

Managing Perfectionism

What Is Perfectionism?

This is the first of two newsletters that address perfectionism. In this issue, we will explore what perfectionism is and why it is destructive. In the next one, we will take a look at some strategies for both controlling the need to be perfect and living a more relaxed, satisfying life.

Perfectionists aspire to be top achievers and do not allow themselves to make even a single mistake. They are always on the alert for imperfections and weaknesses in themselves and others. They tend to be rigid thinkers who are on the lookout for deviations from the rules or the norm.

Perfectionism is not the same as striving for excellence. People who pursue excellence in a healthy way take genuine pleasure in working to meet high standards. Perfectionists are motivated by self-doubt and fears of disapproval, ridicule, and rejection. The high producer *has drive*, while the perfectionist *is driven*.

Causes and Characteristics

Fear of failure and rejection. The perfectionist believes that she will be rejected or fail if she is not always perfect, so she becomes paralyzed and unable to produce or perform at all.

Fear of success. The perfectionist believes that if he is successful in what he undertakes, he will have to keep it up. This becomes a heavy burden—who wants to operate at such a high level all of the time?

Low self-esteem. A perfectionist's needs for love and approval tend to blind her to the needs and wishes of others. This makes it difficult or impossible to have healthy relationships with others.

Black-and-white thinking. Perfectionists see most experiences as either good or bad, perfect or imperfect. There is nothing in between. The perfectionist believes that the flawless product or superb performance must be produced every time. Perfectionists believe if it can't be done perfectly, it's not worth doing.

Extreme determination. Perfectionists are determined to overcome all obstacles to achieving success. This is also true of high achievers, but the perfectionist focuses only on the *result* of his efforts. He is unable to enjoy the *process* of producing the achievement. His relentless pursuit of the goal becomes his downfall because it often results in overwhelming anxiety, sabotaging his heroic efforts.

The Costs of Being a Perfectionist

Perfectionism always costs more than the benefits it might provide. It can result in being paralyzed with fear and becoming so rigid that a person is difficult to relate to. It can produce contradictory styles, from being highly productive to being completely nonproductive. Some examples of these costs include the following:

Low self-esteem. Just as low self-esteem is a cause of perfectionist behavior, it is also a result. Because a perfectionist never feels good enough about himself or his personal performance, he usually feels like a loser or a failure.

Gloominess. Since a perfectionist is convinced that it will be next to impossible to achieve most goals, she can easily develop a negative attitude.

Depression. Perfectionists often feel discouraged and depressed because they are driven to be perfect but know that it is impossible to reach the ideal.

Guilt. Perfectionists never think they handle things well. They often feel a sense of shame and guilt as a result.

Rigidity. Since perfectionists need to have everything meet an ideal, they tend to become inflexible and lack spontaneity.

Lack of motivation. A person who expects perfection may never try new behaviors or learn new skills because she thinks that she will never be able to do it well enough. At other times, she may begin the new behavior but give up early because she fears that she will never reach her goal.

Paralysis. Since most perfectionists have an intense fear of failure, they sometimes become immobilized and stagnant. Writers who suffer from writer's block are examples of the perfectionist's paralysis.

Obsessive behavior. When a person needs a certain order or structure in his life, he may become overly focused on details and rules.

Compulsive behavior. A perfectionist who feels like a failure or loser may medicate him- or herself with alcohol, drugs, food, shopping, sex, gambling, or other high-risk behaviors.

Eating disorders. Many studies have determined that perfectionism is a central issue for people who develop eating disorders.

The Perfectionist versus The High Achiever

People produce many of their best achievements when they are striving to do their best. High achievers, like perfectionists, want to be better people and achieve great things. Unlike perfectionists, high achievers accept that making mistakes and risking failure are part of the achievement process—and part of being human.

Emotionally Healthy High Producers

You can be a high achiever without being a perfectionist. People who accomplish plenty and stay emotionally healthy tend to exhibit the following behaviors:

- Set standards that are high but achievable.
- Enjoy the process, not just the outcome.
- Recover from disappointment quickly.
- Are not disabled by anxiety and fear of failure.
- View mistakes as opportunities for growth and learning.
- React positively to constructive feedback.

Once you are aware of the ways by which you expect yourself to be perfect, you can start to change your behavior. In my next newsletter, I'll offer some tips to help you get started. Until then, begin the change process by thinking about which causes apply to you and writing down examples of these perfectionist behaviors as you observe them.