



## Perfectionism

By Cindy Trevitt, Registered Professional Counsellor

“Progress, not perfection: How much of our lives is frittered away – spoiled, spent, or sullied – by our neurotic insistence on perfection? Perhaps our parents expected us to live up to a standard they knew themselves could never achieve. Certainly they wanted more for us. But more of what? Misery? Haven’t you had enough? Today, accept that perfection is unattainable. In real life we should strive to be *our* best – not the world’s..... Perfect women do not manifest on this plane of existence. Celebrities who sell perfection are more to be pitied than censured, envied, or emulated. Why? Because, despite their fame and bank accounts, they rarely know a moment’s peace; the whole world is watching, waiting for a misstep.

Thank you, no. I’ll pass. Won’t you? Perfection leaves so little room for improvement. So little space for acceptance – or joy. On the path we have chosen, progress is the simple pleasure to be savored. Daily.”  
From *Simple Abundance, A daybook of comfort and joy* by Sarah Ban Breathnach, May 15<sup>th</sup> entry

“I have never learned a thing from getting things right.”

– Jan Arden

Perfection is a word we may use to describe that which we greatly appreciate or love. It can be a form of praise or recognition. Many of us were raised to believe there will be a special reward for being *the best* or that our value lies in how we perform or on how others think of us but perfectionism as a personal value can be crippling. Perfectionism is a way of saying, “never good enough.” Those of us who struggle with trying to get things perfectly are usually painfully driven by a sense of inadequacy which applies to nearly everything about us:

“Perfectionism assumes that one choice is better than another”

– Gary Zukav and Linda Francis,  
*“The Heart of the Soul”*

our looks; our behaviour; our personality; our environment; our work; our friends; our family.... The list goes on and on. Our worth is equated with our successes or failures and there is no room for anything in between. Success or failure. It is an incessant internal critical voice slicing away at our self-esteem like little, stinging razor cuts over and over.

“Perfectionism is self-abuse of the highest order.”

– Anne Wilson Schaef

Perfectionism often arises in families where only school grades or status are recognized and valued - not the child. So that ‘A+’ is prized but the child is of no consequence - or so that’s the message they infer. The belief instilled then becomes one where if anything they do, say or look like is less than A+ then it’s an abysmal failure - they, *as a person*, are a letdown. There are no grays. No points for effort. And zero consideration for the person’s wants and needs. In dysfunctional settings, there is a prevalent sense of not being important, valued, special, loved, or approved of which also cultivates an inadequate, insufficient, disappointed, and broken sense of self. Such a sense of worth compels us to strive to overcome or compensate for our shortcomings over and over - never realizing that the insufficiencies are coming from within and can never be compensated for by how we perform.

Of course, in life, nobody (or at least nobody I’ve encountered) goes around giving us gold stars for our efforts: “Wow, you look fabulous today! Here’s a gold star for you!” or, “You did an outstanding job at work today. Gold star!” or, “Your conversation at the party was just scintillating! Two gold stars!” And so, without our gold stars, our honour rolls, our A+s, we spiral downwards in a daily plummet of defeat and disappointment. Somewhere rooted in our subconscious is the belief that unless somebody lauds our efforts (usually our own perfectionist opinion is moot by the way) we are poor

under-achievers with something innately wrong with us. Shame-filled because of our perceived inadequacies which lead us to a miserable and painful existence - often a life we conceal rather than admitting we are human and probably be more well-liked.

Perfectionism is why “bad hair days” exist. God forbid that some protein-based follicles jutting out of our head should be in any order other than strictly demanded! As if somehow displaced hair will radically reshape our face, our body, or our personality? To us, that flat top and sticky-out bits have morphed us from a reasonably attractive person to the hunchback of Notre Dame! Does this seem reasonable? A one-millimeter square zit has epic disastrous effects. No matter that proportionately it’s about the size of a drop in the vastness of the ocean. To us it has become beacon blinding everybody in our path! We’ll put so much pressure on ourselves that we procrastinate or freeze, ultimately ensuring failure. As if we are the only people who ever made a single mistake we end up with sleepless, sweaty nights fraught with terror of our imminent dismissal from work for some minor infraction. It is a fallacy to think that somehow others come by things easily and only we struggle.

