

Blueprints for Change

PERFECTIONISM

I recently returned from a trip visiting relatives in Austria. What a wonderful experience it was, returning to the place of my birth. As the old saying goes – “you can take the girl out of the country, but you can’t take the country out of the girl!” There was however, one rather sad aspect to the trip, one which prompted me to write this article on what we can miss out on in life if we strive for perfectionism.

One of the people I visited is a favorite aunt in her mid-seventies. Last year she lost her husband of almost 50 years. Like all marriages, they had their share of “ups and downs” but weathered the storms. After so many years together, people get used to one another, their quirks and idiosyncrasies and the ways in which they “weather” getting older together. Easier for some than others but especially difficult for my aunt who was, and still is, quite a physically stunning woman who could turn men’s heads when she walked into a room. Recently an old friend, a widower, came back into her life. He had been enamored with her at the age of 16 but they had gone their separate ways.

Their friendship is wonderful in so many ways except one – physical intimacy. She always was, and still is, a perfectionist. Perfect makeup, hair, clothes, shoes, jewelry, home, car, etc. So because her body is now no longer “perfect”, she refuses to share that part of herself with the widower. Even my question “Don’t you think he may also be concerned about how he looks?” made no difference. How terribly sad – allowing your happiness to be influenced by the need to be perfect!

Striving for perfectionism is like a double-edged sword – it can do more harm than good. Needing to get everything to the “it has to be right” stage all the time is a struggle with oneself and a no-win situation. It leads to constant stress in one’s life. To believe that you or anything in your environment must be perfect is an irrational belief that often begins as an attempt to win love, acceptance and approval. Those seeking perfectionism are driven by low self-esteem. They are plagued by self-doubt and fears of disapproval, ridicule and rejection. Since a perfectionist follows the “I’ll-keep-at-it-till-it’s-perfect” philosophy, he/she also runs the risk of becoming depressed and feeling pessimistic about future efforts to reach a goal.

There are differences between being a perfectionist and a healthy achiever. Healthy achievers enjoy trying to meet high standards where the process is as important as the outcome while perfectionists believe that anything attempted must be “letter perfect” with no deviations, errors or inconsistencies. They are never satisfied by anything less than perfect. Those striving for excellence in a healthy way see mistakes as opportunities for learning and self-development while the perfectionist views mistakes as more evidence of unworthiness. Perfectionists become overly defensive when criticized whereas healthy achievers react positively to helpful criticism.

Overcoming perfectionism requires courage because it means accepting the fact that as humans, we have imperfections. Some strategies for working with these imperfections and coping with perfectionism are:

- A good question to consider – “Am I doing this to be perfect or do I have a specific goal in mind?” If you’re just trying to be perfect, stop what you’re doing and refocus.
- Consider the negative consequences of perfectionism in your life and what you are doing to address those issues. How are those negative issues affecting your efforts to change your problematic behavior?
- Rate your project on a scale of 1 (not important) to 10 (extremely important) if you are afraid it’s not perfect. Don’t worry about anything below a 9 and find ways to deal with the anxiety that will result. Realize that trying to be perfect is your way to manage anxiety. To check perfectionist tendencies you have to come up with ways to tolerate that anxiety. Use some stress-reducing techniques such as exercise, relaxation tapes, yoga etc.
- Start a new or challenging project. By working on something different, your focus will be on the current task and not on worrying about whether or not the previous task was perfect.

Blueprints for Change

- Make a list of the advantages and disadvantages of trying to be perfect. You may find that the costs (relationship problems, excessive workaholism, food and substance abuse, feelings of inadequacy, self criticism, etc) actually outweigh whatever advantages perfectionism has for you.
- Learn how to deal with criticism. Remind yourself that you learn and grow from your mistakes. Once you get by the irrational belief that you must not make a mistake, you won't feel so angry or defensive when you do make one. Criticism will then seem like a natural way to learn rather than something to be avoided at all costs.
- Set and adhere to strict time limits on your projects. Move on to the next activity when the time is up. In this manner, you can reduce the procrastination that typically results from perfectionism. For example, you must continue writing your book and also research companies whose stocks you are interested in buying. Decide you will spend only 3 hours on the book and 3 more hours on the company research. If you stick to your time limits, you won't spend the entire day researching company information, nor try to write your book late at night when you are too tired to be effective.
- Be realistic about what you can do. By setting more realistic goals, you will gradually realize that "imperfect" results do not lead to the negative consequences you fear and expect. Unrealistic goals lead to disappointment at poor performance and anxiety about improving it. Motivate yourself by praising your accomplishments and enjoying the process as well as the outcome.

The perfect person is as mythical a concept as finding a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. Many of our greatest endeavors have been accomplished while striving to perfect ourselves. Being human and striving for excellence in the positive sense means wanting to be and do better but willing to make mistakes and risk failure. Mistakes and imperfections are part of the reality of being human.

Perhaps, in time, my aunt may come to realize that having the perfect body is unimportant. That imperfections are only in the eyes of the beholder and that for another, you may be PERFECT. I certainly hope so!

©2008 **Evelin Saxinger**, ND, ACH, *The Transition Doctor*, coaching you towards a life of purpose and passion, maximized emotional strengths, improved performance, nutritional savvy, weight wellness, and stress control. Contact: **571-232-2737**