

Resource 14: Thoughts on perfectionism

The extract below is from the counseling centre of the University of Illinois (<http://www.couns.uiuc.edu/Brochures/perfecti.htm>)

Causes of perfectionism

If you are a perfectionist, it is likely that you learned early in life that other people valued you because of how much you accomplished or achieved. As a result you may have learned to value yourself only on the basis of other people's approval. Thus your self-esteem may have come to be based primarily on external standards. This can leave you vulnerable and excessively sensitive to the opinions and criticism of others. In attempting to protect yourself from such criticism, you may decide that being perfect is your only defense.

A number of the following negative feelings, thoughts, and beliefs may be associated with perfectionism:

- Fear of failure. Perfectionists often equate failure to achieve their goals with a lack of personal worth or value.
- Fear of making mistakes. Perfectionists often equate mistakes with failure. In orienting their lives around avoiding mistakes, perfectionists miss opportunities to learn and grow.
- Fear of disapproval. If they let others see their flaws, perfectionists often fear that they will no longer be accepted. Trying to be perfect is a way of trying to protect themselves from criticism, rejection, and disapproval.
- All-or-none thinking. Perfectionists frequently believe that they are worthless if their accomplishments are not perfect. Perfectionists have difficulty seeing situations in perspective. For example, a straight A student who receives a B might believe, 'I am a total failure.'
- Overemphasis on 'shoulds.' Perfectionists' lives are often structured by an endless list of 'shoulds' that serve as rigid rules for how their lives must be led. With such an overemphasis on 'shoulds', perfectionists rarely take into account their own wants and desires.
- Believing that others are easily successful. Perfectionists tend to perceive others as achieving success with a minimum of effort, few errors, no emotional stress, and maximum self-confidence. At the same time, perfectionists view their own efforts as unending and forever inadequate.

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The extract below is from Successful Time Management by Patrick Forsyth

Most people in a job they care about want to do things well... Some people take this further and are perfectionists. Now there is a place for this, and I would certainly not advocate that anyone adopts a shoddy approach to their work. There is, however, a dichotomy here, one well summed up in a quotation from Robert Heimplur, who said (perhaps despairingly): 'They didn't want it good, they wanted it on Wednesday.' The fact is it takes time to achieve perfection, and in any case, perfection may not always be strictly necessary. Things may need to be undertaken carefully, thoroughly, comprehensively, but we may not need to spend time getting every tiny detail perfect. This comes hard to those who are naturally perfectionists, and it is a trait that many have, at least about some things, but it is necessary to strike a balance. The key balance to be struck is between quality - the standard to which things are done - and cost and time. It is one that needs to be consciously struck.

There is always a trade off-here, and it is not always the easiest thing to achieve. Often a real compromise has to be made. Cost is often key in this. It would be easy to achieve the quality of output you want in many things but only if cost were no object. And in most jobs, budget considerations rank high. It is useful to get into the way of thinking about things in these terms, and doing so realistically so that you consider what is necessary as well as (or instead of?) what is simply desirable or ideal. In doing this there is one key factor that needs to be built in: a significant (and sometimes the largest) cost is your time. (p28)