

Perfectionism

A Double-Edged Sword

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Perfectionism: It Cuts Both Ways

Perfectionism is like a double-edged sword—it cuts both ways. Perfectionists often don't realize that they are hurting themselves by their own actions. Perfectionism is a duel with oneself, the ultimate "no-win" situation

Perfectionists tell themselves that their determination to be perfect will win success, acceptance, love and fulfillment, yet the opposite more often occurs. Even when perfectionists do achieve, the methods they use can deprive them of the very love and acceptance they want so badly to gain.

Perfectionism is not a healthy pursuit of excellence. There are big differences between perfectionists and healthy achievers. Perfectionists believe that mistakes must never be made and that the highest standards of performance must always be achieved.

Those who strive for excellence in a healthy way take genuine pleasure in trying to meet high standards. Perfectionists on the other hand are full of self-doubts and fears of disapproval, ridicule and rejection. The healthy striver has drive, while the perfectionist is driven.

Perfectionist vs. Healthy Striver

PERFECTIONIST

- Sets standards beyond reach and reason
- Is never satisfied by anything less than perfection
- Becomes dysfunctionally depressed when experiences failure and disappointment
- Is preoccupied with fear of failure and disapproval—this can deplete energy levels
- Sees mistakes as evidence of unworthiness
- Becomes overly defensive when criticized

HEALTHY STRIVER

- • Sets high standards, but just beyond reach
- • Enjoys process as well as outcome
- • Bounces back from failure and disappointment quickly and with energy
- • Keeps normal anxiety and fear of failure and disapproval within bounds—uses them to create energy
- • Sees mistakes as opportunities for growth and learning
- • Reacts positively to helpful criticism



*Perfectionism is NOT
a healthy pursuit of excellence.*

Costs of Perfectionism

Perfectionism takes a great toll. Perfectionists are likely to experience decreased productivity, impaired health, troubled interpersonal relationships, and low self-esteem. Perfectionists are vulnerable to:

- Depression
- Performance anxiety
- Test anxiety
- Social anxiety
- Writer's block
- Obsessiveness
- Compulsiveness
- Suicidal thoughts
- Loneliness
- Impatience
- Frustration
- Anger

Perfectionism: Myths & Realities

Sometimes it's hard to distinguish motivation for healthy achievement from unhealthy perfectionism, and sometimes we make the distinction even harder by holding on to myths about perfectionism. This makes life a good deal more difficult than need be. Below are common myths about perfectionism.

MYTH: I wouldn't be the success I am today if I weren't such a perfectionist.

REALITY: Perfectionism does not lead to success and fulfillment. Although some perfectionists are remarkably successful, what they fail to realize is that their success has been achieved despite – not because of – their compulsive striving.

There is no evidence that perfectionists are more successful than their non-perfectionistic counterparts. There is evidence that given similar levels of talent, skill or intellect, perfectionists perform less successfully than non-perfectionists.

MYTH: Perfectionists get things done and they do things right.

REALITY: Perfectionists often have problems with procrastination, missed deadlines, and low productivity.

Psychologists find that perfectionists tend to be "all-or-nothing" thinkers. They see events and experiences as either good or bad, perfect or imperfect, with nothing in between. Such thinking often leads to procrastination, because a requirement of flawless perfection, in even the smallest of tasks, can become fearfully overwhelming. The perfectionist believes that the flawless product or superb performance must be produced every time. Perfectionists believe if it can't be done perfectly, it's not worth doing.

Such beliefs often lead to undesired results. A perfectionist student may turn in a paper weeks late (or not at all), rather than turn it in on time with less-than-perfect sentences. A perfectionist worker may spend so much time agonizing over some non-critical detail that a critical project misses its deadline.

MYTH: Perfectionists are determined to overcome all obstacles to success.

REALITY: Although perfectionists follow an "I'll-keep-trying-until-it's-perfect" credo, they are especially vulnerable to potentially serious difficulties such as depression, writer's block, and performance and social anxiety.

These internal blocks to productivity, achievement, and success result from the perfectionist's focus on end-products. Instead of concentrating on the process of accomplishing a task, perfectionists focus exclusively on the outcome of their efforts. Far from an asset, this relentless pursuit of the ultimate goal becomes the perfectionist's greatest liability; the resultant sense of overwhelming anxiety often sabotages the perfectionist's efforts.

MYTH: Perfectionists just have this enormous desire to please others and to be the very best they can.

REALITY: Perfectionistic tendencies often begin as an attempt to win love, acceptance, and approval.

Perfectionists are driven by low self-esteem, so their own needs ultimately blind them to the needs and wishes of others. Indeed, their compulsiveness may lead others to beg for a change that the perfectionist cannot or will not make. Perfectionism is more likely to complicate than enhance one's relationships.

The "perfect human" is as appealing and mythical a concept as the unicorn. Many of our greatest endeavors are indeed accomplished while striving to perfect ourselves. Great achievers, like perfectionists, want to be and do better; unlike perfectionists, they are willing to make mistakes and risk failure. Great achievers recognize mistakes, failure, and general imperfection as part of the reality of being human.



