



Colorado Lawyer Assistance Program

Are You a Perfectionist?

Perfectionism is a dangerous state of mind in an imperfect world. ~Robert Hillyer

As a culture, we reward perfectionists for their persistence on setting high standards and for their relentless drive to meet those standards. On a more personal note, perfectionism starts in childhood when we strive for the love and attention of our parents, teachers, peers, etc. Most perfectionists are high achievers, though they pay the price for success with chronic unhappiness, dissatisfaction, depression, and anxiety. Other perfectionists, however, become chronic procrastinators and can't seem to meet deadlines or get things done because they are paralyzed by a fear of not being "good enough."

In the study of law and the legal profession, perfectionism is encouraged, but it is misunderstood. There really is no such thing as perfection, and when we attempt to control ourselves or the environment and the people in it, we don't make things perfect – we destroy the potential for authentic communication, creativity, honesty, reality, humor, understanding and compassion. The negative psychological ramifications of perfectionism are extreme, including the higher risk of depression, anxiety, and suicide amongst those who are perfectionists. Below are some of the warning signs that your perfectionism might be holding you back. Can you identify with any of them?

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Being eager to please;• Knowing that your drive to be perfect ("control freak") is hurting you or others, but considering it a price to pay for success;• Being highly critical of others (seeing other people's behaviors or choices as "wrong" and believe that your way of doing things is "right" or "better");• Having a hard time opening up to people (fear of rejection or abandonment); | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Obsessing over every little "mistake;"• Taking things personally;• Getting defensive when criticized;• Feeling like you're never really "there" yet;• Taking pleasure in other people's failures;• Focusing on "fault" and problems;• Being rigid, harsh, and static;• Engaging in "all-or-nothing" thinking; or• Feeling guilt or shame often. |
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These tendencies generally direct themselves inward or outward as we become critical, controlling, or shaming towards those around us or toward ourselves. There is a difference between encouraging excellence and expecting perfection. When we encourage ourselves to do the best we can, or we celebrate when those around us accomplish their goals, we are making our own “world” better. However, when we believe that people, situations, projects, or outcomes have to be a “certain” way in order for us to be happy, we set ourselves (and those around us) up for disappointment, depression, anxiety, and hurt. When accomplishments and efforts never seem to be enough, we are focusing on failure rather than celebrating success.

When you start engaging in your particular brand of critical, controlling, or shaming behaviors, ask yourself one (or several) of the following questions:

- Is my way of doing things the “only” way?
- Am I assuming that other people are being critical when they probably aren’t?
- Am I being unnecessarily hard on myself or others?
- Is this thought causing me mental or emotional pain?
- Am I trying to do something for someone else because I don’t trust that they can do it themselves?
- Am I overreacting to my own or someone else’s decision, behavior, or comments?

If you answered “yes” to any of the questions, take a deep breath and try the following remedies:

1. Remember that there is no such thing as perfection. There is no right or wrong way to do something. If you, or someone else, makes a “mistake,” it is an opportunity to learn – it is NOT the end of the world, nor is it an excuse to lose your temper, be critical, or be insensitive.
2. Remember that life is a journey, not a destination. Mind your own business, and let others walk their own road (don’t be co-dependent). Studying and practicing law involve problem solving for others, so it can become second-nature to give advice or try to “fix” other people’s lives. But there is a difference between coming up with a good argument for a case and trying to be a problem solver for everyone you come across (whether they ask for it or not.)

3. Be grateful for who you have become, and set reasonable goals for yourself. Do not punish yourself mentally or emotionally if you don't get things "perfect" along the way. Stand back and appreciate your efforts rather than focusing on whether you have made it to the "destination."
4. Don't compare yourself to others, and don't compare others to you. This can be particularly tempting in law school where we are encouraged to compete with others, but remember that all we can do is our best, and what other people are doing is really none of our business.
5. Keep things in perspective.

Perfectionistic tendencies stem from negative life experiences, such as fear, abuse, neglect, and narcissism. Perfectionism is an attempt to control the world around and within us; but we really know that isn't possible, so it is actually perceived by others as a weakness even though it's an attempt at strength. The next time you find the need to be hard on yourself or someone around you, remember that you are actually showing that you don't have the courage to handle living in an imperfect world. Relax, and be kinder to yourself and to others. It will not only improve your interpersonal relationships, it will also improve your mental, emotional, and physical health. Enjoy the journey!

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