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Stressless strategies for perfectionist women

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Abstract

The emerging field of Positive Psychology provides interventions that cause people to thrive and identify and cultivate psychological variables that make life worth living. Martin Seligman's (2011) [6] conceptualization of human flourishing, or "well-being theory," posits that a life well lived is one characterized by positive emotion, engagement, meaning and purpose resilience, optimism, well-being, achievement, strengths, positive relationships, and accomplishment. This paper reviews the positive psychology literature to develop a frame work for the practical cultivation of positive emotion in women who suffer from acute frustration because of their perfectionist attitude in life. Perfectionism is the belief that mistakes cannot be made and that the highest standards of performance in all aspects of one's life must consistently be met. It is a state of mind where there exists an imbalance between one's standards of success and the ability to achieve success. Worry, fear, guilt and self-doubt usually weave their way into the mind of the perfectionist. The pressure of this self-imposed demand can take a severe toll, mentally and physically. The focus is more on middle-aged working women who suffer from depression because of the faulty assumption that, "I have to be perfect and do things perfectly". A repercussion of this assumption can be blamed for procrastination, lack of wanting to hear feedback from others for fear of being criticized, and the tendency to judge ourselves and others by very rigid standards.

Keywords: Stressless, perfectionism, well being

Introduction

"Perfect is the enemy of good"

This saying reflects the grim side of perfectionism. Perfectionism is a way of life in which the person concerned strives for the best in all fields, be meticulous at his job and perfect in all aspects. Perfectionism is often a quality of highly successful people, but perfection can be a dynamic target. When taken too far, the person creates ever-changing, and therefore, unattainable goals. According to Prof. P. Fry, "Perfectionism is a virtue to be extolled definitely, but beyond a certain threshold it backfires and becomes an impediment". Taken to extremes, perfectionism can be quite detrimental to productivity. At the face of it, perfectionists look productive but are paralysed by fear of appraisal as they feel that their work will fall short when being evaluated. Perfectionism seeps into the psyche and create a pervasive personality style. Perfectionists often are seen as obsessive and at times, pathological.

Why does perfectionism come so easily to women? Women are expected to do well in all spheres of their lives and at the same time, maintain a good work life balance. They are also constantly under scrutiny and being judged about their behaviour and action. Many studies (Besser, Flett, Hewitt, Guez, 2008) [2] have pointed out that their self esteem is contingent on achievement. Moreover, women are also more prone to anxiety, depression and disillusionment that results from trying to reach unattainable standards. Many middle aged Indian women cannot come to terms with the fact that they no longer have the vitality, exuberance and vigour that they had about two decades back. They are walking around with incredibly unrealistic expectations, they are not just striving for excellence, they are striving for absolute perfection, which off course is impossible. So they are setting themselves up for more failure experience. Perfectionism in middle stages of life is sometimes expected to taper off in old age.

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However, it is not so and particularly becomes a matter of concern in the elderly. This paper focuses on suggesting strategies from the field of positive psychology for perfectionists. Positive psychology hails the concept of “positive perfectionism” where the perfectionist can reap the benefits of perfectionism without falling victim to its deleterious effects such as having doubts and concerns over mistakes, anxiety, depression and isolation. The idea is to become a better perfectionist by learning how to turn mistakes into strategic experiments.

The price of perfectionism

Perfectionists can achieve great successes but often with high costs. A 52 year homemaker lady who was an excellent cook but chronically depressed, reported to her therapist that “without my excellent culinary skills, I’m just another nondescript housewife. Who wants to be mediocre and average?” Like other perfectionist women, she sees her perfectionism as the painful price she must pay for her success. She knows too well that she cannot cook extraordinary and exotic dishes all the time, but in spite of her awareness, she relentlessly strives to meet unreasonable and unrealistic levels of excellence and productivity that she has set for herself. The intention to do well isn’t the problem, but the strategy that people use to achieve their goals is. Successful people set very high standards for themselves, yet they are happy, what turns life into the punishing pursuit of perfection is the extent to which people are worried about mistakes. Here comes the paradox of perfectionism. People, especially women have extraordinarily high standards, but objectively can look very dysfunctional in terms of their daily functioning, their physical health, and their achievement.

Perfectionism keeps people from engaging in challenging experiences, they don’t get to discover what they truly like or to create their own identities. Perfectionism also reduces playfulness and the assimilation of knowledge. According to Dr. Szymanski, “Perfectionism is a phobia of making mistakes. Perfectionists are hard on themselves, very self critical and demoralizing. They are not satisfied ever with their performance.

Perfectionism also reduces creativity and innovation. It is an endless report card; it keeps the person totally focused on their performance. Perfectionists like to avoid negative evaluation at all costs and inadvertently land up with steady negative emotions like relentless frustration, anxiety and depression all the time due to perfectionism.

