

WHEN GOOD ISN'T GOOD ENOUGH

Avoiding the Perfectionism Sinkhole

Caring about the work we do and trying to do our best at it are wonderful qualities, but they can have a dark side. When we judge our worth by our productivity and expect ourselves to be perfect, being a flawed human becomes a problem. Human beings (by definition) are imperfect, so perfectionism (by definition) is unachievable. Perfectionism says we're never doing enough, never good enough, and eventually we start to believe those messages. If it's not okay to fail, make mistakes, or achieve less than we're aiming for, we will never be at rest.

Kebede is a lawyer in New York who specializes in helping recent immigrants. His own family emigrated from Ethiopia when he was seven, and Kebede's father impressed on him the importance of excelling at school to succeed in their new country. Kebede developed into a perfectionist who always had to get things right. In school if he got an A- on an exam, he would get upset and ask for extra-credit work to raise his grade. In his career, he shone because of his diligence and the long hours he put in. He was skillful in court and often succeeded in suing for his clients' rights. But when he lost a case, he blamed himself. Surely there was a better argument he could have made. He would then review the transcripts of the court appearance, combing through them for any possible error he had made.

After a while the stress of his work started taking a toll. Kebede was exhausted physically from all the extra hours he put in, he felt burdened by the

feelings of responsibility he assumed for his clients' well-being, and he was mentally drained by his constant self-criticism. He noticed he was caring a little less about his clients and started to feel disconnected from them. Eventually he began to dread going to the office.

HOW PERFECTIONISM CONTRIBUTES TO BURNOUT

Perfectionism is a personality trait defined by the tendency to strive for flawlessness, set unrealistically high standards for oneself, and become self-critical when these high standards aren't met. Research shows that if you're a perfectionist, you're vulnerable to burnout for several reasons. First, you're highly committed to whatever you put your mind to. Although being dedicated is admirable, perfectionists often overcommit. You may invest excessive time and effort into tasks and projects to get things right, often at the expense of your personal life. When perfectionists like Kebede take on more responsibility than is reasonable, they end up working crazy hours to meet those responsibilities. Essential acts of self-care such as eating well, exercising, sleeping, and spending time with friends can fall by the wayside. Eventually the body gives out in exhaustion and burnout sets in.

It's not just physical exhaustion that plagues perfectionists. When you have unrealistically high standards, the pressure to meet self-imposed demands mentally drains you too. Even very good isn't good enough; only perfection will do. It's already stressful to do a difficult job, but even more stressful if the expectation is that you must do that difficult job flawlessly. With no wiggle room, you'll inevitably see yourself as falling short. Perfectionism can lead to an obsessive focus on detail and the desire to control every aspect of one's work. But none of us can control all the factors that determine whether our work will be successful—outside forces and unexpected occurrences always play a role. This means that even when you do everything right, perfectionism leaves you unhappy and dissatisfied with your achievements.

And when you don't do everything exactly right—in other words, when you make errors or poor choices (gasp!)—the response can be downright cruel. You may call yourself names and say mean things that you would never say to someone you cared about. Harsh self-criticism activates the fight/flight/freeze

response, which generates additional physiological and psychological stress (more on self-criticism in the next chapter). The self-critical tendencies of perfectionists also backfire. The assumption is that being cruel to yourself after making mistakes will be so painful that you'll never do it again. But all it really does is spark anxiety and create feelings of inadequacy, shame, and eventually

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depression. All these factors make it more, not less, likely that you will make mistakes in the future.

Finally, perfectionists suffer from fear of failure. If you don't accept failure of any kind, the very thought of potentially failing

can send shivers down your spine. This creates constant worry that never abates. Fear of failure can also lead to procrastination: you put off those tasks that you might fail at because they're risky. This increases stress as deadlines loom and reduces the amount of time available to do tasks well.

Perfectionism is a sinkhole that drains your mental, emotional, and physical resources and sucks you into the pit called burnout. The extra attention you pay, the extra work you do, can certainly contribute to your success. But the unrealistic expectations, the excessive taking of responsibility, overwork, self-criticism, fear of failure, anxiety, and stress you experience make things much harder than they need to be.

ARE YOU A PERFECTIONIST?

