

## In Pursuit of Perfect

**March 2011**

*“To escape criticism - do nothing, say nothing, be nothing”*

*Elbert Hubbard*

It was late November. I made my way to the engineering building noticing little of my surrounds. Once there, I stood before my lecturer's closed door. I raised my eyes and scanned the ID numbers in the grade sheet, column by column and then straight across the page. I found it difficult to see the results - everything was simply a blur - my anxiety had once again over taken me.

This one example represented my university years. I lived my life as if a sword was constantly hanging over my head. What if I missed a crucial moment in the lecture or had even fallen asleep from the exhaustion that I felt from study. What if I did not proof read an assignment for yet another time before submitting? Any of these situations could lead to an imperfect performance, and to the end of the possibility of becoming the kind of person and attaining the kind of life that I envisioned for myself.

That day, standing in front of the door, one of my greatest fears materialized. I failed to get a High Distinction. I left the building engulfed in my inner pain – a pattern I knew well. No achievement was ever good enough. No success was cause for celebration. I was a perfectionist.

Perfectionism is an incapacitating fear of failure that permeates our lives, especially those areas that we care about most. [1]

The reach for perfection is painful because it is often driven by both a desire to do well and a fear of the consequences of not doing well. This is the double-edged sword of perfection.

Failure however is an inescapable part of life and more so a critically important part of any successful life. We learn to walk by falling, to talk by babbling and eat by simply missing our mouths and making a mess.

Take a look at some of the greatest inventions. Thomas Edison who registered 1093 patents – including those associated with the light



bulb, the telegraph and event cement – proudly declared that he failed his way to success.

Those who intensely fear failure end up falling short of their own potential.

To remain employable, let alone competitive. we must constantly learn and grow, and to learn and grow, we must fail. In the words of Tal Ben Shahar - We either learn to fail or fail to learn.

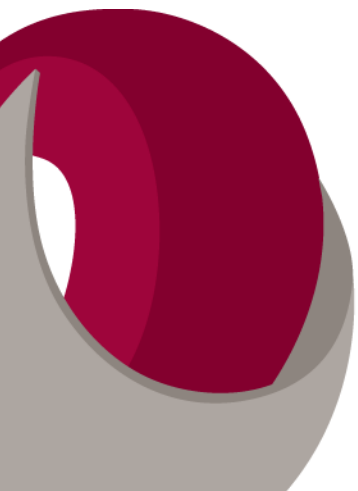
Perfectionists share some common characteristics.

- They are hard on themselves and find error completely unacceptable.
- They worry about what others will think of them.
- They seem to push themselves harder than most other people do.
- Perfectionists can have trouble making decisions.
- And in some cases, they even inflict their standards onto others in turn straining relationships.
- On the outside, perfectionists usually appear to be very competent and confident individuals. They are often envied by others because they seem to "have it all together." Sometimes they seem perfect. On the inside they do not feel perfect, nor do they feel like they always have control over their own lives.

Breaking Free from perfectionism is about changing our beliefs and internal schemas. It is about understanding and challenging the underlying beliefs that drive you to get things "just right". Maybe your beliefs apply to some situations and not others, with some people but not with others. Rather than accepting your belief as a fact, treat it as a hypothesis and test whether it is really true. Gather evidence from your experiences of the past, from your observations of others, or by talking with other people. A key starting point is self awareness.

It is by no means an easy road but it is a worthwhile cause leading to greater happiness and fulfillment. Today, as I look back on my life, I recognise that I am proud of my efforts, my dedication to my goals and what I have achieved. I had learnt that by putting myself on the line I became stronger and more resilient.

The problem is not in having high standards or in working hard. Perfectionism becomes a problem when it causes emotional wear and tear or when it keeps you from succeeding or from being happy. Perfectionism is a problem when you fear making mistakes, feel stress



from the pressure to perform, have low self esteem and a never ending level of anxiety.

Ask yourself, am I learning to fail or failing to learn.

### Do You Have Perfectionist Beliefs

Rate the intensity with which you believe each of these statements, with 100 percent indicating complete agreement and 0 percent indicating that you do not believe it at all. [3]

- \_\_\_\_I must be perfect or I will be rejected.
- \_\_\_\_If I make a mistake, it will be horrible.
- \_\_\_\_If I do it perfectly, then I will be accepted.
- \_\_\_\_I must be perfect or I will be embarrassed.
- \_\_\_\_If I make a mistake, I will be humiliated.
- \_\_\_\_When I get it right, I will finally accept myself.
- \_\_\_\_When I achieve perfection, I will find inner peace.
- \_\_\_\_If I do it perfectly, then it will be rewarded.
- \_\_\_\_If others do not approve of me, then I am not OK.
- \_\_\_\_If I make a mistake, then I am worthless.
- \_\_\_\_I'm not good enough. I must keep trying.
- \_\_\_\_I must be perfect or others will disapprove of me.
- \_\_\_\_If I do it perfectly, then everything will work out right.
- \_\_\_\_I'll never be good enough.
- \_\_\_\_If others approve of me, then I must be OK.
- \_\_\_\_If I do it perfectly, then everyone will notice.
- \_\_\_\_I must be perfect or I will fail.
- \_\_\_\_Things should be done the right way.
- \_\_\_\_There is a right way and a wrong way to do things.
- \_\_\_\_It is possible to do things perfectly.

#### Sources:

[1] Tal Ben Shahar, Ph.D. – *The Pursuit of Perfect*, McGraw Hill, 2009

[2] Psychology Today – *The Perfect Trap*, May 1, 1999

[3] Ramirez Basco, Monica, Ph.D.: *Never Good Enough: Freeing Yourself from the Chains of Perfectionism* (The Free Press).