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### In pursuit of perfectionism

Posted by [Natasa Bansagi](#) on February 27, 2015 @ 11:15 a.m. EST



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I've lost track of how many times I've been told, "You're a perfectionist." Admittedly, I strive to hold myself to the highest standards in life and school, but I've often hinged my satisfaction on the full attainment of these measures alone.

Many times, I've focused more on planning a task rather than actually doing it.

And yet, I've somehow convinced myself that my perfectionism is a good thing. After all, it's improved the quality of my work and motivated me to reach higher goals.

Perfectionism can be adaptive or maladaptive, and consequently affect academics differently, according to Ryerson clinical psychology PhD student Hanna McCabe-Bennett.

"If someone is just setting high standards for themselves, they're likely to see that as motivating. So, they can use that as motivation to accomplish their goals and to achieve very high standards," she said.

"At the same time, if the standards are too high and if they're criticizing those assignments too harshly, then it can

get in the way.”

The definition of perfectionism that most researchers agree on, she said, involves “a combination of setting a high standard and also being quite harsh with your own evaluation of whether or not you’ve achieved the standard.”

In a study she was involved in that examined beliefs towards perfectionism, McCabe-Bennett said that positive beliefs tended to be associated with adaptive perfectionism.

This type of perfectionism refers to setting high standards without being disappointed if these standards aren’t met. Negative beliefs towards perfectionism, therefore, were found to be associated with maladaptive perfectionism.

Studies have shown that highly perfectionistic people tend to exhibit slower performance.

“If they expect that they might be able to achieve perfect performance on a task, then they might take longer to complete the task or use their time less efficiently,” McCabe-Bennett said.

She added that those who don’t expect to attain “perfect performance” might act more impulsively.

Perfectionism may also extend beyond academics to other areas, such as interpersonal relationships.

This arises from an assumption that other people have high standards for you or because you set high standards for other people.

The majority of research on interpersonal aspects of perfectionism has focused on romantic relationships, McCabe-Bennett said. In this case, perfectionistic tendencies can be identified by a gap between expectations and reality.

“What that might look like would be say, you’re living with your partner and you have a very specific idea of how the dishes should be washed or how they should be loaded into the dishwasher, for example,” she said.

“And if your partner does that in a different way or does it in a way that you feel is not good enough, then that’s where some of that discrepancy would come up between your expectations and your behaviour.” This discrepancy has also been associated with relationship dissatisfaction, she added.

More so than men, women tend to experience anxiety when it’s felt that their partner isn’t meeting their “standards.” Despite these negative aspects, perfectionism in romantic relationships may also be associated with loyalty.

“It’s possible that it could lead to disappointment and feeling like your partner is not living up to your expectations, but it can also help you to stay committed to that partner and keep working together,” McCabe-Bennett said.

Simon Sherry, a registered psychologist and an associate professor at Dalhousie University, said perfectionism is a double-edged trait, adding that perfectionists are often very self-critical, chronically self-doubting and highly concerned over mistakes.

“There are parts of perfectionism that can drive a person to great success and there are parts of perfectionism that can drive a person to great distress,” he said.

“[Perfectionism] includes a demand for the self to be perfect, sometimes a demand for other people to be perfect and often a real sense that other people are demanding that you be perfect.”

This binary characterization of perfectionism is likewise present in academics.

Perfectionism is associated with a higher GPA in university, Sherry said. But it’s also linked to “a host of academic difficulties” such as stress, procrastination, public speaking anxiety and test anxiety.

“Perfectionists are often dealing with negative emotions that make it hard to focus on work,” he said.

“Perfectionism may generate depression, which in turn slows down academic progress.”

“Perfectionists often feel lonely and disconnected from others, and I think that their inability to get along with others, to find connection and closeness around others, may actually be key to the difficulties that perfectionists experience in terms of depression, anxiety and so forth,” Sherry said.

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Joseph Lee has experienced both sides of perfectionism during his time at Queen's.

Lee, ConEd '17, said that while perfectionism can lead him to produce his best work, it can also lead to procrastination in writing assignments and studying for tests.

"It's a fine line between hindering and helping," he said.

In order to move ahead with a writing task, Lee begins by recognizing the problem and why he wants to be perfect, then evaluating whether his goal is realistic.

"And I sort of readjust that, because perfectionism sort of motivates me to adjust to something that's achievable," he said.

Perfectionism tends to focus on details, Lee said, so part of his strategy is looking at the big picture.

"Maybe I spend a lot of time worrying about the little things, but in reality I ask myself: does it really matter ... and what's the outcome?"

Learning Strategies Advisor Elizabeth Parsons meets with hundreds of Queen's students every year for one-on-one advising appointments to discuss topics like perfectionism in academic contexts.

Poor time management, lack of confidence in writing and uncertainty about a writing assignment may be confused with perfectionism, Parsons said, but they shouldn't be.

"Those are distinct from 'I'm not working on writing' or 'I'm anxious about writing because my goal is perfection,'" she said.

Learning Strategies defines perfectionism as an "uncompromising pursuit of excellence", Parsons said, adding that it can be problematic in cases that don't call for "uncompromising, defined standards."

"One thing that we see is, a lot of students who experience perfectionism, it's in the writing process," she said. "It's this feeling that you need to move right from brainstorming your ideas right to writing the perfect draft that you can hand in.

"And it can be crippling and debilitating to feel like you need to move from these ideas right into a final draft."

One of the approaches that Learning Strategies takes to tackle perfectionism in writing is "validating" the writing stages between brainstorming and producing a final product.

"There's all of these very messy stages in between that can be a real challenge for somebody whose goal is perfect and whose goal is excellence," Parsons said.

"So, we just try to validate that it's an okay and valid part of the writing process."

Because time demands, resources and assignment weighting may render perfection an impractical goal, she said another strategy involves redefining one's goals from perfect to "good enough".

"Good enough being [a mark of] 80 per cent or just handing it in on time or just an idea of good enough as the goal rather than perfect, is the goal that can shift things."

Finally, Parsons advises replacing the inner critic — an inner, negative voice that espouses feelings of inadequacy — with an inner coach.

"Tell yourself things that a coach would tell you. So, 'you can do this' and 'you are working hard and you do deserve this grade', or whatever it is," she said.

"If you're a little bit nicer to yourself and quiet that negative voice, that can really help alleviate a lot of the stress and anxiety around academics."

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