



Perfectionism—The Foe of Happiness

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The demands of education and occupation appear to be increasing. Performance standards in any given arena are becoming more competitive. In response to increasing stressors, many turn to perfectionism, believing such an approach will ensure success and shield oneself from failure.

Nothing could be further from the truth.

Ambitious individuals tend to label themselves “perfectionists,” and many wear this identity as a badge of honor. Rendering perfectionism this positive connotation can conceal larger, more deep-seated issues. A distinction must be made between the “pursuit of excellence” and perfectionism.⁷ Working hard or pushing oneself relentlessly to achieve a goal is the sign of a dedicated individual, not necessarily perfectionism. In most cases, perfectionism has its origins in anxiety or self-esteem issues, which themselves have been linked to less personal satisfaction and an increased risk of suicide.^{7,9} Perfectionists have a higher risk of eating disorders, anxiety disorders, and depression.⁵ The life of one who strives to be ‘perfect’ is riddled with fear and extreme caution. Creativity, joy, inspiration, and even productivity are throttled when perfection is the only option. Ironically, according to Flett and colleagues,⁵ successful people actually are less likely to be perfectionists, as the symptoms of perfectionism are more likely to thwart higher levels of success one might achieve.^{2,7}

Many of us try to attain perfection. We try to cultivate (or at least project) perfect marriages, and yes, we strive to perform perfect surgical procedures, even though we may know that perfection is an illusion. Yet, we all have tales of surgeons spending more than 6 hours in an operating room attempting to achieve the “perfect” fracture reduction in a case that typically requires a fraction of the time.

In a vocation as demanding as orthopaedic surgery, perfectionism can sap a surgeon’s energy—leaving little room for self-care and relationships. Perfectionists tend to overcommit themselves, and are generally exceedingly sensitive to criticism. They procrastinate, waiting for the ‘perfect’ time to attend to tasks.⁵ For the surgeon, challenging cases may be deferred. Cases that an average surgeon could readily handle on a given day are often referred elsewhere. Instead of doing five excellent procedures, the

perfectionist surgeon may spend hours trying to produce the “perfect reduction” in a case that usually requires about one hour of manipulation.

In essence, perfectionists simply fear imperfection, and equate any error with personal defectiveness. They lead their lives convinced that perfection is the only means to self-acceptance.⁶

Origins of Perfectionism

Beneath perfectionism usually lies a self-esteem issue. During formation, the perfectionist likely received messages of conditional acceptance from a significant caretaker, usually a parent.⁶ The message was interpreted loud and clear: “I will love you if ...” The demands for academic, behavioral, or athletic perfection from a parent can forge a wounded self-image in a child. The presence of affectionless and overcontrolling parental figures, coupled with a tendency for neuroticism have been found as common denominators in the childhood of perfectionists.¹⁰ Our childhood experiences, in addition to some genetic influences, largely determines the burden of intrusive thinking we each experience. The pressure to perform generates dysfunctional thoughts in the young mind and will linger for the remainder of their lives, unless recognition of distorted thought patterns are recognized and addressed.

Cognitive Distortions

Clearly, perfectionism is a byproduct of dysfunctional and distorted thinking. Cognitive behavioral psychologists have characterized faulty, inaccurate thinking into several cognitive distortions or patterns of erroneous thoughts.¹ Each “cognitive distortion” is merely a lie our brain sends to our conscious mind. Common distortions include ignoring the positive whereupon one’s mind is preoccupied with thoughts of all that is wrong with a particular situation, rather than positive aspects of a given occurrence. For example, a preoccupation of the one errant screw in an otherwise superb fracture reduction is a classic example of ignoring the positive. A distortion commonly found in perfectionists is all-or-nothing thinking. That is, one negative event may trigger a cascade of intrusive thoughts which generalize misfortune

into all aspects of one's life. For instance, a difficult surgery to the perfectionist may generate a stream of negative thoughts along the lines of "I am no good," "I am a lousy surgeon," or even "I don't deserve to be called orthopedic surgeon." Even when a perfectionist achieves success, they do not experience the delight of the accomplishment. Instead, there is only relief that this time they did not fail.

Perfectionists also are prone to several other patterns of distorted thinking including personalization and blame—the tendency to blame oneself for something he or she was not entirely responsible for. Another is labeling, whereby one tends to base his or her entire identity on their shortcomings. Instead of acknowledging a mistake, 'labelers' are quick to identify themselves as "losers" or abject failures. Perfectionists may experience as many as 10 common thought distortions, which all lead to diminished personal happiness and joy (Table 1).

The recognition and awareness of these distorted thoughts is the beginning of the road to recovery. Create space with perfectionistic thoughts by observing them and not *becoming* them. When they arise, simply breathe and let these intrusive thoughts pass. Recognize that perfectionistic thoughts and perfection-driven emotional movements are lies that your mind is presenting to you. The compulsions and neurotic movements that distorted perfectionistic thoughts are to be observed as simply tricks your mind is playing. Much has been written on mindfulness, or living in the moment.⁸ When we are entirely present, intrusive and compulsive thinking wanes.

