

To A Tee

Is perfectionism a healthy and highly desirable trait that ensures high standards? Or is it a self-destructive handicap indicative of deeper psychological and emotional issues? **Mira Khreino** explores the darker side of perfectionism.





The Perfectionist

The perfectionist strives to accomplish excellence in all areas of life. On the surface perfectionism may just seem to be about high standards, persistence, organization, and conscientiousness, but delving deeper exposes a myriad of psychological complexities.

Severe perfectionists exhibit rigidity in thinking with no deviations, inconsistencies, or hesitations. They are hyper-sensitive to imperfection, failure, or weakness, and often believe that their acceptability and lovability is a function of them being perfect. They never allow themselves to be “good enough” and if they do not succeed at a task they deem themselves “failures.”

The perfectionist thinks that things ‘need’ to be perfect and persistently pursues that goal. Such people will tend to look at what goes wrong instead of what goes right. An event may go 99 percent to plan, but it is the one percent that does not which preoccupies the perfectionist.

Even though perfectionists may try hard to give off the impression that they are happy, internally, they often feel frustrated, exhausted, and unappreciated. Their constant need for everything to be right can be emotionally draining and the satisfaction gained from achieving this right is often only temporary.



Causes: Where Does It Start?

Perfectionism usually starts during childhood due to a critical parent consistently pushing their child to achieve and succeed. What such parents seldom acknowledge is that they are pushing their children based on their own agenda (of credit and pride), rather than for their children’s own sake. Unfortunately, a child with critical or perfectionist parents often suffers socially and even physically. Excessively high expectations and parental pressures can result in a child experiencing a stunting of social and communication skills, a difficulty in interacting with peers, and not to mention physical ailments including headaches and ulcers.

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The Hindrance

Psychologists almost always see perfectionism as a handicap indicating an inability to de-stress, chronic fear of failure, indecisiveness, procrastination, and a sense of guilt and shame. Perfectionism involves the setting of excessively high personal standards and stringently evaluating one’s own behavior. It can also mean imposing one’s standards on others and having equally high (often quite unrealistic) expectations of others. Perfectionists are often harsh, punitive, rigid, and unforgiving. Interestingly, perfectionism is correlated with other serious mental health issues such as eating disorders, body image issues, social anxiety, and obsessive compulsive personality disorder.

For many, far from being a motivator for productivity, perfectionism can lead to a debilitating pattern of behavior which inhibits healthy functioning. Even though perfectionism has been the driving force behind many famous scientists, sports personalities, and artists, it has equally driven others toward distraction, procrastination, and problems with starting and finishing projects. In these cases, the perfectionists’ procrastination is closely linked to their fear of failure. This is especially debilitating given that a perfectionist’s self-esteem is mostly contingent upon their success.



A Perfectionist's Thinking Patterns, Traits And Beliefs

- Things are right or wrong, black or white, good or bad. Anything that does not equal absolute success, equates to failure. There is no leeway for mistakes or fluidity of thinking.
- Achievements and satisfaction with achievements are temporary, therefore one must always look to be better and achieve more. One is never really satisfied with how things currently are.
- 'Perfection' and 'success' will lead to happiness, anything less won't. Only by achieving perfection will one feel calm and relaxed. Anything less than perfect will usually result in anxiety. Perfectionists will attempt to reduce this anxiety by trying to make things perfect.
- Rigidity, obsessiveness, and competitiveness are typical characteristics. If a task is deemed 'imperfect' it is considered to be rubbish all-together. When a certain level of achievement is not attained then that equates to failure.
- One is valued by one's perfectionist characteristics (such as physique, intellect, income, intelligence, possessions etc.). A perfectionist secretly judges others who fall short of their standard of perfection.
- Self-doubting decisions and actions. The perfectionist questions whether or not he/she is making the most ideal choice.

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Difficulties And Struggles

- Relationship troubles. A perfectionist's romantic partner will often complain about being judged and pressured into living up to high demands and expectations. If standards are not met or if ideal behaviors are not exhibited by a partner (or even in friendships), then the perfectionist becomes angry, disappointed, resentful, and often passive-aggressive.
- Panic attacks and anxiety. Due to high self-imposed demands a perfectionist lives in a perpetual state of anxiety. The control response to that anxiety is to work harder and accomplish more. These efforts leave a person tired, fatigued, and eventually exhausted.
- Control over one's environment and the need to have everything neat and organized. The attempt to control the external environment is quite a prominent characteristic among perfectionists, which often falsely believe that if one can control the outside world, then the inside world (thoughts and emotions) will be safe. Not only are these controlling behaviors time consuming, but are often a form of escapism from uncomfortable, messy, painful, and unprocessed emotions.
- Procrastination. The fear of not succeeding at a task often leads to postponing an attempt at the task, and in extreme cases, giving it up for good. Black or white thinking (if it is not success then it is failure) pervades, and this fear of not succeeding acts as a preventative wall to starting challenging tasks.
- At a fundamental level, perfectionists believe that they are not good enough. Such people gain self-esteem through their perfect achievements. Their worthiness is therefore immediately tied to the quality of their achievements.
- Rigidity of mind. Inflexible thinking restricts the ability to think creatively and insightfully, which hinders the ability to make “optimal” choices. These unhealthy thinking patterns also result in missing out on the full experience of life. For example, perfectionists often prefer to stick to activities which they deem ‘valuable’, missing out on other ‘non-purposeful’ (yet very fun!) activities.



Overcoming Perfectionism

- Knowing where one's perfectionism stems from can help one understand it better. Reflecting on early dynamics with parents, teachers, and care givers who were overly critical, can often give insight into the causes of perfectionism.
- Taking note of when perfectionist traits are most prominent. For some it is relationship oriented while for others it is more career oriented. Being aware of when one is most vulnerable to perfectionism can allow one to prevent its negative effects.
- Giving oneself the leeway to make mistakes and errors. Allowing imperfection can improve one's relationship with oneself.
- Focusing on the journey and the lessons learned along the way should be given just as much importance as the final product of an activity or a task (if not more). This shifts the emphasis from an obsession with a 'perfect result' to the 'learning process.'
- Entertaining the grey in the spectrum opens up alternative ways of thinking and being. A more permissive way of understanding can bring more balance into one's decisions.
- Learning to love oneself unconditionally for one's inner qualities, values, and character can move one away from conditional self-esteem. Perfectionists often like themselves when they are on top and dislike themselves when things are not perfect. This causes fluctuations in mood and self-acceptance.

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To End

A person's perfectionism grows from his feeling of being internally imperfect and fundamentally flawed; a perfectionist's sense of value, worth, and acceptance is based on external achievements. Therefore, the perfectionist needs to re-prove himself through repetitive achievement. This can be exhausting and the satisfaction gained from successful accomplishments is only temporary. For long-lasting satisfaction and happiness one needs to turn one's efforts and attention inwards; to explore the internalized voices which perpetuate unhealthy behaviors. Perhaps through a better understanding, these voices will have less of an influence on the way one acts. One can then start improving the way one views oneself. Inner acceptance is not achieved by changing what is on the outside; it is rather about being at peace with and gaining a greater understanding of what is on the inside. ■