on self-care and wellness. Approaches that promote self-compassion and compassion satisfaction can address IP by reshaping how CITs relate to themselves and their work. Neff (2003) defined self-compassion as "...acknowledging that suffering, failure, and inadequacies are part of the human condition, and that all people—oneself included—are worthy of compassion" (p. 224). Self-compassion promotes kindness over criticism, acknowledges shared humanity, and encourages mindful awareness in lieu of overidentification (Clarke et al., 2025; Neff, 2003; Neff et al., 2007). Closely related, compassion satisfaction refers to the joy of witnessing client progress in counseling (Radey & Figley, 2007; Stamm, 2009). However, IP can disrupt this experience (Clark et al., 2022), increasing the likelihood of practitioner discontent and potentially reducing positive client outcomes. Both self-compassion and compassion satisfaction are positively associated with greater connectedness, resilience, and well-being (Beaumont et al., 2016; Burnett & Wahl, 2015; Clarke et al., 2025; Neff et al., 2005; Neff & Vonk, 2009; Nelson et al., 2017), and reduce the chances of burnout (Bahari et al., 2022; Beaumont et al., 2016; Stamm, 2009; Thompson et al., 2014). Behaviors that strengthen compassion satisfaction include cultivating positive attitudes toward clients, building stress management skills, practicing self-care, adopting a reflective stance, and participating in discussion groups that can provide social support (Baumann et al., 2020; Dehlin & Lundh, 2018; Milasan, 2024; Radey & Figley, 2007; Rivera et al., 2021). Through a critical pedagogy lens, self-care can be viewed as a radical resistance to oppressive hierarchies that promote systems or profits over individual and collective wellness; self-care can also be grounded within the feminist ethics of care, and the concept that "...we must take care of ourselves before we can take care of others" (Mountz et al., 2015, p. 1251).

Because IP thrives in isolation, group-based approaches can be particularly effective. Group supervision offers CITs structured space to discuss IP, normalize self-doubt, and alleviate isolation (Baumann et al., 2020; Clance & Imes, 1978; Rivera et al., 2021; Tigranyan et al., 2021) while integrating proactive strategies that counter IP and promote resilience before problems escalate (Agarwal et al., 2023; Clarke et al., 2025).

RATIONALE

Students in counselor preparation programs experience many stressors including ongoing evaluation of professional dispositions, knowledge, and skills, heavy workloads (Tigranyan et al., 2021), and performance pressures (Warren et al., 2017). These conditions

contribute to self-doubt, perfectionism, stress, anxiety, and depression, which are hallmarks of IP (e.g., Clark et al., 2022; Clarke et al., 2025; Hill & Gotwals, 2025). During practicum and internship, CITs may experience feeling "under the microscope" which can trigger or intensify IP, particularly in the absence of effective coping strategies. CITs' learning, clinical presence, and effectiveness are compromised when self-doubt becomes overwhelming (Salari et al., 2025; Tigranyan et al., 2021).

The use of creative modalities can mitigate IP by fostering reflection, emotional processing, perspective-taking, and cultural competence (Gladding, 2021; Luetkeymeyer et al., 2021). Despite calls for more attention to IP in counseling curriculum (Clarke et al., 2025; Tigranyan et al., 2021), guidance is limited regarding ways to apply creative arts in group supervision in order to disrupt IP narratives.

Group supervision provides an ideal setting to explore how CIT beliefs and experiences influence IP, compassion satisfaction, and burnout (Clark et al., 2022). Integrating strategies into group supervision that center self-care, collective care, compassion satisfaction, and burnout prevention empowers CITs to cultivate skills germane to sustaining careers in counseling. Counselor educators are encouraged to communicate a wider lens of career sustainability and vitality.

ADDRESSING IP THROUGH COMPASSION-FOCUSED PHOTO JOURNALING IN GROUP SUPERVISION

One creative arts strategy commonly used during practicum and internship is reflective journal writing. CITs recognize journaling as a valuable method that supports freedom of expression and professional development (Woodbridge et al., 2017), and it is a recommended strategy to reduce feelings of self-doubt and anxiety associated with IP (Wade-Bell et al., 2024). Compassion-focused photo journaling (CFPJ) builds on this approach by incorporating photography and compassion-focused reflections to enhance well-being and prevent or address common IP thoughts and feelings expressed in supervision. Integrating narrative therapy techniques, such as exploring unique outcomes and externalizing, CFPJ normalizes rather than pathologizes the experience of IP and helps CITs identify strengths and resources that promote resilience and self-compassion (DeCandia Vitoria, 2021).

