

PERFECTIONISM

Does This Sound Familiar?

- None of my accomplishments ever meet my standards.
- I avoid answering questions or even giving opinions because I may say something dumb.
- If I don't give 100%, the outcome will be mediocre.
- I delay completion of projects because I cannot get them just right

An Imperfect Description of Perfectionism

Perfectionism is a set of beliefs, feelings, and behaviors aimed at excessively high and unattainable goals.

Among the underlying beliefs are the following:

- Mistakes must not be made.
- The highest standards must always be met.
- Failure to reach my goals equals a shortcoming in me as a person.
- If others see my flaws, they will judge me negatively.
- Wants and desires are secondary to goal achievement.
- The world is black and white, good and bad, right and wrong, with no gray areas.

HEALTHY GOAL SETTING VERSUS PERFECTIONISTIC GOAL SETTING

Goal-setting is a facet of perfectionism. Perfectionism is not, however, the standard by which one may measure healthy goal setting. The pursuit of excellence by individuals who enjoy setting and attaining high standards is not perfectionism. A healthy goal setter has drive. A perfectionist is driven and does not enjoy the process of goal attainment. Perfectionists have a hard time seeing this difference. Do you?

Healthy Goal Setting

- Healthy goal setting is based on wants and desires
- Healthy goals are one step beyond present or previous accomplishments
- Pleasure can be derived from the process of working toward the goal
- Disapproval or failure can be seen as specific to the situation (e.g. I didn't earn an A on this exam. I'll focus on my weak areas so that I can do better on the final exam)

Perfectionist Goal Setting

- Goals are often based on the expectations of others
- Your goal is perfection or the best at all times
- The focus is on the end result; not the process of working towards the goal
- Disapproval or failure is generalized to self-worth. (e.g. I am a failure because I didn't receive an A on this test)

PERFECTIONISTIC ASSUMPTIONS REVISITED

Many writings are quotes by leading poets, philosophers, statesmen, and artists run counter to the beliefs that form the basis for perfectionistic thinking. Some examples are listed below.

Perfectionistic: *If I'm not perfect in every aspect of my life, then I'm a failure.*

Rebuttal: *The main thing in life is not to be afraid to be human.*

Pablo Cassals

Perfectionistic: *If I do things right, I can arrange events in my life so I know their outcome and won't have to worry about failure.*

Rebuttal: *...the best laid schemes of mice and men...*

Robert Burns

Perfectionistic: *Mistakes are cause for great concern.*

Rebuttal: *Tis better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all.*

Alfred Lord Tennyson

OVERCOMING PERFECTIONISM

Perhaps you see more of yourself in this than you wish to see. Maybe you now see the drawbacks to a perfectionistic style. Here are some steps to help you let go of the perfectionistic habit.

- Make a list of the advantages and disadvantages of trying to be perfect.
- Note any self-criticism when you do not reach your goal. Is the criticism realistic? Is it helpful?
- Try changing your standards to 90% of your original for a few projects.
- Set strict time limits on tasks. When that time limit is up, move on to something else.
- Recognize that an activity involves more than the end result. What was the process or journey like? What did you learn?
- Ask yourself: What is the worst thing that could happen if I don't do this task perfectly?
- When you make a mistake ask yourself what you can learn from the mistake.
- Recognize that most criticism is specific to an action. It is rarely a rejection of the individual.

Remember: A healthy goal-setter has drive. A perfectionist is driven.

Adapted from Perfectionism - Associated Psychological Services. John Stallworth, J.D., Ph.D., David S. Litton, Ph.D., Carol Pierce-Davis, Ph.D., Licensed Psychologists. Austin, TX, 1998.

<http://www.jump.net/~dlitton/html/perfectionism.html>



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