

LAST UPDATED: JANUARY 31, 2011 2:16 PM

Perfectionism hurts students: study

Not everyone is buying the psychology study's conclusions

Torey Ellis — The Dalhousie Gazette (Dalhousie University)

HALIFAX (CUP) — A psychology professor at Dalhousie University has found that perfectionism may be doing some people more harm than good.

"It's an ugly situation, where you're striving for more but achieving less," said Simon Sherry, one of the authors of a new study on perfectionism in the academic world.

The study surveyed approximately 1,300 professors from psychology programs throughout North America. The study suggests professors with high levels of perfectionism tend to produce less research, and the research that is produced is published in less prestigious journals.

Sherry says the findings can be applied to students as well.

"What do we know about perfectionism in academia? It's associated with writer's block, public speaking anxiety, fear of failure, fear of success, statistics anxiety and a range of academic problems," said Sherry. All of these, he says, are traits students can relate to.

Aislin Graham, a third-year psychology PhD student, can attest to that.

"It's the same thing with undergrads, professors are just at a more extreme level," she said. "You're always in this environment where you're receiving criticism or feedback and individuals who have perfectionism on top of that, I think they kind of get stuck."

Sean Mackinnon, another PhD student studying under Sherry, says that the first transitioning year into university is the most emotional.

"The university environment, unfortunately, is one that really pulls for perfectionism. Because theoretically, you can do perfect," he said. "Realistically, nobody can get 100 per cent.

"Other parts of perfectionism are people evaluating you and having really high standards for you, and sometimes in a university environment that's not all in your head. People are really doing it."

But David Mensink, a psychologist at Dalhousie's counselling centre, disagrees with the idea that perfectionism could be bad.

"I don't think you can over-strive," he said. "What I would say is problematic is the response to not doing things perfectly."

Mensink says the top three issues that students bring to him are anxiety, depression and relationship problems. He also runs a group for students with eating disorders. All are dysfunctions that Sherry believes result from perfectionist thinking.

"For the perfectionistic person, [negative] feedback likely gets framed in terms of a failure, which can be the take-off point for problems in young people. Depression, anxiety, disordered eating, that sort of thing," said Sherry.

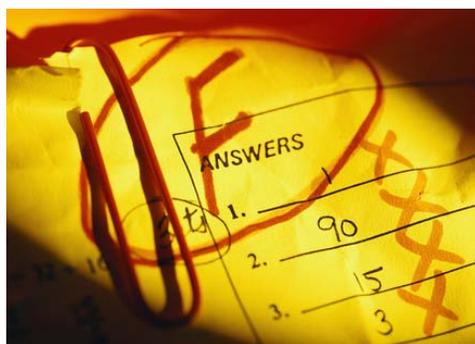


Photo courtesy of Isletsofhope.com

For more stories from this school visit [The Dalhousie Gazette](#).

 Recommend  17 recommendations. [Sign Up](#) to see what your friends recommend.

 Tweet  4  Email

Subscribe & Search



SEARCH

Federal Election Coverage



Featured Articles



May to fight for environment, parliamentary reform

Newly-elected Green MP Elizabeth May plans on wasting no time in bringing issues of the environment and parliamentary reform to the House of Commons.



Electoral map: The youth vote

The map covers all universities in Canada and outlines the margin of victory that candidates enjoyed in the last election. Compare that number with the number of youth and students in the riding to see just how much an impact youth voting can have in a specific riding.



The youth vote: Can young Canadians swing this election?

With less than two weeks to go before Canadians hit the polls on May 2, federal party leaders are certainly not the only ones who have kicked this election campaign into high gear.

CUPcast

Episode 39 — The Quark Episode
Episode 38 — The Sheepdogs Episode
Episode 37 — The V-day Edition

Photo Gallery

"Perfectionists also often view other people not as collaborators but as competitors," he said. "We know that perfectionism results in a number of relationship difficulties."

"I don't agree with that at all," said Mensink. But, he believes "perfectionism" is the wrong word. He says that the self-defeating behaviours Sherry mentions are the result of what he calls "distorted thinking."

Mensink uses a personal example to demonstrate his idea of perfectionism. "I want to do therapy perfectly. I do. For every client that comes in that experiences depression, anxiety, relationship problems, I want to help them perfectly."

In terms of the self-defeating behaviours that Graham, Mackinnon and Sherry believe perfectionist thinking brings on, Mensink argues that that mindset can also be the cure.

"Say someone has anorexia — so how can they have a more perfect relationship with their food? That's what I want to get at," he said. "Perfectionism is a good thing."

The question of whether perfectionism is a good or bad trait is an ongoing debate, says Sherry.

"I think a good way to think about perfectionism is: There's nothing wrong with being a perfectionist, as long as everything is perfect."

-30-

Canadian University Press
Suite 503, 920 Yonge Street
Toronto, ON
M4W 3C7
Email: [national\[at\]cup.ca](mailto:national[at]cup.ca)

All stories © 1999-2010 Canadian University Press

