



COLORADO LAWYER ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

How to Deal with a Perfectionist

“Perfectionism is self-abuse of the highest order.” ~ Anne Wilson Schaef

Every one of us has come across a perfectionist: we were raised by one, we married one, we work for one, we’re friends with one, opposing counsel was one, etc; in fact, in the practice of law, the odds are pretty high that we *are* one. For those who don’t identify with type-A perfectionism, remember that some tendencies are actually perfectionism in disguise; perfectionism is often the cause of procrastination because of a fear of failure or judgment if we do not meet others’ standards. Practicing law requires a special set of skills, including: tier level thinking (like playing chess); being skeptical and critical; being independent/disciplined/hardworking; having constant deadlines; having a “tough skin;” and being a perfectionist. The practice of law is a highly detail-oriented profession with high stakes, and that lends itself to the need for perfectionism. Many of us entered law school with a “healthy” amount of type-A tendencies, but all who survived the process came out with the ability to switch into type-A, perfectionistic “mode” at the drop of a hat. These tendencies made us successful in the competitive, adversarial practice of law. The problem, as research points out, is that these tendencies do not make for successful interpersonal relationships or even personal well-being and happiness.

Perfectionistic tendencies stem from negative life experiences, such as fear, abuse, neglect, and narcissism. Maybe we were raised in a family where we were only allowed to express certain emotions, or we only received validation if we had straight-A’s or were the star athlete, or the external presentation of the family (the house, how we dressed, etc.) was perfect for the world to see but what went on inside the home was chaotic and traumatizing. Or, sometimes, the children were somehow responsible for the wellbeing of the parents. This is called the parentified child. Maybe the parent(s) suffered from mental illness such as depression, substance abuse, were having financial difficulties, or fought often. The child learns that in order to get love and attention from parents who are self-absorbed or preoccupied, the child must “be” a certain way. The child learns to comfort and sooth him or herself by setting expectations and then trying to live up to those expectations. This need drives the child to scrutinize and criticize the environment, other people, and situations; then compare the results to the expected standard of “perfection.” These tendencies strategically distract the child from feeling isolated, invisible, unloved, or not good enough.

In adulthood, perfectionism becomes 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. It takes courage to accept the imperfect

world that we live in. However, when the unpredictability of the imperfection frightens us, or we believe that things have to be a certain way in order for us to be happy or content, we might try certain tactics to make us feel better, such as being highly critical of others; being eager to please; having a hard time opening up to people for fear of rejection or abandonment; overreacting to situations; making sure everything in the environment is spotless; obsessing over every little “mistake;” taking pleasure in other people’s failures; focusing on whose “fault” something is; focusing on problems; feeling guilty or shame often; being rigid, harsh, and static; or engaging in “all-or-nothing” thinking.

Research points to three types of perfectionism that you may recognize in yourself and/or those around you:

Self-oriented perfectionists exhibit the stereotypical motivation to adhere to strict standards while maintaining a strong motivation to attain perfection. This motivation causes a person to avoid failure at all costs and to be self-critical in a way that leads to obsessiveness (such as obsessive worrying), inefficiency or avoidance (procrastination to avoid the failure or going slowly with projects to make sure they are perfect), and victim/martyr mentality (I am the only one who cares about things being “right” or “good enough”). These individuals have a self-created, hypothetical idea about what is right/best/great and will not accept any other option.

Other-oriented perfectionists set unrealistic standards for significant others, spouses/partners, co-workers, children, and friends/family. They then stringently criticize or judge the performances of those around them. These individuals are almost tyrannical in their judgment and expectation of others, but never have the same expectations for themselves. If they make mistakes, they rationalize and have excuses for their behavior; but they will never allow others to “get away” with that same behavior. They project their perfectionism to the people around them. The old adage “do as I say, not as I do” applies to other-oriented perfectionists.

Socially-prescribed perfectionists believe that others hold unrealistic expectations for them that they cannot live up to. They perceive a pressure to be perfect, believing that others evaluate them critically. They feel shame when they do not adhere to the standards they believe others have for them; therefore, rather than believing “I *did* something wrong,” they believe “there must be something wrong with *me*.” They strive to be flawless because they believe that being perfect is important to other people.

