

PERFECTIONISM: ARE YOU SURE IT PAYS OFF?

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The “Real” Problem With Perfectionism

If you ask someone with OCD about the payoffs for engaging in compulsive behavior (what desired *outcomes* do you get), he or she will typically respond by saying: “It is the only way I know how to reduce my anxiety”. If you ask about the costs of compulsive behavior (undesired *outcomes*), he or she readily acknowledges a long list including loss of time, money, jobs, school, accomplishments, relationships, independence, etc. Systematically weighing out the positive and negative consequences of a behavior in this way is a Motivational Interviewing (Miller & Rollnick, 2002) strategy that therapists use to help individuals generate motivation to give up undesired behavior (in this case compulsive behavior). When you help people see that their current behavior works more against them than for them (over the long-term they recognize that their anxiety is increasing not decreasing) you have an opportunity to encourage them to try something different.

Try this same strategy with perfectionists: “What are the payoffs of your perfectionistic behavior?” You get a much different and longer list of positive *outcomes* than for compulsive behavior: good grades in school, special recognition by a boss, praise from others, feelings of accomplishment, etc. You then ask, “What are the costs of your perfectionism?” In this case, you typically get an equally long list of negatives: time consuming, anxiety provoking, interpersonal conflict with others, low self esteem (“nothing ever feels good enough”), etc. This is a trickier situation in that perfectionists on average see their perfectionism as something they like and value about themselves even though they are able to recognize the costs. However, if you challenge their perfectionism, they typically feel misunderstood or believe that you are asking them to “just be average”.

Separating Intentions, Strategies, and Outcomes

If you ask perfectionists about the intentions of their perfectionism (“What do you *want* to happen?”), what you commonly hear is a need to be seen as competent, wanting to feel satisfied with something they’ve accomplished, or wanting to stand out. Typically, perfectionists think that an attack on their perfectionism is an attack on their goals or values (that is, their intentions or what they want). Therefore it is important to highlight that you agree with them that the problem is not with their intentions, it is with their strategies. Strategies in this case are what perfectionists use to express their intentions in the hopes of translating them into desired outcomes. For example, if someone wants to express the *intention* of feeling competent at work he or she may adopt an all-or-none *strategy* (99% equals 0%) in hopes of achieving the desired *outcome* (praise by the boss, sense of accomplishment). Perfectionists are able to recognize this reasoning and also recognize the low probability (but very powerful) payoff of this strategy. However, they also have a hard time letting go of this strategy. Other *maladaptive* perfectionistic strategies with poor payoffs include:

Rigidly Following the Rule: Perfectionists typically describe that their behavior and performance “must” adhere to a rule or standard about how a task should be completed. You hear perfectionists say “It *has* to be done this way” or “Do things right or don’t do them at all”. Perfectionists report that they usually are identified by others as being detail oriented and in some cases praised for this attribute. However, they are also described by others as being controlling and rigid.

Everything is Equally Important: Because perfectionists want to do everything well, they have a difficult time prioritizing tasks. All tasks seem equally important, and the same level of detail, effort and energy is brought to all tasks. If you asked perfectionists to identify some tasks to complete at 100%, some at 80%, and some at 50% they have a difficult time moving tasks out of the 100% category.

Mistakes are Catastrophic: Perfectionism can be thought of as a phobia of mistake making. Perfectionists will go to great lengths to hide perceived or actual errors or mistakes from others. They also tend to overestimate the consequences of making mistakes. It is difficult to give perfectionists constructive feedback as they equate something less than positive being said about them or their performance as an indication of a lack of respect or liking on your part.

Repetition Until it Feels/Looks/Sounds “Right”: Because tasks have to be without mistakes and feel/look/sound “right”, perfectionists tend to over edit, review, and repeat compulsively. This behavior is also intermittently reinforced as a teacher or boss will say that it was the best paper/report in the class/office. It is unacceptable for a perfectionist to let others see “rough drafts” or “works in progress”.

