The Perfectionist's Handbook

Take risks, invite criticism, and make the most of your mistakes

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The Perfectionist’s Handbook

Take Risks, Invite Criticism, and Make the Most of Your Mistakes

Jeff Szymanski, PhD
To Mom, Richard, Becky, and Corey
Acknowledgments

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Introduction

During the sixth week studying nonstop for my doctoral candidacy exam—a two-day test that required nine hours of essay writing—I had constructed a three-inch binder filled with notes, articles, and outlines. I had decided I wanted to be a psychologist when I was 15 years old, and by doing well on this exam, I would gain official entry into the doctoral program in clinical psychology. It would be worth it when it was all over—when all of my studying, dedication, and striving to be the best got me to this place.

I was thinking about this as I sat on my bed in my 300-square-foot studio apartment with the binder on my lap, when I realized that I had been studying for a while and needed a break. I went into the kitchen to get a drink of water, but my mind kept going back to the topics I had been poring over: “What was the outcome of that depression study?” “Who developed that anxiety disorders assessment?” “I have to get myself organized if I am going to do well on this exam!” Then, as I was finishing my water and looking at the cupboard, a seemingly unrelated thought occurred to me: The glasses in the back of the cupboard weren't getting used as much as the ones in the front. I started to grab the glasses in the back, moving them to the front, keeping track of which glasses were recently used and which were not. It seemed ridiculous to me at the time that I hadn't thought of this before. “Organizing the outside organizes the inside—and I need to be organized if I am going to do well!” Wait a minute. What was I doing? Admittedly, it was a little crazy. Organizing my drinking glasses wasn't going to help me with my exam. Organization worked in one context, but it didn't in another. My perfectionist nature was getting the best of me and actually removing my focus from where it needed to be. I tried to get ahold of myself and continue studying.

I did well on my exam and started the dissertation process—one more obstacle surpassed brought a new one to undertake. I spent yet another summer sitting on my bed in my little studio apartment, reading article after article, constructing my ideas, building my case, and going into the lab and writing pretty much every day. I continued to follow the rules and make sacrifices, knowing that my persistence would eventually pay off.

I turned in a draft and ended up in a 45-minute discussion with my dissertation advisor about whether an apostrophe at the end of a sentence needed to be bolded or not. We even printed off one copy with the bold font and one without and laid them side by side for comparison. You couldn't tell the difference, but we both agreed that you had to adhere to the proper writing style. I was worried that I would look like an idiot to the rest of my committee and humiliate my dissertation advisor, and I was concerned that the graduate school may not even accept the final draft if I didn't follow the proper style requirements. I was especially paranoid knowing that the committee checked the final document using rulers to make sure that the margins were correct. Talk about attention to detail!

Both applying for and making my way through graduate school definitely exacerbated my need for perfectionism. However, I was left wondering exactly how having the right margins and bolding the necessary punctuation had anything to do with reaching my goals and feeling good about the outcome I reached. When had hard work on an innovative project turned into the minutia of “to bold or not to bold”? By the time I finished my dissertation, I had changed the filename to
God hates me. Needless to say, graduate school was a very stressful experience for me. In the end, I finished my PhD—and even landed a Harvard Medical School internship. Since then, I have gone on to have a successful career as a psychologist with an appointment at Harvard Medical School and McLean Hospital. I now work as the executive director of the International OCD Foundation, a nonprofit for people with obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD). I attribute much of this success to my perfectionism; I am, in fact, a proudly self-described perfectionist. However, since graduate school, I have reflected a lot on how and why my perfectionism resulted in great rewards, but also at times came with significant costs. Did they always need to go hand in hand? No pain, no gain?

This personal dilemma—wondering what my perfectionism earned versus cost me—mirrored my early experience as a therapist as well. I started out as an outpatient therapist treating a wide range of individuals, many of whom have been very successful in the working world—chief executive officers (CEOs), finance managers, lawyers, doctors, marketing directors, data analysts, performers, and even other therapists. Over time, I started to find that I was talking with many of my patients about this very same dilemma: how their perfectionism is both the source of their greatest achievements as well as much of their stress, anxiety, and interpersonal conflict. Was I supposed to tell them to give up their perfectionism—and should I do the same?

I then received the opportunity to work at the Obsessive Compulsive Disorder Institute (OCDI) at McLean Hospital. This was a very enlightening experience, as perfectionism goes hand in hand with many individuals with OCD. In addition, I got to lead the weekly therapy group devoted specifically to issues with perfectionism, aptly named the “perfectionism group.” The OCDI is a residential facility; the patients with whom I worked were very different from my outpatients in that their symptoms were much more severe. It was also more obvious that these individuals' perfectionism wasn't working for them. I saw firsthand how perfectionism could be especially detrimental when it becomes extreme—when it interferes with one's basic daily functioning, work, relationships, and caring for oneself. In this case, it becomes increasingly associated with psychological disorders such as depression, eating disorders, and OCD. For example, at the Institute, Stephanie was spending three to four hours per day folding her laundry perfectly; Jon spent months agonizing over an overdue article he was writing, thereby putting his job in jeopardy once again; and Christian was not getting out of bed in the morning because he couldn't bear another day fraught with making mistakes.

