

## Perfectionism and Mental Health

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### ABSTRACT

Perfectionism involves setting high standards for oneself which motivate him/her to reach peak performance resulted excellence. People with perfectionism often link their self-worth with success. They are highly critical about themselves and focus more on their flaws. Perfectionism is a problem when it interferes with a person's day-to-day life, consume time, energy, as well as affect the relationships. It is often associated with the fear of failure, disappointing others, and consider themselves as not good enough. The various negative emotions associated with perfectionism include anxiety, exhaustion, guilt, shame, frustration, and irritability. People those who experience perfectionism feel that they are not living up-to their expectations. The present paper highlight upon the meaning of perfectionism, types, causes, symptoms, harmful effects, mental health, and coping strategies.

**Keywords:** *Individual, Perfectionism, Mental health, Organisation*

Perfectionism can be defined as when one is setting “high standard”, “rigid”, “flawless”, excessive demand for himself and other individuals. Some individuals are able to achieve success by setting high goals they strive to meet where as other struggles with low self-esteem/disappointed due to unable to meet the goals. Perfectionism can be defined as persons those who want to perform the task faultless, setting high standards for themselves and evaluate the behaviour as critical (Burns, 1980, Flett & Hewitt, 2002) and often guided by their self-defined rule (Horney, 1950). Generally, it is being studied by psychopathological aspects (Wyatt & Gilbert, 1998). The problem with perfectionism is also known as maladaptive or clinical perfectionism.

Researchers state two aspects of perfectionism (Stumpf & Parker, 2000, Suddarth & Slanley, 2001).

- a) **Positive or Normal Perfectionism:** It includes setting high level of performance standards and to be the best. The positive perfectionism and psychological wellbeing are positively correlated.
- b) **Neurotic or Negative Perfectionism:** It shows positive correlation with maladaptive result or outcome (Stoeber, 2007). Negative perfectionism has negative correlation with psychological distress. It includes:
  - Mismatch of expectation and result or outcomes
  - Fear of failure or mistake
  - Uncertainty

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- Fear of to be criticised or judged by others.

Perfectionism is related to various areas of life such as:

- Fitness and health
- Academic area
- Physical appearance
- Relationship with family, friends and relatives
- Organisational cleanliness, timeliness and orderliness
- Athletic performance

### **Perfectionism: Concept**

The pioneer of perfectionism is Gordon Flett, and Paul Hewitt. Flett, Professor, working as Faculty of Health at York University of Canada. Hewitt was a Professor of Psychology, University of British Columbia (UBC), Canada. They emphasised upon three facets of perfectionism:

- Self-oriented perfectionism
- Other oriented perfectionism
- Socially prescribed perfectionism

### ***Types of Perfectionism:***

Perfectionism is broadly divided into three main types:

- a) Self-Oriented Perfectionism:** It refers to tendency of the individual to put excessive demand on themselves. Perfectionists are very critical to themselves. For their self-satisfaction and self-worthiness, they depend more on external achievement. The characteristics exhibited by perfectionists are: conscientiousness, highly motivated, neurotic, obsessive thinking, anxiety and worry.
- b) Other-Oriented Perfectionism:** Persons are setting high expectations on other persons, parents, children and pressurise them to pursue their expectations. The academic performance of the children is being criticised by perfectionist parents. In contrast, some other parents may exhibit controlling behaviour with the objective to push their children to perform best in what they do.
- c) Socially-Prescribed Perfectionism:** Socially prescribed perfectionism refers to when others expect one to be perfect. Some may internalise and emphasizing more upon social and cultural expectations. Other individuals may develop perfectionism in a highly competitive environment. People display perfection as others will judge in order to secure social approval. Social context is excessively demanding compared to self-oriented perfectionism and other oriented perfectionism.

