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Pros and cons of being a perfectionist

At York St John University we have the largest group of researchers dedicated to examining the consequences of perfectionism in the UK. The most common question we are asked about our work is whether it is a good or bad thing to be a perfectionist. That is, do we want our students, employees, athletes, even children, to be perfectionists? Based on the findings of over 60 studies members of our group have conducted to date, and the many more conducted by other researchers around the world, the answer to this question is, well, complicated.

Before we explain, first we

should clarify what we mean by perfectionism. Perfectionism is a personality trait that includes two main features – the tendency to set exceptionally high standards (often referred to as perfectionistic strivings) and the tendency to be harsh and self-critical when these standards are not met (often referred to as perfectionistic concerns). It develops as the result of both genetic and social factors, so some people are born with a proclivity for perfectionism, but it can also be learned, particularly from parents. (1,2,3)

Also, contrary to what people might think, there really is no such thing as a perfectionist. Like other personality traits,

perfectionism exists to some degree in everyone. Some people are highly perfectionistic (ie, report higher levels of the features of perfectionism) and other people are less perfectionistic (ie, report lower levels of the features of perfectionism). This is important because this means perfectionism is not an issue that concerns only the gifted and talented, as some people think. On the contrary, the effects of perfectionism are relevant for everyone.

In regard to what the effects of perfectionism are, and herein lies the complexity, research indicates that for some people, some of the time, perfectionism

may have some benefits.

However, for most people, most of the time, perfectionism is likely to come with significant costs. The benefits of perfectionism lie in the potential for the achievement behaviour associated with perfectionism to contribute to better performance. This is a relationship that has been found in multiple domains including school, sports and the workplace. This finding reflects the well documented benefits of setting high goals, hard work and single-minded dedication, all things we can expect to an extent from individuals who exhibit perfectionism. (4,5,6)

The costs, however, lie in the relationship between perfectionism and both mental and physical illhealth. Evidence of the link between harsh self-critical features of perfectionism and mental ill health is the strongest in research, by far outweighing the evidence of the relationship between its other features and performance. A number of large scale studies have recently been published that have collated all available research on these topics and have reported that harsh self-critical features of perfectionism are positively related to anxiety disorders, burnout, depression and suicide ideation. Less research is available on perfectionism and physical health but what is available suggests that these features are also related to a range of illnesses such as insomnia and chronic fatigue syndrome, even earlier death. (7,8,9,10,11,12)

Because individuals who report higher perfectionistic strivings also tend to report higher perfectionistic concerns, it is difficult not to consider one without the other. The consequences and desirability of perfectionism therefore reflect the potential for both some possible performance gains, at least in the shortterm, and likely health difficulties in the longterm.

Another way of making sense of this complexity is to think of perfectionism as a vulnerability factor. That is, even seemingly well-adjusted, high-performing and healthy people are likely to develop mental and physical illhealth if they have higher levels of perfectionism and things become stressful. In this sense, rather than providing resilience to routine setbacks, perfectionism makes people

profoundly susceptible to inevitable bumps in the road.

We have seen this in our own laboratory work where a single failure on a performance task is enough to induce more negative thoughts and avoidance strategies. (13)

In considering existing research, our opinion is that the downsides of perfectionism by far outweigh the upsides. Do we want our students, athletes, employees and children to be more perfectionistic? No, perfectionism holds too few benefits and too greater risks for those who exhibit it. So, what are we to do? Our advice is that if perfectionistic tendencies are contributing to mental health issues, people should obviously seek support from trained professionals, starting with a GP.

However, for people who are not suffering mental health issues, and like many of us simply live with more perfectionistic tendencies than we would like, we need to learn to better manage our perfectionistic tendencies and keep them in check.

Some of the easiest things that we can all do are to recognise the potential costs of perfectionism to ourselves and others, remind ourselves that we can still achieve our goals without being perfectionistic (in fact, it is probably more likely and will definitely be more fun along the way) and, in our daily lives, be a little less critical and a little more flexible when things go awry.

The article is co-authored by Michael Grugan, a graduate teaching assistant and doctoral student at York St John University. His research to date has focused on how perfectionism influences the

interpersonal behaviour of athletes. He is also interested in how the social environment encourages perfectionism.

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