The Perfect Trap

Perfectionism can lead to physical and emotional stress. A guide to giving up the unattainable.

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If you're always worried that no matter how hard you try it is never good enough, or you're constantly disappointed in the people you live or work with, you may be caught in a sneaky snare. Here's how to break free.

Susan, an interior designer, had been working frantically for the last month trying to get her end-of-the-year books in order, keep the business running, and plan a New Year's Eve party for her friends and her clients. Susan's home is an advertisement of her talent as a designer, so she wanted to make some changes to the formal dining room before the party that would be particularly impressive. It all came together in time for the party and the evening seemed to be going well, until her assistant, Charles, asked her if Mrs. Beale, who owned a small antique shop and had referred Susan a lot of business, and Mr. Sandoval, a member of the local Chamber of Commerce and a supporter of Susan's, had arrived.

Susan felt like her head was about to explode when she realized that she had forgotten to invite them to the party. "Oh, no," she moaned. "How could I be so stupid? What am I going to do? They'll no doubt hear about it from someone and assume I omitted them on purpose. I may as well kiss the business good-bye." Though Charles suggested she might be overreacting a little, Susan spent the rest of the night agonizing over her mistake.

Susan is an inwardly focused perfectionist. Although it can help her in her work, it also hurts her when she is hard on herself and finds error completely unacceptable. Like many people, she worries about what others will think of her and her business. However, in Susan's case her errors lead to humiliation, distress, sleepless nights and withdrawal from others. She has trouble letting go and forgiving herself because, in her mind, it is OK for others to make mistakes, but it is not OK for her to make mistakes.

Tom, on the other hand, is an outwardly focused perfectionist. He feels OK about himself, but he is often disappointed in and frustrated with others who seem to always let him down. Quality control is his line of work, but he cannot always turn it off when he leaves the office.

Tom drove into his garage to find that there was still a mess on the workbench and floor that his son Tommy had left two days ago. Tom walked through door and said to his wife in an annoyed tone of voice, "I told Tommy to clean up his mess in the garage before I got home." His wife defended their son, saying, "He just got home himself a few minutes ago." "Where is he now?" Tom demanded. "He better not be on the phone." Sure enough, though, Tommy was on the phone and Tom felt himself tensing up and ordering, "Get off the phone and go clean up that mess in the garage like I told you." "Yes, sir," said Tommy, knowing that a lecture was coming.

For Tom, it seems like every day there is something new to complain about. Tommy doesn't listen, his wife doesn't take care of things on time, and there is always an excuse. And even when they do their parts it usually isn't good enough, and they don't seem to care. It is so frustrating for
Tom sometimes that he does the job himself rather than ask for help, just so he doesn't have to
deal with their procrastination and excuses.

Tom's type of perfectionism causes him problems in his relationships with others because he is
frequently frustrated by their failure to meet his expectations. When he tries to point this out in a
gentle way, it still seems to lead to tension, and sometimes to conflict. He has tried to train
himself to expect nothing from others, but that strategy doesn't seem to work either.

The Personal Pain of Perfectionists

The reach for perfection can be painful because it is often driven by both a desire to do well and a
fear of the consequences of not doing well. This is the double-edged sword of perfectionism.

It is a good thing to give the best effort, to go the extra mile, and to take pride in one's
performance, whether it is keeping a home looking nice, writing a report, repairing a car, or doing
brain surgery. But when despite great efforts you feel as though you keep falling short, never
seem to get things just right, never have enough time to do your best, are self-conscious, feel
criticized by others, or cannot get others to cooperate in doing the job right the first time, you end
up feeling bad.

The problem is not in having high standards or in working hard. Perfectionism becomes a
problem when it causes emotional wear and tear or when it keeps you from succeeding or from
being happy. The emotional consequences of perfectionism include fear of making mistakes,
stress from the pressure to perform, and self-consciousness from feeling both self-confidence and
self-doubt. It can also include tension, frustration, disappointment, sadness, anger or fear of
humiliation. These are common experiences for inwardly focused perfectionists.

The emotional stress caused by the pursuit of perfection and the failure to achieve this goal can
evolve into more severe psychological difficulties. Perfectionists are more vulnerable to
depression when stressful events occur, particularly those that leave them feeling as though they
are not good enough. In many ways, perfectionistic beliefs set a person up to be disappointed,
given that achieving perfection consistently is impossible. What's more, perfectionists who have a
family history of depression and may therefore be more biologically vulnerable to developing the
psychological and physical symptoms of major depression may be particularly sensitive to events
that stimulate their self-doubt and their fear of rejection or humiliation.

