



## The Pitfalls of Perfectionism

Holding yourself to impossible standards almost always backfires.

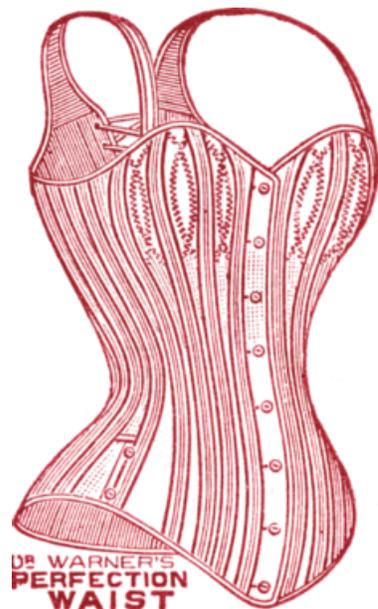
### Can perfectionism lead you to overeat?

An unexpected consequence of perfectionism: binge eating

Published on June 20, 2011 by Rodolfo Mendoza-Denton, Ph.D. in Are We Born Racist?

It might seem counterintuitive to think that striving for perfection would be related to overeating. Shouldn't perfectionism, after all, be related to a desire to have the "perfect" figure? The answer, as it turns out, is yes, but recent research published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* (Sherry and Hall, 2009) shows us how unrealistic expectations -- a hallmark of perfectionism-- can backfire and lead us to sabotage our own goals.

Researchers at Dalhousie University and the University of Waterloo recruited 566 women to take part in a 7-day diary study of their eating behavior. All told, the researchers collected close to 4,000 diary entries. The diaries captured instances of binge eating (defined in the research as consuming a lot of food quickly and uncontrollably in a short period of time), and allowed the researchers to analyze some of the triggers that precipitated the overeating.



The researchers found a strong relationship between binge eating and socially prescribed perfectionism-- the kind of perfectionism in which you feel like you can never meet others' expectations, and in which you try very hard to avoid disappointing others. Unsurprisingly, over the course of the diary study, these perfectionists ended up constantly feeling like they let others down, which led to both depression and further worrying about what others thought of them.

Interestingly, the feeling of letting other people down directly led to extreme efforts to restrict caloric intake-- things like skipping meals, or refusing food or drink altogether. It's almost as if socially prescribed perfectionism leads people to attempt to gain the ever-elusive approval of others by trying to -- yes-- achieve that "perfect" figure. But as I discuss in [this blog post](#), extreme patterns of dietary restraint lead to caloric deprivation (and extreme hunger!), which then predispose us to binge in our private, vulnerable moments.

Not all dieting efforts, of course, are related to socially prescribed perfectionism. But if you struggle with yo-yo diets, and can relate to the feeling of constantly feeling like you can never meet others' standards, it may be worth thinking about how the two may be related. The change you need may not lie in the newest diet as much as in recognizing that you cannot be everything to everyone... and that that's OK.

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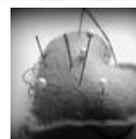
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