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Pros and cons of being a perfectionist

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 and 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 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 deaths. (7,8,9,10,11,12)

Because individuals who report higher perfectionistic orientations 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 the link between all available evidence of 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, but 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 suggests 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 and 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, but can also be learned, particularly from parents. (1,2,3)

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