The same seems to be true for eating disorders, such as anorexia nervosa and bulimia. Several
recent studies have found that even after treatment, where weight was restored in malnourished
and underweight women with anorexia, their perfectionistic beliefs persisted and likely
contributed to relapse. Perfectionism also seems to be one of the strongest risk factors for
developing an eating disorder.

Sometimes the pain of perfectionism is felt in relationships with others. Perfectionists can
sometimes put distance between themselves and others unintentionally by being intolerant of
others' mistakes or by flaunting perfect behavior or accomplishments in front of those who are
aware of being merely average. Although they feel justified in their beliefs about what is right
and what is wrong, they still suffer the pain of loneliness. Research suggests that people who have
more outwardly focused perfectionism are less likely than inwardly focused perfectionists to
suffer from depression or anxiety when they are stressed. However, interpersonal difficulties at
home or on the job may be more common.
How Did I Get This Way?

There is considerable scientific evidence that many personality traits are inherited genetically. Some people are probably born more perfectionistic than others. I saw this in my own children. My oldest son could sit in his high chair, happily playing with a mound of spaghetti, his face covered with sauce. My second son did not like being covered in goo. Instead, he would wipe his face and hands with a napkin as soon as he was old enough to figure out how to do it. As he got a little older, he kept his room cleaner than his brother. When he learned to write he would erase and rewrite his homework until it was "perfect."

Parental influences can influence the direction or shape that perfectionism takes. Many perfectionists, especially inwardly focused perfectionists, grew up with parents who either directly or indirectly communicated that they were not good enough. These were often confusing messages, where praise and criticism were given simultaneously. For example, "That was nice, but I bet you could do better." "Wow, six As and one B on your report card! You need to bring that B up to an A next time." "Your choir performance was lovely, but that sound system is really poor. We could hardly hear you."

Unfortunately, with the intention of continuing to motivate their children, these parents kept holding out the emotional carrot: "Just get it right this time and I will approve of you." Some psychological theories suggest over time the child's need to please her parents becomes internalized, so that she no longer needs to please her parents; she now demands perfection from herself.

Some perfectionists tell stories of chaotic childhoods where they never seemed to have control over their lives. Marital breakups, relocations, financial crises, illnesses and other hardships created an environment of instability. One of the ways in which these people got some sense of order in their otherwise disordered lives was to try to fix things over which they had some control, such as keeping their rooms neat and tidy, working exceptionally hard on schoolwork, or attempting to control their younger brothers and sisters. As adults, however, when their lives were no longer in flux, they may have continued to work hard to maintain control.

Are You A Perfectionist?

Perfectionists share some common characteristics. They are usually neat in their appearance and are well organized. They seem to push themselves harder than most other people do. They also seem to push others as hard as they push themselves. On the outside, perfectionists usually appear to be very competent and confident individuals. They are often envied by others because they seem to "have it all together." Sometimes they seem perfect. On the inside they do not feel perfect, nor do they feel like they always have control over their own lives.

Let's look at some of these characteristics more closely and how they interfere with personal and professional life. Terry, 34, a divorced working mother of two, is a high achiever with high career ambitions. But she can sometimes get hung up on the details of her work. She is not good with figures, but does not trust her staff enough to use their figures without checking them herself. She gets frustrated with this mundane work and makes mistakes herself and then becomes angry with her subordinates for doing poor work.

Perfectionists also tend to think there is a right way and wrong way to do things. When Joe, a retired Marine Corps drill sergeant, takes his boys fishing they have a routine for preparation, for fishing and for cleanup. It is time-efficient, neat, organized. The boys think the "fishing ritual" is
overdone and they resent having to comply.

Expecting people to do their best is one thing. Expecting perfection from others often means setting goals that can be impossible to achieve. Brent, 32 and single, has been looking for Ms. Right for 12 years but cannot seem to find her. He does not have a well-defined set of characteristics in mind. He just has a general impression of an angel, a sexual goddess, a confident, independent, yet thoroughly devoted partner. Blond is preferable, but he's not that picky.

Perfectionists can have trouble making decisions. They are so worried about making the wrong one that they fail to reach any conclusion. If the person is lucky, someone else will make the decision for them, thereby assuming responsibility for the outcome. More often the decision is made by default. A simple example is not being able to choose whether to file income tax forms on time or apply for an extension. If you wait long enough, the only real alternative is to file for an extension.

Along with indecision, perfectionists are sometimes plagued by great difficulty in taking risks, particularly if their personal reputations are on the line. Brent is in a type of job were creativity can be an asset. But coming up with new ideas rather than relying on the tried and true ways of business means making yourself vulnerable to the criticism of others. Brent fears looking like an idiot should an idea he advances fail. And on the occasions when he has gone out on a limb with a new concept he has been overanxious. Brent's perfectionism illustrates several aspects of the way that many perfectionists think about themselves. There can be low self-confidence, fear of humiliation and rejection, and an inability to attribute success to their own efforts.

