

PERFECTIONISM: FRIEND OR FOE?

By Marie-Christine Albert, M.Sc.



Dear readers, do you tend to...

- want to do your best in every situation?
- not take the time to savour your successes?
- have trouble making decisions and feel paralyzed by indecision?
- think that being flawless will protect you from the judgment or disapproval of others?
- produce results that exceed expectations, thanks to your hard work and critical thinking?

If you answered “yes” to one or more of these questions, you may have perfectionist tendencies.

Perfectionism is a personality trait characterized by high performance standards, a critical attitude toward oneself and a constant drive for perfection.

It's undeniable: being a perfectionist pays off! You are congratulated, admired and offered projects or new activities: the spotlight is on you! Indeed, seeking personal development and a sense of fulfillment is a sign of good health.

Where it gets complicated is when perfectionism becomes obsessive and affects your well-being: your expectations for yourself get out of hand, you find yourself constantly dissatisfied and you feel devalued. If you aren't careful, you can end up in a destructive spiral of need for recognition, chronic stress, depression, deteriorating personal relationships, etc.

From one perfectionist to possibly another, let me tell you: the solution isn't to simply stop being one. There is such a thing as constructive perfectionism – the challenge is to preserve the benefits of this tendency while minimizing its darker side.



Developing constructive perfectionism

If you want to put your perfectionism to work for you, you must acknowledge it, understand it and properly regulate the thoughts and emotions it elicits in you, in the relevant contexts. Easier said than done! I recommend starting by working backwards to identify these situations. To help, here are the key points of an introductory exercise I give my clients.

At the end of each day for a week, assess the behaviours you engaged in order to achieve one or more of the objectives you had set for yourself. Describe the effect these actions had on your well-being. What did you feel? A sense of accomplishment, hope at the idea of succeeding or pride in using your skills? This indicates that you benefitted from your perfectionism. If, on the other hand, you experienced performance anxiety, guilt about not doing enough, sadness or fatalism, be careful: it may be time to consider whether or not your perfectionism is serving you well.

At the end of the week, draw two columns on a piece of paper. On one side, list the times when your perfectionism was constructive, and on the other, the times when it was excessive. What do you notice? In hindsight, were there situations in which you could have allowed yourself to be “less perfect”? Imagine being 10% “less perfectionist” the following week: what parts of your life would benefit from it? What could be the potential drawbacks? Happy exploration!

About Marie-Christine Albert



Marie-Christine (marie-christine@capformation.ca) is an expert in talent development and learning. She offers coaching and training services to clients with varied backgrounds, who are facing a variety of challenges. She is also a lecturer in organizational behaviour at HEC Montréal. For more information, go to www.capformation.ca

