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Pitfalls of Perfectionism

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You could say that perfectionism is a crime against humanity. Adaptability is the characteristic that enables the species to survive—and if there's one thing perfectionism does, it rigidifies behavior. It constricts people just when the fast-moving world requires more flexibility and comfort with ambiguity than ever. It turns people into success slaves.

Perfectionists, experts now know, are made and not born, commonly at an early age. They also know that perfectionism is increasing. One reason: Pressure on children to achieve is rampant, because parents now seek much of their status from the performance of their kids. And, by itself, pressure to achieve is perceived by kids as criticism for mistakes; criticism turns out to be implicit in it. Perfectionism, too, is a form of parental control, and parental control of offspring is greater than ever in the new economy and global marketplace, realities that are deeply unsettling to today's adults.

"I don't understand it," one bewildered student told me, speaking for the five others seated around the table during lunch at a small residential college in the Northeast. "My parents were perfectly happy to get Bs and Cs when they were in college. But they expect me to get As." The others nodded in agreement. Today's hothouse parents are not only over-involved in their children's lives, they demand perfection from them in school.

And if ever there was a blueprint for breeding psychological distress, that's it. Perfectionism seeps into the psyche and creates a pervasive personality style. It keeps people from engaging in challenging experiences; they don't get to discover what they truly like or to create their own identities. Perfectionism reduces playfulness and the assimilation of knowledge; if you're always focused on your own performance and on defending yourself, you can't focus on learning a task. Here's the cosmic thigh-slapper: Because it lowers the ability to take risks, perfectionism reduces creativity and innovation—exactly what's not adaptive in the global marketplace.

Yet, it does more. It is a steady source of negative emotions; rather than reaching toward something positive, those in its grip are focused on the very thing they most want to avoid—negative evaluation. Perfectionism, then, is an endless report card; it keeps people completely self-absorbed, engaged in perpetual self-evaluation—reaping relentless frustration and doomed to anxiety and depression.

No one knows this better than psychologist Randy O. Frost, a professor at Smith College. His research over the past two decades has helped define the dimensions of perfectionism. This, he's found, is what perfectionism sounds like:

"If someone does a task at work or school better than me, then I feel like I failed the whole task."

"Other people seem to accept lower standards from themselves than I do."

"My parents want me to be the best at everything."

"As a child, I was punished for doing things imperfectly."

"I tend to get behind in my work because I repeat things over and over."

"Neatness is very important to me."

Each statement captures a facet of perfectionism:

Concern over mistakes: Perfectionists tend to interpret mistakes as equivalent to failure and to believe they will lose the respect of others following failure.

High personal standards: Perfectionists don't just set very high standards but place excessive importance on those standards for self-evaluation.

Parental expectations: Perfectionists tend to believe their parents set very high goals for them.

Parental criticism: Perfectionists perceive that their parents are (or were) overly critical.

Doubting actions: Perfectionists doubt their ability to accomplish tasks.

Organization: Perfectionists tend to emphasize order.

By itself, having high standards (or being orderly) does not impale a person on perfectionism; it is necessary, but not sufficient. "Most people who are successful set very high standards for themselves," observes Frost. "They tend to be happy." What turns life into the punishing pursuit of perfection is the extent to which people are worried about mistakes.

Concern with mistakes and doubts about actions are absolute prerequisites for perfectionism. Perfectionists fear that a mistake will lead others to think badly of them; the performance aspect is intrinsic to their view of themselves. They are haunted by uncertainty whenever they complete a task, which makes them reluctant to consider something finished. "People may not necessarily believe they made a mistake," explains Frost, "they're just not quite sure; they doubt the quality of their actions." Intolerance for uncertainty characterizes obsessive compulsive disorder and generalized anxiety disorder, too.

But it's only paralyzing in the presence of parental criticism and exacting expectations. It's one thing to strive for perfection, another to demand it. "Overly demanding and critical parents put a lot of pressure on kids to achieve," says Frost. "Our studies show that is associated with perfectionism." It's transmitted in subtle ways. There's a modeling effect, so that parents who are obsessively concerned with mistakes raise children who are, too. And there's an interpersonal effect, transmitted by an authority figure in a child's life who is overly critical and demanding.

Concern with mistakes is a reflection of what Frost calls the core issue in perfectionism, the unspoken belief or doubt that arises in a child's mind: "I'm incompetent or unworthy." It leads to hypercriticalness and the rigid adherence to strict standards of performance under all conditions. It is the element of perfectionism most linked to psychopathology. And it comes about because a child has been made to feel that approval is contingent on performance.

