

The Imperfection of Perfectionism

by

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Many people strive for some form of perfection. Whether in their work, in their appearance, in their relationships, in their expectations of others...There are a number of problems with perfectionism not the least of which it is simply not possible. Perfection is an ideal, which, almost by definition, is unattainable. Like trying to stand in the middle of a rainbow; as it's approached, it recedes. The other problem is that the criteria used to gauge perfection are suspect. How did we arrive at these criteria? Is it valid criteria? And, even if we were to judge it as valid criteria, will it remain so through time? If the criteria for perfection changes, then how perfect could it have been in the first place? Perfection suggests no room for improvement, the ultimate, the top of the line...can't get any better. It's perfect! The irony of perfectionism is that to hold that high, high standard, as an ideal, is an imperfection; it is an irrational and illogical standard by which to gauge and determine success or happiness.

Those who strive for perfection often unwittingly make their lives somewhat miserable. There are a number of emotions that accompany the perfectionist attitude. Consider the following questions...

- Do you get angry when you or others make mistakes?
- Are you unwilling to make compromises?
- Do you become easily disappointed?
- Are you impatient?
- Do you strive to be better than others?
- Would you rather do something yourself rather than delegate it to someone else?
- Do you feel that being average is equivalent to failure?

If you answered yes to these questions, then there is a good chance you have some strong perfectionistic attitudes towards yourself and others. And, you're setting yourself up for disappointment. It is possible to be less than perfect and satisfied. Let's take a closer look at perfectionism and how it can become simple satisfaction with acceptable performance.

Perfectionism is a conditioned belief established in the mind during childhood. There is no absolute guideline or rule that says you must be perfect, or else. But, there may be a thought pattern in the mind that says just that. Parents, teachers, coaches and other adults in the life of a child can easily imprint the attitude and belief that anything less than perfection is failure. Exactly what perfection entails is often nebulous and ends up being what the adult says it is. This then teaches the child that perfection is attained only when the adult, the authority, so says. As an adult, any achievement of perfection would then necessarily need to be confirmed by some authority figure. Often that authority figure is projected on the spouse, supervisor, manager or some adult in a position of perceived superiority. Excessive striving for approval

by that authority becomes the means to obtain perfection which can cause undue stress and pressure which can then actually diminish performance resulting in approval ratings that are less than desired and then causing frustration, anger and depression. This may then cause an increase in striving, along with more stress and anxiety which further diminished truly effective performance, and the sought after approval. It becomes a downward spiral ending in excessive depressive moods, low motivation, decreased self-value and, in some cases, suicidal ideation. It need not be like this.

The critical factor in perfectionism is what is referred to as “external locus of control” which simply means that we seek the confirmation of our perfection from outside ourselves. Even if we ourselves hold the standard of perfection, we internalized that standard from adults while growing up. It is not a standard we have consciously, intelligently and maturely chosen or have derive after some deliberate thought. Of course, we may use the word “perfect” in a generic sense referring to acceptable, or even better than acceptable, behavior or performance. And, that behavior or performance is gauged by realistic and reasonable criteria. But, that is not perfectionism. Perfectionism, by definition and by the conditioning in which it was internalized in the mind, suggests a standard both unreachable and only confirmed by an outside source. As such, the first step in overcoming perfectionism is to recognize from whence comes our high, high standard and then to adjust that standard according to our own internal framework. That internal framework ought be based on a clear and rational assessment of individual capacities, interests and motivations. An understanding of reality based personal and professional goals, along with a rational understanding of what it means if those goals are not met, is important in re-evaluating exactly what determines success, as opposed to achieving perfection.

There are several beliefs that can run through the mind reinforcing perfectionism and those need to be changed. For example, the simple belief that “if I am not successful, then I am a failure” is perfectionistic. There is no middle ground. It is either success OR failure. There are no gradations. In fact, it is possible to be 80% successful, and that in no way means failure. Even 30% success is not failure; it simply suggests a need for improvement. In that sense, failure is simply feedback showing what needs to change to achieve a higher rate of success. And, indeed, viewing failure as feedback suggests there really is no such thing as failure, only feedback.

Another common belief is that “If I am not the best, I am no good.” This highly competitive attitude is based on the idea that the best is perfect and anything less than the best is the worst. It is also, like failure and success, devoid of gradations. It is externally oriented as the best is determined by comparison with others rather than internal standards of excellence. However, even internal standards can be highly unrealistic having been internalized as a child from overly demanding parents. It’s ironic that striving to be the best can cause increased stress and anxiety that reduces the chances of performing well, let alone at one’s best. And, by taking a more casual approach, there is less tension and pressure, and performance tends to be better. It’s a lot easier to be your best when you don’t **have to** be your best for fear of being the worst—and perhaps even being punished.

Personal satisfaction and happiness can come from successes and achievements that in turn come from effective performance and intelligent behavior. But, there is no evidence

whatsoever that “perfection” equates to real satisfaction or genuine happiness; but there is evidence to suggest that striving for perfection causes excessive stress, pressure and tension that then gives rise to anxiety, depression, psychosomatic symptoms and a general dissatisfaction and unhappiness. That is the imperfection of perfection. Why not learn to be less than perfect; you’ll be happier and healthier.