

All too perfect

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By Everton McLean

The constant pressure of feeling one is not allowed to make mistakes - and the inability to accept mistakes when they do happen - plays a key role in higher rates of depression among perfectionists, suggests new research from Capital Health psychologist Dayna Sherry.

Sherry is publishing a paper that looks at the mechanisms that result in specific groups of perfectionists suffering from depression. While in common terms, people call those who strive for achievement “perfectionists”, Sherry says clinical perfectionism is not about striving to do well. It is about being unable to accept mistakes or anything less than perfect outcomes.

Her research specifically focuses on those who feel their peers, co-workers, families and society in general expect nothing short of perfect from them, using a sophisticated analysis to locate the connects with mental health.

These “socially prescribed perfectionists” have a particular problem according to Sherry; not only are they preoccupied with being perfect, but that preoccupation exists even after a mistake is made, a deadline is missed or a word is flubbed. Without being able to accept the past, these perfectionists have trouble living happily in the present. This lack of acceptance is correlated with higher rates of depression.

What’s more, the more demanding one is of perfection, the higher the likelihood of depression.

“What we have found through a lot of research in the perfectionism literature is that socially prescribed perfectionism is very detrimental to your mental health,” said Sherry. “It is associated with a number of mental health problems such as eating disorders and suicide.”

Socially prescribed perfectionists also tend to be very high in self-criticism and self-doubt. The personality trait also tends to lead to less fulfilled lives.

“Because [the perfectionists] are trying to be perfect in everything, they may try to avoid things where failure is likely or where they may have missteps,” she said. “They may have a narrower experience because of that.”

Sherry said perfectionism can also be a barrier to treatment. People with socially-prescribed perfectionism often avoid seeking counseling. And once in a counseling setting, they tend to have difficulty with the process.

“They get perfectionistic about therapy,” she said, which leads to problems establishing a good therapist-patient relationship.

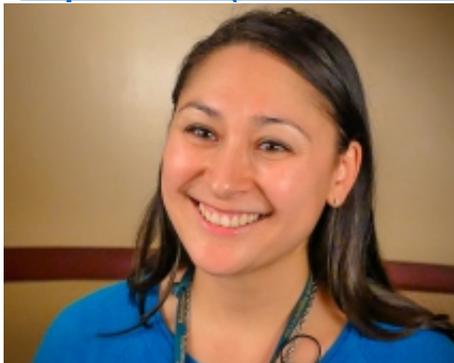
Fortunately, once a good relationship is created and a counseling intervention is established, there are effective programs to help with perfectionism.

More recent Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) interventions include aspects of acceptance and mindfulness, which help patients with perfectionism move forward.

“We all have bad things happen to us. Things like failure is an inevitable part of life,” said Sherry. “Finding ways to be compassionate towards yourself, finding ways of accepting that failure is a part of life and you can still move towards your goals.”

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Capital Health psychologist Dayna Sherry

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