

PERFECTIONISM: PERFECTLY UNHEALTHY!

While many occupations require precision and perfection every day – especially those in the medical and health delivery fields- the classic “Type A” overachiever who strives to control every aspect and outcome of their work most often lives a frustrated and unhappy existence.

Perfectionism is considered an aspect of personality and has been defined as “a complex pattern of deeply embedded psychological characteristics that are largely non-conscious and not easily altered.” (Millon, 2006)

Many perfectionists justify extreme types of behavior, even though they are not necessary for task completion and success. Some believe that being “perfect” has contributed to their success, but the reality is that perfectionists have serious problems with procrastination, reduced productivity and failed deadlines. Being a perfectionist consumes an inordinate amount of time and energy.

Many perfectionists have difficulties letting things go or relinquishing control. They become completely incapacitated and unable to make important decisions for fear of making mistakes or being perceived as “less able.” They experience “paralysis through analysis” and are stuck in indecisiveness. This is especially true in high demand work environments where pressure to excel is intensified – think law, medicine, enforcement and corporate America.

Perfectionists who are under a great deal of stress are more likely to gravitate towards obsessive compulsive traits and to work harder at being perfect. This gives them a sense of security and comfort, in spite of the behavior’s unhealthy aspects. In reality, this creates more havoc and chaos internally and externally.

Perfectionists tend to be “black and white” thinkers and assume an all-or-nothing approach to life. People with this trait demand excellence for themselves and others. Some perfectionists are so preoccupied with the order and details that they lose objectivity and the major point of their activity.

The perfectionist constantly aspires to prove his worthiness through high achievement. Expectations are often unrealistic and overwhelming. Negative self-talk is regular and reinforces the behavior. The perfectionist is his own worse critic and can be self deprecating. As a result, many perfectionists struggle with low self-esteem and feel that their achievements are “never good enough.” Fear and guilt are underlying emotions, motivators and perpetuators. The negative motivators and negative self-talk create a cycle of disappointment, anger, and depression. Work performance and productivity suffers from the perfectionist’s overly-critical nature and fixation on eliminating all imperfect details.

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Perfectionists can also be overly defensive when criticized, making it difficult for them to learn and grow. Fear of failure and unwillingness to make mistakes often mean perfectionists will avoid taking on new and challenging tasks. Flawlessness is their only option.

Perfectionists focus more on objects or tasks and less on people. Their fixation on right versus wrong, as opposed to the emotional impact of their decisions, causes the end result to become more important than the process. Perfection is an unrealistic expectation and denies our humanity and fallibility.

Perfectionism can negatively impact management style and effectiveness. More specifically, perfectionists have great difficulties delegating assignments and setting boundaries.

The perfectionist tends to be overextended, overcommitted and overwhelmed. Burn-out is one high cost of perfectionism. Constant internal conflict and unrealistic expectations wear out the mind and body. Rigid and inflexible management styles create discord with others since being wrong is unacceptable.

Perfectionists stifle creativity and prevent others from thinking on their own. The perfectionist's need for control and fear of failure limits his ability to delegate and nurture professional growth and development in others.

Perfectionists have poor boundaries. They can be so fixated on the outcome that the process is completely lost. For example, completing an assignment may normally take three hours, but a perfectionist can easily spend six hours completing the task perfectly. They have not set a time boundary for themselves. In the midst of their boundary violation related to time, they expect others to join in and assume their own quest for perfection.

If you can identify with some of these traits and feel you may be slipping down the slope of perfectionism, rest assured there are ways to lighten your internal load and become more relaxed about your life, your work and your relationships.

Coping with and Changing Perfectionist Attitudes

- Set realistic goals and priorities.
- Lower your expectations and accept that you are - we all are – fallible.
- Desensitize yourself to making mistakes by practicing with someone you trust in safe situation - tell a friend you don't know the answer to a question! The world will not stop spinning!
- Delegate tasks and learn to say “no.”
- Modify or eliminate negative self-talk by replacing “should, must, have to and need to” with “can, will, and want to.”
- Be decisive and walk away from decisions both physically and mentally.

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- Be assertive in your communication, using “I” instead of “you,” and confronting conflict proactively without trying to make everyone happy.
- Decide on a time frame for a project and move on after the time has expired.
- Accept criticism by being human and acknowledging that mistakes are necessary for learning and growth.
- Practice patience and self-forgiveness.