

Childhood Trauma & Perfectionism

Perfectionism as a response to childhood trauma: Perfectionism can be a trauma response due to childhood conditioning, psychological and emotional trauma, and abuse.

Perfectionism can also be reaffirmed through our society—trying to have the perfect body or feeling we need to have “stuff” to prove our success. It’s a cycle that continues within our families, religions, and communities.

As children, there may have been expectations imposed on us—standards that were so high and unattainable, yet we kept trying because we wanted to feel loved and accepted. It feels like the more we try, the more the target moves.

After a while, we become so exhausted and depleted, that we forever fall short. This may be why we find ourselves spiraling into despair, helplessness, or depression after pushing for so long. It’s like our mind is saying, “You’re not perfect. So do more, be more, push harder, hurry up!”

The expectations imposed on children to be perfect, perform, and strictly abide by the rules of the adults cause doubt in one’s own ability.

As children we learn that they are correct, and we are wrong. Unfortunately, this carries over into adulthood, whereby we constantly second guess ourselves (hello anxiety).

If we were punished, ridiculed, or blamed for not living up to a specific standard, without room for mistakes, we learned that perfection is the only option. Therefore, if we fail to be perfect, we may feel it's related to our worth. This can cause us to feel shame and embarrassment for not being perfect. We may wonder why we cannot reach this (impossible) goal. What is it about us that is incapable?

When children grow to feel they have to prove their worth because love doesn't come naturally—and unconditionally—they think they must try harder and become perfect to be loved and accepted. But it's impossible to be perfect, so the goal is unattainable.

We create this mask and false identity that we think people will like and approve of. At first, we might succeed. Most of us can agree that we have had great success and achievements by living up to this high standard of being. But the problem is retaining and maintaining it.

It becomes too hard to uphold and live by because it's not authentic. In many cases, we probably reached a goal by doing it quickly, hard, fast, and obsessively (another trait of perfectionism).

It's a heavy burden for anyone to strive for perfectionism because what is perfection? Who can say what it is and what it isn't?

The life of perfectionism is like living on a rat wheel. Around and around we go, thinking we're heading somewhere, when suddenly, we're struck with immense fear, panic, and dread. We worry, oh how we worry. We worry about things that are minute, and things that are big—we worry about every detail of life as we desperately try to control outcomes, and ourselves, and well, life.

Here are some major signs of perfectionism:

- Disassociation
- Driven by anxiety, fear, and worry
- Lack of trust in one's ability
- Results focused instead of process focused
- Procrastination
- Lack of confidence in one's self (body image, skills, as partners)
- Seeks validation from others
- Seeks out advice from others rather than trusting self
- Cut off from intuition or ignoring instincts
- Anxiety
- Seasons of depression, despair, suicidal thoughts
- Yo-yo cycles
- Addictions
- Quitting too soon

We keep trying, pushing and excelling. But eventually, the pressure gets to us, and when we can't live up to the idea we are chasing after, we quit, procrastinate, become sick, or mentally burned out.

This results in yo-yo cycles, the "all or nothing" mentality, and quitting things too soon or self-sabotaging (including relationships). In addition, we may struggle with self-doubt and anxiety (like a ton of anxiety).

We'll do something exceptionally well, but then we worry it's not good enough (or we're not good enough).

On the one hand, we may be excited about what we are doing, but on the other, it's like something is holding us back from thoroughly enjoying our life, work, relationships, and experiences.

It's like having a rope around our stomach attached to a brick wall as we try to run forward. We're putting in so much effort and time trying to move, and we get to a certain point, but the rope prevents us from moving. After a while, we feel exhausted, helpless, and stuck.

That rope is the mind of a perfectionist. We could remove the rope and freely run, but we remain trapped in this psychological loop until we make pivotal changes. And these changes are not about doing more, becoming more, or adding more to the plate—they are about understanding and undoing the conditioning that keeps us on this rat-wheel.

Letting Go

Letting go of perfectionism feels like we are failing—it often brings on more anxiety, this idea of surrender, when we're accustomed to holding on for dear life, trying to juggle perfection in every area.

But we can change if we make the effort. Identify your perfectionism; write about it; talk about it; feel the anxiety of letting go without acting out; let go; move on with your life.

Prayer has helped me through those times, and it has shown me how any of us, no matter how perfect we may try to be, can feel better if we ask our Higher Power to heal us. (7th Step)