
HOW TO TAME YOUR PERFECTIONISM DURING TIMES OF CHANGE

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As Heraclitus and many other philosophers and theologians have pointed out over the ages, the only constancy in life is change; yet change is still what causes us the most stress. Why is change stressful? In general, we feel safe when we have the right balance of consistency and growth (or ‘wanted’ change). Too much consistency feels boring, uninspired, and stagnant. When we don’t have room for growth and expansion, we desire change. Too much change, however, feels overwhelming and ‘out of control.’ What tips the balance one way or the other is subjective depending on the person. It could be anything from too many emails in our inboxes, having to go to school to pick up one of our children who was just suspended, attending to an aging parent who now needs a high level of care, too much traffic on the way to court making you late, unexpected discovery in a case, or the fact that your spouse or partner didn’t take out the trash as promised. Any number of unwanted changes that we perceive as stressful and negative can result in feeling strain, worry, low energy, and hopelessness, particularly if the stress becomes compounded and gains momentum like a snow ball rolling downhill.

Maintaining this balance is challenging for attorneys because we not only have to create



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a balance of safety, reliability and calm with the right amount of passion and interest in our own lives, but we are consistently helping our clients navigate through change in their lives. As such, our profession demands a special set of skills and competencies to make sure the change our clients experience is as painless as possible. Because the practice of law is a detail-oriented profession with high stakes, and because our clients want whatever changes they are experiencing to happen in a certain way, perfectionism is one of those skills. The problem, as research points out, is that perfectionistic tendencies ironically make

“Everything changes and nothing stands still.”

~Heraclitus



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facing change difficult, and can negatively impact our interpersonal relationships, personal well-being, and happiness.

Perfectionism is basically an attempt to protect ourselves and feel safe; after all, if we can create the illusion of control, then we must be safe, right? Part of the problem is that the environment is always changing, and we have very little to no control over how circumstances play out, or how people around us are going to behave, what they will say, or what they will think. Another part of the perfectionistic equation is spending a tremendous amount of time and energy worrying about what other people think of us and modifying our behavior, our words, or our appearance in order to please others. There is a good reason why social media outlets put “like” as a response option to posts; this temporarily boosts a sense of self-worth and a sense of control in the person posting it. But this temporary feedback is like everything else - it will change, and that will leave us scrambling to find new ways to please and impress others. Like an addiction, it is a vicious cycle that leave us feeling hollow and even less capable of dealing with change.

Striving to do our best and setting goals 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. After all, 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 and anxiety amongst those who are perfectionists.

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, and, ironically, destroy the very skills we need to handle change: creativity, honesty, reality, humor, understanding and compassion. After all, nothing extinguishes laughter and joy faster than judgment, criticism, guilt, shame, and being or feeling micromanaged.

So 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 and success (beauty, weight, money, etc.)? Two antidotes for perfectionism are vulnerability and authenticity. In the legal profession, 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. In order to handle change well, we have to know our priorities and be honest with ourselves and others about our preferences and opinions. Other quick tips to try when unexpected and unwelcomed changes occur include:

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. Focus on your strengths, resiliency, and ability to bounce-back from stress. What have you or other people done in the past to handle the type of situation you are now facing?
3. 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). Often times we try to control changes going on in other people’s lives because we believe that we know what is best for another person. As attorneys, however, 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. Keep in mind that the more you go looking for problems, the more you will find!
4. 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 pre-determined destination. After all, people who never face failure are those who never take risks or have the strength to be authentic.
5. Don’t compare yourself to others, and don’t compare others to you.
6. Keep things in perspective.

The pressure to be flawless and for things to stay status quo 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 change and transformation keep our lives from being stagnant. Focus more on how to creatively approach and resolve problems than on the inconvenience and stress that the problems might create. And, if there is something in your environment that you cannot control, do not waste your time perseverating on it or worrying about it. 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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