“Wabi sabi”

– Japanese term for, “imperfect, impermanent, and incomplete.”

We’re shocked when people don’t agree and respond with, “As a matter of fact, yes, your freakishly large head *is* blocking the sun; you *are* more hideous than a forest troll; you *do* smell like sulfuric gas and you *are* dumber than a bag of hair!” Even if someone does ever give us credit, we are so deeply enmeshed in our dark belief that we immediately discredit it with, “They’re just saying that to be nice.” or, “They don’t know the whole story”, or, “What do they want from me - they’re obviously trying to get something from me.” Even true successes are

minimized or dismissed by the perfectionist thereby ruling out the possibility of achievement and entirely enabling them to keep their “not good enough” status intact.

“The maxim “Nothing but perfection” may be spelled “Paralysis””

– Winston Churchill

Words like *okay*, *adequate*, *pretty good*, or *satisfactory* can be daggers to the heart for the avid perfectionist but they are words we should try to make friends with. We need to leave space in our lives to accept things as they are. To appreciate ourselves as we are right now. So you have a big head! Studies show that famous people often have big heads - people are drawn to big heads. So you have a zit or a farm of zits - give them names and make up stories about them, it's more interesting. You made a mistake at work? Go out and celebrate afterwards with a nice cup of mocha and a peanut butter square! Dare to be different! Dare to be happy! You can beat yourself up or you can choose to be happy - the same events will occur, you'll just feel better about it if you choose a happier, more forgiving route.

Be willing to question your perfectionism. Consider the possibility that it is very, very wrong! Imagine you used this same set of standards to speak to a small child - would you still do it? Would you still say, “You're fat. You're dumb. You didn't do that right - you can't do anything right! Why do you even bother? You should put that off because you're only going to fail! Nobody wants to hear what you have to say - you're boring! You're burdening me with your miserable existence!”

“When you judge one circumstance to be superior to another, you confuse your preferences with perfection.”

– Gary Zukav and Linda Francis,  
“The Heart of the Soul”

Introduce a compassionate and lenient voice into your life - about yourself. Consider phrases such as, “Oh well, these things happen” when you make a mistake or, “It's not the end of the world”, or “It's pretty small, no one will even notice and if they do, what do I care?” Give yourself permission to not have all the answers (how could you possibly? No one does!) Allow yourself the liberty of being slightly askew or messy or insufficient. Look for opportunities to do *adequately* and then compliment yourself with vim and verve afterwards, “That was a

fairly adequate job you did there! I'm so proud!” “You made a mistake at work today and didn't beat yourself up! Congratulations! That's fantastic!”

Lower your standards. Many perfectionists have standards that amount to 200% of what someone else might do - you can afford to bring it down to 199% or even 95%. When we lower our standards we're more relaxed and productive. If nothing you do is good enough then there is no joy and no motivation but if you feel excitement and satisfaction in what you do, you feel rewarded and motivated to do more. Rewards must come from within - only your thoughts make you feel good or bad.

“Perfectionism is an attempt to inhabit an imaginary world in order to avoid experiencing the world in which you live.”

– Gary Zukav and Linda Francis,  
“The Heart of the Soul”

When the perfectionism is used to escape painful emotions, then the cure is in allowing yourself to experience the pain. Stop the perfectionist pursuit you're presently engaged in and feel how hard that is. Feel how painful. When you are willing to face yourself, you frustrate and suffocate the perfectionism.

Learn self-esteem, pride and pleasure in your life instead. What do you need? Pursue that. Perfectionists may avoid certain experiences for fear of failing. They avoid the possible accompanying disapproval. Perfectionism is paralytic. Perfectionism is a self-defeating thought pattern.

If you had a critical or abusive upbringing or one where only excellence was overvalued, there may be a subconscious part of you treading water for these many years in an attempt to get that approval (and love) from the *source* that you so desperately crave. Try to dig deep within yourself and see if this is true because it will haunt you and nip away at your heels until you realize this and come to terms with it. Ask yourself how this has been represented in your life, how you manifest this belief over and over and how it has held you back. Coming to terms with it might include accepting the painful fact that you did not get this approval and it isn't forthcoming. But you can choose to give it to yourself - allow yourself the possibility that you're a worthy human being who doesn't need to have tortuous standards and can still be a pretty worthwhile person deserving of love!

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