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Perfection or Obsession?



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We human beings are not perfect. We are flawed like all other living creatures on earth. But, that does not mean that we should not strive for excellence. However, there is a big difference between a person who strives for excellence and a perfectionist.

Excellence is attainable, and presumes that we are doing the best we can do on a project. In fact, excellence presumes that we are trying hard to do even better than we may have done in previous efforts. Because excellence is attainable, there is motivation in that direction. A job well done feels really good. That good feeling does not necessarily come from the praise of others, but from an inner feeling of satisfaction. Excellence is both real and achievable. It teaches us to set realistic goals and work hard to reach them.

A perfectionist, on the other hand, strives for excessively high standards due to fears of failure and concerns about disappointing others. Unlike the person who strives for excellence, perfectionists never feel pride or satisfaction in a job well done because they never believe their job was done "well enough."

In psychology, perfectionism is considered to be a personality disposition. It is characterized by setting extremely high performance standards and a compulsion to strive for flawlessness. The positive side of perfectionism, which I call "Adaptive Perfectionism", makes the person to push hard and achieve great accomplishments. The negative side, which I call "Maladaptive Perfectionism", is destruc-

tive, leading people to strive for unattainable and unrealistic goals. When those goals cannot be met, it leads to reduced self-esteem and depression.

Adaptive perfectionists (AP) are fair and objective people who strive to live good lives. They are accurate, thorough and orderly. They view themselves as rational and principled, and want others to view them as reliable, responsible and hardworking. They have a strong sense of purpose and high ideals. They like to excel in whatever they do. They are extremely detail oriented and methodical. This form of perfectionism is a generalized form that tends to be focused on one area of life. This can actually be healthy, pushing the individual to work harder and achieve greater goals. Many successful people are AP to a degree. In some careers, e.g., medicine, it may be ideal to have someone who is a bit of a perfectionist.

Maladaptive Perfectionists (MP) are extremely self-critical and have a need for positive feedback from others to bolster their sense of self-worth. They may become very obsessed with others' opinions. The MPs "cannot see the forest for the trees". In other words, the MPs become so focused on the tiny details that they forget that there is a purpose to what they are doing. MPs are never content with where they are at in life and never be satisfied with what they have accomplished. They, typically, fixate on unattainable goals and, as a result, forget to embrace success and focus on the positive.

They become procrastinators. Filled with so much anxiety about having to do every little detail to perfection they become discouraged about ever starting their project. Over time, this unhealthy perspective causes a fear of failure and rejection and, without some sort of positive intervention, eventually gives way to psychological breakdown, perhaps, to a clinical depression or a psychosis.

While perfectionism is not, per se, a clinical disorder, it is an essential feature of the so-called Obsessive Personality Disorder (OPD). A person with an OPD is preoccupied with perfectionism, and mental and interpersonal control, and orderliness at the expense of flexibility, openness, and efficiency. They are preoccupied with doing the right thing and avoiding mistakes. More specifically, the person with an OPD is associated with such traits as preoccupation with details, excessive devotion to work and productivity at the expense of leisure, excessive conscientiousness, scrupulousness, inflexibility and rigidity in the issues of morality and ethics, hoarding or difficulty discarding worn-out objects that have no sentimental value, reluctance to delegate tasks or to relinquish control, or to submit to someone else's standards.

An Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD), on the other hand, is a clinical illness that requires treatment. Here, "obsession" refers to a recurrent thought or image that is insistent and persistent and preoccupies the person

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to the exclusion of everything else; ‘compulsion’ refers to an action undertaken in order to reduce the preoccupation with obsessive thoughts. A compulsion has a magical quality of putting a stop to the obsessive thought. But then, the obsession returns and the obsessions followed by the compulsions completely preoccupy the person to the exclusion of everything else. The obsessions in an OCD are undesirable and cause distress to the person. Obsessive rumination can also be a symptom of a psychosis. A psychosis is a serious mental disorder characterized by thinking and emotions that are beyond the control of the individual and are so impaired as to cause the person to lose touch with reality.

Clinical depression (see Health Planters issue 6) can be of a psychotic nature when the depressive thoughts are not in touch with reality eg., the person may be firmly convinced that he / she is useless or worthless even when evidence to the contrary is presented to them. Obsessive thinking in psychosis does not disturb the person (as it is very real to him / her) who firmly believes in the righteousness of his or her obsessive thoughts or compulsive actions. In sum, it could be then said that perfectionism, obsessive personality, obsessive compulsive disorder and obsessive psychotic thinking all form part of a spectrum with perfectionism at one end and psychosis at the other. Although there are clear conceptual differences between OPD, OCD, and Obsessive Rumination in psychosis, in practice these disorders can at times be difficult to tell apart.

In addition, sometimes a person with an OPD may develop an OCD, or a psychosis. Therefore the clinical experience of a qualified psychiatrist is often needed to make a proper diagnosis. As with all forms of mental-illness, a proper diagnosis is essential to ensure the proper treatment. OCD and Obsessive psychotic rumination require to be treated with medication. Cognitive Behaviour therapy is the treatment of choice for OPD, and is also useful in OCD in conjunction with medication. Maladaptive Perfectionism is a trait that can be modified by mentoring, and when severe, may require counseling/psychotherapy/cognitive therapy. So remember – you don’t have to always do things right – as long as you always do the right thing. Life is much more rewarding and enjoyable this way!



Perfection Vs Pursuit of excellence	
MALADAPTIVE PERFECTIONISM	PURSUIT OF EXCELLENCE
Doing things ‘right’	Doing the right thing
The perfectionist wants to get things totally right every time. He / she does not listen to others or take feedback.	The person who strives for excellence focuses on taking the right action to get the job done and takes feedback to improve.
Focused on how things APPEAR to others and if OTHERS think it’s done right	Focused on the REASON for the task and the RESULTS for it to be a success
Demands unachievable outcomes, making you try to achieve the “perfect” outcome, that is always out of reach.	Keeps you focused on what matters, to achieve a desirable and attainable outcome, even if it is less than perfect
If we expect perfection from ourselves we will be in perpetual disappointment. If we expect perfection from others, we will be hyper-critical.	When we expect excellence from ourselves we work toward a goal cushioned with grace. When we expect excellence from others, we set goals and encourage others under the umbrella of grace, that allows for humanity–mistakes and all.
Motivated by fear of failure.	Motivated by confidence. Allows for failure.
Can drain your energy and diminish your productivity, your efficiency and effectiveness, and worse still, may damage your self esteem, and peace of mind.	Fills you with energy, acts as your cheerleader, boosts your self esteem, and makes you productive.
Often MPs will not complete things, not start things, or not even take things on at all, for fear of not being able to do it perfectly. Perfectionism often causes procrastination. Fear of being unable to deliver to some unachievable standard often causes them to completely avoid doing what needs to be done. Perfectionists are terrified of making a mistake, and consequently find themselves stressed, anxious, and desperately focused on not failing. They maintain unrealistic expectations of themselves and of others and will often micromanage, causing undue stress on themselves and others.	Excellence focuses your attention on what’s right and working well, rather than what’s not working – and this keeps your attention on the positives and how things could be even better. Excellence is limitless and progressive, since you can always reach for greater and greater excellence.
Perfection may demotivate, steal your joy and results in hopelessness.	Excellence motivates you to do well within the reality of your temperament, your talents, and your circumstances. We “hit the mark” in context of all those things