

Identify your perfectionist hotspots

We often take great pride in our perfectionism, but having extreme high standards can backfire. Discover where your pursuit of excellence is getting in the way of your goals and sabotaging your life **BY KATHERINE BALDWIN** PHOTOGRAPHY **VICTORIA BIRKINSHAW**

You spend hours rewriting your presentation but your garden is overgrown with weeds and your living room strewn with papers. You won't leave the house unless you look immaculate but you're not at all perturbed when your pavlova collapses... While a few of us are perfectionists across the board, most of us apply extreme high standards only in certain areas, perhaps around our work or our body shape, and are more relaxed in others, say in cooking or housework.

Psychologists suggest that we tend to be perfectionists in areas that have a

particular importance or relevance for us – that are tied up with our sense of identity and self-esteem. 'When someone is a perfectionist in one area but not another, it's because it matters to them to the point that they have a degree of ego involvement and it seems some aspect of themselves is being judged,' says Gordon Flett, professor of psychology at York University in Toronto.

Our early experiences often dictate our perfectionist tendencies. These can develop in response to chaotic or controlling parenting, and if our caregivers put particular stock in academic achieve-

ment or sporting excellence, success or failure in those fields is likely to carry extra weight.

'You often find with perfectionists that a history of parental criticism or expectation comes into play,' says Flett. 'If someone felt evaluated in terms of an aspect of themselves, for example, their performance at school or their appearance, they'll be sensitive in that area.'

Fear of judgement

As a journalist and writer I can relate to that fear of being judged. When it comes to choosing the right words, even after 17 years of publishing articles, I can spend hours revising a story and the process at times has been excruciating.

Of course, this drive for perfection can serve us well. We excel in our professions, keep spotless homes, host fabulous >>>

«With perfectionists, **parental expectation** often comes into play»

«I'd rather write than do housework»

Rachel Lyon, 33, copywriter and children's author

I'm so untidy – I didn't have a window cleaner for four years because I was too ashamed – I didn't want anyone looking in and seeing the state of the house. But the windows became so bad I had to relent. Now if I see the window cleaner on the street I start hiding things under the beds so it doesn't look too shocking.

Untidiness just doesn't offend me as it seems to most people. When it comes to housework, there's just always something else I'd rather be doing – such as writing.

But I'm a perfectionist with words. I'm a copywriter by trade and am having my first children's book published next year. It's a rhyming story, so every word has to 'fit'. Sometimes the words flow easily, but there's

also a whole lot of agonising to make sure you get the perfect combination. Sometimes it means throwing away whole tracts of work and starting again.

Before I had the current story accepted, I sent an idea for a children's novel to a few publishers but none was interested. I'd kept my writing ambitions to myself – I thought people would think I was living in cloud cuckoo land – so to get rejections confirmed my innermost fears.

When I got the idea for *The Cautionary Tale*, I took a chance. Getting that call from the publisher saying they were interested is just about the best feeling I've ever had.

'The Cautionary Tale Of The Childe Of Hale' by Rachel Lyon, (Maverick Books) will be published in May 2013





>>> parties, create beautiful flowerbeds, or bring up accomplished children, depending on where our standards are highest.

Surveying our achievements, we wear our perfectionism as a badge of honour, seeing it as a reflection of our hard work and self-discipline.

The cost of excellence

But perfectionism isn't always something to be proud of. 'Having high standards and striving to be the best is functional,' says Roz Shafran, professor of clinical psychology at the University of Reading and co-author of *Overcoming Perfectionism: A Self-help Guide Using Cognitive Behavioural Techniques* (Robinson). 'It's related to achievement and success and there's no problem with it. The problems come when you are extreme, rigid and inflexible.'

Needing to be perfect and refusing to accept anything less can actually stand in the way of performance. A study published in the *Canadian Journal Of Behavioural Science* in 2010 found that

psychology professors who demanded perfection of themselves were less likely to produce publications, receive citations and publish in high-impact journals.

To work out whether your pursuit of excellence is hindering you, start by identifying aspects of your life where you take any hint of failure seriously, where you're governed by the words 'must' and 'should' or by beliefs such as 'I must be perfect to be a worthwhile person', or 'If I make a mistake, I am a mistake'.

'Look for areas in which you have exceedingly high standards of what you or others are doing or of outcomes – areas in which you feel everything has to be done perfectly or not done at all,' says Joachim Stoeber, reader in psychology at Kent University.

Think of the dieter who, after succumbing to a small piece of chocolate,

feels a failure and spends the rest of the day eating sweets and cakes. This is all-or-nothing, black-and-white thinking, with no room for shades of grey.

