

Perfectionism and Mental Health



Many of us hold high standards for ourselves. We want to achieve great things. We want to move forward in our careers. We want to be the model parent, child, and friend. Having goals and standards for ourselves is important. They help to ensure that our choices are in line with our values. There are times, however, where these standards we set for ourselves can become unhelpful and problematic. Here, we may stray into what is commonly referred to as “perfectionism.” In our newsletter today, we will be discussing perfectionism, the effects it can have on our lives, and ways that we can better manage it when it does arise.

What is Perfectionism?

Perfectionism is a term used to describe a certain personality trait associated with high standards and drive. The American Psychological Association describes perfectionism as “a tendency to demand of others or oneself an extremely high or even flawless level of performance, in excess of what is required by the situation” (2018). Perfectionism, at times, can be quite helpful to us and doesn’t always manifest in unhealthy ways. Some may use the term “toxic perfectionism” to describe the cases where perfectionism can become a destructive force in someone’s life.



How can Perfectionism Become Problematic?

Perfectionism involves lofty goals, intense determination, and a lack of tolerance for mistakes. In addition to driving us to achieve at a high level, it can also set us up for frequent disappointment and strife. For those of us dealing with the strongest levels of perfectionism, it can feel crushing at times. Life can be very messy, and all of us are guaranteed to make mistakes and to fail. The meaning we ascribe to our experiences can yield immense impacts to our health and functioning. Being fired from a job, having a relationship suddenly end, not being picked for a team; all of these experiences can be tough to manage. For someone with extremely high levels of perfectionism though, they can seem world-ending. When perfectionism becomes so intense that our failures seem insurmountable, it will have negative impact on our mental and physical health.



Perfectionism and Catholicity

“For we all stumble in many ways. And if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body.” (James 3:2)

We may strive for greatness, to be the best that we can be. We may even hope to achieve perfection in certain endeavors, but we are all fallible. We are humans and to err is in our nature. Willing ourselves to be perfect won’t make us so and will set us up for a great deal of disappointment and hardship.

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According to Psychology Today, perfectionism, when taken too far, can lead to procrastination, rigid black and white thinking, toxic comparisons, a reduction in creativity, and risk/challenge avoidance. Perfectionism is heavily driven by fear. Perfectionism can be associated with low self-worth, poor self-esteem, and adverse childhood experiences (Psychology Today, 2024). People with higher levels of perfectionism may be at greater risk of depression, anxiety, obsessive-compulsive disorder, eating disorders, and suicidal thinking.



Pushing Back Against Perfectionism

Learn to Recognize It

This newsletter has helped to shed light on the concept of perfectionism, an issue faced by many people. Now that you know more about perfectionism, its causes, and the way it may hold us back, work on recognizing it in your own life. When we are able to identify perfectionistic thoughts we can remove some of their power.

Avoid Comparisons

It has been said that comparison is the thief of joy. Comparison plays perfectly into perfectionism because, when we are comparing ourselves to others, we do so in an unfair and unrealistic way. We don't look at a person on balance. Instead, we cherry pick the things we perceive to be best about them and, naturally, we feel we don't measure up.

Think Realistically

When you are calm, consider some reminders you may need to hear when you are struggling with perfectionism. Think of some balanced and realistic statements such as "No-one is perfect.", or "All I can do is my best." These statements may seem obvious, but they may be just what we need to hear when we feel the pressure of perfectionistic thinking.

Look at the Big Picture

People who struggle with perfectionism often get wrapped up in the fine details of things. Zoom out and consider the issue in a larger context. Ask yourself: "What's the worst that could happen?", "If the worst does happen, will I make it through?", or "Will this still be important tomorrow? Next week? What about next year?" You may be surprised.

Give Exposure a Try

Exposure is a very important aspect of challenging anxious thinking. This includes perfectionistic thinking. Consider ways to expose yourself to the things your mind tries to tell you must be avoided at all costs. Send an email without checking it for typos. Allow for silence in social conversations. Say no to new tasks when your plate is already full.

Seek Professional Help

Perfectionistic thinking can be a vicious cycle that feeds maintains itself. Counsellors can be prone to perfectionism themselves, but they can also help you to see and understand your thoughts and actions from an outside perspective. If you are struggling with perfectionism, consider speaking to a professional.