

# HOW PERFECTIONISM FAILS US

Weekly Wellness and Counseling Newsletter : Volume 3 : Issue 5

## PERFECTIONISM: PART TWO

In last week's newsletter, we described how our culture encourages perfectionism even though it has been linked to a variety of serious mental health issues.

How can we tell the difference between healthy motivation and harsh, self-critical perfectionism? As researcher Brené Brown explains, "**Perfectionism is not the same thing as striving to be your best.**

Perfectionism is the belief that if we live perfect, look perfect, and act perfect, we can minimize or avoid the pain of blame, judgement, and shame. Perfectionism is not self-improvement. Perfectionism is, at its core, about **trying to earn approval and acceptance.**"



## PROCRASTINATION

Perfectionism is so afraid of failure (or, more accurately, imperfection) that it can turn us into master procrastinators. After all, not starting a project in the first place guarantees we won't make any mistakes! Despite what you may have heard, "procrastination isn't actually a character flaw or a mysterious curse on your ability to manage time, but a way of coping with challenging emotions."

The truth is that we do ourselves a great disservice by trying to cut failure out of our lives.

Perfectionism is so rigid and unforgiving that it leaves no room for growth. Failure, on the other hand, **builds resilience, perseverance, and flexibility.** It lets us see problems we couldn't have otherwise predicted. Failure is not the opposite of success--it's a crucial part of it!





# SOCIAL PRESSURE

The pressure to appear "perfect" online is well documented. For better or worse, we know we have been encouraged to view our social media profiles as a public "performance" of sorts. We also know that [social media usage](#) can contribute to increased anxiety, sleep disturbances, depression, loneliness, and a myriad of other problematic stressors. But despite knowing the costs, social media platforms are still the most popular way for young people to engage with their peers and the outside world. To many people, opting out of social media would mean opting out of their primary source of social connection.

Is it fair to place **all** the blame on TikTok and Instagram for the pressure young people feel to perform? Some research suggests the problem isn't simply our usage of social media apps, but the deeper cultural beliefs we're filtering through them. As [one study on perfectionism](#) explains, society tells a shared story that "the perfect life and lifestyle--encapsulated by achievement, wealth, and social status--are available to anyone, provided they try hard enough." It's easy to see how this myth can create a foundation for perfectionism. When we internalize our culture's meritocratic message, we learn to **equate our self worth with measured accomplishments**. Having grown up with the experience of being "sorted, sifted, and ranked by schools, universities, and the workplace", college students and young adults know the importance society places on such things. In this current cultural story, the need to strive, compete, and perform is central to a "successful" and "happy" life. We're used to **assigning value to our accomplishments** using dollars, clicks, likes, test scores, and followers, but can truly we quantify success and happiness this way in the first place?






## IDENTIFY YOUR OWN PERFECTIONISM

Want to try giving up perfectionism? A good first step toward making a change is to identify how perfectionism shows up in your life. Ask yourself:

- When you write a paper (or, say, a newsletter on perfectionism), do you agonize over the details and take forever to complete assignments?
- Do you second guess everything you might say before you speak up in class?
- When faced with a choice, do you find yourself imagining if others will approve before you've even taken action?
- If a professor or colleague offers criticism of your work, do you feel ashamed, embarrassed, or defensive?




Make an honest and **non-judgmental** examination of your feelings and behaviors. Practice self-compassion and remember that there is nothing wrong with answering "yes" to any of these questions. There's also nothing wrong with recognizing the patterns of your own thoughts and feeling frustrated when you fall into them again. **Perfectionism is trap** that keeps us thinking we must remain dissatisfied with ourselves even as we're trying to get better. We can find freedom if we practice identifying these moments and letting them go.



## YOU ARE NOT PERFECT *and that's okay!*

"You will never be perfect." The flawed logic of perfectionism requires that we deny this most basic truth of existence. Therefore, to overcome perfectionism we must instead choose to **accept** and **celebrate** this truth. Humans are flawed works in progress and we always will be. This is part of the beauty of what it means to be alive. Imperfection means there is always more to learn about ourselves, each other and the world around us. Mistakes and failures are small gifts that keep life interesting and help us cultivate a resilient spirit.







## COMMUNITY VS. COMPETITION

We know that humans are social, cooperative creatures by nature. **Community feeling** (defined as helpfulness and wanting to improve the world through activism and giving) is a key component of belongingness and shared emotional connection. Yet more and more studies are finding that loneliness is increasing and "social cohesiveness is on the decline, with more Americans saying they have no one to confide in." What's going on here? Over time, our **cultural values** have shifted away from **collectivism and belonging** toward **competitiveness, materialism** (attaching importance and status to the accumulation of goods), and **individualism** (the principle of being independent and self-reliant). What does all this have to do with perfectionism? Research suggests that systemic individualism has raised the bar of society's expectations for what a single person should accomplish to an impossible height. Our behaviors are reflecting these trends. The increased levels of perfectionism we now see in college students and young adults might be considered symptomatic of the way they're trying to cope and find acceptance in today's harsh society.

## CHALLENGE YOURSELF ~~the~~ *the culture!*

Systemic perfectionism sounds overwhelming! Letting go of the pressure to be perfect is hard enough as it is. Even as we work on ourselves, won't algorithms continue to reinforce impossible standards? How are we supposed to **collectively heal** from perfectionism if the odds are against us??

Take a deep breath. Recognize that a culture of perfectionism **keeps us occupied**, striving for goals that are impossible to achieve. This distraction keeps us from questioning what else is possible. Allow yourself to wonder! We can choose to reject the cultural message that anything less than perfect is unacceptable. Imperfection, vulnerability, and feelings of inadequacy are not wrong--they are part of the **shared human experience**. Perfectionism, like individualism, can make us feel alienated from each other. But we can counteract this by **embracing community** in order to heal. Lean in to your support systems. Confide in someone when you feel overwhelmed. Practice asking for help when you need it. Support others who you see making these same efforts. Vulnerability is not weakness--it is, in fact, incredibly brave.

