

## Perfectionism – 3 articles

Practice may make perfect, but perfectionism makes for reduced job performance, depression, and illness—not to mention alienated colleagues.

So reports psychologist J. Clayton Lafferty, Ph.D., who looked at the lifestyles and personalities of 9,211 managers and professionals. His conclusion: Striving for perfection is likely to harm employees and companies alike.

"Perfectionism has nothing to do with actually trying to perfect anything," Lafferty says. "It is about illusion, the desire to look good." Because they equate their self-worth with flawless performance, perfectionists often get hung up on meaningless details and spend more time on projects than is necessary. Ultimately, productivity suffers.

Another problem is that perfectionists may cover up errors in an attempt to maintain a superhuman image. That's why, contrary to expectations, perfectionists are ill-suited to working in risky environments like nuclear reactors or high-tech fighter planes, where mistakes must be shared at once to avoid catastrophe. Indeed, a study of pilots found that accidents and perfectionism often go hand-in-hand.

Disaster can also ensue when perfectionism pervades corporate culture. "The ability to make the distinction between what is achievable and what isn't is highly associated with business effectiveness," says Lafferty, of Human Synergistics International, a Michigan consulting firm. He cites one major company that nearly engineered its own demise by setting sales goals so high that it failed to meet them for 16 consecutive years.

While working under such conditions takes its toll on employees, it is the perfectionists themselves who suffer most from their compulsions. Their self-induced stress leads to a cornucopia of health problems, from headaches and chest pains to depression and impotence. "Achievement acts as an insulation against physical illness," notes Lafferty, "while perfectionism seems almost to conduct it."

It's the 2004 French Open, and Venus Williams has just claimed her seventeenth victory of the season -- no losses. In her moment of triumph, she turns to reporters and says, in near-perfect French:

"I haven't worked hard enough. Sometimes, I've wanted it too much. Sometimes, I haven't wanted it enough. Sometimes, I didn't listen to my coaches. Sometimes, I didn't listen to myself." She adds, "I hate mistakes in everything, not just on the court."

So, what's wrong with perfectionism?

Findings from decades of personality research say plenty. Even though perfectionists are often high-achievers, they are also at risk for eating disorders, sexual dysfunction, obsessive-compulsive disorder, depression, divorce, and suicide. They lead a life of continual anxiety and fear of failure. Even when they succeed, like Venus Williams, perfectionists never feel satisfied.

According to psychologist Gordon Flett of York University in Toronto, perfectionism is particularly dangerous for athletes and people who exercise regularly. They often over-train and burn out, by pushing their bodies beyond their limits. Instead of letting up, they exacerbate their injuries, potentially causing permanent damage. Simply put, they cannot tolerate flaws.

Exceptionally talented athletes may be protected from the pitfalls of perfectionism for a while, but inevitably everyone runs into obstacles, either on or off the playing field.

"Even if you are a champion, someday you will lose a game or get injured or just get old," says Flett. "Perfectionists don't respond well. They become extremely angry with themselves and depressed."

The obsession with exactitude tends to cover all aspects of life. Perfectionists are very rarely obsessive about only one aspect of their lives; they "hate mistakes in everything," just like Williams. If they don't have the perfect body, they develop an eating disorder. If they don't have the perfect marriage, they get divorced.

Flett calls this type of all-or-nothing thinking the "just right" phenomenon. If something isn't "just right" to a perfectionist, then it might as well be thrown away. This may explain the high incidence of suicide among perfectionists: They think that if life isn't perfect, then it's worthless. Get rid of it.

But not all perfectionists are the same. Flett identifies three different types perfectionism, each with a distinctive array of drawbacks. Some perfectionists are almost entirely self-motivated. In spite of any amount of praise they might receive from other people, these self-oriented perfectionists can always find fault with themselves. Karen Kain, Canada's prima ballerina and one of the most respected dancers in the world, gave over 10,000 performances in her career. In her biography, she wrote that she received satisfaction from about 12 of them. Her primary feeling about her abilities was disappointment. Other perfectionists feel as though the world expects them to be impeccable. In a classroom setting, these are the children who won't try new things because they're scared of looking foolish. They often must cope with sadness or anger, because they perceive the demands of others as unreasonable and unfair. Since they need to appear perfect, so-called "socially-proscribed" perfectionists almost never ask for help. They keep problems to themselves and let them fester.

