

5.9 Costs of Impression Management

How does image control correlate with diminished life experience?

Fall 2025

Leading with A Good Face vs. Backfiring Results

If Facades of Conformity feel a bit much, how about Impression Management strategies? Let's talk about common strategies, the risks vs. rewards, and negative return on energetic investments.

summary

This conversation delves into the themes of conformity and impression management, exploring how individuals often sacrifice their true selves to fit societal expectations. It discusses the psychological implications of these behaviors, including increased loneliness and decreased life satisfaction, and highlights various strategies people use to manage their self-image. The conversation emphasizes the risks associated with these strategies and the long-term consequences of suppressing one's true identity.

takeaways

- Impression management is a common behavior in social interactions.
- It can lead to higher loneliness and lower life satisfaction.
- People often feel pressured to conform to societal norms.
- Impression management can be a double-edged sword, creating more problems than it solves.
- Different strategies of impression management include ingratiating, self-promoting, and suppression.
- Supplication can lower self-esteem and self-image.
- Suppression can lead to emotional exhaustion and impaired relationships.
- Authenticity is crucial for genuine connections.
- The effort to manage impressions can be exhausting and counterproductive.
- Creating environments of authenticity can improve overall well-being.

keywords

impression management, conformity, emotional welfare, social support, loneliness, self-image, authenticity, psychological health, social dynamics, coping strategies

This month... the world has caught up with the show. As we... maybe suspected it would.

As discussed last time, we were talking about facades of conformity – or, the ways we ditch our real values to demonstrate that we're in line with systematized ones to prevent resource loss (at the expense of our own emotional welfare). Having particular state-supported opinions about public figures to maintain one's job, for instance.

And this month we deepened the conversation by dipping into the behavior of impression management. Perhaps, the lesser form of FOCing, Imp Managing refers to the ways we attempt to control our self-image to present a favorable face, depending on who that face will be observed by.

Here comes the cynicism: Yes, we all do it. And yes, it is required so we are not feral.

But some of us do it more than others. People pleasing with our presented identities to try to grease the wheels of life, especially when that life has been rather rusty and screaming for attention.

And sometimes, in some circumstances, it works.

So.

The problem?

Imp Manning is correlated with higher loneliness, low sense of control, and low life satisfaction.

Now, it's unclear from the research which comes first. If these factors are the inspiration or the outcome of impression management. From experience, we suggest the answer is "both." A person isn't happy with how things are going socially or practically, they attempt to rectify the problems by being "more readily acceptable," and it results in deepening their problems.

If you're lonely, pretending to be someone other than yourself won't create connection. If you're feeling out of control, putting your success into the hands of others appraisals won't create a stronger sense of agency. If you're dissatisfied with life, faking it and hoping that one day you end up making it doesn't increase fulfillment.

So, impression management is generally not a strong resolver of issues.

Because. The other problem?

Research says impression management is risky, difficult, and often returns negative results.

Individuals don't know if they're choosing the right strategy for each person they encounter. Then, they don't know if they're executing it correctly. And if deception is detected it inspires

distrust or negative relationship turns.

In other words, impression management requires a custom presentation for every situation. This is stressful, energy reliant, and challenging. And there's no guarantee that it will be effective. Massive effort can be poured into trying to control how others see a being, and all the work can make relationships worse.

In short: No one likes a try hard. And all the hard trying can be executed incorrectly.

The OTHER other problem?

If a motherfucker IS successful in managing impressions, guess what they earn?

- Long-term imprisonment sustaining all those efforts and identities, indefinitely, which comes with continual stress. See above points.
- They are rewarded with more or more intensive unmet needs than ever before.

Here's why.

The theory of social support tells us: people want to help other people, but only if their need is being detected. If they appear "lower" than the person who might issue the help, then they are more likely a cup to be poured into.

Through impression management, though, we usually try to raise ourselves up. To appear better off than we really are. Because we generally believe this makes us more acceptable.

In this way, even if we make ourselves likable through imp-manning, we create conditions in which social support doesn't come because we've presented ourselves as un-need. As equal or "greater" than our social connections, so they don't think to offer the support that we need, which has likely inspired the impression management behavior in the first place.