Adding the visual element of photography to the journaling process introduces an alternative method through which to express feelings and thoughts that are difficult to convey through words (Ingeberg, et al., 2012), utilizing sensory, kinesthetic, and imaginal ways of knowing (Chilton et al., 2015) and providing further insight into how CITs interpret events (Niese, et al., 2024). Mindful photography can enhance mood, life satisfaction, and overall well-being (Brewster & Cox, 2019; Diehl & Zauberman, 2022). Techniques such as therapeutic photography in counseling practice (Milasan, 2024; Upton et al., 2023) and the participatory method of photovoice (Emelianchik-Key et al., 2025) demonstrate photography's ability to foster intrapersonal reflection, self-

awareness, and professional identity, while simultaneously buffering against burnout (Upton et al., 2023).

Counselor educators can use this strategy in supervision to help reauthor the CITs' relationships with IP-related thoughts and feelings during clinical training and foster self-compassion, compassion satisfaction, and well-being. Utilizing CFPJ in group supervision involves four key components: (a) preparation, (b) education, (c) implementation, and (d) connection. Through CFPJ, CITs can explore values, skills, and strengths that support their well-being and longevity in the profession. This approach also explores systemic wellness challenges, creating space for mutual support (Lorde, 1988).

Innovative Teaching Strategy: Compassion-Focused Photo Journaling

Informed by feminist andragogy, this strategy integrates compassion-focused practices with inclusive pedagogy emphasizing personal empowerment, systemic awareness, self-expression, and creativity (Alhumaid, 2019; Rodrigues et al., 2025) Utilizing narrative therapy and photovoice, it invites CITs to curate images locating their wellness and growth within sociocultural contexts while interrogating systems and nurturing self- and community-compassion. The approach aligns with CACREP standards for self-care and social/cultural diversity (CACREP, 2024, 3.A.11 & 3.B), and culturally responsive supervision (ACA, 2014, F.2.b; American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2024, C.3).

COMPASSION-FOCUSED PHOTO JOURNALING PROCESS

Implementing CFPJ in group supervision involves a scaffolded process where faculty model the approach, provide an initial structured prompt to practice the process, and empower CITs to select the prompts that have the most meaning for them in that moment. Later in the course, CITs may create their own journal prompts as they authentically tell their field experience story. Prompts are influenced by narrative therapy through externalizing and identifying unique outcomes and promoting self-compassion and compassion satisfaction.

Preparation
The preparation stage involves building a safe, supportive environment where sharing of photos and stories is respected and validated (Houin & Perryman, 2023). The first class begins with community agreements and team-building activities that set the stage for navigating challenging topics such as IP. Engaging CITs in a safe and supportive group supervision environment is an important aspect of this teaching strategy.

Education

Early in the term, instructors provide psychoeducation on IP, facilitate discussions of cultural factors that influence the development of IP, share strategies associated with well-being, and review legal and ethical considerations when taking photos (e.g., informed consent; Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) in schools; Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) in clinical contexts). CITs are introduced to the use of photo journaling as a self-care strategy for self-awareness, meaning-making, well-being, connection, and sustainable practice. Instructors model the photo journaling approach to demonstrate how to implement this process into their field experience journey.

Implementation

CFPJ prompts are provided to all students at the beginning of the course rather than assigning a designated prompt each week. The prompts are provided for ongoing personal reflection to help CITs deepen their field experience story to acknowledge inequitable power structures and identify unique outcomes, values, and strengths in order to build resilience, improve mental health wellness, encourage self-care, and increase focus on compassion satisfaction. Using a variety of prompts allows each CIT the flexibility to focus on their most salient individual experiences and cultural and environmental factors rather than expecting students to respond to a prompt that may not resonate with them. CITs have freedom to choose the journal medium (electronic or physical) to accommodate personal preferences. Counselor education programs operating on a quarter schedule may opt to implement a weekly photo journal schedule; a full semester course might use a journal schedule every other week. This strategy is adaptable to online and in-person field experience courses, as well.