According to researchers, there are many facets of perfectionism. The need for perfectionism comes in different flavours, both positive and negative. Research findings reveal that the consequences of perfectionism include:

- Mood disorder (Rasmussen & Hawton 2010, Strauman,1989)
- Anxiety disorder (Juster et al., 1998, Shumaker & Rodebaugh,2009)
- Eating disorder (Bardone cone et al., 2007, Peck & Lightcenseyjr, 2008)
- Personality disorder (Huprich et al., 2008)

Few other research confirms positive relation between:

- Perfectionism and feeling of success (Frost & Steketee,1990)
- Perfectionism and educational achievement (Besharat, 2005)

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- Perfectionism and positive feelings (Frost et al., 1998)

Perfectionism is different from atelophobia. Perfectionism is search for flawlessness, and excellence in oneself and others. Some perfectionists accept imperfections even though they search for excellence where as others do not think in that way. Atelophobia is a type of anxiety disorder. It also characterised by fear of failure and imperfections which leads to physical as well as mental symptoms.

### Causes of Perfectionism:

There are two kinds of the individual with two different types of mindsets such as growth mindset and fixed mindset. Persons with fixed mindset consider their skill and abilities are innate and setting higher expectations for themselves. Individuals with growth mindset embrace growth and learning. They navigate challenges and resilience and believe in their capacity to learn and ability.

American Academic of Paediatrics states that perfectionism is a inherent and fixed mindset inclination of the individual. They want to be perfect towards task/assignments which resulted achievement or success. Due to unrealistic expectations, setting high self-expectations, without understanding the self-worth of oneself leads to various mental health issues. Societal pressure also putting pressure upon the individual.

Medical researchers found causes of perfectionism as follows:

- a) Genetics:** Perfectionism found in the families. Research studies found that two factors such as genetic and environmental play a significant role in perfectionism.
- b) Childhood Upbringing:** The children and adolescent exhibit perfectionism due to certain behaviour of the parents during the upbringing of the children in childhood. These are a) expectations of parents, b) parental pressure and c) controlling behavioural style of parents.
- c) Stress and Trauma:** Those who are perfectionism, they reported trauma they experience such as abusive behaviour, and childhood neglect.

### Perfectionism: Symptoms

The mental health professional states that perfectionist is not the only high expectation persons for themselves, but they unrealistically expect perfectionism from their family, friends and relatives. Some of the signs are –

- Setting adherence to standards
- Everything should be neat and organised
- Afraid of failure or mistake
- Sensitive towards criticism
- Putting themselves down

The examples of perfectionist behaviour include:

- **Performance Checking:** Constantly checking the performance, comparing the performance with others and seeking reassurances from others.
- **Avoidance Behaviour:** Avoiding the opportunities for the fear of failure so not applying for job and promotion.
- **Other Counter-Productive Behaviour:** The other counter productive behaviour include:
  - Indecision

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- Excessive organising
- Showiness
- Checking repeatedly

These behaviours are not only problematic on their own but also contribute to maintain perfectionism.

### Harmful Effects of Perfectionism:

- a) **Anxiety and Stress:** Perfectionist deals with high levels of anxiety and stress due to striving for perfection.
- b) **Depression:** The constant pressure to be flawless make people feel worthless and hopeless. Perfectionists may think negatively about themselves as well as their abilities which make them joyless.
- c) **Low self-esteem:** Perfectionists often focus their attention on their achievements and how to achieve their standards. They set high expectations for themselves and not forgive their mistakes easily. Constant self-criticism affect the self-esteem and make them inadequate.
- d) **Struggle with Relationship:** Perfectionist expect too much for themselves as well as for others. It is very difficult to accept imperfections neither on themselves nor their loved ones which resulted conflict, trouble and resentment.
- e) **Burnout and Exhaustion:** Continuous chasing of perfections by the people leads to burnout which resulted exhaustion physically, mentally and emotionally. Perfectionists sacrifice their health in order to reach lofty goals.
- f) **Procrastination:** When one set high expectations for themselves and task is unattainable, it is a daunting task for someone to move in a right direction.
- g) **Body image and Perfectionism:** Perfectionism also affects body image. One is getting self-esteem form one's work. The ideal body image is required for the persons such as athlete, ballet dancer, gymnast, body builder of sports. One is deriving self-esteem from one's appearance. Perfectionism related to body image. It leads to unhelpful coping behaviours such as restrictive diets, time as well as cost associated with attaining certain images.