The conditionality of love doesn't have to be stated. It can be communicated in simply "the way the whole environment is structured," says Frost. "If the parent is enthusiastic only when the child accomplishes something or spends a lot of time working at something, then it's unspoken yet demonstrated by the environment."

Pushing for perfection clashes with children's developmental needs. If a child's sense of self comes to rest on accomplishments, they buy into the idea that they're only as good as they achieve. Driven from

within to reach that impossible ideal, perfection, they become compliant and self-focused.

"There's a difference between excellence and perfection," explains Miriam Adderholdt, a psychology instructor at Davidson Community College in Lexington, North Carolina, and author of *Perfectionism: What's Bad About Being Too Good?* Excellence involves enjoying what you're doing, feeling good about what you've learned, and developing confidence. Perfection involves feeling bad about a 98 and always finding mistakes no matter how well you're doing. A child makes all As and one B. All it takes is a parent raising an eyebrow for the child to get the message.

The truly subversive aspect of perfectionism, however, is that it leads people to conceal their mistakes. Unfortunately, that strategy prevents a person from getting crucial feedback—feedback that both confirms the value of mistakes and affirms self-worth—leaving no way to counter the belief that worth hinges on performing perfectly. The desire to conceal mistakes eventually forces people to avoid situations in which they are mistake-prone—often seen in athletes who reach a certain level of performance and then abandon the sport altogether.

Frost also looked at writing ability in college students. "We found that those with great concern over mistakes did poorly on a writing test. People learn to write by showing their work to others and having it critiqued. Perfectionists avoid having their writing evaluated. They avoid courses that require sharing their writing . They don't develop their writing skills because they don't put themselves in the right environment." The pressures of perfectionism similarly keep people from developing social skills and emotion-regulation skills that would help them cope in life.

Perfectionism is self-defeating in still other ways. The incessant worry about mistakes actually undermines performance. Canadian psychologists Gordon L. Flett and Paul L. Hewitt studied the debilitating effects on athletes of anxiety over perfect performance. They uncovered "the perfection paradox." "Even though certain sports require athletes to achieve perfect performance outcomes, the tendency to be cognitively preoccupied with the attainment of perfection often undermines performance." Overconcern about mistakes orients them to failure.

Preoccupation with perfection also undermines performance in cognitively based academic pursuits such as math—especially among the best students, those who have superior working-memory capacity. Such students are most apt to choke under pressure, which selectively erodes their memory capacity.

Emote Control

In the grand scheme of things, perfectionism is an intrusive form of parenting that attempts to control the psychological world of the child. But where does psychological control come from? At the Catholic University of Leuven in Belgium, developmental psychologist Luc Goossens and colleagues have identified two distinct sources of psychological control.

One is the parents' own perfectionism, an excessive concern with mistakes. Parents approve of their children only when high standards are met. Using covert, indirect techniques—a sigh, a strategic silence, the raised eyebrow—perfectionist parents apply their psychological control on the children, who then become self-critical.

Another source of control is parents' separation anxiety. The adults are overly attached to their kids and anxious about their growing autonomy ; a child's continued development poses the threat of emotional loss and abandonment to the parent. Such parents guilt-trip their kids, approving of their behavior only when the children remain close and dependent on them. Parents tend to resort to keeping their children dependent when their own adult relationships are less than fulfilling.

Whether stirred by fear of loss or a need for status, parents who employ psychological control focus primarily on their own personal needs, not their children's developmental needs.

Suniya Luthar was not at all prepared for the discovery she made about the modern pressures on kids. Children of upper-class, highly educated parents, she explained in a 2005 article, "Children of the Affluent," experience just as many problems as inner-city kids—and in some cases, more. Luthar tracked the source of their problems. First and foremost are achievement pressures. "Children with very high perfectionistic strivings—those who saw achievement failures as personal failures—had relatively high depression, anxiety, and substance use, as did those who indicated their parents overemphasized their accomplishments, valuing them disproportionately more than their personal character."

Here is the key point: Among the young, high pressure for achievement is ipso facto experienced as parental criticism. Children come to feel that their failure to accomplish will seriously diminish the affection, regard, and esteem with which their parents view them as individuals.

The push for perfection comes at a high cost to children. But the biggest problem with perfection may be that it masks the real secret of success in life. Success hinges less on getting everything right than on how you handle getting things wrong. This is where creativity, passion, and perseverance come into play. In a flat world, you don't make people powerful by pushing them to be perfect but by allowing them to become passionate about something that compels their interest.

