



Perfectionism: Cause or Effect of Depressive Symptoms?

May 1st, 2012

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There is an abundance of literature providing evidence for a link between perfectionism and depression. People who are highly self-critical with respect to perfectionism are more vulnerable to [negative moods](#). These individuals tend to be overly harsh on themselves when they make a mistake and are extremely sensitive to the evaluations of others, which can lead to feelings of [inadequacy](#). Perfectionist strivings are characterized as attempts to achieve perfection. Both of these perfectionist traits impact depressive symptoms. However, until recently, few studies have looked specifically at the different ways in which perfectionism influences depression. Daniel S. McGrath of the Department of Psychology at Dalhousie University led a study to address this gap.

McGrath and his colleagues looked at how depressive symptoms that impair motivation and exacerbate avoidance and isolation impacted perfectionism in a sample of 240 college students. Over 4 weeks, the researchers evaluated the students for levels of [self-critical](#) perfectionism, perfectionist strivings, and depression and assessed how each factor influenced the other. The results revealed that depression increased self-critical perfectionism and self-critical perfectionism increased depression in the students. The reciprocal nature of these findings lends support to existing research. However, McGrath also discovered that the individuals who engaged in perfectionist strivings realized decreases in their symptoms of depression. McGrath also found that in these same students, perfectionist strivings increased as depressive symptoms increased.

These results suggest that depression may actually complicate symptoms of perfectionism, not increase them. These findings are in line with other studies that found a complicated and bidirectional link between [depression](#) and perfectionism. Specifically, McGrath found that individuals with high levels of self-critical perfectionism who were unaccepting of their accomplishments engaged in self-degradation, which decreased their motivation and increased their avoidance. McGrath said, "Persons high in self-critical perfectionism may find themselves in an escalating pattern where self-critical perfectionism leads to, and results from, depressive symptoms." McGrath believes that further research is needed to untangle the relationship between different types of perfectionism and depression.

Reference:

McGrath, D. S., Sherry, S. B., Stewart, S. H., Mushquash, A. R., Allen, S. L., Nealis, L. J., et al. (2012). Reciprocal relations between self-critical perfectionism and depressive symptoms: Evidence from a short-term, four-wave longitudinal study. *Canadian Journal of Behavioural Science/Revue canadienne des sciences du comportement*. Advance online publication. doi: 10.1037/a0027764

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**patti**

May 1st, 2012 at 3:54 PM

I think that I have been a perfectionist since the day I was born!

It was the way God made me I suppose. For me my thoughts are that my perfectionism does not in any way lead to me being depressed. I am happy with who I am and the way that I do things.

But I can see how for some people they give in to the pressure to be perfect 24/7- nobody can achieve that and even I with all my little quirks and hang ups realize that.

I am sure that many suffer from this, but thankfully for me my desire to always do things right just makes me strive to work harder and that never gets me down. It kind of inspires me to keep going in a way.

#1 [Family Counselor](#) | [Psychotherapist](#)**AllyCat**

May 1st, 2012 at 5:10 PM

How can you always want to be so perfect and not experience some signs of depression? I have lived like that and the sadness that I felt when I was not able to live up to my own crazy expectations was enough to send me on a downward spiral. I had to get to a point so low that there was nowhere else to go. I had to learn how to give myself a break every now and then, and when you have these kinds of tendencies you will know that this is not the easiest thing in the world to do. But we all deserve a break, and staying so down on myself all the time to achieve what I came finally to learn was unrealistic, I was able to let some of that go. It's okay to want to do things well, but you can't always be perfect or the best, and you have to tell yourself that this is not a failure, but that it is fine.

#2

**BANNISTER**

May 2nd, 2012 at 4:20 AM

when I was depressed i really didn't care if i did anything well or not- i really didn't care if i did much at all.

#3

**Ruthie**

May 2nd, 2012 at 4:24 PM

Plain and simple: when you are always trying to be perfect then sooner or later that pressure will catch up to you, and you will feel depressed. I am a true believer that every now and then you have to give it a break. There is only so much that we can do, and only so much that our brain is capable of taking on without doing a little crash and burn. That little down time doesn't have to be a bad thing, does not always have to be a cause for concern, especially if you try to take it as a little warning sign that maybe now would be a good time to slow it down a little. It's ok to chill from time to time, take a deep breath, and then start back over. Sometimes that's my little respite, because I too am one of those always seeking perfection. Sometimes you find it and sometimes you don't but you have to at least take a step back from time to time to clear your thoughts and get back into a good state of mind.

#4

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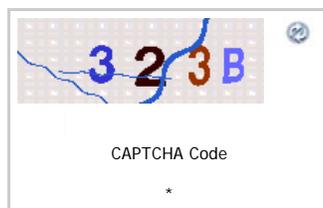
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