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PERFECTION'S DECEPTION

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What's wrong with our quest for perfectionism? Do we have healthy ambitions or are they unreasonable expectations? An energetic drive for excellence is a healthy trait, yet sometimes our goals can take us too far, as *our culture purveyor Jonathan Spindel* learns in a new book

What happens when we fall short of our goals? Striving for total excellence is a worthy endeavor, and yet we've all experienced that inner critic, the voice that sets the bar too high and screams "failure" even when we succeed. Have you ever held yourself to an impossibly high ideal?

Dr. Jane Bluestein, an internationally renowned counselor and author, presents *The Perfection Deception*, an enlightening investigation of how perfectionism can undermine hard work and success. Dr. Bluestein explains how perfectionism shapes our reality and defines our identity, and offers solutions to help find the balance between determination and acceptance. We caught up with Dr. Bluestein to discuss her latest book and shed some

light on an issue with which so many of us can identify these days.

Where do we get the seemingly perfect ideals to which we compare ourselves? “The media may be the easiest to target,” Dr. Bluestein asserts, “but it is also the hardest to ignore. We are barraged with messages about who we are supposed to be, how we’re supposed to look, what our lives are supposed to look like.” Naturally, the media portrays the most perfect version of reality. On television, for example, it seems everyone is impossibly beautiful, wears the latest fashion, and drives the newest car. But this idealistic portrayal is not itself responsible for perfectionism. As Dr. Bluestein articulates, “My main concern was about what makes us vulnerable to these messages; a feeling like we’re inadequate if we don’t drive a certain car, wear a certain brand—not to mention size, make a certain income, or live up to standards that really are not appropriate for who we really are.”

A beneficial approach to amend the drive to perfectionism is to understand the difference between healthy ambition and unreasonable self-expectations. So, what’s the difference? “Well, it actually took most of the book to answer that question,” Dr. Bluestein says. “The shortest possible answer compares perfectionism (and the need to pull off a certain image) with the healthy pursuit of excellence. I’m actually quite a big fan of accuracy, precision, and doing the best we can do.”

Striving for perfection may manifest in your professional identity as well as your personal. Let’s examine how perfectionism affects professional ambition. A good place to begin is to look at your daily, weekly or monthly to-do lists. “I tend to cross the line when I’m over-committing or over-correcting, or when I actually think I can accomplish a to-do list that would reasonably take weeks to finish,” Dr. Bluestein admits. We’ve all experienced that feeling of over-extension; we commit to more than we can reasonably

accomplish. And yet we fulfill our commitments – but all too often, it's at the expense of our personal time, our families, our emotions and our health.

We've all experienced stress; it's a natural component of hard work, and in fact can serve to motivate us to fulfill our goals. But how can you tell if you're working toward your goals, or feeding the "perfection deception" within you? "Is it worth the stress to meet an unrealistic deadline, or say, choose a career based on pressure to get approval or acceptance?" Dr. Bluestein asks. We should ask ourselves: when we commit to more than we can accomplish, is it for our personal satisfaction, or for the sake of outside approval? Do we go out of your way to please others? A little selfless generosity is a great virtue, but remember we must also balance this with your own goals and priorities. "Healthy striving does not usually involve trying to prove ourselves or our worth," Dr. Bluestein advises. Can we forgive ourselves for imperfections? Yes we can. If we fail to meet our goals, that simply means we're still on the path of self-improvement.

"Am I doing something to satisfy curiosity or a particular passion, or am I'm doing it to look good, get approval, gain self-worth, or avoid negative reactions from others?" Dr. Bluestein asks. "If I'm interested in growth—learning, improving, or producing, trying to get ahead of where I was when I started, then I'm not quite so worried about getting it right." So when we push ourselves to meet high expectations, we ought to remember to take stock before we start suffering. "Is it worth the stress, pain, health risks to carve myself to fit into some random cultural ideal of beauty, meet an unrealistic deadline, or say, choose a career or mate based on pressure to get conditional approval or acceptance from some person or group that's important to me? I guess the bottom line is: are we having fun yet?"