My patients' extreme need for perfectionism was clearly ruining their lives. It therefore became evident to me that I needed to help exorcise this pathological trait from these suffering individuals. To that end, I would start each group meeting by asking: “Does everyone recognize that their desire for perfection is self-defeating?” “Yes,” they would reply in unison. “Okay. Then let's spend some time talking about what we can do differently.” At this point, their eyes glazed over. I was saying their perfectionism was something bad and self-destructive—something of which they needed to rid themselves. But they had just agreed with me, so why did they stop paying attention as soon as I tried to help them out of this trap?

This pattern kept repeating itself at every group meeting: I would identify perfectionism as a bad thing, a statement with which everyone would agree. Then, the second I began trying to talk them out of it, they would tune me out. They complained that I was telling them to “lower the bar” or...
“just be average,” and they continued to be unwilling to change their perfectionistic habits. At some point, one group member even challenged me, “You seem like a perfectionist yourself.” “Yes,” I admitted, “but mine works for me! Well, most of the time.” So of course, they wanted to know: “How and why does it work for you and not us?”

This conversation took place at about the same time I came across an article describing the difference between healthy versus unhealthy perfectionism. When working for you, perfectionism encourages you to achieve high but reasonable standards that lead to feelings of satisfaction and increased self-esteem, that is, healthy perfectionism. Unhealthy perfectionism, on the other hand, compels you to strive to meet unrealistically high expectations and can be driven by a fear of failure and disappointing others. I thought about how perfectionism played out in my own life. It seemed to me that my intentions were always to strive to achieve positive outcomes and good feelings. If my intentions were good (wanting to excel) and the outcomes I wanted were reasonable (to feel competent and satisfied), why would my perfectionism backfire and result in unhappiness and unwanted results? What made the difference between healthy and unhealthy perfectionism? Apparently, not all perfectionism is the same. This was a critical insight for me and for my patients.

Armed with this new distinction between healthy and unhealthy perfectionism, I realized I could continue to be a perfectionist; I just had to figure out how and why perfectionism sometimes worked and sometimes didn't.

As I began to shape my understanding of perfectionism, the next question that occurred to me was: What did it actually mean to be a perfectionist? What are the defining features of perfectionism? While sorting out these definitions (reviewed in Chapter 1), I then came to realize that no two perfectionists were alike. Everyone seemed to have their own talents and abilities, when their perfectionism paid off, as well as limitations and places where they got stuck. In other words, everyone had their own unique “profile” of their strengths and weaknesses and fell along a continuum of healthy to unhealthy when it came to their perfectionism. Everyone, myself included, seemed to be an amalgam of healthy and unhealthy perfectionism. In Chapter 2, I'm going to ask you to build a profile of your perfectionism: what aspects of perfectionism apply to you and where on the continuum do you fall from healthy to unhealthy.

In my group, I found that this was a much more interesting (and productive) conversation than, “It seems like your perfectionism might not be working, so stop trying to be a perfectionist.” They now had a new understanding of their perfectionism and their own personal perfectionism profile. They could decide for themselves what worked and what didn't and what they were willing to change. However, even with this new perspective and recognizing there were some aspects of their (unhealthy) perfectionism they wanted to change, some still kept hitting roadblocks. It can be very anxiety provoking to give up an old way of doing something and try something new. Therefore, in Chapter 3, I review some strategies for getting past these obstacles.

Once you identify your profile of perfectionism and a willingness to change (if need be), you can take on the second part of the book. I devoted these chapters to covering some common perfectionist strategies that tend to be unsuccessful and introducing alternatives to try. I try to avoid oversimplifying the issues. For example, many other self-help books on perfectionism will typically make statements such as: “Your standards are unrealistically high; stop being so self-defeating,” or “Be more comfortable with making mistakes; everyone does it.” Who wants to hear that? This is
why I encourage you to identify where your perfectionism is working and build on that in the first part of the book (Chapters 1–3). The goal in the second part (Chapters 4–10) is to help you think through some of the strategies you are using that might not be working; figure out why you might continue to use them even when they don't work; determine why they don't work; and discover what some alternatives might be.

I would like you to start with the idea that perfectionism can help you be successful; it isn't necessarily a bad thing to be eliminated altogether. Quite the opposite is true, in fact; your perfectionism might be one of your most valuable attributes and the source of your successes and self-esteem. You hold in your perfectionism the things you want for yourself—things that you may sometimes or even often get for yourself.

Therefore, the first step is fairly simple: Identify and build on your strengths. Figure out what is working, and do this more often. However, when things are not going as well as you'd like, you may also want to ask yourself what you might do differently. The point of this book is not to convince you to give something up. I want to help you become more aware of what you are doing and why and then use this improved self-awareness to make some decisions about what to change and what to leave as is.

With that said, it's easy in our culture—where we regularly hear messages about the need to improve oneself—to become overwhelmed by the feeling that we have to work on everything about ourselves all of the time. We all have our anxieties, weaknesses, and struggles in life; we simply have to figure out which are most important for us to work on. Priorities and contexts change over [End of Sample]