

Good Perfectionism versus Bad Perfectionism

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Although perfectionism undoubtedly brings me suffering and pain, I've come to appreciate the snobby part of my personality because it also bears gifts, especially over time.

For the last three years, perfectionism has placed me in an okay spot in a terrible economy. Had I not invested so many hours into networking and writing blogs the last five or so years — sometimes on top of full-time employment and other responsibilities — I would not have a job right now. And spending a night or two recently with friends of friends I knew back in high school made me proud of all the [therapy](#) and recovery I have done since graduating.

Had I not held myself to a high standard back then, I wouldn't have quit drinking at the age of 18, and may still be hitting the bars at night.

Perfectionism can even be noble when we are able to turn the neurosis into acts of service, where we help others in similar pain.

However, the same energy that drives me to get up early in the morning and swim so that my brain operates with fewer hiccups than it would without the workout is also the fuel that wraps my brain cells in an [OCD](#) loop, in which I have trouble letting go of the decision I made last week, or a mistake I made six years ago, or something in the future that I'm preparing for.

I think the line that determines "bad" perfectionism from "good" perfectionism is drawn with how well you are able to function despite the loud conversation in your head. If the chatty dialogue is so obnoxious that it's hard for me to get anything done, then I have myself a case of debilitating OCD. However, if the

perfectionism and fear of failure propels me to chart a course for recovery (exercise in the morning, therapy on Thursday, a half-hour meditation every day), or if it pushes me to map out an outline for a work project so that I'm not so stressed when I sit down to tackle the thing ... it becomes my ally.

In her book, *Better By Mistake*, author Alina Tugend offers a helpful distinction between good perfectionism and bad perfectionism:

Being a perfectionist isn't a bad thing; in fact, it may mean you have very high standards and you often meet those standards. Those who have perfectionist tendencies without having those tendencies rule — or ruin — their lives are what psychiatrists call "adaptive" perfectionists. They find it very important to do certain things in the right way, but this need doesn't hinder their lives and can actually help them achieve great success....

On the other hand, what psychiatrists call maladaptive perfectionists need to be the best at everything, and if they make a mistake, it's a crisis. It's also not just about how they perceive themselves, but about how others perceive them: they believe they will lose the respect of friends and colleagues if they fail. They have to hit all their marks all the time. Their need for perfectionism can sabotage their own success.

Clearly, my perfectionism robs me of hours, if not days, of joy. Because, instead of enjoying the moment with my kids at a lacrosse game or during our walk home for school, I'm usually obsessing about a certain blog post, or thinking about next week's topics, or doing the math *again* to see if I can make the amount of money this month that I need to make. Too often, I suffer from tunnel vision, where I am blind to the blessings going on all around me. I waste the opportunities of wonder, as psychologist Mel Schwartz explains in his post called ["The Problem of Perfectionism"](#):

In our culture we move relentlessly toward greater emphasis on achievement and goal attainment. We ask our children what their grade was, not what they learned. We tend to measure our lives in terms of success and achievement and lose perspective on what it may mean to live well. This ruptures any sense of balance in our lives. We seem to lose the capacity for wonder and awe. Could you imagine looking at a magnificent rainbow and complaining that the width of

one color was imperfect because it was narrower than the other colors? Not only would that be ridiculous, we'd also be ruining the splendor of the moment. And yet that is exactly what we do when we judge ourselves for our imperfections. We forget that as humans we're part of nature, as well. As such, we would benefit if we came into acceptance of the natural flow of life, which by the way, happens to be imperfect.

What we're aiming for, then, is to harness our perfectionism in a way that can allow us to stay in the moment, and experience the wonder born in *imperfectionism*.

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