Thus, again, decreasing life satisfaction and increasing loneliness – the opposite of what we set out to do.

Meaning impression management is a counterproductive, tenuous, and self-brutalizing strategy in many cases.

But that's not the end of the story.

For this reason, some people choose to "go low" with impression management methods, rather than talking themselves up.

There are several forms of impression management, and I bet they sound familiar to you from workplaces and other social systems.

The ones we spoke about this month were:

Ingratiating

Self-promoting

Intimidating

Exemplifying

Supplicating

And Suppression.

A little detail for you:

Ingratiating is complimenting others: or “sucking up.”

Self-promoting is highlighting or exaggerating one’s self-importance.

Intimidating is using force or threat of punishment to get what you want.

Exemplifying is trying to demonstrate worth by going above and beyond.

Supplicating is the strategy of “going low” or presenting weakness to elicit help.

And suppression is hiding one’s real values or emotions.

Which tactic an individual chooses to use? Depends on circumstance. Research says each is more or less viable depending on the power dynamics at play and the likelihood of negative returns, something we uncovered in another paper.

Folks who believe they need help but don’t know how to ask for it? Might supplicate to demonstrate their neediness... or exaggerate what they’re capable of doing, so less is asked of them.

And people who realize that there are punishments for disagreeing with normative or prevailing moors? Might use suppression to juuuust shut the fuck up how they REALLY feel regarding an issue, if, say, they’ve seen their peers get fired for having similar opinions. Or AI is being used to seek out “hate speakers” who dissent from government sanctioned narratives. Things like that.

Speaking to that last point, suppression got its own series of episodes this month for obvious reasons.

It comes with side effects of increased emotionality and emotional exhaustion, decreased performance on tasks, impaired memory, and increased health risks sparked from the stressed cardiovascular systems and sustained sympathetic activation. It's transferable and tends to flow from the "higher ups" downward. And it impairs adult-child relationships, as well as children's social skills.

Just some points to note, in case "following orders" or "playing along with fascistic regimes" seem like the easier roads to wander down.

They're not. They're long-term life-deleterious. Even if they save your ass in the short-term.

So, Fuckers.

While we are human beings, and everyone needs to impression-manage to be a part of society and socializing... remember the negative returns on energetic investment if this becomes a large part of life.

And the strong chance of "doing it wrong" which can negatively turn peers and abusive supervisors against you.

Or, take some time to reflect upon the fact that Imp Manning increases loneliness, decreases sense of control, and increases life dissatisfaction. Which may help explain why certain environments have created unpleasant outcomes in your happiness, fulfillment, and sense of connection... after working very hard to try to secure those things.

Facades of Conformity and Impression Management! The "easy ways to get along" generally results in a death spiral of hellish experience, especially over long durations of time.

And that's why we still suggest having...

No FOCs to Give.

Come learn about alllll the details from this little summary post and hear the academic research that backs it up at patron.com/traumatizedmotherfuckers

And also tap into an episode on suppression - the Spiral of Silence in the United States – a research article about self-censorship taking over American culture with shocking prevalence that got thrown into the mix – while you're there.

Reminder: workbooks and digital course additions are now streaming there, weekly, as well.

And take solace in knowing: whether you actively participate in the community or not, you never have to FOC off to be a part of this project.

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Take care.

Watch your imp manning, determine commonly used tactics, and monitor for how it impacts YOU in reality... including potential negative returns on emotional and energetic investment.

A for Effort? More like F for Faker.

Until that pattern is broken and environments of authenticity are created, from the self-outward.

And til we talk again next month...

Cheers ya'll.

Thanks for being here.

Notes (fill in blank)

Imp Manning is correlated with higher _____, low sense of _____, and low life _____.

If you're lonely, pretending to be someone other than yourself won't create _____. If you're feeling out of control, putting your success into the hands of others appraisals won't create a stronger _____. If you're dissatisfied with life, faking it and hoping that one day you end up making it doesn't increase _____.

Research says impression management is risky, difficult, and often _____.

impression management requires a custom presentation for every situation. This is stressful, energy reliant, and challenging. And there's no guarantee that it will be _____. Massive effort can be poured into trying to control how others see a being, and all the work can make relationships worse.