Constant checking, rumination, anxiety, stress and sleeplessness are all signs of dysfunctional perfectionism, psychologists say. Similarly, failing to complete a task and move on to the next, refusing to ask for help and being unable to enjoy your achievements or other areas of your life suggest that your high standards have become a problem.

Looking at that list, I could be a poster girl for perfectionism. I've stayed awake stewing over a turn of phrase in an article I've written. I've failed to move on to a new task in a timely fashion, causing a backlog of work that means fun or relaxation get squeezed out. And I've rarely celebrated my successes. Instead, I've moved >>>

«I'm determined never to miss a deadline»

Suzie Grogan, 50, freelance writer and researcher

I've always been a perfectionist about work. When I was an employee I would bring work home and work late, and since I've been self-employed I'm determined never to miss a deadline and often spend far more time on a project than necessary. This means housework and cooking are neglected.

Not being a perfectionist about housework rarely affects me. One of my main issues, however, is money. I don't spend a lot, but I certainly don't check the bank account. I don't know who our energy providers are or how much we are charged for anything. I am a little ashamed of this. As a woman who considers herself a feminist it is an indefensible position.

The main problem, though, is being a perfectionist about work. In 1997 I was diagnosed with OCD and an eating disorder. Things had to be perfect or I would think some dreadful tragedy would befall my family. Then I was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2006, and tried to go back to work too soon after chemotherapy. I continued to take on work even though I couldn't do it, and this raised my anxiety levels so much that my husband had to step in.

I am having counselling, which has helped me to be kinder to myself. Not missing a deadline is a good way to run a business but it is much better to take on only a reasonable amount, so it doesn't build up.

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«As a perfectionist, I never get complacent»

Morgan Nichols, 32, yoga teacher, poet and stay-at-home mother

Being a perfectionist as a parent is mainly a good thing because it means that I never get complacent; I don't just parent from a default position. It makes me think deeply and constructively about what values and qualities I want my child to be able to develop and what kind of parenting facilitates that.

It means I put a lot of time and energy into it, reading books, talking to others, thinking and doing personal development work to help me be a better, more loving and effective parent.

The downside is that I can be too hard on myself. When I make a mistake – as I invariably do – I feel like a

terrible parent and can get despondent. Because I expect a lot of myself as a parent I can also take what my child does or how he behaves too personally and forget that he is a separate person from me and not a project that I can ensure turns out a certain way.

As for housework and organisation, I would definitely like to be more effective in these areas but often feel that it takes too much sacrifice of other things that are more important to me. I am working on the balance of this one. I now ask for help when I need it and get more support with the areas in which my standards are lower.

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>>> the goalposts, setting new targets as soon as I've met the first ones.

These attributes could make me a maladaptive perfectionist, one of those people who 'are usually never satisfied and don't feel pride when they've done something positive,' says Stoeber.

Perfect procrastinators

If we're afraid of making mistakes, it's natural we'll want to put things off until the last minute, which is why perfectionism and procrastination go hand in hand, creating a vicious cycle. 'If you leave things too late, you avoid testing yourself in areas that are important to you,' says Shafran. And as we're likely to slip up when we're rushing, procrastination reinforces low self-esteem, leading to more anxiety and further procrastination. In the extreme, perfectionism and procrastination lead to paralysis, says Flett.

Our high standards can also be directed towards others. So if you're single, as I am, it's worth asking whether your search for the elusive 'perfect' partner is keeping you out of relationships.

«If you leave things too late, you avoid testing yourself»

To beat perfectionism, ideally we would lower our standards – settling for 80 instead of 100 per cent – but psychologists say this is very hard for perfectionists to do as their identity is so bound up with their performance.

The key, then, is to change our approach to those standards and our emotional response to achieving less than our goals, says Flett. One tip is to set deadlines or boundaries around tasks. Tell yourself you will garden for an hour, stop working at dinnertime or make only two attempts at baking that cake.

However, we should also try to keep things flexible as rigid deadlines can cause perfectionists more stress, adds Shafran. Having a balanced life in which work, fun, relationships and relaxation all have a place is a good way to challenge problematic perfectionism. Since taking up team sports after work, I've found it

easier to down tools at six o'clock, though sometimes I still get stuck at my desk.

Breaking tasks down into chunks can help with procrastination. 'Tell yourself that today I'm only going to write the first paragraph of the story or I'll plant the violas but I won't rearrange the whole garden,' says Stoeber. 'If you look at the whole task, it can be overwhelming.'

On a deeper level, try to separate your achievements or your appearance from your sense of identity and self-esteem.

'People have to accept they're not going to be the best, the prettiest or the cleverest person in the room – there's only one of those,' says Shafran. 'If you really want to be happy, it's about fulfilling your own potential as opposed to comparing yourself with others – it's about learning to accept your limitations.'



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