

PERFECTLY UNREASONABLE:

Expecting perfection is unreasonable. Here's why,

by Melanie Bowden

Jenna Glatzer knew at a young age that she was a perfectionist. In the fourth grade she hid on her school bus all the way to the bus yard to avoid showing her parents her report card. For the first time she had received something other than a 100--a humiliating, to her, 98 in Science.

Perfectionism can show up early in life, as in Glatzer's case, or manifest itself in adulthood, and it isn't always a bad thing. Perfectionists produce incredible work, are usually very organized and detail oriented, and create wonderful experiences for others. If perfectionism goes too far, however, stress, depression, relationship problems, and eating disorders can occur. The fear of not making the "right" choice can also leave perfectionists with regrets about not living the life they dreamed of.

Monica Ramirez Basco, Ph.D., clinical associate professor of psychology at the University of Texas-Southwestern and the author of, *Never Good Enough: Freeing Yourself from the Chains of Perfectionism*, says there are two kinds of perfectionists--inwardly focused and outwardly focused--and each comes with its own implications.

Inwardly focused perfectionists struggle with the idea that their actions aren't ever good enough. "The self esteem of inwardly focused perfectionists can take a big hit," says Basco. "They are prone to depression and anxiety." Outwardly focused perfectionists, on the other hand, are often frustrated by the way others do their jobs and can be highly critical. For that reason, "their perfectionism can have a negative impact on relationships. They tend to micromanage everything and then end up frustrated along with the people who work and live with them. There is a lot of wear and tear emotionally for both types."

Glatzer, a writer, is a combination of both types. "I think of everything I send out as a representation of myself, so I'm super careful to always meet my deadlines, double-check my facts, proofread endlessly, etcetera," she says. "I expect a lot of others, but even more from myself. I'm intolerant of excuses."

WHEN IT GOES TOO FAR

From years of working with clients, Basco has learned the warning signs of over-the-top perfectionism. "Consistently setting unachievable goals, always feeling let down by either yourself or others, anxiety about being seen when you're not put

together, and finding mistakes intolerable are all signs," she says. "Making mistakes is really big for perfectionists. One mistake can ruin their whole day."

Other warning signs to look for are never taking risks, being overly critical of others, obsessing over making choices, and having an unreasonable fear of a bad outcome if you don't control how things are done. Procrastination is another indication of perfectionism--something stay-at-home mom Darcy Spence knows all too well. The idea of wanting to do something perfectly sometimes immobilizes her. "This leads me to either not do the task at all," she says, "or I do it poorly due to lack of time [after having procrastinated] and then feel bad about myself."

Often your body will let you know your perfectionism is off the charts. Headaches, tightness in the neck, shoulders, or back, panic attacks, sleep problems, and irritability can all be signs that it's time to evaluate where you need to go easier on yourself or the people in your life.

LOOSENING PERFECTIONISM'S GRIP

The first step, Basco says, is to determine where in your life perfectionism is doing damage--work, home, social life, or elsewhere--then set a goal to make changes in the targeted area.

Test out your guesses about what will happen if you don't do things perfectly. Make a few mistakes intentionally and publicly just to see what will happen. The next time you throw a dinner party, try burning a dish or leaving an ingredient out of the salad. Once you see that it's not the end of the world, you're more likely to cut yourself some slack.

Let someone else do things the way they want to, instead of your way. If you let your assistant send out a memo without proofreading it first, does it lead to disaster? Basco says a perfectionist's fears are often irrational. "You need to ask yourself, 'What's more important--getting help, or doing it all my way, along with the stress that includes?'"

And if you're one of those who feel paralyzed by the fear of making the wrong decision, try bringing some discipline to the process. When trying to decide whether or not to change jobs, for example, Basco suggests listing the major pros and cons of each job. Next figure out if there's a way to maximize the pros and minimize the cons. Finally, list the worst things that could happen as a result of taking the job and staying with your current job and say your fears out loud. Verbalizing the worst case scenarios can help lower your anxiety and bring you closer to a decision.

Yoga, escaping into a good book, and seeking the input of nonperfectionists can also help you gain balance.

DON'T OVERSIMPLIFY

Basco challenges her perfectionist clients not to oversimplify things. Rather than two extremes--perfection or failure--look for shades of gray. In her book, Basco profiles a woman who puts tremendous pressure on herself to keep every item of clothing in the house laundered and pressed. Basco asks her to think about under what circumstances she might be 25%, 50%, and 75% satisfied with the laundry.

"You want to catch yourself when you think that a situation is either perfect or not, and question that belief," she says. "Maybe 50% or 75% is good enough and you can live with that. Think about the time and energy it takes to be 100%. Is it worth it? Where do you really function best?"

WITH IMPERFECTION COMES FREEDOM

Alexandra Stoddard offers a more Zen-like approach in her book, *The Art of the Possible: The Path from Perfectionism to Balance and Freedom*. She suggests looking for "perfect moments" to savor in our day rather than chasing a perfect life. "Those perfect moments lift us up and delight us," she says. "But if the focus is perpetual perfection, there is no peace."

Glatzer, who considers herself a recovering perfectionist, adds, "I had to learn to say 'so what?' sometimes. So what if my hair wasn't perfect? So what if I got somewhere late or had to leave a little early? I had to give myself permission to be imperfect. That freed me up to be more of a real human being."

Melanie Bowden is trying to savor that she's an imperfect mother. She's also considering throwing a bad dinner party and inviting all the perfectionists she knows.

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