- Do you often have the feeling that you're not good enough?
- Do you try to do everything as well as possible?
- Do you feel like you're only as good as your last achievement?
- Do you adopt unrealistically high standards for yourself?
- Do you beat yourself up for making small mistakes?
- Do you keep working harder and harder, despite feeling more and more exhausted?
- Are you afraid of failure?

PERFECTIONISM AND SELF-WORTH

Research shows that perfectionists tend to have what is called *contingent self-esteem*, meaning our sense of self-worth depends on achievement in those areas of life that are important to our identity. If being a competitive runner is key to your identity and you have contingent self-esteem, you will feel on top of the world if you win that next race but like a total loser if you come in third. (You probably won't mind if you lose a karaoke contest if you don't identify as a good singer.) Whether you're an ER nurse, a schoolteacher, or a child at your ill parent's bedside, if you're a perfectionist, you will feel good about yourself when you meet your high standards and bad about yourself when you don't.

Perfectionism is a false friend. We think that trying so hard will help us, but when we set unrealistic standards for ourselves and then judge ourselves harshly for not meeting them, we just end up shooting ourselves in the foot.

Perfectionism is also a fair-weather friend. It provides a sense of worthiness in the good times but deserts us when we need it most, when we fail or fall short. For instance, Kebede would beam with pride and confidence when he won a case for a client but hang his head in shame the next week if he lost a case. His self-esteem bounced up and down like a yo-yo on a trampoline. This instability in self-worth left him more vulnerable to stress, anxiety, feelings of inadequacy, and depression—all contributors to burnout.

Self-compassion, on the other hand, is a true and stable friend. With self-compassion our sense of self-worth isn't contingent on success or failure; it's

Perfectionism is a false and fickle friend. Self-compassion is a true and constant friend.

rooted in being a flawed human being doing the best we can in the moment. Self-compassion provides a source of unconditional self-worth that is always available, regardless of circumstances.

DOES SELF-COMPASSION LOWER YOUR STANDARDS?

Self-compassion helps us let go of the idea that we are in complete control of how things turn out. The truth is, life happens. To be human means making mistakes, getting it wrong, and missing the mark. But if self-compassion says

you're "good enough," doesn't that mean you'll set the bar too low and stop aiming for greatness?

Interestingly, studies show that self-compassionate people still set high standards for themselves: if you care about yourself, you will want to reach your goals and realize your dreams. The big difference is how self-compassionate people relate to themselves when they fail to meet their high standards. They are kind and supportive rather than cold and cutting toward themselves. With a sense of worth and self-confidence intact, and the safety that comes from knowing it's okay to fail, they are more likely to pick themselves up and try again. This orientation toward growth and learning contributes to success.

We recently conducted a study of how self-compassion training impacted NCAA athletes. In the United States, college players have incredibly high standards for themselves. Good enough means being damn good. College scholarships and future professional careers depend on excellence, and slacking means being kicked off the team. We found that athletes who learned to be compassionate toward their mistakes in games or shortcomings in their training routines became less self-critical and experienced reductions in depression, anxiety, and stress. Most telling, they reported that their athletic performance improved and their coaches agreed with this assessment. Being kind to yourself doesn't mean letting your standards slip; it simply means you have more resources available to meet them.

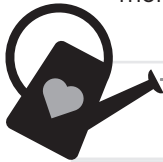
GIVING YOURSELF COMPASSION FOR BEING A PERFECTIONIST

If you're a perfectionist, by now you might be interpreting your perfectionism as a sign of being imperfect. And since you're probably a burned-out perfectionist or you wouldn't be reading this book, you're probably also down on yourself for contributing to your exhausted state. First, it's important to be kind to yourself for striving so hard. You're trying desperately to do good work here. Also, no one consciously chooses to be a perfectionist. Perfectionism is typically a learned behavior stemming from pain in our childhood. People who grew up with parents or other adults who were highly critical or demanding learned that when their performance was perfect, they were safe. If we don't do anything wrong, we can't be criticized. This pattern typically starts with fear of criticism from

parents, teachers, and others who have some authority over us and eventually becomes internalized.

This is certainly what happened with Kebede. He loved his father and greatly respected him, and his approval felt essential to Kebede's survival. It killed him to see that look of disappointment cloud his father's face when Kebede's grades weren't perfect. He assumed that his father would stop loving him if he didn't excel in all his classes. Even though that probably wasn't true, Kebede wasn't going to risk it. The pain of working long hours and studying till he dropped was not as bad as the pain of disappointing Dad. At some point Kebede came to rely on perfectionism to make his way in the world. And that was a very human thing to do.