Breaking Free

To escape the tyranny of perfectionism, you need to understand and challenge the underlying beliefs that drive you to get things "just right."

Each of us has a set of central beliefs about ourselves, other people and the world in general and about the future. We use these beliefs or schemas to interpret the experiences in our life, and they strongly influence our emotional reactions. Schemas can also have influence on our choice of actions.

Perfectionists tend to have the beliefs listed in the accompanying box. But under every perfectionist schema is a hidden fantasy that some really good thing will come from being perfect. For example, "If I do it perfectly, then...I will finally be accepted...I can finally stop worrying...I will get what I have been working toward...I can finally relax." The flip side of this schema, also subscribed to by perfectionists, is that "If I make a mistake," there will be a catastrophic outcome ("I will be humiliated ....I am a failure...I am stupid...I am worthless").

Changing these schemas means taking notice of the experiences you have that are inconsistent with, contrary to, or otherwise do not fit with them. June, who prides herself on being a "perfect" homemaker and mother, believed with 90% certainty that "If I do it perfectly, I will be rewarded." Yet she does a number of things perfectly that others do not even notice. June would tell herself that there would be a reward from her husband or her children for taking the extra time to iron their clothes perfectly. Her son did not even realize his shirts had been ironed. When Mother's Day came, she got the usual candy and flowers. No special treats or special recognition for her extra efforts.
When June begins to notice the inaccuracy of her schema, she begins to reevaluate how she spends her time. She decides that if it makes her feel good, then she will do it. If it is just extra work that no one will notice, then she may skip it. She is certain that there are some things she does, such as iron the bedsheets, which no one really cares about. As a matter of fact, June herself doesn't really care if the sheets are ironed. However, she does like the feel of a freshly ironed pillow cover, so she will continue that chore. June has modified her schema. Now she believes that "If you want a reward, find a quicker and more direct way to get it."

If your schema centers around more existential goals, like self-acceptance, fulfillment or inner peace, then you must employ a different strategy. If you believe that getting things just right in your life will lead to acceptance, then you must not be feeling accepted right now. What are the things you would like to change about yourself? What could you do differently that would make you feel better about who you are? If you can figure out what is missing or needs changing, you can focus your energies in that direction.

Or you may be motivated to take a different, less absolute, point of view. Instead of "I must have perfection before I can have peace of mind," consider "I need to give myself credit for what I do well, even if it is not perfect." Take inventory of your accomplishments or assets. Perhaps you are withholding approval from yourself.

If your schema is that other people's opinions of you is a mirror of your self-worth, you must ask yourself if you know when you have done something well, if you are able to tell the difference between a good performance and a poor performance. If you are capable of evaluating yourself, you do not really need approval from others to feel like you are a valuable worker or a good romantic partner.

In general, you must treat your perfectionistic schemas as hypotheses rather than facts. Maybe you are right or maybe you are wrong. Perhaps they apply in some situations, but not in others (e.g., at work, but not at home), or with some people, such as your uptight boss, but not with others, such as your new boyfriend. Rather than stating your schema as a fact, restate it as a suggestion. Gather evidence from your experiences in the past, from your observations from others, or by talking to other people. Do things always happen in a way that your schemas would predict? If not, it is time to try on a new basic belief.

One of my patients described the process as taking out her old eight-track tape that played the old negative schemas about herself and replacing it with a new compact disc that played her updated self-view. This takes some practice, but it is well worth the effort.

Do You Have Perfectionistic Basic Beliefs?

Rate the intensity with which you believe each of these statements, with 100% indicating complete agreement and 0% indicating that you do not believe it at all.

--- I must be perfect or I will be rejected.

--- If I make a mistake, it will be horrible.

--- If I do it perfectly, then I will be accepted.

--- I must be perfect or I will be embarrassed.
--- If I make a mistake, I will be humiliated.
--- When I get it right, I will finally accept myself.
--- When I achieve perfection, I will find inner peace.
--- If I do it perfectly, then it will be rewarded.
--- If others do not approve of me, then I am not OK.
--- If I make a mistake, then I am worthless.
--- I'm not good enough. I must keep trying.
--- I must be perfect or others will disapprove of me.
--- If I do it perfectly, then everything will work out right.
--- I'll never be good enough.
--- If others approve of me, then I must be OK.
--- If I do it perfectly, then everyone will notice.
--- I must be perfect or I will fail.
--- Things should be done the right way.
--- There is a right way and a wrong way to do things.
--- It is possible to do things perfectly.


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