Everyone has some version of perfectionism, and it’s often a combination of the three. As a culture, we reward perfectionists for their persistence on setting high standards and for their relentless drive to meet those standards. Most perfectionists are high achievers, though some 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." Either way, perfectionists have a desire to be faultless and equate errors as personal defects that diminish self-worth or the worth of others, and have a need for external validation, praise, and constant feedback from others.

Researcher Brené Brown explains the problem with perfectionism: "Perfectionism is a self-destructive and addictive belief system that fuels this primary thought: If I look perfect, and do everything perfectly, I can avoid or minimize the painful feelings of shame, judgment, and blame." So what happens when we can't reach the standard of perfection we set for ourselves or others, and feelings of shame, judgment, and blame take over? The negative psychological ramifications of perfectionism are extreme, including the higher risk of depression, anxiety, and suicide amongst those who are perfectionists. It is no coincidence that attorneys, practitioners of a profession with high rates of perfectionism, also have high rates of depression, anxiety, and suicide.

A recent informal survey of States' Lawyer Assistance Programs (LAPs) across the country revealed that between November 2014 and May 2015, 20 LAPs reported a total of 44 known attorney and judge suicides. Colorado contributed to that total number. It should be noted, however, that some deaths identified as accidents may have been suicides, so the rate could be higher than the survey revealed. Depression statistics from the American Psychological Association show that lawyers are 3.6 times more likely to suffer from depression than non-lawyers, and that depression is also a strong risk factor for suicide. Because of the mental health crisis going on in the legal community across the country, CNN published an article written by Rosa Flores and Rose Marie Arce in January of 2014 titled "Why are lawyers killing themselves?" Not surprisingly, the article points to high levels of stress and depression as contributing factors.

How can we take care of ourselves in a profession that fuels perfectionism, and in a society that bombards us with specific standards for "happiness" (beauty, weight, money, etc.)? Two antidotes for perfectionism are vulnerability and authenticity. In the legal profession, however, the idea of being vulnerable is likened to appearing "weak;" and appearing as anything less than "Superman/Superwoman" is taboo. But being vulnerable does not mean weakness or submissiveness. Vulnerability implies having the courage to be yourself, which means being authentic. When we are fearful that others will not accept us, or when we are attempting to achieve a certain goal that requires some acting, we behave inauthentically. Interestingly enough, research shows we perceive inauthenticity on a physiological level. When we are around someone who is "fake," our blood pressure increases and we feel uncomfortable. Ironically, when we behave inauthentically so that

others will accept us, we end up pushing them away. In addition, it takes a lot of energy to suppress our ideas or our true personality, and to wear different masks to please (or confront) those around us. It is an unnecessary drain on our energy that can create depression, sleep disturbances, anxiety, and fatigue.

Striving to do our best and setting goals for ourselves is gratifying and healthy. Perfectionism, on the other hand, is “frustrating, neurotic, and a terrible waste of time” according to journalist and news editor Edwin Bliss, who spent 25 years producing for the likes of Edward R. Murrow and Walter Cronkite. In the legal profession, perfectionism is often prized, 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 do not make things perfect – we destroy the potential for authentic communication, creativity, honesty, reality, humor, understanding and compassion. Nothing extinguishes laughter and joy faster than judgment, criticism, guilt, and shame.

What sort of situations bring out your personal brand of perfectionist? What type of people do you project your perfectionist onto? Be honest with yourself: do those traits serve you well? Do they enhance your experience of life? Do your controlling thoughts or behaviors bring you closer to, or separate you, from those around you? 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: 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.

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). As attorneys, we are involved in other people's lives on a daily basis. But there is a difference between providing legal counsel or advice when we are being paid and trying to be a problem solver for everyone we 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 your predetermined destination.
4. **Don't compare yourself to others, and don't compare others to you.**
5. **Keep things in perspective.**

The pressure to be flawless is both internal (something we expect of ourselves) and external (something that comes from those around us or from society in general). 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. And, when you come across a perfectionist, remember that their need to control actually stems from suffering and different types of traumatic experiences. Relax, and be kinder to yourself and to others, including those perfectionists around you. It will not only improve your interpersonal relationships, it will also improve your mental, emotional, and physical health.

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