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LAB PROBES PERFECTIONISM FOR LINKS WITH DEPRESSION

UBC lab involved in more than 25 research projects including perfectionism's possible link to suicide

by Michelle Cook staff writer

Perfectionists. Leonardo da Vinci was thought to be one. Michael Jordan is often mislabeled one. Martha Stewart is most definitely one. Simon Sherry is not. And that, he says, is a good thing.

Sherry is one of 15 graduate and undergraduate Psychology students at UBC conducting breakthrough research on perfectionism's troubling links to depression and suicide, particularly in people their own age and younger.

"In an achievement-oriented domain like a university, a lot of people identify with perfectionism. But the condition isn't limited to campuses," explains Sherry, who plans to finish his master's degree in Psychology this year. "Many people in the community suffer from it. If you took an average sample, it would be easy to see that perfectionism is a malignant force in our society."

It was the chance to work in Psychology Assoc. Prof. Paul Hewitt's Perfectionism and Psychopathology Lab that brought Sherry to UBC.

Under the direction of Hewitt, Sherry and other lab team members are involved in more than 25 research projects, including a one-year study on perfectionism, depression, suicide and stress in 1,000 Vancouver-area adolescents.

The project will also assess the same characteristics in children diagnosed with depression and considered high suicide risks.

Hewitt's group is the first to conduct research to examine whether perfectionism may be the cause of suicidal thoughts and behaviours.

The lab is also following a group of 200 UBC students for six months to explore how perfectionists sever their social support systems leading to isolation, suicidal thoughts and behaviours, and looking at whether perfectionist tendencies in children with cancer interfere with their abilities to cope with the disease.

In today's high-performance society says Sherry, perfectionism is often confused with positive achievement characteristics such as conscientiousness. The lab's research shows perfectionism is a negative factor in people's lives that creates vulnerability to an assortment of psychological difficulties including eating, personality and anxiety disorders.

Hewitt's lab is also the only one of its kind to divide perfectionists into three types: self-oriented perfectionists who set impossibly high standards for themselves; other-oriented perfectionists who set rigid and unrealistic standards for those around them; and socially prescribed perfectionists who feel that others are demanding perfection of them.

Another innovative concept being explored is the difference between people who need to be perfect and people who need to appear to be perfect.

For Sherry the saddest discovery has been how perfectionism robs people of happiness, but this is also what makes the lab's work rewarding for him.

"I feel tremendous potential for this program of research to overturn the idea that perfectionism is a desirable trait," Sherry says.

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