If a motherfucker IS successful in managing impressions, they earn: 1) Long-term imprisonment sustaining all those efforts and identities, indefinitely. 2) More or more-intensive _____ than before.

If we make ourselves likable through imp-manning, we usually create conditions in which social support doesn't come because we've presented ourselves as un-needy; as equal or "greater" than our social connections, so they don't think to _____, which has likely inspired the impression management behavior in the first place.

Meaning impression management is a _____, _____, and self-_____ strategy in many cases.

_____ is complimenting others: or “sucking up.”

_____ is highlighting or exaggerating one’s self-importance.

_____ is using force or threat of punishment to get what you want.

_____ is trying to demonstrate worth by going above and beyond.

_____ is the strategy of “going low” or presenting weakness to elicit help.

And _____ is hiding one’s real values or emotions.

Suppression comes with side effects of increased _____ and emotional exhaustion, decreased _____ on tasks, impaired memory, and _____ sparked from the stressed cardiovascular and sustained sympathetic activation.

While we are human beings, and everyone needs to impression-manage to be a part of society and socializing... remember the _____ if this becomes a large part of life.

There’s a strong chance of “doing it wrong” which can negatively turn peers and abusive supervisors against you. And Imp Manning increases loneliness, decreases sense of control, and increases life dissatisfaction. Which may help explain why certain environments have _____ in your happiness, fulfillment, and sense of connection... after working very hard to try to secure those things.

And that’s why we still suggest having..._____.

Notes Key

Imp Manning is correlated with higher _____, low sense of _____, and low life _____.

Loneliness; control; life satisfaction

If you're lonely, pretending to be someone other than yourself won't create _____. If you're feeling out of control, putting your success into the hands of others appraisals won't create a stronger _____. If you're dissatisfied with life, faking it and hoping that one day you end up making it doesn't increase _____.

Connection; sense of agency; fulfillment

Research says impression management is risky, difficult, and often _____.

returns negative results

impression management requires a custom presentation for every situation. This is stressful, energy reliant, and challenging. And there's no guarantee that it will be _____. Massive effort can be poured into trying to control how others see a being, and all the work can make relationships worse.

Effective

If a motherfucker IS successful in managing impressions, they earn: 1) Long-term imprisonment sustaining all those efforts and identities, indefinitely. 2) More or more-intensive _____.

unmet needs

If we make ourselves likable through imp-manning, we usually create conditions in which social support doesn't come because we've presented ourselves as un-need; as equal or "greater" than our social connections, so they don't think to _____, which has likely inspired the impression management behavior in the first place.

offer the support that we need

Meaning impression management is a _____, _____, and self-_____ strategy in many cases.

Counterproductive; tenuous; brutalizing

_____ is complimenting others: or “sucking up.”

Ingratiating

_____ is highlighting or exaggerating one’s self-importance.

Self-promoting

_____ is using force or threat of punishment to get what you want.

Intimidating

_____ is trying to demonstrate worth by going above and beyond.

Exemplifying

_____ is the strategy of “going low” or presenting weakness to elicit help.

Supplicating

And _____ is hiding one’s real values or emotions.

Suppression

Suppression comes with side effects of increased _____ and emotional exhaustion, decreased _____ on tasks, impaired memory, and _____ sparked from the stressed cardiovascular and sustained sympathetic activation.

Emotionality; performance; increased health risks

While we are human beings, and everyone needs to impression-manage to be a part of society and socializing... remember the _____ if this becomes a large part of life.

negative returns on energetic investment

There's a strong chance of "doing it wrong" which can negatively turn peers and abusive supervisors against you. And Imp Manning increases loneliness, decreases sense of control, and increases life dissatisfaction. Which may help explain why certain environments have _____ in your happiness, fulfillment, and sense of connection... after working very hard to try to secure those things.

created unpleasant outcomes

And that's why we still suggest having..._____.

No FOCs to Give

Multiple Choice Notes/Quiz

Imp Manning is correlated with higher _____, low sense of _____, and low life _____.

