

PERFECTIONISM

“You can’t have everything. Where would you put it?” – Steven Wright

Through advertising on TV, radio, billboards and other popular media, we are constantly told that we can achieve perfection in everything: the perfect gift, the dream vacation, an ideal hair day. The catch is we must buy their products in order to achieve this state of perfection. If only we had the perfect job that paid the perfect salary so we could afford perfection!

The fact is, that regardless of those people who seem to succeed at everything they try, nobody is perfect. Trying to achieve this non-existent state can be not only extremely frustrating and depressing, but also incredibly dangerous to our health and our well-being. We have all heard stories about women who starve themselves in an attempt to look like supermodels or men who take steroids in an effort to meet their goal of making it to the finals in a sporting event. While it is a great idea to set goals, “realistic” must be a key phrase to keep in mind. And establishing healthy, life-enhancing steps to accomplish these goals will prove much more successful than the destructive patterns referenced earlier.

You might experience bouts with perfectionism in other aspects of your life. Do you often redo your homework problems because your eraser smeared on one of the original pages? Do you beat yourself up when you receive a “B” or “C” on a term paper? How often have you led a meeting where no one felt like participating and you blamed yourself for days afterward?

And when it comes down to it, what good does it do to get down on yourself about these situations?

Rather than defeating yourself with constant criticism and unhealthy decisions, take a step back and evaluate your situation. What could you do that might improve your situation?

- Acknowledge and move on. One of the greatest statements ever made! When you receive that term paper with a lower grade than you expected, don’t cut yourself down and decide you are not worth anything. At the same time, you do not have to ignore the fact that you received a lower grade than you anticipated. Put the paper in your bag and in a couple of hours, after you have relaxed with a good dinner and an episode of Seinfeld, take out the paper and look at it objectively. What were the strong points of your paper? Areas to be improved? Write down specific areas to refine and review this list when composing your next paper. Do you feel your grade was unjustified? Write down your reasons in a clear, thoughtful manner and after a day has passed, make an appointment with your professor to discuss your thoughts. Regardless of whether your grade is changed as a result of this meeting, you will have a better understanding of the professor’s grading procedures, and she will be aware of your sincere interest to perform well in the class.
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Don't compare yourself. One of the cruelest things we do to ourselves is compare ourselves to others. "Why can't I get good grades like my sister?" "Why am I less successful than John?" "Why can't I look like Raquel?" Instead of these questions, we should be asking ourselves, "What are my greatest strengths? What goals do I have for my life? What steps can I take to achieve them?" Rather than comparing yourself to others, set realistic goals for yourself and establish ways to reach them.

- Have patience. Don't expect to knit a perfect scarf the first time you pick up needles – or even the second or third. Patience is a virtue and developing a talent often takes time (and a lot of it!). Again, do not let it bother you if your best friend wins first place in a talent show the first time she sings in public. Some people have natural talents that don't take a long time to improve and others have to work at them.
- Give yourself a break. As was once stated, "You may not know all the answers, but you probably won't be asked all the questions, either." Sometimes doing your best is good enough – and probably a lot better than you think.
- Think big picture. Don't be completely dismayed by setbacks. In the grand scheme of life, what will a B- on one assignment mean to you in 25 years? What will it matter that you burned an entire batch of chocolate chip cookies? Though they may seem major at the time they occur, everything can be put into perspective.
- Be yourself – not who others want. Sometimes it is other people – parents, professors, friends – who are putting unrealistic pressure on us. Although it may be difficult at first, make it clear to them that you will do your personal best and they need to accept that. You need to do what is healthy, constructive and will give you pleasure. Remember the line from country legend Ricky Nelson: "Well it's all right now, I've learned my lesson well, you see you can't please everyone so you've got to please yourself!"

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