

Amanda Ruggeri examines the dangers of perfectionism.

- 1 In one of my earlier memories, I was drawing. I cannot recall what the picture was supposed to be but I remember the mistake. My marker slipped, an unintentional line appeared and my lip trembled. The picture has long since disappeared, but that feeling of deep frustration has stayed with me. More often than I would like to admit, something inconsequential will trigger the same unyielding quest to be perfect. Even squashing the loaf of white bread I had just bought can tumble around in my mind for several days, accompanied by incessant self-rebukes of "You should have known better!" Falling short of a bigger goal, even when I know achieving it would be near-impossible, would leave me deflated. That is the thing about perfectionism: it takes no prisoners. 5
- 2 Admittedly, perfectionism can, in some circumstances, be healthy and useful. When perfectionism involves the setting of high personal standards and working towards those goals proactively, the results speak for themselves. Nowhere is the 'practice makes perfect' adage more religiously adhered to than in the world of classical music. Virtuoso Lang Lang started practising the piano at age 3 and spent an average of 8 hours a day honing his craft. His perfectionistic and unflinching work eventually paid off – he helms sold-out concerts in major cities today. Self-professed perfectionists, Michelin-starred chef Gordon Ramsey and tennis maven Roger Federer are also at the top of their leagues. These Goliaths whose unceasing and intense pursuit of perfection have empowered them to hone their talent, build illustrious careers and amass vast fortunes certainly make perfectionism appear extremely valuable. 10 15
- 3 Contrary to popular perception, perfectionism has not always made humanity more accomplished; rather, it has made us excessively demanding of ourselves and others. Indeed, perfectionism is a self-defeating way to navigate the world – everywhere we look, there are omnipresent reminders that we need to be much better. Beauty advertisements promise us flawless skin, diets grant us 'ideal bodies' and gurus offer magic tips (list-making, email-answering, desk-tidying...) to make our lives exemplary. But any pursuit of perfection sows discord within our families as it consumes our leisure hours and squeezes the enjoyment out of all our activities. The thought of not succeeding distresses us so much that we develop a more exacting routine to cope. In fact, this behaviour becomes so ingrained that it degenerates into an addiction. 20 25
- 4 Multiple studies have also found a correlation between perfectionism and performance anxiety. In sports, perfectionist athletes tend to deliver second-rate performances regardless of their talent. When such athletes equate performance to self-worth, they do not just feel disappointed when they fail to meet their sporting goals; they are mortified. Their pursuit of perfection traps them in a repeated pattern of self-induced setbacks, disproportionate expectations and inordinately rigorous training regimes. Their critical inner voice that chides them to be "swiftest, highest and strongest!" always leaves a bitter sense of dissatisfaction and inadequacy, even in times of victory. 30
- 5 Nonetheless, there is a distinction between perfectionism as a tool and perfectionism for its own sake. The former involves an attitude of wanting to improve and to reach for higher standards, elevating work and raising performances beyond the ordinary. The latter ignores achievements as long as they fall short of perfection. In addition, perfectionists are adroit at stirring a squall into a snowstorm and whipping a brief ill wind into a category-five hurricane. Inept at handling failures, they boil with self-rage or slump into melancholic despair when success is not as instant nor as tangible as they wish. To make matters worse, perfectionists are also unlikely to verbalise their need for help as they cannot admit that they are less than perfect. They might even develop depressive symptoms over perceived failures which can then spiral into self-recrimination and a total depreciation of self-worth. 35 40
- 6 However, the distinction is lost on those who continue to misconstrue perfectionism as an admirable character flaw at the workplace. Declaring that we are perfectionists comes off as subtle self-praise; it is practically a stock answer to the trick question "What's your worst trait?" in job interviews. Surely, a workaholic who will not leave the office till a project is completed to the highest of standards must indubitably be an asset to the company? Won't someone who takes a longer time to complete the job produce work that is wonderful to behold and a cut above the rest? Perfectionism purportedly results in amazing ideas, amazing works of art and even more amazing products. According to urban legend, the most famous of all perfectionists, the late Steve Jobs, paid attention to every minute detail of every Apple product. Even the screws holding an iPhone 45 50

- together were a big deal for him because he wanted the overall experience of using one of his products to be “totally amazing!” until the consumer hankers for the next epitome of perfection. 55
- 7 In addition, anecdotal evidence indicates that this curse of perfectionism afflicts women more than men. It is acceptable for men to turn up in the office dishevelled and unshaven but social constructs dictate that women dress well, look confident and maintain an immaculate work space all the time. Women also believe they have multiple roles they need to fulfil impeccably: the consummate spouse, the bearer of model children or the faultless mother. Is it any wonder that women tend to establish unrealistic standards of perfection for themselves more often and become disconsolate at the thought of never being able to reach the pinnacle of perfection? 60
- 8 To cope with this quest for Nirvana, we need to trace the roots of our fixation with perfectionism. Perhaps the more pertinent question should be: where is perfectionism *not* coming from? Living in societies that only embrace accomplishments and frown upon failures, it is no surprise that we feel compelled to meet such impossible standards in our lives. The fear of being less than perfect is especially severe in market-based societies where governments have removed social safety nets. Competitiveness to be the best has also become the DNA of all schools. Standardised testing and high-pressure university entrance requirements have resulted in parents putting more pressure on themselves and their children to become overachievers. When children internalise that aspiration for perfection, they begin to define themselves only in strict, narrow terms of academic success. Such perfectionistic tendencies take root for life, causing many gifted children to become merely mediocre adults. 65 70
- 9 The high premium placed on perfectionism can also be attributed to how we think of our public lives as a flawless performance instead of a participation exercise. We all know how it feels to envy others – their celebrations, holidays and achievements. Mired in the perfectionist paradox, we crave validation which drives us not only to meet the established standards but to trump them. A lot of participants on social media aspire to “measure up” to their peers and judge others harshly too. Ask anyone with an Instagram account! All those glossy feeds of picture-perfect people living it up, lock everyone into a game of mutually assured depression. 75 80
- 10 It is a Herculean task to convince perfectionists that they have an attribute that needs to be moderated. Perfectionists disregard the oceans of tears that their stellar role models had shed to attain success and the countless sacrifices the latter had made to become ‘perfect’. They habitually belittle their own accomplishments, big and small, blinded by their insistence on being impossibly perfect in an imperfect world. 85

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