Sample compassion-focused prompts may be:

- Think about how you are feeling as you are about to begin your practicum or internship placement. Take a photo of something that represents that feeling. Where do you feel the emotions in your body? What internal and external influences are underlying that feeling? Describe them without placing judgment on that feeling.

- Take a photo of the values and strengths that symbolize how your social identities, culture, and worldview contribute to your emerging counseling identity. Journal about the richness that these values and strengths bring to your work.

- Take a photo that reflects a challenging experience at your practicum/internship site. Externalize and name the "problem" or "issue" as if it is a character in your story. Journal about how this problem shows up during your field experience and note when it is absent. What strengths do you notice when the problem is not present?

- Take a photo of something that represents wellness and joy that you experienced at your placement site this week. What sustains you on days when practicum/internship is challenging, or when you receive difficult feedback?

- Think about a self-critical thought or feeling you experienced this week that connects to a sense of impostor phenomenon, feeling out of place, or "othered." Take a photo

of something that symbolizes self-compassion and write a poem, or letter as if from an encouraging friend. Note how you feel after writing and reading your letter.

■ Take a photo of an image symbolizing a systemic institutional issue or practice at your field experience site that impacts your well-being. In your journal, write about the issue and how it creates a barrier to wellness. Acknowledge its presence in your experience and hold space for the feelings that emerge. Notice what relationships, strengths, and moments of joy sustain you as you navigate the issue.

Connection

Sharing stories with others facilitates group connection, encouragement, validation, enhanced empathy, and perspective taking (Gladding, 2021; Gottlieb et al., 2020; Houin & Perryman, 2023). Group supervision offers an opportunity to examine systemic influences on IP, practice self-compassion, foster social connections, and receive encouragement and feedback from faculty and peers (Clarke, et al., 2025). We integrate photo and reflection sharing periodically during group supervision to facilitate connection, validation, and collective meaning-making. CITs typically take turns sharing their photo from their phone or laptop computer and provide a brief summary of their reflection at the beginning of group supervision.

APPLICATION TO COUNSELOR EDUCATION

Current prevalence data indicate that CITs are vulnerable to developing IP and experiencing its adverse effects, which interfere with their personal and professional lives (Clarke et al., 2025; Salari et al., 2025; Tigranyan et al., 2021). Counselor educators and supervisors play a crucial role in CITs' development and preparation to enter the workforce. Integrating self-care practices, self-compassion, compassion satisfaction, feminist andragogy, and creative arts into a supportive group supervision environment has the potential to minimize the negative impacts of IP and contribute to satisfying and sustained careers in the counseling profession.

During practicum and internship, CITs are exposed to new situations and complex scenarios when providing mental health care to clients and K-12 students, increasing the potential for self-doubt and feelings of being a fraud. Fears of making a mistake or saying the wrong thing are frequently expressed in practicum and internship supervision. Rather than waiting for compassion fatigue and signs of burnout to emerge, CFPJ can be applied as a prevention strategy. Group supervision has been identified as a helpful format for CITs' development (Gonultas et al., 2024) and is an optimal place within the curriculum to implement self-care practices and strategies to support resilience and sustainability during the transition from CITs to professional counselors.

Integrating a creative arts approach provides another way for counselor educators to broach conversations related to micro- and macro-level injustices. When CITs share images depicting systemic barriers, the group can name patterns across individual experiences. Supervisors can consider participating alongside students in the CFPJ

activity. Supervisors can model power-sharing by making visible their own impostor histories and the institutional conditions that shaped them. By doing so, supervisors can disrupt the supervisor-as-infallible dynamic and reframe IP as a shared professional experience requiring structural intervention, not just individual resilience.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS AND FOSTERING INCLUSIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

Integrating self-care and wellness into teaching and supervision aligns with CACREP standards and ACA and ASCA ethical codes that highlight self-care and well-being as ethical expectations in order to fulfill professional responsibilities (ACA, 2014, Section C; ASCA, 2022, B.3.h; CACREP, 2024, 3.A.11; Ellison, et al., 2024; Nelson, et al., 2017; Radey & Figley, 2007). Additionally, counselors must have the ability to recognize impairments to well-being and seek assistance to avoid harm to clients (ACA, 2014, C.2.g.).