Perfectionism may be the ultimate self-defeating behaviour. It turns people into slaves of success but keeps them focused on failure dooming them to a lifetime of doubt and depression. It also winds up undermining achievement. The truly subversive aspect of perfectionism is that it leads people to conceal their mistakes. Unfortunately, this way people prevent others from giving them a crucial feedback. The desire to conceal mistakes eventually forces people to avoid situations in which they are mistake prone. The incessant worry about mistakes actually undermines performance. Pressures of perfectionism keep people, especially women from developing social skills and emotion regulatory skills that would help them cope in life. Constant rumination about mistakes excessive time given to each minute detail makes them miss deadlines and lose confidence.

Perfectionism consumes more and more of the self. It is ultimately self destructive to devote all ones psychic resources to oneself. It is an unhealthy way to live. Expecting the impossible is a straight shot to trouble, disappointment and rocky interpersonal relationships. Women undergo emotional

turmoil when they have this belief that “nothing but the best” is acceptable and hence raise the bar to a ridiculous high. Convincing women of the insidiousness of this particular mindset presents quite a challenge. Hence perfectionism is costly, debilitating and not fun at all. It takes away exploration, discovery, spontaneity and joy from the person’s life.

Striving for excellence is motivating, striving for perfection-demoralizing

There’s a difference between excellence and perfection. Excellence involves enjoying what you are doing, feeling good about what you have learned and developing confidence. Perfection involves feeling bad about an “A” grade and brooding about not getting an A+ and finding mistakes no matter how well you are doing. Striving for excellence is a positive driver because excellence is an attainable quality that allows for some miss steps along the way. But striving for perfection

- I. Is not attainable
- II. Is based on fear of failure or inadequacy and
- III. Can actually set up to fail.

Perfectionists can be chronic procrastinators and control freaks; potentially doomed to pervasive frustration is their search for life satisfaction.

Categories of perfectionism

Research on perfectionism includes the following three categories of automatic thinking:

- a. Self oriented perfectionism, is which individuals impose high standards on themselves
- b. Other oriented perfectionism in which individuals place high standards on others and
- c. Socially prescribed perfectionism, where individuals feel others expect them to be perfect.

Researchers have found that middle aged women are high on socially prescribed perfectionism and as a result experienced more symptoms of health problems. They appear to be more vulnerable to a member of potentially serious mood disorders, including depression, performance anxiety, social anxiety, writers block and obsessive compulsive illness.

Stressless strategies for recovering from perfectionism of course, there is nothing inherently pathological about setting high standards for oneself, and those who do so selectively are not necessarily unhappy or unproductive. But women who are habitual perfectionists can profit from these stress less strategies.

The perfectionist woman has really perfected a skill, the ability to focus. Unfortunately, she has used the skill to focus exclusively on her own automatic, rigid and irrational beliefs. Becoming more aware of these beliefs is the first step in the path toward imperfectionism. Next, the needs to objectivity and realistically look at the downside of these beliefs. Do they really work consistently? An honest answer would trigger an insight which will lead her to the conclusion that striving for perfection just makes her feel stressed, self-critical, exhausted and stagnant.

Follow this up with challenging those patterns. She can talk to herself to work towards achieving goals with a gentler, more positively realistic attitude. It is all about changing focus.

Conclusion

Stress excellence rather than perfection. Remind yourself and others about the difference between the desire to excel and the

desire to be perfect. Sometimes this distinction can help curb perfectionist thinking with more mindfulness.

Cultivate “learning” rather than a “performance” mindset. With a learning mindset, we think of mistakes as information for learning how to do things differently next time. With a performance mindset, we tend to focus on success or failure of the outcome and miss the opportunities to learn from the process.

Focus on “benefit-finding” rather than “fault-finding.” Catch yourself and others doing something right by noticing and shifting your tendencies to be critical. Of course, it’s hard to rewire our critical thinking brains. But you can start by changing the balance of positive and negative thoughts. Look for, savor and celebrate the good things more than you search for things that go wrong.

Put it in perspective. Put it into perspective by asking yourself; will this matter in a year? Is it worth the cost of the self-esteem, psychological and emotional health of yourself, your friends, colleagues or your child?

Monitor your self-talk when you or others make mistakes. Instead of sending the message “you’re not good enough,” consider actions that appreciate the effort or notice the steps in the process. Create space for imperfection by allowing the effort to be “good enough.” Better yet, celebrate mistakes

Focus on the journey. Set a goal, write it down, and then forget about it by directing your attention to the process of getting there. Focusing on what’s happening in the moment will help distract you from worrying about the outcome. Mindfulness training helps with focusing on the moment.

Ultimately, we are becoming a culture focused on performance, but we are more than the sum of our achievements. Human beings are also made up of emotions, values, passions, hopes and dreams. We need to remember to honor who we are as well as what we do. Otherwise, we’d be called “human doings.” You can be excellent, but not perfect, at some chosen goals, and just plain mediocre at others that don’t matter much at all. Make the decision to be selective about what endeavours merit your finest efforts, and then plan to revel in your accomplishments -- even the ones that may fall short of the mark.

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