Coping Strategies

Overcoming perfectionism requires courage, for it means accepting our imperfections and humanness. Here are several strategies that will help replace perfectionistic habits with healthier, more satisfying behavior patterns.

1. Make a list of the advantages and disadvantages of trying to be perfect.

When you make your own list of costs and benefits, you may find that the costs are too great. You may discover that problems with relationships, excessive workaholism, eating and substance abuse problems, and other compulsive behaviors (plus the accompanying anxiety, nervousness, feelings of inadequacy, self-criticism, and so on) actually outweigh whatever advantages perfectionism holds for you.

2. Increase your awareness of the self-critical nature of your all-or-nothing thoughts, and how they extend to other people in your life.

Learn to substitute more realistic, reasonable thoughts for your habitually critical ones. When you find yourself berating a less-than-perfect performance, whether your own or someone else's, force yourself to look at and acknowledge the good parts of that performance. Then ask yourself questions like these: Is it really as bad as I feel it is? How do other people see it? Is it a reasonably good performance for the person(s) and circumstances involved?

3. Be realistic about what you can do.

By setting more realistic goals, you will gradually realize that "imperfect" results do not lead to the punitive consequences you expect and fear. Suppose you swim laps every day, not as athletic training, but for relaxation and exercise. You set yourself the goal of 20 laps, and you can barely swim 15. If you are perfectionistic, you soon feel disappointed at your poor performance and anxious about improving it. You may even give up swimming because you're not "good enough."

Suppose that instead you tell yourself 15 laps is good enough for now. You accept the possibility that you may never be able to swim 20 laps easily, if at all. So you continue swimming without anxiety. You don't necessarily stop trying to improve, but you swim for fun and exercise and relaxation—for however many laps you can. Perfectionists often miss out on fun, relaxation and satisfaction.

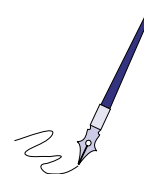
4. Set strict time limits on each of your projects. When the time is up, move on: attend to another activity.

This technique reduces the procrastination that typically results from perfectionism. Suppose you must find references for a term paper and also study for an exam. Set time limits. For example: Decide that you will spend only 3 hours looking up references, then only 3 more hours studying for the test. If you stick to your time limits, you won't spend the entire day searching for elusive references, nor try to study late at night when you are too tired to be effective.

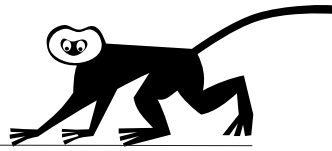
5. Learn how to deal with criticism.

Perfectionists often view criticism as a personal attack, responding to it defensively. Concentrate on being more objective about the criticism, and about yourself. If someone criticizes you for making a mistake, acknowledge the mistake and assert your right to make mistakes.

Remind that person and yourself that if you stop making mistakes, you also stop learning and growing. Once you no longer buy into the fallacy that humans must be perfect to be worthwhile, you won't feel so angry or defensive when you make a mistake. Criticism will then seem like a natural thing from which to learn, rather than something to be avoided at all costs.



The South Indian Monkey Trap



A PARABLE

One of the characteristics of perfectionists is their "value rigidity." They refuse to let go of particular ideas, even in the face of obvious evidence to the contrary. Here is a fable illustrating the pitfalls of value rigidity, adapted from Robert Pirsig's well-known work, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*.

The "South Indian Monkey Trap" was developed by villagers to catch the ever-present and numerous small monkeys in that part of the world. It involves a hollowed-out coconut chained to a stake. The coconut has some rice inside which can be seen through a small hole. The hole is just big enough so that the monkey can put his hand in, but too small for his fist to come out after he has grabbed the rice.

Tempted by the rice, the monkey reaches in and is suddenly trapped. He is not able to see that it is his own fist that traps him, his own desire for the rice. He rigidly holds on to the rice, because he values it. He cannot let go and by doing so retain his freedom. So the trap works and the villagers capture him.

Perfectionists need to rethink their own values and decide whether they are going to continue to be trapped by these values or free themselves.



Suggested Reading

A Guide to Rational Living. Albert Ellis. Wilshire Book Co., 1998 (3rd revised edition).

Feeling Good: The New Mood Therapy. David D.

Burns and Aaron T. Beck. Wholecare, 1999

(revised ed.).

How to Get Control of Your Time and Your Life. Alan Lakein. New York: New American Library, 1996.

I've Done So Well—Why Do I Feel So Bad? Celia Halas and Roberta Matteson. Ballantine, 1987 (reissue ed.).

When Perfect Isn't Good Enough: Strategies for Coping with Perfectionism. M. M. Antony & R. P. Swinson. New Harbinger, 1998.

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Campus Resources

Counseling & Mental Health Center: 471-3515

5th Floor, Student Service Building

www.utexas.edu/student/cmhc

Telephone Counseling: 471-CALL

(24 hrs./day, 7 days/week)

UT Learning Center: 471-3614

Jester Center, Room A332

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