The Trouble With Being a Perfectionist

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The Toll of Perfectionism and Anxiety

Being 'perfect' sounds like a good quality, right? Isn't it a characteristic a job interviewer or potential romantic partner would find appealing?

Being successful and working to achieve your goals adds motivation to your life. With these qualities, you can find happiness. Unfortunately, this is not always the case. Setting goals and working hard to obtain them is a great notion, but sometimes people take this mindset to an extreme.

No matter what the issue, any mindset taken to the extreme becomes negative. This is true with perfectionism.

What Is Perfectionism?

Perfectionism is not a diagnosable mental health condition. This means you cannot check with the reference materials to gain a clear definition of what perfectionism actually is, so there are some differing opinions.

At its core, perfectionism is the unwavering desire to be perfect in every possible way. A perfectionist will accept nothing less than perfection from themselves and the others in their life. They want to think perfectly, behave perfectly, feel perfectly, and have perfect interactions. Not only must they be perfect, they must be perfect *constantly*.

A perfectionist has high standards, and they believe the only way they can be loved or accepted is by being perfect. If they are not perfect, they are a failure.

Views on Perfectionism

A major debate when dealing with perfectionism is whether perfectionism is healthy or unhealthy, good or bad, right or wrong. When experts discuss perfectionism, they use terms like adaptive and maladaptive. An adaptive trait is one that develops to benefit the person; their life improves with adaptive traits.

Maladaptive traits are the opposite. They may seem helpful and productive at first, but with time, they cause damage.

At its most extreme, perfectionism is maladaptive. No one can be perfect, and no one can expect perfectionism from others in their life. Unrealistic expectations only lead to feelings of frustration, disappointment, and lowered self-esteem, which means a true perfectionist is going to be unhappy most of the time.

Some people may have a modified definition of perfectionism that is more mild and centered. They think perfectionism is when someone tries their best and is slightly annoyed when the desired results are not present.

This annoyance is motivation, not life shattering. This perfectionism is adaptive, but at the same time, it is skewed version that is not true perfectionism.

Perfectionism and Anxiety

Being a true perfectionist is exhausting. All day every day, you have to fight a losing battle. You have to be perfect in an imperfect world. The never-ending stresses, pressures, and tensions flow towards two directions: depression and anxiety.

Many perfectionists end up experiencing a high level of mental health concerns because people are not designed to manage these extreme expectations. They feel sadness, hopelessness, helplessness, low motivation, and low energy, while being more irritable with thoughts of suicide.

Alternatively, they will feel very nervous, worried, and physical tension. In the worst situations, the person will not have depression or anxiety — they will have both.

Another mental health concern closely associated with perfectionism is obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). OCD, as the name suggests, is the experience of strong, negative thoughts that are often stressful or based in anxiety. These are called obsessions. Contrary to use in popular culture, obsessions are not comfortable or desirable.

They are so problematic that the individual is compelled to perform a behavior repeatedly for relief. The behaviors are called compulsions.

A perfectionist might have OCD traits illustrated by constant worry about their performance in a number of related tasks. At work, a perfectionist might obsess morning, noon, and night about a report or a presentation. Each line will be mulled over being written and rewritten endlessly.

At times, OCD, like perfectionism, makes it nearly impossible to complete the desired task. Since the project cannot be completed perfectly, it isn't completed at all.

Improving Perfectionism

Everyone falls somewhere on the continuum on perfectionism, but people with high levels of perfectionism need the most assistance. Staying there for too long can lead to untold stress, so a concerted effort to move to the middle is essential. Here's how:

Acknowledge the Problem

Addressing perfectionism with a perfectionist can seem like a losing battle because they are unable or unwilling to accept their state. Of course, they don't have a problem — their perfectionism is a good trait, they might say.

If you are the perfectionist and reading this, congratulations! You just saved yourself and your loved ones a lot of work. If you are interested in helping a loved one, the journey is challenging. They must admit imperfection when they admit they have a problem.

When you work to discuss their perfectionism, try to keep the conversation focused on objective facts rather than your perceptions to be more convincing.

Separate Your Esteem

The perfectionist has their self-esteem tied into their accomplishments. Without spending time being perfect, there will be a significant loss of identity.

This can be very uncomfortable and will be a major obstacle in your efforts to move away from the extreme.

Instead of focusing on your successes, you should consider shifting your focus towards other desirable characteristics you possess.

Are you kind to others? Are you a good listener? Can you tell a good knock-knock joke? Whatever your strengths are, find some ways to emphasize them.

Try to Fail

When you are a perfectionist, your goal is to overachieve. To this, there is an easy solution: try to underachieve. This may sound odd, but it is a valuable mindset. Imagine being a student studying for a test. Of course, you are trying to get an A, but now, try to get a C.

This changed focus forces you to build a new understanding of what your mission should be. By setting a new goal, you can still accomplish your task while defeating perfectionism.

Do less. Fail. It will be a liberating experience that will not cause the harm you've imagined it would.

If you are a perfectionist, you have a problem that only grows worse with time. It will negatively influence your life before it spreads through your network of supports. Perfectionists cannot be happy in the long-term. Choose happiness — you'll be glad you did.