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The perfection problem: How friendships help first-year students manage depression

[Ryan McNutt](#) - August 28, 2014



Students arriving on campus. (File photo)

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You can feel a change coming in the air — and it's more than the slight dip in temperature. It's the U-Haul trucks; the lineups in the coffee lines; the energy on the streets in university towns like Halifax and Truro.

They're coming.

Thousands of new students will arrive on university campuses across Canada this weekend, ready to take their first steps into higher learning. It's an exciting time, but certainly not one without its stresses.

One group of students who can face challenges in their first year on campus is those with perfectionistic tendencies. With expectations a bit higher in university, and with many running up against early assignments that test their abilities like never before, students who are overly focused on grades or achievement can sometimes encounter new struggles.

"I think it's fair to say perfectionism is rife in academia," explains [Simon Sherry](#), a clinical psychologist and faculty member at Dal who researches perfectionism. "People with perfectionistic traits select themselves into high-achieving, pressure-filled environments like academia, and then those environments strengthen their dispositional tendencies to be perfectionistic. There's an interplay."

Perfectionism isn't inherently a bad thing; quite the opposite, in many cases. We all have some perfectionistic tendencies and, if utilized well, they can be a driver for personal success. But not all types of perfectionism are equal. One dimension in particular — socially prescribed perfectionism — can be quite destructive, and is often associated with depression, anxiety and other psychological disorders. It's when an individual bases their desire to be perfect on their perceived expectations of others — and in an environment of papers, grades and exams, that can be a big problem for some students.

"The perfectionistic traits that drive you to come to university may also be the perfectionistic traits that

make you depressed at university,” says Dr. Sherry. “It’s a double-edged trait: it drives you to succeed and it can drive you to distress.”

Relationships matter

Recent research from Dal lecturer Sean Mackinnon, completed during his PhD studies at Dal with Dr. Sherry, offers insight into how that perfectionism can affect first-year students — and how successful students manage it.

Dr. Mackinnon’s study looked at nearly 130 students starting at university for the first time, having them answer questionnaires and take part in detailed narrative interviews over the course of their fall term. The study was conducted with Dal students, but Dr. MacKinnon says the results would be expected at any major university in Canada. (The paper, published in *The Canadian Journal of Behavioural Science*, is co-authored by researchers at Western University and Wilfrid Laurier University.)

The study’s takeaway: interpersonal relationships matter a great deal.

“People who are high-end on the socially prescribed perfectionism scale tended to do worse when they had problems in their close interpersonal relationships, specifically those from before university; in particular, breaking off from those high school or earlier friends in a way that was unsatisfactory,” explains Dr. Mackinnon.

“Sometimes that’s just drifting away and not being in touch as often anymore, and sometimes it’s a big fight or argument, but that transition to university often means geographical separation for those old friendships. When that was more unpleasant for whatever reason, rates of depression or depressive affect increased.”

Dr. Mackinnon describes a prototypical story that popped up time and time again in his interviews, which he called the “prom story.” It involves a student having one last big gathering with their high school friends — sometimes at prom, sometimes at a party or other event. How students perceived that event was often telling about their ability to manage depression.

“[The event] solidifies for people whether these are friends you’re going to keep for life, or if this might be the last time you’d ever see them,” he explains. “That prototypical event could be interpreted in different ways. Most people saw it in a positive way, but the people who had trouble with the separation were often ones who had a more difficult time in their first year.”

In essence, close friendships are a support system for perfectionists. They rely on them to help them through stresses and challenging times. But university is a major transition point for many friendships, and a student’s first few months on campus — away from old friends but only starting to make new ones — can threaten that support system.

“Perfectionists are prone to living their life in a very narrow space, where great emphasis is placed on achievement often to the exclusion of relationships,” says Dr. Sherry. “The irony, then, is that relationships are often one of the best ways to address and deal with that.”

The importance of getting involved

So how can first-year students who struggle with the transition into university manage their perfectionism and its negative effects?

“For a subset of perfectionists, it will be important to seek help, and for perfectionists that’s often difficult because it involves admitting imperfections and limitations,” says Dr. Sherry. “But we have strong resources on campus with [Counselling and Psychological Services](#) that students can access if they find themselves distressed.”

But for others struggling a bit in their first year, the researchers say it’s important to get involved on campus: make time for clubs, social events, study groups; for forming new relationships and building a network of friends to spend time with.

“Perfectionists are prone to putting all their eggs in one basket, to developing an overly narrow focus on achievement,” says Dr. Sherry. “To counter that, it’s important to have a diverse and stable set of activities beyond just work or school.”

“We know that close, intimate friendships, especially at this age, is a protective factor against a lot of psychological problems; it’s not destiny for someone with perfectionism to have a psychological disorder,” adds Dr. Mackinnon. “And university is one of those rare times in your life when you have an entire community you’re living and studying among, often with similar interests.”

The researchers note that actively seeking out new friendships doesn’t come naturally to everyone. But for students looking to succeed at university, and make the most of the experience, it’s key.

“University is a time when you can make a lot of new friends that can be incredibly important in your life, in many ways,” says Dr. Mackinnon. “And that’s as true for perfectionists as it is for everyone.”

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