

Getting Real, Getting Well

by Dr. Jane Bluestein

“I guess I’m a bit suspicious about the idea that a perfectionist can just stop being one. I applaud anyone who’s managed to pull that off, but for me, the process is ongoing, and on behalf of anyone in a similar position, shooting for imperfect progress might be a more reasonable goal.” (page 162)

Consider this:

- My perspective (again): There is no such thing as “good perfectionism.” Perfectionism is a pathological adaptation to the fear of abandonment, rejection, or exclusion. This fear can apply to our family of origin, peer group, work environment, or society in general, and may be associated with physical, emotional, social, or financial survival.
- “Identifying perfectionism can be especially tricky because in so many ways it resembles a positive, healthy pursuit of excellence.” (page 167) The acid test generally refers to how we’re feeling. If we’re learning and having fun with whatever mess we’re making, it’s probably a pretty healthy venture. If we’re stressed, anxious, worried about what others may think, and keep doing it over (or putting it off), we have probably crossed the line.
- There is no quick fix for perfectionism. The goal is to find ways to quit having it run our lives.
- People with perfectionistic tendencies can change their belief systems and behavior patterns, however deep-seated fears may persist. Sometimes getting whole requires falling apart.
- Standing up to the Inner Critic is incredibly liberating. Allowing the death of our ego’s perception of who we are can provoke uncertainty, hopelessness, fear, and depression. This is rarely an easy journey and will most likely require the assistance and support of a caring professional.
- Different strategies will be effective with different people, or at different times in the healing journey.
- Stay open to different approaches. Even small changes can trigger big shifts.

Potential healing strategies:

- Pay attention to the need for approval and the degree to which we are willing to shape-shift either for the benefit of others or to protect ourselves in some way.
- Examine the “deception.” Which parts of yourself do you hide, suppress, or deny?
- Acknowledge and celebrate accomplishments. Make peace with being kind of awesome.
- Redefine your idea of *perfect*. Sort out cultural ideals from what is authentic for you.
- The airlines tell us to put our own oxygen masks on first for a reason. Make yourself a priority.
- Self-care requires a belief in our right to happiness and peace of mind.
- Stop comparing yourself—*with anyone*. Reflect on your own growth and progress.
- Learn from failure. Be compassionate with yourself. (Self-loathing is not a healing modality.)
- Set achievable goals. Focus on personal needs rather than expectations of others.
- Learn to say no (or not now, or not yet) when necessary.
- Pay attention to how your choices affect you—physically, emotionally, and psychologically.
- Consider the philosophy of *kaizen*: honoring small improvements and tiny, positive shifts.
- Embrace creativity and the messiness of trial and error.
- Watch your response to disapproval and discouragement. There will always be people who don’t understand your passion, get who you are, or like you. Know that that’s OK.

- Look for useful data in even harsh criticism. Try not to personalize negative feedback.
- Attempt to stay grounded in present time. Make peace with the past. Focus on what's on your plate right now, what you can control.
- Keep moving forward, whether or not you can see the results of your efforts at the moment.
- Make gratitude a part of your daily practice, focusing on what's going right and getting better.
- Our relationships with others is only as healthy as our relationship with ourself.
- Respect other people's need for autonomy, success, and dignity.
- Practice win-win: "How can we both get what we want?"
- Watch out for resentment, self-righteousness, and feelings of helplessness or victimization.
- Avoid connecting people's behaviors to your emotional well-being. (Stop using I-messages.)
- Learn to ask for what you want.
- Practice setting boundaries, letting others know how they can get what they want. Focus on the positive consequences of their cooperation.
- To whatever degree possible, minimize contact with negative, critical people who hold you back or bring you down. Seek those who will love you for who you are, and who will support and encourage the person you are becoming.
- Show kindness and appreciation for others. Be an encourager.
- Forgive yourself and others. Accept the reality of what actually occurred rather than ruminating over what should have happened. Grudges get pretty heavy to carry around. Let go.
- Remember that change is possible. Our brains are capable of reorganization as we build new brain cells and neural networks with changes in our behavior, environment, and thinking.
- Be willing to experience the discomfort of stripping away masks and patterns you developed long ago to protect yourself. There is magic on the other side of this healing process.
- Healing may require you to tolerate a good bit of anxiety and face up to the imperfections you've been trying to hide. Watch out for the tendency to numb out or self-medicate (using drugs, alcohol, food, work, sex, shopping, gaming, or TV, for example). Don't rely on familiar anesthetics to help you through the healing process.
- Reach out and get help. You don't need to go through these changes on your own, and there are others (individual professionals and groups) who can understand what you're feeling.
- There are dozens of therapeutic modalities. Find one that you trust and feels right for you.
- Watch out for people who try to cheer you up, distract you, or tell you how good you have it, especially when you're feeling vulnerable or are in emotional distress.
- Make time for quiet reflection. (You may have to put "Take a break" on your to-do list.)
- Consciously change verbal patterns from fixed mindset comments ("I can't do this.") to growth mindset ideas ("I'm struggling but I can improve with practice and help.").
- Consider integrating body work, energy work, and relaxation techniques (with or without traditional cognitive approaches) to balance thoughts and emotions.
- Move. Stretch. Take a walk. Meditate. Hydrate. Breathe. Spend some time in nature. Laugh.
- Keep a journal. Some people process well by writing down their thoughts.
- Deliberately try something new. Allow yourself to not already be great at something.
- Remember that you are so much more than your grades, your income, your thighs or abs, or how neat you keep your house or car.

"So can we please stop chasing perfection? It doesn't exist, won't last when we think we've found it, and will create all sorts of problems for us along the way. Help is available. Change is possible, as is self-acceptance and the kind of love that doesn't take away from who we are or came to be."
 (From *The Perfection Deception*, page 261.)