



Perfectionism at Harvard: Friend or Foe?

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In our conversations with students, we often hear people refer to themselves as “perfectionists.” Students declare this with some ambivalence because, as many of them have discovered, living with perfectionism can be painful and difficult. It also creates obstacles for accomplishing one’s goals.

What is perfectionism?

Sometimes people confuse having high expectations of themselves with being a perfectionist. Typically, in a perfectionistic mindset, the expectations are *unrealistically high* to the point where they interfere with the person’s ability to do the task at hand; no matter the quality of the effort or the quality of the end product, the person feels dissatisfied.

Perfectionism and procrastination

Perfectionism can also lead to procrastination. For instance, in a perfectionistic mode, the person spends so much time worrying that each sentence needs to be “perfect” that no sentence can be written. Often, when living as a perfectionist, someone will wait until the last minute to produce something because then it is not *really* one’s best efforts so it doesn’t “count” and then the pain that the person might feel from a disappointing performance is lessened.

Perfectionism at Harvard

Before coming to Harvard, many students did successfully reach their highest goals, including being accepted to Harvard. Yet when they begin their education at Harvard, they find that their previous strategies and mindset no longer work effectively and they are failing to achieve at the level they have always come to expect of themselves. Some students are paralyzed in their ability to work. Others feel perpetually dissatisfied with their performance in their classes and in their extra-curricular life. Sometimes, the criticism or comments they receive on their work are too difficult to bear and use constructively, because any criticism means that the work was not “perfect” and therefore not good enough. These perfectionistic expectations can create serious obstacles for learning and completing work.

Below are some of the challenging aspects of perfectionism and some benefits of reconsidering the way you might think about your life and your work. At the Bureau of Study Counsel, we welcome the opportunity to speak with students about such concerns as these. Please contact us for an individual appointment with a counselor.

Some Challenges to Overcoming Perfectionism

1. Believing that “There’s a right and wrong way to do something”; being devoted to perfectionistic to all-or-nothing, black-and-white, either-or thinking.
2. Believing that “Only ‘perfect’ will do” and that “anything else is mediocre.”
3. Thinking that “I’ve succeeded *because* I’m a perfectionist.”
4. Suspecting that if “I only get respect or love because I do things so perfectly.”
5. Believing that “Mistakes mean failure. Failure is devastating.”

The above are common perfectionistic beliefs and, like many beliefs we hold, are often deeply ingrained in the way we view ourselves and the world. It takes a process of discovery, time, and effort to adjust these beliefs so that our work and lives can be more satisfactory, productive, and rewarding.

Perfectionism as an obstacle to learning

As seen in the sample statements above, perfectionistic tendencies don't allow for mistakes. For a perfectionist, then, the learning process is particularly difficult since mistakes and risk-taking are often necessary to learning. Also, in the process of learning, one needs to go from a place of not knowing something to a place of understanding something better. For the perfectionist, being in the position of not knowing or beginning to know something new can be extremely uncomfortable. A perfectionistic student is in an especially painful bind.

The process of overcoming perfectionism

Part of overcoming the bind of perfectionism, then, is to begin to accept that mistakes are a learning opportunity and an inevitable part of being human. Failure is only failure if one gives up and can't learn from the experience and move on. Accepting this perspective can seem like an impossible task because your current beliefs seem so *true* and *right*, the way that beliefs usually do for us. It can be especially daunting to consider these issues on your own. If you'd like to begin to explore how to create alternate ways to consider your work and your life, please contact the Bureau to speak with a counselor or find a trusted person in your life with whom to explore your experience.

Some Benefits To Overcoming Perfectionism

Below are some of the benefits you might experience once you reconsider your perfectionistic tendencies.

1. The opportunity to enjoy the *process* of doing something, rather than yearning for the praise or external reinforcement that might come only from the end product.
2. The chance to recognize that we're all human, with different strengths, limitations, interests, passions. With this recognition, you may begin to forgive yourself for mistakes and not being perfect, and begin to learn that mistakes themselves can be a valuable learning opportunity and may open new doors for you.
3. The chance to be freed from your fears of failure and the fear of disapproval by others. Instead you might have the opportunity to feel good about your efforts and to enjoy, for its own sake, the work that you do.
4. The chance to be freed to work with a lesser tendency to procrastinate. If you're not afraid of mistakes or "imperfection," then the process of completing a task becomes much less problematic.
5. The chance to feel better about yourself and feel more satisfied with the work you do and who you are.
6. The chance to set and reach goals that will help you feel satisfied and accomplished and not leave you with feelings of discontent and dissatisfaction.

Further Reading

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