

On Perfectionism

In the perfectionist's ideal world, every paper handed to a professor would be error-free. He or she would say the right thing and do the right thing, at the right time, all the time. Since successes, applauded by a professor, boss, parent or partner, are rewarded with good grades and affirmation, the perfectionist keeps doing his or her best, attempting to yield the results of self-satisfaction and rewards well-earned.

The perfectionist's bubble pops when he or she realizes that doing one's best never seems to be enough. As life's demands change, as people's expectations vary, frustration and low self-esteem seep into any project that feels imperfectly done. Receiving an "A" on a paper no longer retains its value of a job well-done because the perfectionist may not feel it was completed well enough, and therefore makes excuses for the professor giving such a grade. Any lesser grade, on the other hand, would be confirmation of "falling short" in the assignment, resulting in feelings of inadequacy. Rather than feeling like a success, grades and other accomplishments can feel like personal defeats since there's no room for mistakes in life.

In a culture saturated with self-help strategies for success, the perfectionist may feel he or she is doing the right thing by striving for the highest standards or an impeccable work ethic. Many perfectionists have been raised with the belief that they should always try to do things perfectly and that there would be some special reward for being the best. However, while short-term results may be uplifting and rewarding, the long-term effects associated with these traits are self-defeating. Perfectionists have a tendency to have expectations about themselves, others, and life that are unrealistically high. When expectations aren't met, they become disappointed and/or critical. Perfectionists tend to be over-concerned with small flaws and mistakes in themselves or their accomplishments. In focusing on what's wrong, what's right can be discounted and ignored. Expecting perfection is a set up for distress and the following challenges:

Low self-esteem. Perfectionists frequently tell themselves they are not trying hard enough, not doing well enough and even that they are not good enough as people. They often judge their personal worth by what they accomplish, not who they are. With self-esteem based primarily on external standards and other people's approval, perfectionists are excessively sensitive to the opinions and criticism of others.

Procrastination. Perfectionism is a major cause of procrastination. By trying too hard and putting too much pressure on themselves, perfectionists may feel so stressed they procrastinate and do nothing at all. It may feel easier and less painful to avoid a task (even with all the negative consequences that go along with doing so) than to admit that perfect expectations are impossible to achieve (Hirsch, n.d.).

Chronic stress, anxiety, and depression. In always pushing forward yet never achieving what they think they ought to, perfectionists are never satisfied with themselves or their performance and in turn experience ongoing stress and anxiety. Without a sense of accomplishment, satisfaction, or reward for hard work, exhaustion and burnout can occur.

While perfectionists often tell themselves that their determination to be perfect will win success, acceptance, love, and fulfillment – the opposite more often occurs. Although some perfectionists are remarkably successful, their success has been achieved despite – not because of – their compulsive striving. Perfectionists tend to

be less successful than non-perfectionists because they spend too much time worrying about being perfect and not enough time making mistakes and finding out what works and what does not. Even when they fail, non-perfectionists often achieve more, because they recover from failure more quickly and are more relaxed, productive and creative (Burns, 1989). Moreover, those who strive for excellence in a healthy way take genuine pleasure in trying to meet high standards. Consider the contrasts illustrated below.

Letting Go of Perfectionism

The first step toward letting go of perfectionism is to recognize that striving to attain perfection is both impossible and undesirable. Overcoming perfectionism means accepting your imperfections and humanness. It means letting go of the idea that your worth is determined by your achievements and accomplishments or others' expectations. Instead reinforce the idea that your worth is a given. Here are some steps to guide that process (Bourne, 1995; Hirsch, n.d.):

Increase your awareness. Catch yourself in the act of saying perfectionistic things to yourself and substitute them with more realistic, reasonable thoughts. For example, instead of saying, "You are so dumb if you can't understand this," replace that thought with, "This is really hard but I believe I can understand this if I just keep working on it." If you say, "I've got to do this better than anyone else can," say instead, "I hope I can be the best but even if I am not I can still be very successful and feel good about what I've accomplished."

Learn to deal with criticism. Perfectionists often view criticism as a personal attack and respond defensively. Concentrate on being more objective about criticism and about yourself. If someone criticizes you for making a mistake that you have made, acknowledge the mistake and assert your right to make mistakes. Once you no longer buy into the fallacy that humans must be perfect to be worthwhile, you won't feel so defensive when you make a mistake. Instead, criticism will seem like a natural way from which to learn.

Be realistic about what you can do. By setting more realistic goals, you will gradually realize that imperfect results do not lead to the disastrous consequences you expect and fear. For example, suppose you set a goal of running three miles every day and you can barely run two; if you are a perfectionist, you feel disappointed and anxious about improving your performance and may even give up running because you're not "good enough." Suppose you tell yourself that two miles is good enough for now. You accept you may never be able to run three miles easily, you continue running without anxiety, and you may well enjoy yourself and feel relaxed and satisfied.

Set time limits on your projects. When the time limit you have set for yourself is over, move on to another activity. For example, decide you will spend only three hours looking up references for a paper instead of spending the entire day searching for elusive references. Discriminate high priority tasks from low priority ones. Make your effort proportionate to the task's importance.

Focus on the positive. In dwelling on small errors or mistakes, perfectionists tend to discount their positive accomplishments. Think about what ways small or large, you've been helpful or pleasant to people during the day. Think of any small steps you've taken toward achieving your goals.

Develop an appreciation for the process. Focus on the *process* of doing an activity, not just on the end result. Evaluate your success not only in terms of what you accomplished but also in terms of how much you enjoyed the process of completing the task.

Cultivate more pleasure and recreation in your life. Perfectionism has a tendency to make people rigid and self denying. Create time for relaxation and fun.

Changing perfectionistic beliefs and the constant striving to reach unrealistic standards is an ongoing process. However, once one realizes that perfectionism does not lead to success or happiness, the present can take precedence over fears of the future. Thus, one's daily lifestyle can be less about focusing on projects awaiting never ending improvements, and more of a journey waiting to be explored.

PERFECTIONISM

- Motivated by fear of failure
- Accomplishments never satisfy
- Compares self negatively with others
- Feels must be successful to be loved and accepted by others
- Reluctant to share vulnerable feelings like sadness or insecurity; believes others would think less of you
- Takes failure at a goal as a personal failure
- Focuses only on outcome
- Emphasizes keeping life under control

HEALTHY PURSUIT OF EXCELLENCE

- Motivated by enthusiasm
- Accomplishments give satisfaction
- Recognizes own positive uniqueness
- Does not feel has to earn love and friendship by impressing people with intelligence or success
- Not afraid of being vulnerable or sharing feelings with people you care about; this helps you feel closer to them
- Takes failure at a goal as a goal failed
- Enjoys the process or "journey"
- Emphasizes keeping life in balance

(adapted from Burns, 1989)

References:

Bourne, J. (1995). *The anxiety and phobia workbook*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger.
Burns, D.D. (1989). *The feeling good handbook*. New York: Penguin Group.
Hirsch, G. (n.d.). An imperfect look at overcoming perfectionism.
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