We can be kind and understanding to ourselves for patterns of perfectionism, but at the same time, caring about ourselves means trying to do something different. Perfectionism isn't helping us, and it's contributing to our feelings of burnout. We can learn a different approach to our work that will be more effective and less exhausting: self-compassion.



SELF-COMPASSION TOOL 12

Letting Go of the Need to Be Perfect

Even if we don't have the personality trait of perfectionism, we all want to get things right. Because we receive so many messages in our society that we need to achieve in the work realm to be worthy, it can be challenging to let go of the need to be perfect in those areas of life that are important to us. See if this writing exercise can help.

✦ Think about some aspect of your work life where perfectionism may be rearing its head. For instance, maybe you expect yourself to answer every email in a timely manner. Maybe you're a caregiver and you expect to fully meet the needs of the person you're caring for. Maybe you're an accountant who expects that you will never make a miscalculation in your balance sheets. Please focus on an area of your work that's important, but not crucial to the safety of yourself or others (for instance, a doctor who expects not to make a mistake while performing open-heart surgery). Focus on one way in which you're being perfectionistic.

- ✦ Imagine that you fail to meet your expectations or you make a mistake in this area of your work life. What are you afraid might happen to you?
- ✦ Notice whether you're focused on how your work performance will be affected (for example, it will slow you down) or on what it says about you (you'll be a laughingstock, embarrassed, a failure).
- ✦ What emotions come up for you when you imagine not meeting your expectations? Fear, anxiety, stress, shame, disappointment, sadness, frustration, anger?
- ✦ If it feels comfortable, take two or three deep breaths and put your hand on your heart or some other soothing place. Allow yourself to get in touch with any discomfort in your body.
- ✦ Now speak to yourself (out loud or silently) in warm, compassionate language about the desire to be perfect. You might imagine what you would say to a friend who was causing themselves unnecessary stress and tension due to perfectionism or what a good friend might say to you. Try something like: "It's okay to be imperfect and make mistakes." "You're only human." "Your worth doesn't depend on success." "I love you unconditionally."
- ✦ If feelings of fear and anxiety are especially strong, you can give assurances to yourself like "I'm here for you. I won't abandon you. Just do the best you can and take it step by step."
- ✦ Finally, try to let yourself be as you are, flawed and imperfect. Realize that you are not alone, that your imperfections are what make you a card-carrying member of the human race.



When Kebede did this exercise, he got very emotional. He focused on his unrealistic expectation that he could win all his court cases. The truth was that he won plenty, but when he didn't succeed it tore him up inside. When he thought about the impact of failing, he realized that his focus was primarily on what it said about him. He cared about his clients, of course, but what upset him the most was the look on their faces when he had to tell them he had lost their case. He felt ineffective and incompetent. Feelings of shame arose. He imagined the face of his dad as a newly arrived immigrant being deeply disappointed in him.

So Kebede gently placed his hands on his heart and held himself while feeling his discomfort. The warmth of his hands felt supportive. He allowed the pain in, and tears started forming in his eyes.

At first when he said "It's okay to be imperfect" and "Your worth doesn't depend on success," he didn't believe it. But then he imagined that one of his colleagues at the law firm came to him with similar feelings of shame over not winning a case. Without hesitation he would say "You can't control everything; you're only human. Losing comes with the territory. Don't be so hard on yourself." When he imagined that his colleague said these words back to him, he could receive the words more easily. He saw the truth of them.

Kebede started to practice being more compassionate to himself at work and setting more realistic expectations, and he noticed his stress started to diminish. He stopped working such crazy hours and spent more time on doing those things that replenished him. What filled his cup the most was knowing that his worth was unconditional. That he didn't have to earn it and that it was okay to be imperfect.

Self-compassion allows us to embrace our imperfections and realize that our flawed humanity is what connects us to others. What a relief. Although self-compassion won't magically make your burnout disappear, it can be a crucial pressure-release valve for the stress caused by perfectionism. Once you aren't so anxious and exhausted, and once you know that you'll catch yourself if you fall, it will become easier to recover from burnout.

Although perfectionists are especially self-critical, self-criticism is a feature of life for everyone, perfectionistic or not. There are powerful reasons why our inner critic speaks so loudly, which we examine in the next chapter.