

Perfectionism: What is it; am I one; can I change?

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“I can’t believe I made a 98. I studied for hours.”

“Of course I’ll stay. The job isn’t done and everything has to be right for the presentation.”

Sound familiar? Do people tell you to “chill out” about different things in your life? If so, consider the possibility that while you are definitely a hard-worker, you may also be a Perfectionist. You might question, “Well, what’s wrong with that? How can striving for perfection be negative?” The simple answers: Perfectionism is NOT about success. In fact, striving for perfection is actually an attempt to achieve highly unrealistic goals.

Inevitably, Perfectionists miss their goal, not for lack of ability, but because the end was unattainable. Because Perfectionists can’t accept their goals as skewed, there is constant pressure to “get it right.” And, when goals are missed, Perfectionists self-examine and decide they “should” have done something differently and determine things will “be better” next time. Perfectionists are unstoppable; they “must” perform, “must” accomplish, “must” succeed, for if they don’t, they have to contend with (in their opinion) external proof that they are not valuable or lovable.

Because Perfectionists associate tasks with love and acceptance, their self-esteem is connected with approval by others. Thus, relationships are usually tenuous. Having their identity contingent upon “success,” Perfectionists ultimately fear rejection for being “inferior.” Often, they become “bubble boys” to protect their fragile self-worth. Just as detrimental, Perfectionists expect everyone to be perfect and assume everyone holds the same beliefs that they do. Either way, Perfectionists usually emotionally isolate themselves, further necessitating performance for acceptance.

Perfectionism is not about “success.” Perfectionists need external recognition because they cannot self-validate. When all the walls are down, Perfectionists believe they are ill-equipped, inadequate, and undeserving of love and acceptance.

As with any belief, perfectionism can be changed. You must simply decide and then find the help needed to ensure your new desired “YOU” remains.

To begin the journey from Perfectionism, consider the following:

1. Redefine Perfectionism

Old: Perfectionism is good because it validates me with love and acceptance. Perfectionism equals success.

New: Perfectionism is detrimental. I don't "need" others to validate me because my worth is self-determined.

2. Set realistic goals

Establish short- and long-range goals with tangible benchmarks. Think about goals like eating a pie: Unless you're a giant, you can't consume an entire pie with one bite. Thus, several bites are required. Each bite is a benchmark for the ultimate goal: total pie consumption. In this way, each bite/benchmark affirms your mounting and consistent success.

3. Identify and Deal

Depression, anxiety, fear. These are powerful negative emotions. Ask yourself: "Why am I so sad?" "What am I afraid of?" "Who'll reject me?" "Who has rejected me?" Explore these questions and wait for the answers. From the answers, you know how to proceed.

4. Redefine success

Old: Success is "all or nothing."

New: Success exists on a continuum, comprised of numerous benchmarks. Even if a goal is unmet, consider the benchmarks. Identify how many you accomplished and where you faltered. With this knowledge, the mistakes are springboards for new learning.