

Perfectionism — a vice or a virtue?

Like many women born into a Western industrialised mind-set, I became a perfectionist because I desperately wanted to be something other than what I was. The niggling feeling that I wasn't good enough was heightened at the University of Edinburgh — I have visceral memories of, *sweat accumulating in my palms as my eyes dart around a room full of people I'm supposed to consider my peers. Anticipating each word: I must sound smart; ideas forming, only to be bulldozed down by more anxious thought: what if they see through my fancy façade? I put on my listening-intently-to-others-expression, but each well-executed point only amplifies my own sense of inferiority. I know what I'm doing is silly though — I can do this — I just need a few more moments to make sure I have this down pat. But by the time I've mustered the courage to share my borrowed opinions, people are making a beeline for the door — class is over and I have ten minutes before the next tutorial begins.*

Of course, there were periods where I allowed myself to live more freely, but throughout my early 20s I grew somewhat accustomed to these dizzying spells of anxiety, which occasionally took the shape of panic attacks. And as I blindly bolted Scotland for post-graduation travels, I carried with me a deep fear of what might happen were I to stop performing — were I to stop trying to be *perfect*.

I'll base these thoughts on Carol Dweck's (2014) definition of perfectionism as, *an incapacitating fear of failure*. This also links to the dimensions of perfectionism in clinical and non-clinical groups as initially set out by Frost et al. (1990) — which are predominately characterised by *an obsessive concern over making mistakes*. While I believe that perfectionism of this nature poses an equal threat to men, I'll focus on the pressures women face to reach what I perceive to be illusory ideals. Perfectionism, as described in this light, should not however be confused with having high standards — I'll refer to this state as *striving for excellence*.

Laurie Penny (2014) argues that our most important battles are fought on the level of the imagination. I'll add to this by suggesting that every human's existence is, in some shape or form, defined by illusory stories that help us digest and clarify what might otherwise be perceived as a disordered and meaningless existence.

Fortunately, a philosophical enquiry into the nature of reality lies outside the scope of this conversation, but I think it's important to acknowledge that it's *because* we live through our imaginations that I consider us all to be on the spectrum of perfectionism. However, it's when these narratives diverge so far from an obtainable reality, that perfectionism becomes extremely damaging. From my own experience, this is predominately because a perfectionist's overly-generalised ideas of how the world *should* be, fuel an ongoing sense of dissatisfaction with themselves and their external environment (Dweck 2014). For the perfectionist, ideas of what's expected are usually derived from their own conditioning and understanding of 'good' and 'worthy' — thereby establishing fixed-models such as *I must be a well-rounded career woman; a great mother; sexy; smart; kind; soft — but not a push-over, unique — but not weird; organised; wise, etc.*

That which differentiates the perfectionist from someone in the habit of *striving for excellence*, is the former's all-or-nothing approach to life (Dweck 2014). I can give you many examples of my own catastrophizing of situations — where a negative encounter with a friend shook the foundations of an entire relationship; where a poorly graded essay gave me reason to believe I really *was* stupid. Different themes, same principle: *if I fail in this area, it's as bad as being a complete failure as a person*. Given that the feeling of failure isn't a pleasant one, what ensued was an intense fear of making a mistake. Naturally, if the brain correlates mistakes with humiliation and loss of respect, it's not surprising that one would invest more effort in being perfect as a preventative measure. But despite tiresome efforts, my hidden reality often oozed through the cracks of my defensive veneer: dinner-parties were often painful experiences wherein which I'd interpret my minced words and half-baked ideas as yet more evidence that I wasn't good enough. The hangover from the wine and cigarettes was miniscule in comparison to the oppressive anxiety of feeling like an imposter.

Psychologist Albert Bandura (1994) has worked extensively with the concept of self-esteem and self-efficacy. An interesting point that permeates throughout his work is that, the perception we hold of ourselves is strongly linked to how we perceive ourselves coping with life situations. *People's beliefs in their coping capabilities affects how much stress and depression they experience in threatening or difficult situations, as well as their level of motivation. Perceived self-efficacy to exercise control over stressors plays a central role in anxiety arousal* (Bandura: 1994: 3). It follows that, a perfectionist's cowardly and over-careful approach to life has a direct and negative effect on their self-esteem; someone who constantly sees their own inclination to run away from difficult situations, is more likely to think poorly of themselves. Put differently: the perfectionist becomes the very thing that they most fear — a failure — due to their own paralysis to take action, and a tendency to perceive challenges as threats to be avoided, as opposed to challenges to overcome.

Considering myself a realist, it struck me time and time again was that I actually was failing: I often failed to be cool and collected; I often failed to appear effortlessly smart; I often failed to feel attractive; I often failed to balance my finances. But I also failed to see that many of these expectations were questionable social constructs that had morphed into personal commitments. These blinding ideals not only peddled an ongoing sense of disappointment with the imperfect person I knew myself to be, but they also prevented me from seeing things that *were* going well at the time. As discussed by Bandura (1994: 5): individuals who doubt their capabilities and ruminate on what might go wrong, not only remove their focus and energy from what's important to get the job done, but are also more likely to give up on tasks and ideas. Bandura logically suggests that, an individual in the habit of giving up and accumulating negative impressions of themselves, are more prone to slip into depression and experience higher levels of stress. (Bandura 1994: 1-2).

Despite my many TED-talk-binges and the refuge I found in Buddhism, the concept that I might already be good enough was generally something I rationally

appreciated, but deep down took for a clichéd consolation for people who didn't 'have what it takes'. I preferred the harder route — upholding an ideal that required more exertion and creativity than getting my coursework in on time. And when fending off disillusionment and maintaining a sense of perfection in front of others grew too exhausting, I'd spend chunks of time alone in my thoughts, where I had more control. See, the problem with holding onto an illusory self is that we tend to avoid situations that threaten our projections; I was quick to opt out of social happenings — preferring to stay home with a heavy piece of literature and wine, or frivolous TV series and chips: either extreme would do. And while family members did their best to check in, it was perhaps the ongoing feeling that I didn't fully belong to a tribe that created the most distress. This period taught me what loneliness truly feels like — and I'm not talking about the sexy aloneness of a self-exiled artist, but the desperate kind of loneliness that even jars the barista making your morning coffee. Acutely aware of my privilege as a white middle-class student, I rejected the idea that I might need psychological help — there were people dying in Africa, right?

“If your fidelity to perfectionism is too high, you never do anything”

— David Foster Wallace

I'm not about to launch into a feel-good, *that was then — this is now*, conclusion. But along the path of disentangling myself from self-destructive habits like bulimia and binge drinking, I've grasped something important: that it's only when we're able to free ourselves from the frozen and romanticised masks of who we think we should be, that we're able to pay attention to the specks of imperfect beauty that are inherent to our otherwise absurd existences. To observe reality as it, not as we want it to be, is to date the best advice I could offer to anyone who resonates with these thoughts on perfectionism.

Over to you – I'd love to hear your experiences and opinions on perfectionism. Do you see this mind-set as a vice or a virtue? How strongly do you think perfectionism contributes to the rising levels of depression and anxiety for women? Comment below, and let's kôrero.

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