Drawing inspiration from narrative theory, feminist andragogy, and creative arts, this method creates an inclusive space for learning that honors each CIT's unique story. This strength-based approach empowers CITs and acknowledges the systemic and sociopolitical influences on IP (Bernard et al., 2017; Chakraverty, 2022; Clance, et al., 1995; Cokley et al., 2024). An inclusive learning environment fosters a sense of safety within the group supervision setting, allowing for vulnerability and centering and validating the stories of CITs.

Acknowledging IP and closely-related characteristics such as perfectionism (Hill & Gotwals, 2025) brings awareness to systemic and sociopolitical factors that influence counselors' beliefs and life experiences. It is important to consider external messages and positions of power that may contribute to IP (Chakraverty, 2022; Cokley et al., 2024). Reflecting on dominant narratives perpetuated by unjust systems raises critical consciousness and lays the foundation for centering social justice and sustainability. Photovoice centers the voices of marginalized groups to inspire social change by combining photography, storytelling, and advocacy (Emelianchik-Key, 2025). Similarly, the CFPJ centers the voices of CITs during their field experiences. In alignment with feminist pedagogy, this method facilitates sharing diverse perspectives and the acknowledgment of structures that reinforce inequalities. It is essential to note that photo journaling is an activity designed for personal growth. Counselor educators have an ethical responsibility to inform students of their autonomy in this process, as they have a choice in what information is shared (ACA, 2014; F.8.c).

Because the CFPJ strategy relies on the use of photography, counselor educators need to consider accessibility and have a means to provide cameras to CITs who may not have them, such as checking out cameras from campus technology services. This strategy can be adapted to combine or substitute photo journaling with other forms of visual expression such as collages, drawing, painting, digital images/memes, and

sculptures. When using this strategy in an online course, the privacy policies and permission settings of the platforms used to share or submit students' photos and journals must be considered (Warren et al., 2017). Using a secure platform in the campus' learning management system or a private file storage system with robust password protection is advised.

This model is adaptable to meet the needs of specific environments or students from varying cultural backgrounds. Photo-journal prompts may also be updated to reflect emergent topics and experiences. Journal reflections need not be restricted to prose; students can use poetry, native language, storytelling elements, found -pictures, internet memes, sketches or doodles, collages, or music. Videos or voice recordings can be used to submit their journal reflections.

REFLEXIVITY AND INTRAPERSONAL AWARENESS

Counselor educators must remain attuned to potential impacts on individual participants and the classroom when incorporating CFPJ into supervision. Expressive and reflective activities can surface emotionally-sensitive material that may require additional exploration and support. Students from collectivist cultural backgrounds may experience photo journaling's emphasis on individual introspection as culturally incongruent, while students with trauma histories involving photography or visual surveillance may find the modality triggering rather than healing. Some students may experience their instructor's co-engagement in the activity as unsettling rather than enriching, particularly given the inherent power differential. In addition, educational and socioeconomic differences among both faculty and students can influence group dynamics if the activity is not facilitated with care.

It is important to acknowledge that IP is likely not a universal phenomenon, and therefore, not every CIT will endorse or resonate with experiences of IP. Emerging critiques of IP as a construct also argue that framing IP as primarily an individual experience masks larger systemic and institutional cultures that are discriminatory or exclusionary in nature (LaDonna et al., 2025). Regardless of IP presence, CFPJ's creative and experiential nature offers opportunities to deepen intrapersonal awareness, foster authentic relationships, reduce power differentials, and normalize reflective practice (Houin & Perryman, 2023).

SUGGESTED RESOURCES

Free and low-cost resources are available to support the implementation of a compassion-focused photo journaling strategy. The Professional Quality of Life (ProQol) website (https://proqol.org/) offers handouts on self-care strategies, provides free access to the *ProQol* 5 measure, and includes links to additional resources related to their work. Kristin Neff has established a self-compassion community at the Self-Compassion Practice website (https://

self-compassion.org/), featuring guided practice, self-compassion exercises, a complimentary self-compassion assessment, and opportunities to participate in workshops and community events. Counselor educators can provide a resource list to CITs to encourage ongoing mentoring and group support; potential resources include the National Board of Certified Counselors (NBCC) Minority Fellowship Program, professional organization emerging leader and mentorship programs, and ASCA affinity groups.

