

2011-02-17
(NOTE: Archived content:
Current issue [here](#))

 [Previous Issues](#)

- News
- Empty bottles, trash or cash?
 - SU looks to trademark Bermuda Shorts Day
 - Kielburger says students can make a difference on campus
 - U of A pushes for longer fall reading break
 - Perfectionism can paralyze work, says study
 - Video game symposium comes to U of C
 - Exercise linked to increased brain activity in seniors

- Opinions
- A penny taxed is still a penny
 - Valentine's Day and consumerism
 - Election results don't mean an end to racism
 - Political sex can be a useful tool
 - Transgenders and transsexuals have rights too

- Sports
- Women in the change room
 - Perfect season dreams die
 - Women's wrestling win CW banner
 - Volleyball finish season sixth in CW
 - UBC win two against women's basketball
 - Bears dominate men's basketballsaurs

- Entertainment
- More than just a couple of soundtracks
 - Plenty to *Lear* at
 - Aging medium meets aging magician
 - The Seeds have been
 - CJSW Profile: Mind Folk'd
 - Into Eternity raises questions for the ages
 - Spun: LCD Soundsystem
 - Spun: Good Lovelies
 - Spun: Buck 65

- Web
- Confession: a Roman Catholic app isn't a good idea

- AP
- Asshole ex-girlfriend plans to remain asshole for benefit of ex-boyfriend
 - New Pokemon designs pale in comparison to originals, say adult fans of Pokemon
 - Student copiers still closed while raccoon remains loose



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Perfectionism can paralyze work, says study

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Gauntlet News

February 17, 2011

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If you often find yourself not making a deadline because your work needs to be perfect, you could be suffering from perfectionism.

An article by University of Dalhousie psychology professor Simon B. Sherry and colleague Skye Fitzpatrick emphasized the fact that some researchers and students are so concerned with producing perfect work that they sometimes end up with nothing.

"Perfectionists tend to do things perfectly or not at all," said the authors in Canada's psychology magazine *Psynopsis* last year. "Perfectionism is a counter-productive form of compulsive over-striving that limits research productivity."

A more recent study carried out by Sherry revealed this is also a problem among professors. Sherry's team surveyed about 1,300 professors from psychology programs throughout North America. The results indicated there are individuals with standards so high they are paralyzed in their research and tend to publish fewer articles in magazines or specialized publications.

University of Calgary professor and author of *The Procrastination Equation* Piers Steel said perfectionists are so anxious of their work being judged that at times they never complete it.

"You tend to see this behavior more with impulsive people," said Steel. "When perfectionists are also impulsive, they have more difficulties dealing with the anxiety associated with perfectionism."

But, according to Steel, perfectionism is not always a bad thing.

"Some perfectionists love their high standards and they feel a tremendous sense of accomplishment from it, while other people might feel trapped by it," Steel said.

Engineering master's student Rohana Rezel considers himself as a perfectionist.

"My definition of perfectionism is that you have certain expectations of outcomes and you try to meet them 100 per cent," said Rezel. "And if it's less than that, then it's not perfect."



High personal standards can be good, said Steel. This type of perfectionism is healthier than social perfectionism, trying to meet others' expectations.

"That tends to have a little bit more of a negative impact," said Steel. "You internalize other people's standards and become alienated from your own motivations and this is more harmful and less satisfying when you're going through it because even when you achieve it, you don't feel any true satisfaction. You're just trying to please somebody else."

Steel said treatment for perfectionism is simple and can usually be done just by talking.

"It's about people understanding a little bit more carefully how their thoughts and beliefs are controlling their actions in a dysfunctional way," Steel said. "It's really discussing about their lives and how they're going to live it, giving them some suggestions about alternate ways of dealing with the situation. You can call it therapy, but I think is more like getting good advice."

According to Students' Union vice-president academic Alyssa Stacy, the student success centre, located on the fourth floor of MacEwan Student Centre is available to help students with these issues.

Stacy said in the end it's all about students' personal commitment to excellence.

"You need to try to achieve excellence in your work, but remember that you're here to learn," she said.

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