



(IM)PERFECT PERFECTIONISM

Perfectionists, by definition, strive for the best, trying to ace exams, trying to be meticulous at their jobs, and raise perfect children. So one might assume this drive for the ideal translates over to their health as well, with perfectionist being models for physical and mental well-being. But new research is revealing the trait can bring both profits and perils.

Though perfection is an impossible goal, striving for it can be a boon for one's health, causing one to stick to exercise programs to a tee, say, or follow a strict regimen for treating chronic illnesses like type II diabetes. But the same lofty goals can mean added mental pressure when mistakes are made and the resistance to asking for help from others in fear of revealing one's true, imperfect self. In fact studies show the personality trait of perfectionism is linked to poor physical health and an increased risk of death.

According to prof. Prem Fry of Trinity Western University in Canada, "Perfectionism is a virtue to be extolled definitely but beyond a certain threshold, it backfires and becomes an impediment." "Perfectionists are very self-critical, they are not satisfied ever with their performance," Fry said.

Perfect in all aspects

"A true perfectionism comes in a generalized form. You should want to be perfect across a variety of aspects of your life," said Gordon Flett, a psychology professor at York University in

Canada. "It's natural to be perfectionistic in the thing that matters the most, like your job. If you're a surgeon, there's no room for error," Flett said. "But you don't want that same person to be going home and using those same standards to evaluate family members, which causes stress," he said. "It has to generalize."



Perfectionism tends to have two components: a positive side, including things like setting high standards for themselves; and a negative side, which involves more deleterious factors, such as having doubts and concerns over mistakes and feeling pressure from others to be perfect.

Some scientists have argued a subset of these high-achievers can be classified as "positive perfectionists," those who reap the benefits of perfectionism without falling victim to its ills. However, others say that while perfectionism might seem to be advantageous in certain situations, it always has a dark side that inevitably rears its head. For instance, a perfectionist might seem fine under normal circumstances, but lose control under stress. While the existence of "positive perfectionists" is still debated, there's no doubt the trait can be quite counterproductive in some cases.

Perfect and dysfunctional

"That, in essence is the paradox of perfectionism, that certain people have extraordinarily high standards, but objectively can often look very dysfunctional in terms of their daily functioning, their physical health, their achievement," said Patricia DiBartolo, a psychology professor at Smith College, in Northampton, Mass. "They flunk out of college, and the reason why is they're so perfectionistic they can't actually achieve any goal; as you begin the process, it's just impossible."

Compared with the number of studies looking at perfectionism's impact on mental health, relatively few have examined the condition's toll on physical health. Some earlier work has linked the trait with various ailments, including migraines, chronic pain and asthma.

Lifespan

The researchers suspect high levels of stress and anxiety, which are known to be linked with perfectionism, might contribute to the decrease in lifespan. Next, they reasoned that if perfectionism showed this association in a normal population, it might have an even greater impact on those with a chronic disease, which would put their bodies under even more stress. But after following 385 patients with type II diabetes for 6.5 years, the researchers actually saw the opposite effect. Those with high perfectionism scores had a 26-percent lower risk of death than those with low scores. The results suggest that in certain situations, perfectionism can have advantages.



Those who feel others expect them to be perfect might experience declines in health as a result of distancing themselves from other people, and any support from friends and family. "We know social support is a huge indicator of physical health. If you tend to have strong bonds with people, good family life, good friendships, you tend to be healthier," Molnar said. "And we know socially prescribed perfectionists, they tend to have this sense of disconnection with other people, so it would make sense that one of the ways they would experience poorer health is because of this sense of social disconnection from others." Even if others reach out to help, socially prescribed perfectionists may view the kind actions as critical.

"Perfectionism in the elderly is of particular concern because, although they still have the same high expectations, they are unable to perform as well, which could ultimately lead to greater depression and anxiety," Fry said.

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