

EmployeeCare News



Larry Welin

Perfectionism: When Good isn't Good Enough

By Larry Welin, Counselor

Know anyone who ...

- Seems highly competitive and constantly compares himself to others?
- Finds it hard to relax and enjoy the present moment?
- Hesitates to take risks for fear of failing?
- Experiences frequent stress and anxiety?
- Seems prone to discouragement?
- Procrastinates often because of a need to do things perfectly?
- Struggles with relationships because he expects too much of himself or others?
- Appears to be a compulsive planner?

Maybe you've seen these tendencies in someone at home, at work, or in yourself. While no one of these is a sure sign of perfectionism, the more of those qualities you notice the greater likelihood perfectionism is present. Perfectionism impacts people of all ages, in all walks of life and surprises many parents when they experience it in their children.

In Freeing Our Families from Perfectionism, Thomas S. Greenspon, PhD, a psychologist, defines a perfectionist as "someone who sets unrealistic goals and then feels extremely frustrated when the goals can't be met."

Perfectionism is no fun. As a matter of fact it is painful. The person feels trapped, never measures up, never completes something to satisfaction, and is always under the scrutiny of self-criticism. The excitement and enthusiasm of trying something new, developing a new skill or creatively facing a challenge are met with the feeling of defeat.

In contrast many people enjoy doing things well. They feel good about successfully completing a project, doing the best at their work, having a special interest or feeling passionate about an endeavor. Detours don't stop them. Their motto may be "If at first you don't succeed, try, try again." But for the perfectionist nothing less than



an “A” will do and even 98% is viewed as a disappointment.

Perfectionism ranges from mild to extreme. The stronger it is the more it interferes with peace of mind. Perfectionism contaminates one’s behavior, thoughts and feelings.

In actions, a perfectionist may come across as a worrywart. A typical school assignment becomes another mountain with a lot of witnessed distress. Some students will appear to be disorganized or lazy because they cannot get started and do not get their work turned in on time. Parents get frustrated, angry and desperate.

The internal message is “I’m such a dummy” or “How could I be so stupid?” They may have trouble getting started because of their fears and anxiety. They may be extremely sensitive to other’s comments. When a youngster comes home excited about a picture she drew and the comments from dad are “You forgot to include ...” the effect can be depressing and add to negative self-talk.

A perfectionist’s belief may be that the only way I matter to someone else or can be accepted or loved is to be perfect. The “all or nothing” thinking is predominant. Sometimes children will hold themselves accountable for what actually belongs to their parents. For instance they might believe if I’m perfect, Mom and Dad won’t argue so much, won’t fight or won’t divorce. Try as they might and despite their best efforts they conclude “I’m not good enough” or “I’m a failure.”

Perfectionists are often afraid, anxious and angry. They feel powerless and paralyzed. They can also have a profound sense of shame. They see themselves as inferior, judged and found lacking. They are afraid they will never be good enough and repeatedly convince themselves of just that. Messages such as “There’s nothing to be afraid of” or “Don’t be such a baby” can put a perfectionist into an impossible bind because they worry about not being able to do something well enough and they worry about worrying too much.

There is an important difference between encouragement and praise. Praise is often given when a major accomplishment is completed. The subtle message can be that anything less than first place is not good enough. If the top honor is not received, how are the effort, learning and energy that went into it acknowledged? However encouragement focuses on what the child or adult enjoyed and takes with them from that experience. Encouragement lets the person know they are recognized, validated and affirmed. It builds up a base of self-acceptance. It can come in a smile or a special note. Encouragement reflects the progress and effort made rather than just the output.

None of us is perfect. As was said so well long ago, we don’t always do what is desirable and at times we do what is self defeating. Mistakes are learning opportunities and need to be just that in our families, with our friends, co-workers and for ourselves. We each need to be verbally and emotionally accepted for who we are. If there has been frequent criticism, rare affirmation, and being told too frequently to do better, that no longer needs to be our anchor. Yesterdays do not need to dictate the shape of today and the hopes for tomorrow for ourselves or those closest to us.

The differences between excellence and perfectionism Dr. Greenspon notes can be helpful.

- Excellence is risk. Perfectionism is fear.
- Excellence is effort. Perfectionism is anger and frustration.
- Excellence is openness to being wrong. Perfectionism is having to be right.
- Excellence is spontaneity. Perfectionism is control.
- Excellence is flow. Perfectionism is pressure.
- Excellence is confidence. Perfectionism is doubt.
- Excellence is journey. Perfectionism is destination.
- Excellence is acceptance. Perfectionism is judgment.
- Excellence is encouraging. Perfectionism is criticizing

– Adapted from various anonymous sources.



