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Progress Not Perfection

Liya Panayotova, Psychologist, liyap.com 18.6K reads

Do you have standards so high that other people have remarked on them? Do you become anxious or depressed at the thought of not doing something perfectly? Do you struggle to meet the expectations you place on yourself? If so, perfectionism could be causing you dissatisfaction.

Perfectionists often spend a lot of time on tasks because they re-do them in the hope of making it perfect. They might be obsessed with small details that most people don't even notice.

Sometimes we become so obsessed with reaching a goal that we don't give ourselves credit for the progress we've made. Even if we don't reach a particular goal, we can still make a lot of progress in a particular area.

The banner features the Explorable logo and the text "Quiz Time!". Below this are three quiz cards:

- Card 1: Image of red roller skates on a wooden deck. Quiz: Psychology 101 Part 2
- Card 2: Image of a fan of colorful pencils. Quiz: Psychology 101 Part 2
- Card 3: Image of a Ferris wheel at sunset. Quiz: Flags in Europe

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Why Does Perfectionism Occur?

Certain unhelpful thinking patterns play into perfectionism. It may be worth having another look at the section on them. For example, people who tend to think in black-and-white may struggle with the grey areas that life so often brings. They may berate themselves for not reaching a certain goal, or for not doing things perfectly. Ultimately this doesn't help much in either achieving the goal or feeling good about oneself.

Should You Resign Yourself to Mediocrity?

This is not to say, don't aim high. Try your best but remove any qualms about whether it was good enough. If you are measuring progress, then you are inviting ways to evaluate progress and think about how you might do something better the next time around. Altering your standards is not the same as scrapping your standards altogether.

Humans are fallible. Trying to be perfect is like setting oneself up for a life-time of disappointment. However, breaking free from perfectionism is not easy. One of the first things to reassess is whether you are being realistic about your life and goals. When we're fixated on the big picture, we sometimes forget to smell the roses along the way.

Go Step by Step

Perfectionism and procrastination are often bedfellows. When you are so intent on doing something perfectly, you may become terrified of making a mistake that you can't bring yourself to get started. To combat this, break down tasks into smaller ones.

Learn to Accept Mistakes

The next suggestion may sound counterproductive, but can be very illuminating when done carefully. Choose a task where you aim to complete or achieve 95%. Instead of worrying about the end result, try to enjoy the process. For example, cook a new recipe. It may not turn out perfectly, but you're still learning a new recipe along the way. How did it feel? Write an email or a message where you make one deliberate mistake, then send it. The chances are the recipient will not even notice.

Focus on the Solutions, Rather than the Worries

In life, there are inevitably situations where we face rejection or fail. These can be great learning opportunities, but it takes a shift in mindset to see them in this way. See if you can put yourself in someone else's shoes. Imagine that your best friend always tries to achieve the best results at work. One day, your friend was called in to an unexpected meeting with his superiors. Your friend panics so much that he is not able to talk about all the great work he has done, and his superiors seem unhappy. He is devastated and spends the whole week criticizing himself. How would you make him see that it is not the end of the world and can be fixed?

Another Perspective

In order to deal with these sorts of situations, draw a worry tree about your perceived outcomes. On a piece of paper, brainstorm all the bad things that you are worried could happen. Look carefully at your fears. Can you flip the coin, and write all the potential positive outcomes of trying an activity?

Try to find other perspectives on your perfectionism. Ask yourself: Will this matter one week, one month, one year from now? Often we invest too much energy on tasks that don't matter

much in the long run. It helps to rehearse some phrases that counter perfectionism, such as:

“My best is good enough.”

“If I stop to look around, I realize nobody is perfect.”

“The people who look perfect in the media don’t look like that when they wake up.”

“Mistakes are an opportunity to learn.”

These techniques require practice. As you keep rehearsing them, note your successes and reward yourself for them. This creates an upward spiral for your self-esteem. Remember, being you is perfectly okay.

Key Points:

- Perfectionism is not the same as having high standards. Perfection doesn’t exist, whereas high standards do.
- Many people with low self-esteem are perfectionists in some areas of their lives.
- Perfectionism can exacerbate low self-esteem and also lead to anxiety and depression.
- There are many simple strategies that can help lessen your perfectionism.

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