

Perfectionism:

Psychologists describe two kinds of perfectionism. *Normal* perfectionists "derive a very real sense of pleasure from the labours of a painstaking effort" while *neurotic* perfectionists are "unable to feel satisfaction because in their own eyes they never seem to do things good enough to warrant that feeling". Such perfectionists are people who strain compulsively and unremittingly toward impossible goals and who measure their own worth entirely in terms of productivity and accomplishment.

There are three aspects of perfectionistic behaviour:

1. advertising one's own perfection,
2. avoiding situations in which one might appear to be imperfect and
3. failing to disclose situations in which one has been imperfect.

Perfectionists tend to have obsessive personality types who need to feel in control at all times to protect themselves and ensure their own safety. The obsessive person is highly vigilant and ruminates constantly about trying to control a situation to prevent some form of failure

By being constantly vigilant and trying extremely hard, they can not only ensure that they not only fail to disappoint or are beyond reproach but also they can protect against unforeseen issues (such as economic downturn). Vigilance may include constant monitoring of any issues that the perfectionist feels may affect him or her – whether it is related to work, family, or social issues..

Perfectionists may be workaholics who can't relax; people who give themselves a hard time for the smallest errors or wrong words for days afterwards; the person so intent on finding the perfect mate that they never settle down; the procrastinator; the finicky person; and so on. Perfectionists tend to be exceptionally sensitive to criticism.

Perfectionists often embody some or all of the following personality traits: emotional guardedness; fear of making mistakes or errors; thrift; need to be above criticism; tendency to be stubborn or oppositional; and so on.

Having said all of that, there are both positive and negative aspects to perfectionism. Perfectionism can drive people to accomplishments and provide the motivation to persevere in the face of discouragement and obstacles. Perfectionism can provide the driving energy which leads to great achievement. The meticulous attention to detail, necessary for scientific investigation, the commitment which pushes composers to keep working until the music realises the glorious sounds playing in the imagination, and the persistence which keeps great artists at their easels until their creation matches their conception all result from perfectionism. High-achieving athletes, scientists, and artists often show signs of perfectionism. For example, Michelangelo's perfectionism may have spurred him to create masterpieces such as the statue *David* and the Sistine Chapel. Perfectionism is associated with giftedness in children.

The negative aspects of perfectionisms include procrastination ("I can't start my project until I know the 'right' way to do it."), and self-criticism when it is used to excuse poor performance or to seek sympathy and affirmation from other people ("I can't believe I

don't know how to reach my own goals. I must be stupid; how else could I not be able to do this?").

At work, perfectionism is often marked by low productivity as individuals lose time and energy on small irrelevant details of larger projects or mundane daily activities. In intimate relationships, unrealistic expectations can cause significant dissatisfaction for both partners. Perfectionists may sacrifice family and social activities in the quest for their goals. Perfectionists can therefore suffer anxiety and low self-esteem.

Psychologists attempt to tackle the negative thinking that surrounds perfectionism, in particular the "all-or-nothing" thinking where someone believes that an achievement is either perfect or useless. They encourage clients to set realistic goals and to face their fear of failure.

This "all or nothing" thinking has been likened to a parable known as the "South Indian Monkey Trap." This parable is reputed to have been adapted by villagers in Southeast Asia. Upon trying to tackle their increasing population of monkey's, villagers had placed rice grains inside the hollows of coconuts which were tethered to a chain. The desired result was that the monkeys would then trap themselves, and the villagers would then dispose of the monkeys.

In essence, the monkey's would grab the grains of rice, and upon trying to remove their hand from the coconut hole, the monkey's would subsequently become trapped by their own fist. Since the hole was just big enough so that the monkey can put his hand in, and too small for his fist to come out after it has grabbed the rice, the monkey's ended up trapping themselves. Rather than letting the grains of rice go and escaping, they chose instead the rice to their own peril.

The moral of the story, as it pertains to perfectionists, is that like the monkey, the perfectionist must make a choice of importance. Either the perfectionist rigidly holds on to what he values, or his own desire for those values in essence become his ruin.