### Perfectionism and Mental Health:

Research studies reveal that perfectionism may harm both physical and mental health of the individual. Though perfectionism is not considered as a mental disorder, but it is unhealthy for certain reasons. The individuals those who are perfectionist, they are experiencing and also more prone to various mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, and obsessive-compulsive disorder.

Two researchers such as Thomas Curran and Andrew P. Hill, explain that 50 percent of the people those who committed suicide are perfectionist according to their loved ones. According to the research conducted by Curran and Hill from 1989-2016, more than 40,000 American, Canadian, and British college students those who have exhibited perfectionism rise by 33 percent.

According to Curran and Hill, the occurrence of self-oriented perfectionism is due to the a) one's illogical importance of to be perfect, b) expectations of the individuals are unrealistic, and c) self evaluation is punitive. It leads to depression, eating disorder and untimely death. The risk of bipolar disorder is found among the self-critical perfectionist. Research studies

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reveal that high blood pressure and cardiovascular diseases are more prevalent among perfectionist people.

### **a) Anxiety:**

Research studies reveal there is an association between perfectionism and anxiety. According to Clinical Psychology Review, perfectionism elevated anxiety disorders such as generalised anxiety, social anxiety, panic and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). The social anxiety disorder people exhibit perfectionism as there is a fear among people to be judged by others (Anxiety and Depression Association of America (ADAA)). In generalised anxiety disorder (GAD), perfectionism leads to pathological worry. Perfectionist with generalised anxiety disorder (GAD) symptoms seek the mental health professionals.

### **b) Obsessive – Compulsive Disorder (OCD):**

Obsessive-Compulsive disorder (OCD) is a mental health disorder. It involves both obsessions (intrusion and incoherent stream of thoughts) and compulsions (repetition of the rituals that someone is performing to manage the anxiety). Those who are perfectionist, they may develop OCD. Children and adolescents who exhibit perfectionist traits have a higher chance of developing OCD symptoms during their life time.

### **c) Eating Disorder:**

Research findings reveal that perfectionism and eating disorder are related. Eating disorder include a) Anorexia Nervosa and b) Bulimia Nervosa. According to the researcher, perfectionist prefer -

- To be extremely thin.
- Expressing dissatisfaction with one's body or weight.
- Seeking to achieve beauty which is unattainable.

### **Coping Strategies for Perfectionism:**

- Setting realistic goals.
- Focusing more on progression not on perfectionism.
- Embracing mistakes and imperfection as a natural part of life. It may be considered as opportunity for growth and learning.
- Practicing relaxation techniques such as deep breathing, hobbies, mindfulness and engaging oneself the activities one enjoy.
- Seeking support from family, friends, medical professionals and counsellors. One should share their feelings or experiences the struggle of perfectionism with them.
- Setting boundaries of saying "NO" to unreasonable demands or expectations both from yourself as well as from others. One has to prioritise or focussing on what really matters to him or her.
- The perfectionist thought such as unrealistic and unattainable goals may be replaced with balanced as well as realistic thought.
- Practice mindful self-compassion. A study conducted by Australian Catholic University of Sydney states that self-compassion helps significantly with people suffering in depression with perfectionist tendency. According to one of the researchers Madeleine Ferrari, the relationship between depression and maladaptive perfectionism can be reduced with the practice of self-kindness.

### CONCLUSION

Perfectionism is considered as the positive trait and it reflects one's effort for the growth as well as improvement. Success and failures are part and parcel of one's life. Excessive focus on perfectionism resulted unhealthy avoidance behaviour. Individual efforts along with the therapy such as i) Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) and ii) Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) can be helpful and effectively utilised for the perfectionists to overcome the challenge. Research findings reveal that CBT reduces mental health symptoms such as anxiety as well as helpful for coping with the inaccurate thinking patterns and imperfect behaviour. Perfectionist may consult mental health professionals for support and guidance for the resilience and overall wellbeing in order to get rid of perfectionism.

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### ***Conflict of Interest***

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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