Instagram follows; control; goals

Self-esteem; uncertainty; consequences

Loneliness; control; life satisfaction

Loneliness; self; direction

If you're lonely, pretending to be someone other than yourself won't create _____. If you're feeling out of control, putting your success into the hands of others appraisals won't create a stronger _____. If you're dissatisfied with life, faking it and hoping that one day you end up making it doesn't increase _____.

Clarity; goal orientation; uncertainty

Self-esteem; sense of self; disassociation

Direction; relationship experience; problems

Connection; sense of agency; fulfillment

Research says impression management is risky, difficult, and often _____.

returns negative results

creates counterproductive relationships

backfires

leads to success over time

Impression management requires a custom presentation for every situation. This is stressful, energy reliant, and challenging. And there's no guarantee that it will be _____.
Massive effort can be poured into trying to control how others see a being, and all the work can make relationships worse.

Easy

Difficult

Effective

Compromising

If a motherfucker IS successful in managing impressions, they earn: 1) Long-term imprisonment sustaining all those efforts and identities, indefinitely. 2) More or more-intensive _____ than before.

relationships

friends

unmet needs

self-esteem

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be kind to us

challenge our facades of conformity

trauma history

offer the support that we need

Meaning impression management is a _____, _____, and self-_____ strategy in many cases.

Challenging; rewarding; fulfilling

Difficult; validating; satisfying

Counterproductive; tenuous; brutalizing

Dangerous; rewarding, satisfying

_____ is complimenting others: or “sucking up.”

Intimidating

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Self-promoting

Suppression comes with side effects of increased _____ and emotional exhaustion, decreased _____ on tasks, impaired memory, and _____ sparked from the stressed cardiovascular and sustained sympathetic activation.

Emotionality; performance; increased health risks

Emotional clarity; hesitancy; better health

Memory; teamwork; lower health risks

While we are human beings, and everyone needs to impression-manage to be a part of society and socializing... remember the _____ if this becomes a large part of life.

negative returns on energetic investment

likelihood of eventual backlash

difficulty sustaining imp-man strategies

long-term benefits

There's a strong chance of "doing it wrong" which can negatively turn peers and abusive supervisors against you. And Imp Manning increases loneliness, decreases sense of control, and increases life dissatisfaction. Which may help explain why certain environments have _____ in your happiness, fulfillment, and sense of connection... after working very hard to try to secure those things.

bolstered positive results

produced worthwhile challenges

created unpleasant outcomes

eventually created increases

And that's why we still suggest having..._____.

A fake personality to revert to

Strong imp-man skills

Suppressive tactics for life

No FOCs to Give

Notes/Multiple Choice with Key

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Strong imp-man skills

Suppressive tactics for life

No FOCs to Give

Reflection Qs

Do you feel like impression management strategies turn out positively for you?

Short term? (fleeting interactions)

Long term? (ongoing, consistent, relationships)

Have you ever seen Imp-Manning turn negative for another person?

Why do you think that was?

Are there any vicarious takeaways?

Can you recall a time when imp manning resulted negatively for you?

Emotionally?

Economically?

Relationally?

In stress load?

Do you mask your vulnerabilities to make others comfortable or present an “acceptable” face?

Do you highlight your strengths?

Do you fake a few?

Do you feel like people struggle to get to know the real you?

When holidays roll around, do people know what to get you?

Do people ask you personal questions that feel completely out of left field?

Do you have many social misunderstandings to clear up, regularly?

If “yes,” could any of these issues be created by FOCs or Imp-Manning?

Are your needs usually met when you don’t directly state them?

What about when you hide them?

When impression management has opened a social door, did you ultimately receive what you needed from that engagement?

Do you put in enormous effort, only to eventually “jump ship looking for a better boat”?

How does your life feel, overall, when you’re unable to be effortlessly authentic?

How does your life feel when you’re allowed to be yourself without punishment?

All things considered (including the validation that there ARE environments in which you’re not required to FOC-off), in your experience, is impression management worth the effort?

Or are the returns on investment rather low?

Could you experiment with ruthless authentic (NOTE: not asshole) behavior? In at least one environment?