What is perfectionism?

***Perfectionism is:***

* the irrational belief that you and/or your environment must be perfect
* the striving to be the best, to reach the ideal, and to never make a mistake
* an all pervasive attitude that whatever you attempt in life must be done letter perfect with no deviation, mistakes, slip ups, or inconsistencies
* a habit developed from youth that keeps you constantly alert to the imperfections, failings, and weakness in yourself and others
* a level of consciousness that keeps you ever vigilant to any deviations from the norm, the guidelines, or the way things are ``supposed to be''
* the underlying motive present in the fear of failure and fear of rejection, i.e., if I am not perfect I will fail and/or I will be rejected by others
* a reason why you may be fearful of success, i.e., if I achieve my goal, will I be able to continue, maintain that level of achievement
* a rigid, moralistic outlook that does not allow for humanism or imperfection
* an inhibiting factor that keeps you from making a commitment to change habitual, unproductive behavior out of fear of not making the change ``good enough''
* the belief that no matter what you attempt it is never ``good enough'' to meet your own or others' expectations

#### What irrational beliefs contribute to perfectionism?

 It is unacceptable to make a mistake.

 You must always reach the ideal no matter what.

 If those in authority say this is the way it is supposed to be, then that is the way it is supposed to be.

 You are a loser if you cannot be perfect.

 It is what you achieve rather than who you are that is important.

 I have no value in life unless I am successful.

 There is no sense in trying to do something unless I can do it perfectly, e.g., ``I don't attempt things I can't do well.''

 If I have a failure or experience a set back in my efforts to change then I should give up.

 The ideal is what is real; unless I reach the ideal I am a failure.

 There are so many roadblocks and pitfalls to keep me from succeeding. It is better just to give up and forget my goal.

 Unless I am ``Number One'' there is no sense in trying. Everyone knows what ``Number Two'' is. To win is the only acceptable goal.

**What are some** **negative consequences of perfectionism?**

***Examples of the negative consequences of perfectionism include:***

**Low self-esteem.** Because a perfectionist never feels ``good enough'' about personal performance, feelings of being a ``failure'' or a ``loser'' with a lessening of self-confidence and self-esteem may result.

**Guilt.** Because a perfectionist never feels good about the way responsibility has been handled in life (by himself or others) a sense of shame, self recrimination, and guilt may result.

**Pessimism.** Since a perfectionist is convinced that it will be extremely difficult to achieve an ``ideal goal,'' he can easily become discouraged, fatalistic, disheartened, and pessimistic about future efforts to reach a goal.

**Depression.** Needing always to be ``perfect,'' yet recognizing that it is impossible to achieve such a goal, a perfectionist runs the risk of feeling down, blue, and depressed.

**Rigidity.** Needing to have everything in one's life perfect or ``just so'' can lead a perfectionistic to an extreme case of being inflexible, non-spontaneous, and rigid.

**Obsessiveness.** Being in need of an excessive amount of order, pattern, or structure in life can lead a perfectionistic person to become nit-picky, finicky, or obsessive in an effort to maintain a certain order.

**Compulsive behavior.** Over-indulgence or the compulsive use of alcohol, drugs, gambling, food, shopping, sex, smoking, risk-taking, or novelty, is often used to medicate a perfectionist who feels like a failure or loser for never being able to be ``good enough'' in life.

**Lack of motivation.** Believing that the goal of ``change'' will never be able to be ideally or perfectly achieved can often give a perfectionist a lack of motivation to attempt change in the first place, or to persevere if change has already begun.

**Immobilization.** Because a perfectionist is often burdened with an extreme fear of failure, the person can become immobilized. With no energy, effort or creative juices applied to rectify, improve, or change the problem behavior in the person's life, he becomes stagnant.

**Lack of belief in self.** Knowing that one will never be able to achieve an idyllic goal can lead a perfectionist to lose the belief that he will ever be able to improve his life significantly.

**What rational** **behaviors are needed to overcome perfectionistic tendencies?**

***To overcome perfectionism one needs to:***

* accept self as a human being
* forgive self for mistakes or failings
* put self back on the wagon immediately after falling off
* accept that the ``ideal'' is only a guideline or goal to be worked toward, not to be achieved 100%
* set realistic and flexible time frames for the achievement of a goal
* develop a sense of patience and to reduce the need to ``get it done yesterday''
* be easier on oneself; setting unrealistic or unreasonable goals or deadlines sets you up for failure
* recognize that the human condition is one of failings, weakness, deviations, imperfections, and mistakes; it is acceptable to be human
* recognize that one's backsliding does not mean the end of the world; it is OK to pick oneself up and start all over again
* develop an ability to use ``thought stopping'' techniques whenever you find yourself mentally scolding yourself for not being ``good enough''
* reward yourself for progress, to reinforce your efforts to change even if progress is slight or doesn’t meet your idealistic expectations
* love yourself, to believe that you deserve good things

**How can a social** **support system help in overcoming perfectionism?**

***Social support systems can help you overcome perfectionism if you:***

* select realistic people who are not perfectionists in their own life
* encourage your support system members to not be rigid or moralistic in their attempts to keep you on an honest course
* have support people who role model forgiving and forgetting when mistakes, failures, offenses, or backsliding occur
* have given them permission to call you on being ``too hard,'' ``too brutal,'' ``too rigid,'' ``too unrealistic,'' or ``too idealistic'' in your expectations
* have people who will give positive reinforcement for any positive change, no matter how small or slight it is
* select trustworthy people who are open, honest, and have a sincere interest in your personal growth

**Steps to overcome perfectionism**

**Step 1: In your journal, answer the following questions:**

a.    What characteristics of perfectionism are true for me? How do these perfectionist traits impede my efforts to change my problematic behavior?

b.   What irrational beliefs of perfectionists do I ascribe to? How do these beliefs influence my desire to change? How do these beliefs contribute to a failure script in my efforts to change? What rational alternatives can I adopt to reduce the negative impact of perfectionism in my life?

c.    What are the negative consequences of perfectionism in my life? What am I doing to address these negative issues in my life? How do these negative issues affect my past and current efforts to change my problematical behavior?

d.   What new rational behavior do I need to develop in order to overcome the negative impact of perfectionism? How will these new behavior traits help me to fully achieve change in my life?

e.    How can my social support system help me in overcoming my perfectionist attitude? What contributes to perfectionism in my support system? What changes in my support system would reduce its perfectionist character?

f.    How does dealing with my perfectionism help me in my efforts to change? How well does perfectionism explain why past attempts to change have failed?

**Step 2:**   In your journal, identify a problematic behavioral pattern you want to change; then list the characteristic negative behavior traits of the pattern. For each of the negative characteristics list positive alternative behavior traits. For each of the new alternative behavior list your likelihood of achieving them 100% of the time. How many new behavior traits could you achieve 100% of the time?

**Step 3:**   Once you have recognized that no change can be achieved 100% of the time, continue changing your problematic behavior patterns. If you continue to be hindered by perfectionism, return to Step 1 and begin again.

See Graphics that follow…

TAKEN FROM: Coping.ORG Tools For Coping With Life’s Stressors

<http://www.coping.org/growth/perfect.htm#What>

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