

## PERFECTIONISM

- Do you feel what you accomplish is never quite good enough?
- Do you often put off turning in papers or projects, waiting to get them just right?
- Do you feel you must give more than 100 percent on everything you do or else you will be mediocre or even a failure?

If so, rather than simply working toward success, you may in fact be trying to be perfect. Perfectionism refers to a set of self-defeating thoughts and behaviors aimed at reaching excessively high unrealistic goals. Perfectionism is often mistakenly seen in our society as desirable or even necessary for success. However, recent studies have shown that perfectionistic attitudes actually interfere with success. The desire to be perfect can both rob you of a sense of personal satisfaction and cause you to fail to achieve as much as people who have more realistic strivings.

### Cause of Perfectionism

If you are a perfectionist, it is likely that you learned early in life that other people valued you because of how much you accomplished or achieved. As a result you may have learned to value yourself only on the basis of other people's approval. Thus your self-esteem may have come to be based primarily on external standards. This can leave you vulnerable and excessively sensitive to the opinions and criticism of others. In attempting to protect yourself from such criticism, you may decide that being perfect is your only defense.

A number of the following negative feelings, thoughts, and beliefs may be associated with perfectionism:

- Fear of failure. Perfectionists often equate failure to achieve their goals with a lack of personal worth or value.
- Fear of making mistakes. Perfectionists often equate mistakes with failure. In orienting their lives around avoiding mistakes, perfectionists miss opportunities to learn and grow.
- Fear of disapproval. If they let others see their flaws, perfectionists often fear that they will no longer be accepted. Trying to be perfect is a way of trying to protect themselves from criticism, rejection, and disapproval.
- All-or-none thinking. Perfectionists frequently believe that they are worthless if their accomplishments are not perfect. Perfectionists have difficulty seeing situations in perspective. For example, a straight "A" student who receives a "B" might believe, "I am a total failure."
- Overemphasis on "should." Perfectionists' lives are often structured by an endless list of "should" that serve as rigid rules for how their lives must be led. With such an overemphasis on should, perfectionists rarely take into account their own wants and desires.

- Believing that others are easily successful. Perfectionists tend to perceive others as achieving success with a minimum of effort, few errors, emotional stress, and maximum self-confidence. At the same time, perfectionists view their own efforts as unending and forever inadequate.

### **The Vicious Cycle of Perfectionism**

Perfectionistic attitudes set in motion a vicious cycle. First, perfectionists set unreachable goals. Second, they fail to meet these goals because the goals were impossible to begin with. Failure to reach them was thus inevitable. Third, the constant pressure to achieve perfection and the inevitable chronic failure reduce productivity and effectiveness. Fourth, this cycle leads perfectionists to be self-critical and self-blaming which results in lower self-esteem. It may also lead to anxiety and depression. At this point perfectionists may give up completely on their goals and set different goals thinking, "This time if only I try harder I will succeed." Such thinking sets the entire cycle in motion again.

This vicious cycle can be illustrated by looking at a way in which perfectionists often deal with interpersonal relationships. Perfectionists tend to anticipate or fear disapproval and rejection from those around them. Given such fear, perfectionists may react defensively to criticism and in doing so frustrate and alienate others. Without realizing it, perfectionists may also apply their unrealistically high standards to others, becoming critical and demanding of them. Furthermore, perfectionists may avoid letting others see their mistakes, not realizing that self-disclosure allows others to perceive them as more human and thus more likable. Because of this vicious cycle perfectionists often have difficulty being close to people and therefore have less than satisfactory interpersonal relationships.

### **Healthy Striving**

Healthy goal setting and striving are quite different from the self-defeating process of perfectionism. Healthy strivers tend to set goals based on their own wants and desires rather than primarily in response to external expectations. Their goals are usually just one step beyond what they have already accomplished. In other words, their goals are realistic, internal, and potentially attainable. Healthy strivers take pleasure in the process of pursuing the task at hand rather than focusing only on the end result. When they experience disapproval or failure, their reactions are generally limited to specific situations rather than generalized to their entire self-worth.

## What to do About Perfectionism

The first step in changing from perfectionistic attitudes to healthy striving is to realize that perfectionism is undesirable. Perfection is an illusion that is unattainable. The next step is to challenge the self-defeating thoughts and behaviors that fuel perfectionism. Some of the following strategies may help:

- Set realistic and reachable goals based on your own wants and needs and what you have accomplished in the past. This will enable you to achieve and also will lead to a greater sense of self-esteem.
- Set subsequent goals in a sequential manner. As you reach a goal, set your next goal one level beyond your present level of accomplishment.
- Experiment with your standards for success. Choose any activity and instead of aiming for 100 percent, try for 90 percent, 80 percent or even 60 percent success. This will help you to realize that the world does not end when you are not perfect.
- 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 task. Recognize that there can be value in the process of pursuing a goal.
- Use feelings of anxiety and depression as opportunities to ask yourself, “Have I set up impossible expectations for myself in this situation?”
- Confront the fears that may be behind your perfectionism by asking yourself, “What am I afraid of? What is the worst thing that could happen?”
- Recognize that many positive things can only be learned by making mistakes. When you make a mistake ask, “What can I learn from this experience?” More specifically, think of a recent mistake you have made and list all the things you can learn from it.
- Avoid all-or-none thinking in relation to your goals. Learn to discriminate the tasks you want to give high priority to from those tasks that are less important to you. On less important tasks, choose to put forth less effort.

Once you have tried these suggestions, you are likely to realize that perfectionism is not a helpful or necessary influence in your life. There are alternative ways to think that are more beneficial. Not only are you likely to achieve more without your perfectionism, but you will feel better about yourself in the process.

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