Ironically, it could be that children of working-class immigrants to the U.S.—one of five children in 2006—are really in the most privileged position. With parents who speak little English and lack the know-how to manipulate the system on their behalf, they have no one to run interference for them, no one to clean up a mess in their wake. They are forced to learn to bring in their homework and handle life on their own.

On an airline flight, I was seated next to a woman who is a vice president of a major investment group. She comes in regular contact with young people. She confided that she hires only children of first-generation immigrants. They are resourceful, hardworking, good at problem solving. The "fancy kids," she says, are not persevering, not willing to work hard, not clever at problem solving, not resourceful. The kids she hires whose parents didn't speak English well had to learn to figure out things for themselves; they couldn't rely on their parents. Their "disadvantage" wound up making them stronger.

To consign children to the pursuit of perfection is to trap them in an illusion. Like the anorexic literally dying to be thin, perfectionism consumes more and more of the self. Among the many paradoxes of perfectionism is yet one more: It is ultimately self-destructive to devote all one's psychic resources to oneself. *—Hara Estroff Marano*

How to Criticize

The big element influencing perception of parental relationships is criticism. Criticism implying that affection or approval is conditional on good performance is lethal. What's destructive is the actual or threatened withdrawal of affection or approval: the expression of anger when he gets something wrong or disappoints, even a sigh or sounds of exasperation, irritation, or annoyance.

- Never tell kids that second best is not good enough. If you feel disappointment in a child's performance, use it constructively. Ask her to evaluate her performance. "Are you happy with it?" "Why?" "What did you get out of it?" Ask: "What would you do differently next time?"
- Ask a child what he needs in order to do as well as he wants. Maybe your child needs more sleep or to learn how to prioritize.
- Offer support verbally and nonverbally. Empathize with the child: "This stuff is hard, isn't it?"
- If a child leaves her homework for the last minute and consequently doesn't do well on a test, don't put the knife in with "I told you so." Instead, capitalize on her own disappointment. "You're not happy with the way things turned out, are you?" Ask: "What can you do next time to make it come out the way you want?"

How to Give Praise

Praise given the wrong way can reinforce the need to be perfect.

- Reward the process and the effort, not the talent or the product. Shifting focus to effort illuminates the key to mastery.
- When a child gets a great grade on a paper, resist the urge to say: "You're brilliant." Instead say: "You're a really good thinker." Be specific: "It's great that you connected X to Y." Or ask a question that focuses attention on the thinking: "What got you interested in this?" If you praise kids' intelligence and then they fail at something, they think they're not smart anymore, and they lose interest in work. But kids praised for effort get energized in the face of difficulty.
- Praising effort also gives kids (and adults) the keys to their own mental health. The brain is built so that it generates positive mood states—and subdues negative ones—as it works hard toward a meaningful goal.
- Do not supply material rewards for achievement. Instead, congratulate your kid. Ask why things worked out so well and what your child attributes her success to. You want kids to understand exactly which efforts pay off in which situations. Supplying external rewards kills internal motivation and turns an activity into inspiration-crushing work.

Letting Go is Hard to Do

Perfectionists fear that if they give up perfectionism, they won't be good anymore at anything; they'll fall apart. In fact, perfectionism harms performance more than it helps. The worst thing about it, says Randy Frost, is the belief that self-worth is contingent on performance—that if you don't do well, you're worthless. It's possible to escape that thinking.

- First, watch a movie or a sunset or engage in some activity not affected by your perfectionistic strivings. Pay attention to how much pleasure you get from it.
- Then engage in some activity—say, tennis—that is subject to your perfectionism. How much pleasure do you get from it?
- Ask yourself: So I miss a shot, what does it mean for my self-worth?
- Apply that same insight to all other activities: Is this perfectionistic orientation worth it for this task?
- Now you actually need to experiment with a different way of evaluating yourself and your performance. So deliberately make a mistake; miss a shot in tennis.
- Ask yourself: Does your opponent think less of you? Do observers think less of you? If your opponent makes a mistake, do you think less of him?
- Play tennis and concentrate only on the motion of your body. Did you enjoy that set more?
- Understand the nature of mistakes. They're something we learn from—more than from our successes.
- Look upon failure as information, not a fixed or frozen outcome. It's a signal to try something else—another chance to learn.

From A Nation of Wimps *by Hara Estroff Marano (Broadway Books, 2008), reprinted with permission.*

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