A third group of perfectionists extends their high standards to everyone else in the immediate orbit. "They demand the same thing from others that they demand in themselves, which seems fair to them," says Flett. Personal relationships are nearly impossible, and marriages fall apart. They are the world's worst bosses.

All perfectionists can benefit from learning how to set more realistic standards for themselves. Often when a perfectionist fails to meet a goal -- say, running six miles -- she'll try to overcompensate by aiming even farther, so the next day she'll try for eight miles. They adjust their standards, but in the wrong direction. Perfectionists can learn to undo such potentially harmful logic through counseling.

Perfectionists also harbor other destructive beliefs: for example, that they will be unloved if they aren't perfect. Since being truly perfect isn't possible, they will never feel truly convinced that they are loved.

"They don't get the message that love isn't contingent upon accomplishment," says Flett. Learning to accept the flaws in themselves and others is not the pathway to mediocrity; it's the high road to a more loving -- and satisfying -- life.

Perfectionism, in psychology, is a belief that perfection should be strived for.

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In its pathological form, it is an unhealthy belief that anything less than perfect is unacceptable.

Perfectionism can drive people to accomplishments and provide the motivation to persevere in the face of discouragement and obstacles. Adaptive perfectionists have lower levels of procrastination than non-perfectionists. High-achieving athletes, scientists, and artists often show signs of perfectionism. For example, Michelangelo's perfectionism may have spurred him to create masterpieces such as David and the Sistine Chapel. Perfectionism is associated with giftedness in children. In its pathological form, perfectionism can be very damaging. It can take the form of procrastination when it is used to postpone tasks ("I can't start my project until I know the 'right' way to do it."), and self-deprecation when it is used to excuse poor performance or to seek sympathy and affirmation from other people. In the workplace, perfectionism is often marked by low productivity as individuals lose time and energy on small irrelevant details of larger projects or mundane daily activities

*Not to be confused with [Perfectionism \(philosophy\)](#).*

**Perfectionism**, in [psychology](#), is a belief that perfection can and should be attained. In its [pathological](#) form, perfectionism is a belief that work or output that is anything less than perfect is unacceptable. At such levels, this is considered an unhealthy belief, and psychologists typically refer to such individuals as *maladaptive* perfectionists.

Measurement and definition

Hamachek (cited by [Parker & Adkins 1994](#)) describes two types of perfectionism. *Normal* perfectionists "derive a very real sense of pleasure from the labours of a painstaking effort" while *neurotic* perfectionists are "unable to feel satisfaction because in their own eyes they never seem to do things good enough to warrant that feeling". Burns (also in Parker & Adkins) defines perfectionists as "people who strain compulsively and unremittingly toward impossible goals and who measure their own worth entirely in terms of productivity and accomplishment" ([Parker & Adkins 1994](#)).

[Hewitt & Flett \(1991\)](#) devised the Perfectionistic Self-Presentation Scale (PSPS), which rates three aspects of perfectionistic self-presentation: advertising one's own perfection, avoiding situations in which one might appear to be imperfect and failing to disclose situations in which one has been imperfect.

[Slaney \(1996\)](#) created the Almost Perfect scale, which contains four variables: Standards and Order, Relationships, Anxiety, and Procrastination. It distinguishes between adaptive and maladaptive perfectionism. Both adaptive and maladaptive perfectionists rate high in Standards and Order, but maladaptive perfectionists also rate high in Anxiety and Procrastination.

In the book *Too Perfect*, ([Mallinger & DeWyze 1992](#)) describe perfectionists as having obsessive personality types. The obsessive personality type is distinct from obsessive-compulsive personality disorder; OCD is a clinical disorder that may be associated with specific ritualized behavior. According to Mallinger and DeWyze, perfectionists are obsessives who need to feel in control at all times to protect themselves and ensure their own safety. By being constantly vigilant and trying extremely hard, they can not only ensure that they not only fail to disappoint or are beyond reproach but also they can

protect against unforeseen issues (such as economic downturn). Vigilance may include constant monitoring of the news, weather, and financial markets.

Perfectionists may be workaholics who can't relax; people who reproach themselves for the smallest errors or wrong words for days afterwards; the person so intent on finding the perfect mate that they never settle down; the procrastinator; the finicky person; and so on. Perfectionists tend to be exceptionally sensitive to criticism.

