

# Perfectionism Bane or blessing?

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**P**erfection is all about meeting a standard. When a gifted person sets a standard, it is likely to be very high because they have a clearer picture of what perfect would be and more experience meeting and exceeding other people's standards. There are many different aspects of perfectionism (perfectionism researchers have identified over 20), but they can be sorted into three useful groups: self-oriented, other-oriented, and societally imposed.

Self-oriented perfectionists are the "classic" type – someone who sets impossibly high standards for their performance or behaviour. This person may invest hours working on a project, only to throw out the product and redo the whole project because it is not perfect, though to anyone else it would seem acceptable, even great. This may happen several times over, exhausting the person, wasting their precious time and energy, and eroding their self-esteem. It is no surprise that perfectionism is closely correlated with obsessive-compulsive disorder.<sup>1</sup> People can also set impossible standards for behaviour, for example trying to be the perfect host, spouse, or friend. Any deviation from this standard causes major self-criticism, affecting mood and poisoning the very relationships they are trying so hard to preserve.

Emotional perfectionism can be heartbreaking to witness. The person becomes so greatly distressed by the appearance of a certain emotion (anxiety, hostility, vulnerability, anger, to name a few examples) they begin to command themselves never to have it at all. Then, as the emotion appears, they experience it as intolerable and it creates more of the very emotion they are trying to escape. Despite their efforts, the target emotion will continue to bother them unless they completely cut off all awareness of their emotions.

A potentially dangerous type of perfectionism is other-oriented. In this style,

perfect behaviour is demanded of other people, organizations, and society. This person is likely to become embittered as they realize that no one can ever fulfill their expectations perfectly. This further atrophies their capacity to take risks and withstand disappointment; they end up living a small life without opportunity to grow. Another choice for this type of perfectionist is accept others as long as they are willing to be controlled. Some abusive domestic arrangements grew from a perfectionist with the best intentions who has turned into a tyrant.

Societally imposed perfectionism is the classic "they" that people believe are watching and judging their every move. "They" say that one should not eat chocolate cake for breakfast, "they" say that anyone who got all A's in high school should be a roaring success in the adult world, "they" say that anyone gifted should not make any mistakes. Who are "they"? Often it's a code or dogma that has been internalized, paralyzing the person in a way that they may not even be conscious of. Perhaps it's behavioural standards imposed by a religion, or a school system, or a family. For politicians and celebrities, the media can be a huge influence. For gifted kids, societally-imposed perfectionism can be a real dilemma. Not only do parents, teachers, and society expect great things of them, there's usually a peer group who gives the opposite message – using your gifts is uncool, geeky, or nerdy.<sup>2</sup>

So what's the good news about perfectionism? Wanting to meet high standards and perform to the best of your ability is a natural human drive, especially for the gifted, who often experience a strong *entelechy* (drive to growth). Some researchers say that there is adaptive and maladaptive perfectionism.<sup>3</sup> Adaptive perfectionism seems to centre on the increased ability to concentrate on and achieve goals, the way that the person interprets their results, and the general

emotional adjustment of the individual.<sup>4</sup> This seems largely subjective and outcome-based.

Perhaps a more useful way to look at it is that perfectionism is a matter of perspective. What is unreasonable and perfectionistic to one person would seem normal and achievable to another. Ellis (2002) hypothesizes that it is only once a wish becomes a demand that the less desirable side of perfectionism is triggered.<sup>5</sup> One can hold a high standard as an ideal, but reduce one's internal demand to meet it. Here are some ideas about how to deal with perfectionism in your own life

**1. Expectations, standards, and acceptable behaviours each person sets for themselves and others are within their control to change.** When one is totally unattached to whether one's standards get met or not, one can make decisions based on what actually happens, not compared to fantasies of perfection. Ask yourself, "Would it be fair to apply this standard to a good friend?" If you wouldn't ask it of them, how fair is it to ask it of yourself? Give yourself the unconditional love and acceptance you would extend to others who need your support.

**2. What you can't accept, controls you.** If all you focus on is what you didn't do perfectly, you are unable to see the many ways you succeed every day. Emotions and feelings are one mark of our humanity. You can have any emotion and choose the way you react to it. Requiring things or people to be different is usually futile in the long term. Concentrate on the positive.

**3. Any endeavour is subject to diminishing returns.** The closer one gets to perfection, the more effort it takes to move the last few steps to get to that goal. You can do five things to 80% perfect, or one thing to 100% – it's your choice. Sometimes your 80% is "their" 100%. There are many situations at work or school where quantity or speed is valued more highly than quality.

**4. Socially imposed standards, or memes, are just that.** Bringing awareness to the fact that it is an imposition is the first step in deciding whether or not it is relevant. Carefully examine the rationale for a societally imposed standard before making a conscious choice about conforming to it. Valuing your own perceptions and accepting yourself the way you are is critical to your own growth.

**5. Making a mistake or screwing something up is the most efficient way to get**

**good feedback.** There is a reason that people make prototypes – going through the design process repeatedly and creating a substandard product is the fastest way to success. Give yourself permission to experiment with your life and fail continuously in the service of your learning. Failure is an event, not a person. If you fail, you are a winner because you are pushing the edges of your competence, where the most learning can be found.

**6. One day at a time!** Perfectionism robs us of enjoying the present, because we are always waiting for the day when we achieve perfection, or beating ourselves up for past mistakes. Take a deep breath and look around you, right now. Try to feel your heart beating. Ignore your mind's chatter, just for a moment. What do you notice?

There are lots of resources and research on measuring perfectionism and its relationship to other conditions such as depression, chronic anxiety, and eating disorders. The relationship between high IQ and perfectionism is still under investigation, with researchers finding both positive and negative relationships. If you resent the implication that you might not already know how to handle your own perfectionism, experiment with these concepts and email me with your findings at [jo@lionlifecoaching.com](mailto:jo@lionlifecoaching.com). Or send me your own strategies for combatting the negative effects of striving for excellence. I certainly need all the help I can get!

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