

The Problem with Perfect

by Dr. Jane Bluestein

Negative outcomes that can be associated with perfectionism:

- Internalized beliefs and identity built on feedback and messages about who we are and who we *should* be (reality distortion).
- A misplaced sense of responsibility for the well-being of others.
- A tendency to place others' needs ahead of our own in the belief that doing so is necessary to secure attachment, inclusion, or belonging (avoid abandonment or rejection).
- Decisions based on a fear of hurting, disappointing, or upsetting others, often without consideration of personal needs or priorities, or potential negative consequences to self.
- Loss of authenticity, sense of self.
- "Stinking thinking:" cognitive distortions or irrational thoughts that "[make] you believe you will fail, that bad things will happen to you, or that you are not a very good person." (Definition posted on the Cambridge Dictionary website.) Can include contradictions, generalizations, and rigidity in thinking.
- Behavioral outcomes such as overcommitting and overdoing, underachieving and paralysis, physical and mental disorders, and failed relationships.
- Inclination toward all-or-nothing thinking. (Imperfection equals worthlessness.)
- A tendency to jump to a negative conclusion, make generalizations (assigning a distorted "always" or "never" status to mistakes, failure, or negative experiences). May also include worrying, catastrophizing, assuming what others are thinking, and over-predict negative outcomes.
- Negativity, focus on flaws. "Critic's math:" 1 insult + 1000 compliments = 1 insult.
- Telescopic thinking: Magnifying unmet goals or mistakes, minimizing or dismissing achievements and accomplishments.
- Regrets, ruminating on a negative or embarrassing event. Difficulty staying in present time.
- Comparing self to others, participating in an imaginary competition, usually coming up short. (May also include a temporary rush we get from fixating on someone we consider inferior.)
- Imposter syndrome, sense of phoniness regardless of achievements or accomplishments, waiting to be "found out."
- Emotional reasoning: "Perfection and achievement will win us approval and acceptance."
- Feelings of overwhelm, often from setting the bar higher than is reasonable or necessary. Difficulty saying no.
- Self-sabotage, second-guessing decisions, avoiding situations that trigger the need to be perfect.
- Difficulty completing a task (trying to get it just right). Hyper-focus on detail, endless revisions. OR procrastination and paralysis (fear that prevents starting or undertaking a challenging task).

- Sense of shame or self-loathing. Inner critic that confuses our actions with our worth.
- Difficulty maintaining healthy, caring, respectful relationships. Boundary issues. Intimacy avoidance (fear of being real, authentic, flawed).
- Mistrust of others' abilities, need to "do it myself." Difficulty delegating. "One right way..."
- Disappointment in others, often from unexpressed expectations. "Fantasy ideals" for others.
- Need to be right (at the expense of others being wrong). Need for others to show remorse.
- Defensiveness in response to criticism (fear of being seen as imperfect.)
- Alienating others (with criticism, nagging, sarcasm, re-doing their work, imposing unreasonable standards, shaming, or expressing contempt).
- Development of "psychic holes," seeking fulfillment from outside ourselves (seeking popularity, positive feedback, a sense of importance to others, or acquisition of things, for example.)
- Anxiety or "phobic nervousness" about contact with our "true Nature."
- Reliance on deception or "masks" to cope with feelings of emptiness and fear, or as an attempt to cover up those feelings.
- Stress and anxiety, dread of "falling short." Difficulty gauging when tasks are sufficiently complete. Fatigue and exhaustion.
- Stuffed feelings, fear of social consequences of our emotional authenticity.

"Following the rules and doing what's expected can buy us belonging and safety, but this can come at a high price. We pick on the new kid to be accepted by the popular crowd or laugh at a derogatory joke to fit in with office associates, even though at some level we are squirming in discomfort at our internal hypocrisy. Denying the best parts of ourselves to please others creates a perfect breeding ground for resentment, depression, and self-doubt. And sacrificing our integrity and the essence of who we are to accommodate someone else's ideas about what is acceptable, desirable, or cool is perfectionism at its most soul-killing."
(page 140)

- Potential for a serious mental health crisis.
- Body-image and food issues. Eating disorders, use of amphetamines, addiction (often associated with satisfying a need for power and control in our lives).
- Workaholism, being constantly busy (possibly associated with avoidance of feelings).
- Numbing and self-harm, cutting (often an outlet for deep distress and emotional pain).
Suicide.

Please note that perfectionism can look very different from one person to another, but is likely to include some (or many) of the patterns listed above. All of the items in this list were mentioned frequently in the literature as well as in interviews and conversations with *individual* contributors to the book.

The Perfection Deception by Dr. Jane Bluestein. (Deerfield Beach, FL: Health Communications, Inc., 2015)