

## Binge Eating: When Perfection Unravels

*ScienceDaily* (Apr. 20, 2009) — In everyday life, someone who takes a perfectionist's approach to activities might be admired or even rewarded with a pat on the back.

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These attitudes are tied to a commonly held, but mistaken, belief that perfectionism will ultimately produce achievement and social success. But a psychologist warns that perfectionism is not a healthy, or even effective, approach to life's challenges.

"Perfectionism is a double-edged personality trait," says Simon Sherry, assistant professor of psychology.

A newly-published study shows why individuals with a high degree of perfectionism are often setting themselves up for a host of physical, emotional and mental problems— particularly related to binge eating. Although less well recognized than anorexia or bulimia, binge eating is a serious disorder. Binge eating occurs when a person

feels out of control and rapidly consumes a large amount of food in a short period of time. Binge eating elevates the risk of developing depression, obesity, diabetes and other problems.

Dr. Sherry, of Dalhousie University in Halifax Nova Scotia, has published "The Perfectionism Model of Binge Eating" in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, along with co-author Peter Hall of the University of Waterloo. By closely following the daily activities of a large group of undergraduates, the researchers believe that they're the first to identify why perfectionism results in binge eating.

They have also honed in on the type of perfectionist who is most at risk--someone who believes that others are evaluating their performance critically (as opposed to someone who is self-critical). This kind of perfectionist concludes that a parent, a friend or a boss is being harshly judgmental of their performance and pressuring them to be perfect.

"It seems that as perfectionists go about their day-to-day lives, they generate a lot of friction," says Dr. Sherry. "Because of their inflexibility and unrealistic expectations they also create problems in their relationships."

Let's imagine how a perfectionist might begin their day.

### Today's Goals

- Run faster than yesterday's personal best.
- Drink coffee instead of having breakfast.
- Earn the highest grade in the class on that mid-term.
- Meet for group project at 3 p.m. sharp to fix presentation.
- Find the most original gift for friend's birthday.

What happens when the day ends up looking more like this instead?

### Today's Failures

- Running time misses personal best altogether.



*Binge eating has been found to be associated with perfectionism. (Credit: Daniel Abriel)*

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- Earned 89 on the midterm, so six others are ahead of me now.
- Manage to limit lunch to a salad.
- Group is late for meeting, so presentation is still boring.
- Friend is disappointed with birthday gift.

Chances are the next sequence of events will involve self-harm.

#### Today's Secret

- Late in the day, lose control and binge eat.
- Feel a horrible 'pit in the stomach.'
- Hide the evidence to keep the secret.
- Criticize and loathe myself.
- Dwell on being alone and isolated.

Binge eating becomes an effort to escape from being overwhelmed with feelings of loneliness, failure and sadness. To temporarily escape from a discouraging reality, it's necessary to do away with higher order thought. The experience of eating—smelling, chewing, tasting—is immediate and visceral.

"Think about it—when was the last time that you were rapidly eating a pizza and pondering a major life decision at exactly the same time?" asks Dr. Sherry.

While binge eating banishes troubles and difficulties in the short term, it also generates powerful negative emotions of guilt and shame that are longer lasting.

"We want to improve the lives of perfectionists with patterns of disordered eating," he says.

The intent is that this research will translate directly into better care, through improved assessment and treatment opportunities. Society does demand achievement, but perfectionism is often maladaptive--a conscientious and adaptable person who can modify goals and expectations is better able to excel.

Perfectionists are often not self aware and are reluctant to seek help, posing a conundrum: They don't want to admit they're imperfect.

"I'm hopeful that students will read about this and realize that there are effective interventions for binge eating, including some help for perfectionism—change is possible."

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