



NEW JERSEY PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

Five Reasons to Ditch Perfectionism

by Sarah Seung-McFarland, PhD

Are you a perfectionist? If so, you may be conscientious about following rules, and doing what is right and “proper.” Perhaps you take pride in being orderly, dependable, and detail-oriented. You may even wear your perfectionistic tendencies like a badge of honor, jokingly letting others know you’re a little “OCD” (that’s Obsessive Compulsive Disorder).

On the flip side, you may be fearful of making mistakes, and attempt to compensate for shortcomings by being super controlling and rigid about what you expect from yourself (and others). If you made a mistake during your PowerPoint presentation, it doesn’t matter that you did a great job overall. You’ve spent hours and even days rehashing the mistake wishing you prepared harder. If your supervisor provided you with constructive criticism and areas for improvement on your yearly evaluation, it doesn’t matter that you reached all your identified goals for the year. You just can’t seem to shake the nagging feeling that your performance wasn’t good enough. And if your co-worker scored better on those areas than you did, you’ve been secretly resentful, and find it hard to be happy for your co-worker because you’re equally as unhappy with yourself.

Sound like you? If so, you might be a perfectionist. This is not to be confused with a desire to be your best, or even the pursuit of perfection, both of which can help us reach our highest potential. Rather, perfectionism is a trait associated with fear, and is seen in individuals with avoidant, dependent, and obsessive-compulsive personality disorders, all of which are driven by anxiety and worry. Perfectionism increases our anxiety, and ironically drives us away from our most perfect selves. While no one strives towards imperfection, there is a difference between those who use imperfections to make themselves better and those who use it to validate deeper-seated insecurities. Here are five reasons to ditch perfectionism.

1. We gain a sense of freedom.

If freedom was a superhero, perfectionism would be its arch enemy. Our perfectionistic tendencies hold us hostage and can be so relentless, we may find ourselves remembering every mishap we’ve ever made. This is counterproductive, and prevents us from focusing on our successes. While no one likes to make mistakes, we must learn to accept them, and know that it does not change our value or self-worth. Once we can do this, we have freedom—the freedom to do well, the freedom to mess up, and the freedom to learn from it, all without allowing mistakes to define us.

2. It promotes growth.

When we are perfectionistic, there is only success and failure, nothing in between. Therefore, there is no room to learn and grow because doing so brings the possibility of failure. Consequently, we function

purely within our comfort zone and develop no new skills. On the other hand, if we are not driven by fear of failure, we do not limit ourselves to what we know we can do well, and are more likely to take risks that promote learning and growth.

3. We learn to appreciate the process.

In all fairness, most of us would prefer not to go through the struggles and challenges life brings. In fact, we develop perfectionistic tendencies to shield us from these negative experiences. That is, if we're "perfect" we can avoid the emotional injury that accompanies these experiences. The problem is, in order to be our best selves, we must experience struggles because it authenticates us. It is our ability to overcome inevitable challenges that help to shape us and make us emotionally stronger than we would have been had we not been challenged.

4. We can shine.

If in fact we were perfect, what would that mean? That we'd never make a mistake? That we never did anything different from the status quo? I'm not sure what that would look like, and quite frankly, it sounds a little scary (think *Stepford Wives*). When we harbor perfectionistic tendencies, our anxiety makes us cautious, and this can be reinforcing if we succeed in avoiding mistakes. But at the same time, we also suppress unique aspects of ourselves, those qualities that cause us to shine or stand out. Let's say we both desire to own similar business. If we are true to ourselves, your business and mine would certainly be different. Otherwise, we'd be offering the same exact services in the same exact way, and that would be most uninteresting. Our idiosyncrasies and faults are what distinguish us from others.

5. It reduces the risk for developing anxiety or anxiety-related disorders.

We may be predisposed to certain disorders based upon our genetic make-up, our psychological functioning, and our environment. While the desire to be perfect may not be a disorder per se, it can develop into an anxiety disorder if it isn't addressed. The constant barrage of needing to be perfect, being fearful of failure, and feeling too anxious to try new things is taxing, and saps our emotional energy. We must be kind to ourselves with healthy and accurate thoughts even when it feels counter intuitive to do so because this is what brings peace of mind.

If you are dealing with perfectionistic tendencies that have been impairing your ability to function at work, maintain healthy relationships, or progress in other major areas of your life, you may want to consider meeting with a therapist who specializes in treating anxiety.

These resources may also be helpful:

1. *Life Without Limits: Clarify what you Want, Redefine Your Dreams, Become the Person You Want to Be*, by Lucinda Bassett.
2. *Never Good Enough: How to Use Perfectionism to You're your Advantage Without Letting it Ruin Your Life*, by Monica Ramirez Basco, PhD.
3. *When Perfect Isn't Good Enough: Strategies for Coping with Perfectionism*, by Martin Antony, PhD.

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