

Hills Valley Coalition NEWS

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Parent Newsletter of the Hills Valley Coalition for Resilient Youth: Serving Hillsdale, Montvale, River Vale & Woodcliff Lake

Perfectionism and Mental Health: Should We Be Concerned?*

I have strong personal and professional reasons to care deeply about perfectionism. As a psychologist, I have seen how unbridled perfectionism can be detrimental to mental health, creating increased vulnerability for anxiety, depression, eating disorders, and other mental illnesses. As someone who has struggled with perfectionism and is now raising 3 young boys, I am personally invested in adopting compassionate and flexible expectations, as well as teaching others that it is OK (and even a good thing!) to be imperfect.

Why should we care about perfectionism? Perfectionism is a dangerous trend among young people, and it is on the rise. Curran and Hill (2017) conducted a meta-analysis of 164 samples of 41,641 college students examining changes in perfectionism since 1989. The results suggested that young people are increasingly demanding of themselves, are more demanding of others, and perceive that others are more demanding of them. The authors speculated that the generational rise in perfectionism is accounted for by cultural shifts including increased competitiveness and controlling parenting practices. The authors also mentioned rising anxiety, individualism, and meritocracy (i.e., power based on one's ability) that may influence this trend. (Curran & Hill, 2017)

What does this mean for us as concerned parents, teachers, and community members? America today is arguably more individualistic than ever, and social media offers a "perfect" platform to display one's "best self." In the case of Madison Holleran, Kate Fagan has argued that her perfectionism, characterized by perpetuating a "split image," contributed to her mental illness, and decision to end her life.

On a personal level, I have wrestled with perfectionism since childhood. I put a tremendous amount of pressure on myself to succeed in school, sports, and to be well-liked by everyone. Like most perfectionistic kids, I didn't like making mistakes. In college and graduate school, my perfectionistic tendencies continued as I assumed leadership roles in various organizations, and continued to expect perfection in my work and relationships. Fortunately, as an adult I have learned to become aware of the critical nature of my own perfectionistic "voice," and adopt a more gentle and com-

passionate stance. Therapy, introspection, and talking about my struggles openly has helped. Even writing this newsletter helps. I have worked with hundreds of college students and young adults who display varying degrees of perfectionism. In my opinion, many of these individuals typically do not consciously start therapy because of their perfectionism, but rather because of the toll that their expectations take on their mental and physical health. The good news is that perfectionistic beliefs, once recognized, can be challenged and replaced with healthier ones.

As a psychologist and parent, I have observed a tsunami of a cultural shift. I have noticed an increased emphasis on excellence in performance, coupled with the "split image" phenomenon perpetuated by social media (i.e., being perfect on social media, but secretly struggling). On a personal level, I know how hard it can be

to shift an entrenched style of relating to oneself and to the world. Perfectionism thrives in secrecy, but talking about it may help. Therapy and professional support can be helpful to foster resilience and healing. Check out Brene Brown's book, *The Gift of Imperfection*, for more information about engaging with perfectionism, shame, and vulnerability.

Although my children are young, I have had ongoing conversations with them about perfectionism given the cultural shifts and my own personal tendency. **There is reason to be hopeful!** Based on my own experience, I am confident that, with increased awareness about perfectionism, we can effect change in ourselves and in our children.

We live in a "Stigma-Free" community with excellent access to mental health providers; if you suspect that you or your child is dealing with mental illness associated with perfectionism, you are not alone and professional help is available to you. Do not be afraid to reach out for help. Together, we can combat what appears to be a rising tide of perfectionism and split image, and help foster wellness among our children and within our community.

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References:
 Curran, T., & Hill, A. P. (2017). Perfectionism Is Increasing Over Time: A Meta-Analysis of Birth Cohort Differences From 1989 to 2016. *Psychological Bulletin*, doi:10.1037/bul0000138

*Please note, this is not intended as medical/psychological advice or diagnosis, and only reflects Dr. Dunn's personal viewpoints. This does not constitute or replace professional support or service.

Check out this table for some examples of challenging perfectionistic beliefs:	
PERFECTIONISTIC BELIEF:	HEALTHIER BELIEF:
"I have to try my best, and be the best at everything I do."	"I strive to work hard, but I don't need to be the best in everything I do."
"Failure is not an option"	"Mistakes are part of life and learning. It's OK to fail and make mistakes."
"I can't be less than perfect"	"I don't have to be perfect to be good enough."
"Others expect more than I can give them. They expect me to be perfect"	"I don't have to be perfect to live up to others' expectations of me."