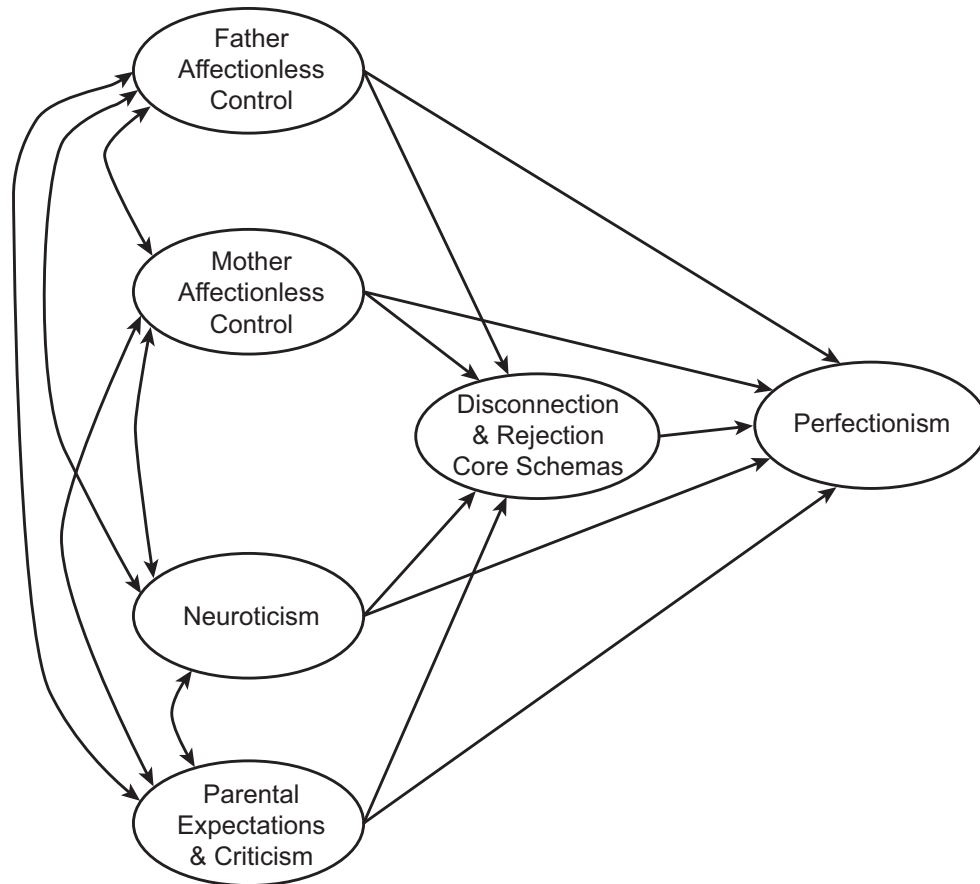
Reading books and attending courses on mindfulness, coupled with daily practice, will yield great benefits in managing our minds.

Recovery: Courage to Accept Imperfection

Recovery from perfection requires an overhaul of improper thinking which may take some considerable time. In his 2008 study, psychologist and marriage and family therapist Thomas S. Greenspon PhD proposes "building an environment of acceptance" through self-empathy, encouragement, self-reflection, and dialogue.⁷ These are not steps, Greenspon argues, but rather elements of an approach that will help an individual move beyond thoughts of perfectionism.

"Perfectionism, in this approach, is seen as a self-esteem issue arising from emotional convictions about what one must do to be acceptable as a person," Greenspon writes in the study. "It reflects a perfectionistic person's basic sense of reality, not simply a set of irrational beliefs that can be changed by deciding to think differently. There is a great deal at stake emotionally, for which perfectionism is a defense. Overcoming perfectionism is a recovery process, more like nurturing a flower's bloom than like fixing a broken object."⁷

Obviously recovery can be hastened with the help of a therapist, and cognitive behavioral therapy has been shown to be especially effective.⁴ A trained therapist can help examine thoughts that evoke anxiety and fear and reframe them into more realistic cognitions. In addition, seeking a mentor who has the right balance of self-compassion and acceptance



may serve as highly effective patterning for one's life. An appreciation that others will accept us more fully when we are authentic and real, rather than a "perfect" pseudoself that our minds have constructed out of fear, may help us become more tolerant of ourselves.

Suggestions to Overcome Perfectionism

1. In the words of David Burns MD:¹ "Dare to be average" for the next 30 days. Accept that you are imperfect and resist the temptation to give into fear. Just *be*, and reconnect with your creative self. Let inspiration and passion rule rather than "shoulds."
2. Make a list of pros and cons on a piece of paper about your perfectionism. Burns uses this exercise to convince his patients that they are less productive when perfectionism takes hold.¹
3. Another tactic Dr. Burns recommends is to become more "process oriented" rather than results oriented.¹ For example, focus on a good consistent effort in the operating room and release the compulsion to attain the perfect surgery. Implicit with a process orientation is the setting of realistic time limits to each task. Be sure to adhere to them. You will be surprised at the satisfaction and productivity boost you will realize.
4. Look at mistakes as opportunities for growth, rather than as signs of failure. We learn from errors, not successes. Each apparent step backward merely brings us closer to our goals.

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