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Breaking Up: Suggested Coping Strategies

By Nicole Ehret, Counseling Intern

Coping with the ending of a relationship can be a difficult task at any age. Whether the relationship lasts 10 months or 10 years, the heart break we experience when it's over is something not easily forgotten. Most of us, at sometime or another have experienced the pain of lost love. Sometimes as the heartbroken; sometimes the heartbreaker, and sometimes it can be more complicated. No matter how a relationship ends, there are strategies we can implement, which help us ease the pain and move forward.

Seek Support

Researchers at UCLA found that talking through the feelings of heartache reduced activity in the area of the brain responsible for pain sensation. Talking through pain can also help a person gain clarity about the array of thoughts and feelings surrounding a breakup. Try reaching out to a trusted friend, family member, or spiritual advisor to talk about your experience.

Take Care of Your Health

While working through the pain of a breakup, many people will allow themselves to engage in unhealthy behaviors they may not otherwise choose to do. These can include over or under indulgence in food, excessive alcohol consumption, or spending time being sedentary and withdrawn.

Although heartache may seem primarily emotional; grieving the loss of a relationship affects every facet of our mind, body, and spirit. In order to care for ourselves during this fragile time, it is important to make healthy choices, so our body has all the resources it needs to help us to grieve and move forward.

Several studies have found exercise can have a positive effect on the heartbroken by helping boost mood and improve self-image. This can be a great time to renew that gym membership, or begin a jogging or biking routine. Relaxation is also important when nursing a broken heart. Relaxation practices such as meditation or journaling (writing down one's experiences) can have a significant effect on mood and can also help improve sleep. Consider which activities help you to relax.

Write an Imaginary Letter to Your Ex

Writing an imaginary letter to your ex-partner can be an excellent way to process the complex thoughts and emotions we experience after a breakup. This task can provide a sense of closure, allowing us to express the things we think and feel about our relationship with our ex-partner that we might not feel comfortable actually telling in person. People who write imaginary letters to their ex-partners experience more relief from the pain of a breakup, than the people who do not.

Avoid Negative Thinking

The ending of a relationship can sometimes cause us to fall into the trap of self-blame. We may feel angry at ourselves for not having known our partner wouldn't be Mr. or Ms. Right. You may say to yourself; "How could I have missed the signs?" Or "I must be stupid to have picked someone who would hurt me this way!" It is easy to call our own judgment into question when a relationship doesn't work. However, it is important to remember that thoughts such as these only carry us deeper into heartbreak. When you find yourself falling into the self-blame trap, try redirecting your thoughts. Remember that no one is capable of predicting or causing another person's behavior. Instead of self-blame, consider what you will do differently the next time around, or what you have learned about

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yourself from this relationship. The answers to these questions can be powerful tools that help you to move forward.

Give Yourself Time and Space

Breakups can leave us feeling rejected and vulnerable. This can cause us to want to begin a relationship with the next available person who shows us any interest. Often our heartache can cloud our judgment, and in an effort to feel loved again, we choose partners who may not be best suited to us. Be patient with yourself. Allow yourself time to heal before beginning a new relationship.

Also consider that often people attempt to build a friendship with an ex-partner immediately following the end of the relationship. Although it is rare that this actually happens, a friendship with an ex-partner is something that should be pursued only after a person has fully recovered from the loss of the relationship. It's easy to send mixed messages in an effort to build a friendship with an ex-partner. Sometimes an ex-partner will agree to a friendship, but secretly be hoping for a reconciliation of the romance you once shared. Be honest with yourself about your intentions and consider what your ex-partner may be feeling. Remember to ensure that both you and your ex-partner have fully recovered from the breakup before you try to build a friendship.

It can be tempting to write off everything about a relationship once it has ended. However, in doing this, we "throw the baby out with the bath water." Every relationship ending indicates there was something redeeming about the experience that kept us there in the first place. How special you may have once felt with that person, or something you have learned about yourself having been in the relationship. Those are precious experiences, which are no less valuable because the relationship no longer exists. Remember, each person's experience during a breakup is unique. If you feel the loss of a relationship has continued to be challenging for you on your

own, the counselors at EmployeeCare are here for assistance. Please contact EmployeeCare to schedule a confidential appointment.

Sources:

Relationships Drs. Les & Leslie Parrott

Finding True Love Diana Kirschner PhD

EmployeeCare

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