

The Illusion of Perfectionism

“Perfectionism is not the same thing as striving to be our best.

Perfectionism is not about healthy achievement and growth; it’s a shield.”

– Brene Brown, American scholar, author, and public speaker

“I’ll probably regret this, but what are you doing?” asked my wife, with hands on her hips.

“What does it look like?” I replied, screwdriver in hand. “I’m fixing the dishwasher.”

I was sitting cross-legged on the floor, a variety of tools spread out around me.

“I thought the landlord fixed the dishwasher yesterday, or am I mistaken?”

“Well, he did,” I began, “but he didn’t do a very good job so I’m –”

“You’re fixing something that has already been fixed. That’s great.”

“Listen, if you’re going to do something, you should do it right.”

“You don’t want it right,” she snapped. “You want it perfect.”

“One and the same,” I replied. “Hon? Where are you going?”

I think most of us would agree that having high standards is an admirable quality. When we strive for excellence, we demonstrate a strong work ethic and a commitment to quality. The most successful people in the world (athletes in particular) strive to reach improbably high standards – often beyond what might be considered possible by the average person.

Striving for perfection – though often confused with excellence – is a very different thing. Perfectionism involves setting standards that are so high, they are unachievable or can only be met (though seldom sustained) with tremendous effort. Perfectionists tend to believe that anything less than perfection is failure, and even a minor imperfection is unacceptable.

Remember, there is a huge difference between someone who strives for excellence – someone who is aspirational – and someone who tries to avoid mistakes and condemnation by being obsessive or overly meticulous. One is driven by passion and purpose, the other by fear.

Perfectionists will try to do everything flawlessly and when they can’t – because it’s impossible – they implode and begin to beat themselves up and tear themselves down. There is no middle ground; they have succeeded utterly or failed completely. More than one study has concluded that people with low self-esteem are the worst culprits. While most people believe that

it's important to do your best and try to avoid making mistakes, the low self-esteemers become fixated on not making a mistake. And it's likely because, at some point in their life, they felt completely out of control or the consequence of making a mistake was dire.

As I have often said, what is expected tends to be realized. When our focus is on avoiding mistakes, the law of reverse effect comes into play. In other words, the more we consciously focus on not making a mistake, the more likely a mistake will occur. One of the biggest reasons is the tremendous amount of stress we create for ourselves when in a perfectionistic head space. The higher the stress, the less focused we become – despite our hyper-vigilance – and mistakes occur. Over time, this tendency can seriously erode self-esteem and self-efficacy.

As a recovering perfectionist, I still hate to make a mistake, but I'm working on it. Of course, I try to keep the number of mistakes I make to a minimum, but when one occurs, I like to ask myself if the mistake was the result of a lack of focus, knowledge/information or understanding. In this way, I'm better able to correct course and find the lesson or learning in the experience.

Remember that perfectionism affects our thoughts, our feelings and our behaviour. It also wastes a lot of time that could likely be better spent in more constructive, less critical endeavours.

So how do we stop our perfectionist tendencies? As odd as it sounds, we stop by starting – starting to recognize our perfectionism. Remember, there's nothing wrong with having high standards. To assess if your standards are realistic, ask yourself a couple of insightful questions. First, do you have difficulty meeting your own standards? And second, do you experience anger, frustration, depression or even (to the extreme) self-loathing when you make a mistake?

Some examples of perfectionist personality disorder, or PPD as it has become known, is a tendency toward thinking in black-and-white terms, catastrophizing, being fastidious, constantly trying to improve things by re-doing them, chronic procrastination and negative self-talk.

One of the best ways to overcome perfectionist tendencies is to replace fearful or self-critical thoughts with more grounded, realistic statements. Phrases such as, "No one is perfect," and "I can only do my best," will help but will take practice. "Making a mistake does not mean that I'm a failure," and "If I've done my best, I have no need for guilt," are also good.

And because many perfectionists also suffer from people-pleasing tendencies and an unhealthy need for validation, it becomes vital that the quest for healthy self-esteem begin in earnest. On my journey, *The Work* by Byron Katie has proved invaluable. Whenever I find myself buying into an unhealthy, self-esteem-damaging belief about my need for perfection, I will ask myself, “Is it true?” “Can I absolutely know it’s true?” “Who would I be without this thought?” and “How would my life be different and what might I experience without this thought?”

Remember that fear lives in the shadow of perfectionism. When we confront our fears and allow ourselves to be flawed and fully human, we become happier and more productive.

On the topic of perfectionism, American author, poet and playwright Julia Cameron wrote, “Perfectionism is not a quest for the best. It is a pursuit of the worst in ourselves, the part that tells us that nothing we do will ever be good enough – that we should try again.”

When we hold an idea of perfection in our mind, we actually limit our ability to succeed. Striving to achieve unrealistic, fear-based expectations sets us up for failure. And that inevitable failure can lead us into feelings of guilt and inadequacy, further eroding our self-esteem. Aspire to excellence, not perfection, knowing that excellence comes from imperfection embraced.