Evaluation of Effectiveness of Innovative Instructional Strategy

Counselor educators can engage in qualitative and quantitative observations and data collection methods to assess the CFPJ's effectiveness and benefits to CITs. Instructors may utilize the qualitative method of memo writing to reveal meaning and engage in thematic analysis of CITs' experience and journal reflections (Birks et al., 2008; Mohajan & Mohajan, 2022). Quantitative assessment measures may be utilized as a pre-post assessment to measure intended outcomes that are associated with reducing IP. Suggested assessments to measure compassion satisfaction and self-compassion include the *ProQol* 5 (Stamm, 2009) and the *Self Compassion Scale* (*SCS*, Neff, 2003), respectively. Several instruments are available to assess levels of impostor phenomenon, belonging, and inclusive andragogy approach effectiveness. Examples of such instruments include the *Clance Impostor Phenomenon Scale* (*CIPS*; Clance & O'Toole, 1987) or the shorter *CIPS-10* version (Wang et al., 2022); The *Yorke Belonging, Engagement, Self-Confidence* (*BES*) Scale (Yorke, 2016) or *Program Sense of Belonging* (*ProSB*) *Questionnaire* (Almonroeder et al., 2024); the *Dispositions for Culturally Responsive Pedagogy Scale* (*DRPS*) (Whitaker & Valtierra, 2018); and the *Andragogy in Practice Inventory* (*API*) (Bates, 2020). Counselor educators should select appropriate assessment measures and provide clear guidelines regarding how reflections will be reviewed, privacy protections when sharing content, and safeguards for anonymity in feedback and formal measures.

At the time of publication, CFPJ is being piloted in an internship course at a small liberal arts university. Feedback from CITs will be collected anonymously using a Google form at the conclusion of the course, with the intention of reporting the results in a future publication. We encourage others who wish to pilot or use the CFPJ instructional strategy to also evaluate the strategy for its efficacy in fostering supportive learning environments and reducing the negative impacts of IP and perfectionism.

Assessment of Student Learning

Assigning a letter grade for this activity is not recommended, as this reflective activity prioritizes process over product (Houin & Perryman, 2023). Letter grades could invite self-judgment, perfectionism, comparison, and self-censoring, inhibiting the strategy's purpose. Instead, consider using complete/incomplete or pass/fail grading, and assess learning through qualitative surveys, interviews, or a gallery walk showcasing critical incidents and defining moments (Furr & Carroll, 2003). Instructors can provide prompts to CITs, such as "Which photo or reflection was the most impactful?"

Discussion and Implications

CFPJ addresses the critical need for IP-focused self-care practices in counselor education (Ellison et al., 2024; Nelson et al., 2017). In the context of group supervision during field experience courses, this approach also creates communal spaces of collective care and support while fostering a sense of belonging to counter the narrative of "otherness" often experienced by minoritized students. Importantly, this approach situates IP not as an individual pathology, but as a systemic response to oppressive structures that have historically constructed "otherness" within academic and clinical spaces. Strengthening CITs' resilience and well-being during the practicum and internship courses may have positive long-term implications for career sustainability while building collective capacity for advocacy and structural change.

LIMITATIONS

Although use of the creative arts as an experiential teaching method has several benefits, CITs may feel uncomfortable with a creative approach that is less structured or that may be perceived as being outside their comfort zone. The implementation of a specific art form, such as photography, may lead to comparison and pressure to excel for CITs who have varying photography skills. Counselor educators can mitigate some of these concerns by properly preparing CITs for the experience: emphasizing the process over the product, acknowledging the varying levels of comfort, and processing any concerns. They can also share research literature that highlights the benefits of using photography and model the process with CITs. Similarly, some counselor educators may hesitate to use photography due to a lack of experience or time constraints in group supervision, which may inhibit effective processing.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

More research is needed on CITs' experiences with CFPJ in group supervision and whether it contributes to personal and professional growth during the practicum and internship courses. Providing a proactive and preventative approach to address common career sustainability challenges contributes to the way we prepare CITs for their careers. It would be beneficial to conduct follow-up studies post-graduation using instruments such as the *ProQol-5* to measure long-term effects of this method on compassion fatigue, compassion satisfaction, and burnout.

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