Missing Deadlines and Procrastination: Procrastination goes hand in hand with missing deadlines and is fueled by the belief that one should “Do it right or don’t do it at all”. Perfectionists are shocked to hear that they are a perfectionist because “My room/desk is always a mess”. If you ask them why it’s a mess they say that in order to clean it up the “right way” it would take enormous energy and effort they feel they don’t have. So they wait for a burst of energy or motivation, then work multiple hours without a break until exhausted, only to be dissatisfied in the end because they will still see something done “imperfectly”. These strategies and outcomes are remembered the next time the project comes up (e.g., cleaning their room) so avoidance and procrastination kick in as the person says, “I just don’t have the motivation or energy to clean my room. I must be a lazy person.”

Adaptive vs. Maladaptive Perfectionism

As an alternative to the above listed *maladaptive* perfectionism strategies (strategies with good intentions but poor outcomes), *adaptive* perfectionism strategies include prioritizing based on values, experimentation/risk taking, appreciating diminishing returns, fighting procrastination, and using others as models.

Prioritizing Based on Values: If anxiety is your decision maker (“I have to do well at everything or it is catastrophic”), then you waste enormous amounts of time on less important, valuable tasks. There are limits on time, resources and energy and if you choose to spend these on one task, it takes away from your ability to devote them to another task. For example, if your anxiety drives you to excel at everything, then being a good parent may end up being on par with being the best sock drawer organizer in the world. Again, your anxiety/perfectionism is telling you that you do have the *time* to do everything and to do everything well. However, your experience is not bearing this out. You have good intentions, but poor outcomes. In Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, Stephen Hayes (2005) makes the argument that people should let their decisions and behaviors be dictated by their values (in contrast to anxiety). One way to tap into these values is to write your own eulogy. That is, if you projected yourself into the future and look back, what would you like for your life to have stood for? What do you want to be remembered for? Based on this then, one begins to form their A list (tasks to be completed at or near 100%), a B list (tasks completed at 80%), a C List (tasks completed at 50%), and an F List (what to let go).

Experimentation and Risk Taking: Re-evaluate your beliefs about mistake making. Allow people to actually see you make some mistakes and pay attention to their reactions towards you. Ask for some feedback on “works in progress” and for collaboration and input from others about your work. Following a rule or standard may be safe and may help you avoid some mistakes, but it is also the opposite of creativity and innovation.

Diminishing Returns: More does not always mean better. Consider the following example: You ask your primary care doctor if there is something preventative you can do to help decrease the chances of developing cardiovascular disease. The doctor might suggest a glass of red wine with dinner each night. You return to your doctor six months later and say: “I enjoyed the glass of wine with dinner so much, I’m up to a gallon of wine a day now!” Repetition, persistence, and more effort do not always reap better rewards. The majority of the payoff for your efforts happens early in the process. Pay attention to when improvements on your outcomes are no longer matching your level of effort.

Fight Procrastination: Break larger projects down into sub-steps and do one at a time. Give yourself rewards for completing steps in a task in order to keep your motivation up throughout completion of the task. Allow yourself to leave a project unfinished and come back to it another time with a fresh perspective. Don’t miss deadlines: It is better to turn in rough drafts than nothing at all.

Use “Conscientious” People as Models: Identify someone in your life who shares your same goals and intentions, but he or she doesn’t seem to be struggling as much and has better outcomes. “How is it that Sue appears to be competent, but does not have to boss other people around? What is she doing differently strategically than what I am doing?” Find out what she is doing and imitate her finding your own style or “take” on these new strategies. In conjunction with this suggestion, I also recommend that perfectionists read “The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People” (Covey, 1989).

Conclusions

When someone criticizes you for being a perfectionist, keep in mind that he or she may not be complaining about your desire to excel. What he or she might be highlighting is that you reconsider how you get there. Again, the problem with perfectionism isn't the desire to do well, it's not giving up on strategies that have poor payoffs.

References:

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