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PITFALLS TO PERFECTION by Andrew May

THE RACE TO THE TOP: There's nothing wrong with pursuing excellence, but perfectionism can wreak problems.

OPINION: I see a lot of perfectionism in my job as an executive coach. And while there is nothing wrong at all with high standards and aiming to be your best, perfectionism does have a number of pitfalls.

Perfectionists frequently think what they do is never good enough, can carry higher levels of stress and anxiety, increased risk of illness, and decreased levels of contentedness. They're also at risk of chronic procrastination because they are constantly waiting to get more information or make a document even better - creating unnecessary stress and often missing deadlines and creating pressure for others around them.

Trying to scale the zenith of perfection has become the plague of our time, and psychologists have recently coined the phrase 'perfection infection'.

This new disease is permeating every aspect of our lives - work, home, relationships, parenting and education. We are seeing an increase in social perfectionism, fuelled by 'Hollywood hang-ups' where we live vicariously through magazines and movies, trying to be flawless like our so-called Hollywood heroes.

Expectations are higher, and we're now expected to be successful in every facet of our lives - the perfect job, the perfect body, the perfect house, the perfect marriage, the perfect kids...

A recent article in *Psychology Today* outlined how experts now believe perfectionists are made and not born, commonly at an early age. Perfectionism is increasing at a rapid rate, and one of the main reasons for this is overzealous parents putting pressure on children to achieve.

Remember the days when kids were allowed to be kids and we didn't fill up every minute of their days? A parent seeking status through the performance of their children is likely to jam-pack their child's schedule with activity after activity in the desire to create the perfect "super child" with French lessons on Monday, swimming on Tuesday, piano lessons before school on Wednesday morning, soccer on Thursday, ballet on Friday and Little Athletics on Saturday morning. Oh, and, of course, Mandarin on Sunday to ensure they are learning both a European and an Asian language.

10 SIGNS OF A PERFECTIONIST:

1. You noticed the error in the title of this list (meant to be you're) and it really annoyed you.
2. You can't stop thinking about a mistake you made.
3. You are intensely competitive and hate losing, even Monopoly or Scrabble.
4. You have to do things perfectly, or not at all.
5. You demand perfection from other people.
6. You won't ask for help, as this can be seen as a flaw or weakness.
7. You will persist at a task long after other people have quit.
8. You are a fault-finder and go out of your way to correct other people when they are wrong.
9. You consider people with cluttered desks or houses as lazy and undisciplined.

Differences between perfectionists and healthy achievers

Perfectionists believe that the highest standard of output, the absolute top level of performance, must be met at all times and that mistakes are not to be tolerated. Perfectionists tend to be full of self-doubt and fears of disapproval, ridicule and rejection. They see mistakes as a weakness.

Miriam Adderholdt, author of *Perfectionism: What's Bad About Being Too Good?*, says: "There's a difference between excellence and perfection.

"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," she said.

Healthy achievers, while still striving for excellence and success, understand that it's OK to make mistakes along the way and tend to engage more in the present, enjoying the process.

They set high standards that take a bit of a stretch, but are still within reach. They enjoy the process as well as the outcome, and bounce back from failure and disappointment quickly and with energy. Healthy achievers view mistakes as opportunities for growth and learning, and react positively to feedback.

Dialling down perfectionism

Overcoming perfectionism requires patience, courage and support. Primarily it involves accepting that as humans, we have imperfections and it is impossible to ever be truly perfect.

1. Make a list of the advantages and disadvantages of perfectionism

Grab a blank sheet of paper and make two columns. On the left side list the benefits of being a perfectionist.

On the right side, list all the costs of being perfect (to relationships, health, behaviour, mind set etc). Hopefully you will find the costs far outweigh the benefits.

2. Increase awareness of self-talk

Tune into your thinking and start to identify unhealthy, all-or-nothing thoughts. Learn to substitute your ANTs (Automatic Negative Thoughts) with more POTs (Positive Optimistic Thoughts). Ask questions like "is there an alternate way to think?", "are things really as bad as I'm thinking right now?", "does it really matter if I only get this document 80 per cent right for now and get some feedback from my manager?"

3. Be realistic

Try being a little easier on yourself and set more realistic goals. If you don't swim a PB in

the pool at lunchtime today or if you don't smash your PB cycling to work tomorrow morning, is it really going to impact your life in a major way? Learn to substitute perfectionism with healthy achievement.

4. Set strict time limits on projects

Move on to another activity when time is up. This technique reduces the procrastination that typically results from perfectionism. If you're doing a proposal, only allow yourself one hour for collating data or research, then one hour for writing the proposal.

5. Learn to deal with feedback/criticism

Perfectionists tend to take all feedback personally. Learn to "professionalise and not to personalise". Concentrate on being more objective, and try to learn and grow from your mistakes.

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