



For you, your career, and your life

RAP

Resident Assistance Program Newsletter
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The Quest for a Perfect Life - Hazardous to Your Health?

Perfectionism can get in the way of having a fulfilling, successful life. Gordon Flett, Ph.D., Professor at York University and holder of a Canada Research Chair in Personality and Health has researched and written about the health risks of perfectionist behavior. He has also studied how perfectionism can damage relationships.

Dr. Flett recently shared his thoughts on this topic with RAP.

Q: What has been the most surprising finding of your research on perfectionism?

A: I think it would have to be the negative impact of perfectionism in terms of health problems. It is important for people to know that perfectionism can be deadly in terms of health consequences due to the stress and the lack of self-care involved. In fact, a 2009 study done in Canada by researchers who used our measures showed over seven years that perfectionism predicts early mortality.

Q: What else do you wish more people understood about perfectionism?

A: How destructive perfectionism is in general—especially socially prescribed perfectionism. And because perfectionism involves standards, and standards are relevant to many life domains (e.g., relationships), the negative effects of perfectionism are far reaching.

Q: Is there a way to avoid socially prescribed perfectionism?

We all fall short of perfection. Sometimes the striving can take its toll on our health and our relationships. When the drive to be perfect becomes overwhelming, there are some immediate steps you can take. One of those is to contact your Resident Assistance Program (RAP). This caring and confidential resource is available to you 24/7. RAP professionals are equipped to guide you through a wide range of challenging, stressful and overwhelming personal and work related issues.

Contact RAP: 813-870-3344

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A: I think socially prescribed perfectionism can be difficult if not impossible to avoid. But what is most needed is learning to place less importance on meeting other people's expectations. Along with that, people need adaptive ways of coping with pressure. That's especially applicable for those in occupations where the demands to be perfect are real and part of the occupational role.

Q: Your research reports that physicians, lawyers and architects, whose occupations



Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering.
There is a crack in everything,
That's how the light gets in.

- Leonard Cohen

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Resources

"Managing perfectionism and the excessive striving that undermines flourishing: implications for leading the perfect life," by Gordon L. Flett and Paul L. Hewitt, Chapter 3 in "Flourishing in Life, Work and Careers: Individual Wellbeing and Career Experiences," edited by Ronald J. Burke, Kathryn M. Page, Cary L. Cooper. Edward Elgar Publishing (2015).

<http://tinyurl.com/ns7ss5v>

WHYY Public Media segment on perfectionism with guests Gordon Flett, Patricia DiBartolo and Noa Kageyama

<http://why.org/cms/radiotimes/2014/10/16/29663/>

"Overcoming Perfectionism: Finding the Key to Balance and Self-Acceptance," by Ann Smith MS LMFT. HCI (2013).

"The Cure for the 'Perfect' Life: 12 Ways to Stop Trying Harder and Start Living Braver," by Kathi Lipp and Cheri Gregory. Harvest House Publishers (2014).

"The Gifts of Imperfection: Let Go of Who You Think You're Supposed to Be and Embrace Who You Are," by Brené Brown. Hazelden (2010).

"The Power of Vulnerability," 2010 TEDxHouston talk by Brené Brown. http://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_on_vulnerability

Your Resident Assistance Program

The RAP newsletter is provided as a benefit to medical residents at the USF Health Morsani College of Medicine and their dependents.

We welcome your comments on newsletter topics, however, we cannot provide RAP services by email.

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Perils of Perfectionism: Q & A with Gordon Flett

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emphasize on precision—and also those in leadership roles—are at higher risk for perfectionism-related suicide. You cite recent cases of prominent perfectionists who died by suicide. Are there some warning signs that a person may be at a higher risk for perfection-related suicide?

A: The issue of warning signs is a tricky one since perfectionists are over-represented among those people who took their lives without apparent warning. I would say in general that people who are being very socially isolated are at risk. If there is someone who *should* be showing signs of stress and distress, but is not, they are likely high in the tendency that we call *perfectionistic self-presentation* and they are hiding their distress. People should try to proactively reach out to them. But the lack of overt warning signs is one reason we highlight the need for prevention.

Q: Do you think there is a way to address this earlier in graduate programs and physicians' training?

A: Yes, it needs to be an open talk very early on in the training. Appropriate ways of thinking about and reacting to mistakes and failures need to be modeled. Heightened awareness is needed. Trainees also need to be made aware of evidence suggesting that perfectionism tends to predict

"I find that it gets perfectionists thinking when I mention that it can hurt relationships and health—two big-ticket items."

lower performance, rather than higher performance, and it has more costs than benefits.

Q: What are some practical ways individuals prone to perfectionism can enhance their resilience and reduce levels of risk?

A: An important key is learning to be self-compassionate rather than self-critical. Stress relief (e.g., relaxation training) is also beneficial. We also advocate the importance of developing the growth mindset that [Stanford University psychologist] Carol Dweck talks about, so that mistakes are seen as learning and growth opportunities rather than indications of personal limitations.

Q: Where can readers learn more about this topic?

A: I have a new chapter [written with Paul L. Hewitt, Ph.D.] in an edited book on flourishing in life. Our chapter outlines why perfectionists typically don't flourish, and provides life advice about what they need to do in order to thrive. (See Resources column)