




Study Factsheet Series - No 12

The Perils of Perfectionism

Perfectionism






-  Do you feel like 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 behaviours 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.

Causes of perfectionism

If you are a perfectionist, it is likely that you learnt early in life that other people value you because of how much you accomplish or achieve. As a result you may have learnt 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 defence.

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 "shoulds." Perfectionists' lives are often structured by an endless list of "shoulds" that serve as rigid rules for how their lives must be led. With such an overemphasis on shoulds, 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 likeable. 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 behaviours 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.

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