

The Freudian Slip

Pathways to Discernment

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I'm Gonna Get This Right if it Kills Me!!

The Pitfalls of Perfectionism

When someone comments, "... well that's close enough for government work . . .," what image comes to your mind? Is the image one of government work being totally sloppy and incomplete? Is the image of government work that of being careless? Or is the image one of government work doing the best and dealing with the mistakes when they happen?

What is so important in doing things "perfectly?" Or rather, the appropriate question to ask is, "Is it worth it to frustrate myself and others for the sake of perfectionism?" One big problem with perfectionism is, how do you know when you have achieved it? I like to use the analogy of the mule chasing the carrot on the end of a stick. The mule stubbornly keeps trying to catch the carrot, getting more annoyed with each failed attempt.

Well, to continue doing something that is so frustrating, common questions asked are why continue or what is the benefit of continuing. Often, I hear the comments of: "I don't get anything out of this.", or "I like a challenge." There is usually a benefit gained. Otherwise, the perfectionism would become extinct.

Perfectionism can take on many forms. It can be the house with everything in its place. It can be the extreme attention to detail. It can be those last ten pounds you want to lose. It can be the need to always be right. It can be the perfect dinner party. It can be a well-kept appearance. It can be the need to control, so criticism is avoided. It can also be self accountability. The list can go on and on.

Perfectionism can be a double edge sword, one side being positive, the other negative. The

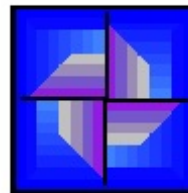
"positive side" of the sword deals with the good feelings an individual receives. These can be praise, admiration respect by others for his or her work, altruism, and/ or self esteem. The negative side would be the feelings of resentment for being taken for granted, ignored and/or used. Another aspect for the negative side reflects the rigidity an individual experiences when he or she is not allowed to make a mistake.

Usually perfectionism is an unconscious choice made by an individual to combat a depressing situation. What I mean by this, deals with the "messages," we each receive throughout our lives. These "messages" are the "don't messages." For example, "don't be late," "don't be smart," "don't be fat," "don't be," "don't fight," "don't be close," "don't cry," etc How we combat these "don't messages" is to give ourselves a "counter-message." These are the "be messages," such as, "be perfect," "be smart," "be friendly," "be

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truthful," "be helpful," etc. ...

A life pattern emerges perpetuating the need for perfectionism. Any deviation from this life pattern runs the risk of conflict, being a bad person, feeling superior to others, not accepting criticism and/or emotional blackmail. Individuals experiencing bad feelings from perfectionist attitudes and behaviors, tend to have amplified depressing situations.

One way this occurs, is when a person's frustration tolerance level becomes more sensitive. For example, "... this is awful why do I make these same mistakes I am a bad person because I cannot do anything right ... why try, they will never be satisfied with what I do ... I am afraid of trying, because I know I will never be able to do it to my own satisfaction."

What is interesting is that perfectionist people often have a double standard with themselves and other people. "It is okay for you to make a mistake, because you're only human. It is unacceptable for me to make a mistake, because mistakes are a sign of weakness or incompetence." I often ask the question of what is the difference between these situations. Usually, there is no difference.

In abusive situations, perfectionism is used as a means of surviving. The belief of being perfect is used for keeping life calm and the abuse to a minimum. These individuals become very focused on trying to control all situations, because hopefully if things are under control, he or she will not be hurt.

This individual's life becomes a win-lose situation. No matter how much he or she tries to be perfect, the other person will find a fault. A vicious cycle is created, leaving the individual feeling like a door mat and being helpless to change his or her situation.

Procrastination may be a subtle form of perfectionism. If a person puts off doing something, then the issue of criticism is circumvented. This behavior seems strange, but when examined closely, perfectionism may be the culprit. What better way for an individual to avoid criticism, finding the mistakes and maintaining a

superior attitude, the perfectionist is not rejected for being imperfect.

So how can an individual atone for his or her perfectionist ways? My response to this question is to ask the question, "What do you get out of perfectionism?" The answer to this question is the true issue that needs further thought. For example, what is so scary about making a mistake?

Developing the ability to set healthy limits for yourself and others is one way of changing perfectionist patterns. When healthy limits are set, the "door mat syndrome" seems to diminish or even disappear. The "magic" of setting limits reflects an attitude change of, "I don't need your approval for me to feel good about myself."

The issue of who has the problem is defined and responsibility for behavior is appropriately placed. The concept of having options available becomes more tangible. The depressing situations begin to slowly change.

Using these small steps, mistakes can be transformed from a negative into a positive. The lessons learned provide a road map for life's journey. Lessons learned help to stop the emotional blackmail of self blame. Lessons learned help gain insight about you and the situation. With insight, comes understanding and eventually self acceptance.

I offer to you this challenge. Why not take inventory of all your accomplishments. My hunch is every endeavor tried is not a failure. So why not allow yourself to be human?

Suggested Readings:

Restoring Hope & Trust by Lisa Lewis Ph.D.

The Dance of Anger by Harriet Lerner Ph.D.

The Dance of Connection by Harriet Lerner

Overcoming Depression by Paul Hauck, Ph.D.