

A focus on Compulsive Disorders

*Day in the Life of a
Psychiatrist*

*First Voice – Compulsive
Disorders*

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Dr. Simon Sherry Study Summary:

At some point, perfectionism may be adaptive, particularly in situations where perfection is clearly defined and possibly obtainable (e.g., a multiple choice quiz in psychology 101). Too often, however, the pursuit of perfection is painful, self-defeating and demoralizing. Whereas persistence, organization, self-discipline and conscientiousness encourage success, perfectionism is something different. Perfectionists rigidly and relentlessly demand perfection of themselves. There is a compulsive need to be perfect and a distressing preoccupation with others' expectations. Perfectionists do things perfectly—or not at all. Negative reactions to failures and doubts about performance abilities trip up perfectionists as they go about their lives.

Perfectionism and depression are robustly linked, but the factors linking perfectionism to depressive symptoms are not well understood. Clarifying such factors is vitally important, as these factors point toward targets for assessment and treatment. My colleagues and I believe that perfectionism contributes to depression through problems in relationships. We recently tested this idea in a sample of 226 romantic couples. To gain an in-depth understanding of whether perfectionism contributes to problems in romantic relationships, we assessed each couple 16 different times over 28 days using an Internet-based questionnaire. We found that people with high levels of perfectionism struggled to get along with their partners. In fact, we observed that people with high levels of perfectionism often engaged in hostile, critical, rejecting and inconsiderate interactions with their romantic partners. We also found that such relationship conflict leads to an increase in depression for people with high levels of perfectionism and their romantic partners. These findings are consistent with several other studies conducted by my research team that suggest perfectionism is closely tied to social situations (e.g., negative, conflictual social interactions) and to social outcomes (e.g., break-up of romantic relationships) conducive to depression.

Dr. Simon Sherry, one of the study authors, comments on the study and its potentially positive impact:

"On the one hand, perfectionists want your caring, respect and approval. On the other hand, perfectionists struggle to play nicely with other people. Some perfectionists struggle with the basic life task of loving other people. Worse yet, it seems perfectionists behave in ways that actually result in a loss of others' caring, respect, and approval. We are working to understand and to change these distressing, self-defeating patterns. Perfectionists are capable of loving, positive relationships with other people. Sometimes, however, they may need additional supports to achieve this important goal."

The paper is currently in review at the Journal of Family Psychology.

Study authors:

Simon B. Sherry, Dalhousie University, Departments of Psychology and Psychiatry

Sean P. Mackinnon, Dalhousie University, Department of Psychology

Martin M. Antony, Ryerson University, Department of Psychology

Sherry H. Stewart, Dalhousie University, Departments of Psychiatry and Psychology

Dayna L. Sherry, Queen Elizabeth II Health Sciences Centre

Nikola Hartling, Saint Mary's University, Department of Psychology

Topic: [Compulsive Disorders](#)

Dr. Simon B. Sherry



Dr. Simon B. Sherry, Registered Clinical Psychologist, is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Psychology at Dalhousie University. He is also cross appointed to the Department of Psychiatry at Dalhousie University. Dr. Sherry's research program occurs at the intersection of personality, social and clinical psychology and focuses on the perfectionism-psychopathology connection, with particular emphasis on understanding the contribution of perfectionism to the onset and the course of psychopathology. From his honours thesis to the present day, his research program has investigated whether, when and why perfectionism is linked to several forms of psychopathology, especially depression and eating disorders.

Dr. Sherry won the Canadian Psychological Association President's New Researcher Award in 2009, distinguishing him as one of Canada's best young researchers in Psychology. In 2011, he won the H. J. Eysenck Memorial Fund Award, an international award recognizing his excellence in research on personality and mental health difficulties. Dr. Sherry is a specialist in treating perfectionism, depression, and eating disorders and he also treats individuals for a wide variety of other mental health difficulties. For more information on his research program and his clinical services, please see www.personality.psychology.dal.ca.