

Battling Perfectionism

Suzanne doesn't just want to do well on her job. Everything she does has to be perfect. The slightest criticism from her manager is enough to send her into a tailspin. If any fault, no matter how small, can be found in her work, she feels an overwhelming sense of failure.

Things are just as difficult for her at home. Everything must be in order before she can rest. Even though she works a full-time job, she takes total responsibility for the house and everything in it. The beds must be made, the dishes put away, carpets vacuumed and the children's lunches for the next day prepared before she can rest. On most days she is in constant motion until she collapses into bed, usually after everyone else is asleep.

Suzanne is struggling with perfectionism. She doesn't know it yet, but she isn't simply seeking a high standard of performance. She doesn't just have high expectations of herself. She is attempting to do what no person can do: live her life without flaw. She learned this script for life when she was a child, had it reinforced in school, refined it in college, then brought it into her marriage and family life.

Human Synergistics International, located in Michigan, IL, is a consulting group which has studied the impact of perfectionism in the workplace and the problems it creates. They suggest this simple test to determine the extent of your perfectionism. Respond to each item on a scale of 0 to 3, where 0 = never, 1 = seldom, 2 = sometimes and 3 = always.

1. I feel no matter how well I do, it's never enough.
2. I feel I must control or anticipate the future.
3. I'm disappointed after success, when I should feel good.
4. Others would say I'm too hard on myself and others.
5. I feel guilty when I'm not working.
6. I suffer from frequent headaches on weekends.
7. When I relax, I still think about work or things I must do.
8. I dominate conversations.
9. I become extremely upset with standing in line, waiting in traffic, poor service and with anything even slightly out of order.
10. Other people rarely come up to my high standards.

These researchers suggest that if you scored between 0 and 10, you don't have much of a problem with perfectionism. If your score was 11 or higher, your perfectionism is probably causing you problems.

If you've decided that being perfect is costing you too much, and if you're ready to change, there are some things you can do to alter your life. Being a perfectionist means we want simple answers that work perfectly, right away. There aren't any of those, but try these.

Change the recordings in your head, the ones that say you have to score 100% on everything you do. Most jobs don't demand that level of performance.

Aim at average in areas where you can do so. You may put off writing a letter to a friend because you think it has to be perfect. Try taking 15 minutes to dash one off.

Structure your work time so that you have blocks of time one or two hours in length during which you can concentrate intensely on a project.

Focus on what's right with people and situations. If you expect circumstances and the persons in them to be perfect, you set yourself up for disappointment. Look for the good.

Learn to laugh at yourself. We can get caught in the trap of taking ourselves too seriously. Let yourself see the humor in your life.

Jeff Hood