Perfectionists often embody some or all of the following personality traits: emotional guardedness; fear of making mistakes or errors; thrift; need to be above criticism; tendency to be stubborn or oppositional; and so on.

Perfectionism is one of the [16 Personality Factors](#) identified by [Raymond Cattell](#). It may be related to Conscientiousness and Neuroticism in the [Big Five personality traits](#). [Stoeber & Otto \(2006\)](#) recently reviewed the various definitions and measures of perfectionism. They found that perfectionism comprised two main dimensions: perfectionistic strivings and perfectionistic concerns. Perfectionistic strivings are associated with positive aspects (see below) and perfectionistic concerns with negative aspects (see below). Healthy perfectionists rate high in perfectionistic strivings and low in perfectionistic concerns, whereas unhealthy perfectionists rate high in perfectionistic strivings and high in perfectionistic concerns.

#### Positive aspects

Perfectionism can drive people to accomplishments and provide the motivation to persevere in the face of discouragement and obstacles. [Roedell \(1984\)](#) argues that "in a positive form, perfectionism can provide the driving energy which leads to great achievement. The meticulous attention to detail, necessary for scientific investigation, the commitment which pushes composers to keep working until the music realises the glorious sounds playing in the imagination, and the persistence which keeps great artists at their easels until their creation matches their conception all result from perfectionism". Slaney found that adaptive perfectionists had lower levels of procrastination than non-perfectionists. High-achieving athletes, scientists, and artists often show signs of perfectionism. For example, [Michelangelo's](#) perfectionism may have spurred him to create masterpieces such as the statue *David* and the Sistine Chapel. Perfectionism is associated with [giftedness](#) in children.

#### Negative aspects

In its pathological form, perfectionism can be very damaging. It can take the form of [procrastination](#) when it is used to postpone tasks ("I can't start my project until I know the 'right' way to do it."), and [self-deprecation](#) when it is used to excuse poor performance or to seek sympathy and affirmation from other people ("I can't believe I don't know how to reach my own goals. I must be stupid; how else could I not be able to do this?").

In the workplace, perfectionism is often marked by low productivity as individuals lose time and energy on small irrelevant details of larger projects or mundane daily activities.

This can lead to depression, alienated colleagues, and a greater risk of accidents ([Psychology Today 1995](#)). [Adderholt-Elliott \(1989\)](#) describes five characteristics of perfectionist students and teachers which contribute to underachievement:

procrastination, fear of failure, the all-or-nothing mindset, paralysed perfectionism, and [workaholism](#). In intimate relationships, unrealistic expectations can cause significant

dissatisfaction for both partners ([Allen 2003](#)). Perfectionists may sacrifice family and social activities in the quest for their goals.

Perfectionists can suffer [anxiety](#) and low [self-esteem](#). Perfectionism is a risk factor for [obsessive-compulsive disorder](#), [eating disorders](#), and [clinical depression](#).

Therapists attempt to tackle the negative thinking that surrounds perfectionism, in particular the "all-or-nothing" thinking where the client believes that an achievement is either perfect or useless. They encourage clients to set realistic goals and to face their fear of failure.

This "all or nothing" thinking has been likened to a parable known as the "South Indian Monkey Trap." This parable is reputed to have been adapted by villagers in Southeast Asia. Upon trying to tackle their increasing population of monkey's, villagers had placed rice grains inside the hollows of coconuts which were tethered to a chain. The desired result was that the monkeys would then trap themselves, and the villagers would then dispose of the monkeys.

In essence, the monkey's would grab the grains of rice, and upon trying to remove their hand from the coconut hole, the monkey's would subsequently become trapped by their own fist. Since the hole was just big enough so that the monkey can put his hand in, and too small for his fist to come out after it has grabbed the rice, the monkey's ended up trapping themselves. Rather than letting the grains of rice go and escaping, they chose instead the rice to their own peril.

The moral of the story, as it pertains to perfectionists, is that like the monkey, the perfectionist must make a choice of importance. Either the perfectionist rigidly holds on to what he values, or his own desire for those values in essence become his ruin.

Perfectionists are then encouraged to rethink their own values and decide whether they are going to continue to be trapped by the values they esteem so highly or to free themselves of it.

### Causes

Like most personality traits, perfectionism tends to run in families and probably has a genetic component. Parents who practice an [authoritarian](#) style combined with [conditional love](#) may contribute to perfectionism in their children ([Castro & Rice 2003](#)).