

PERFECTIONISM

Marleen Williams, Ph.D., Brigham Young University, Counseling and Psychological Services

Perhaps no idea has been the cause of more distress and pressure than the belief that we must achieve absolute perfection right now! But, you may ask, are we not commanded in the bible to be “perfect even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect?” (Matt 5:48) Many students enter college with the hope of excelling. Finding themselves surrounded by talented, bright, attractive people, they push harder for perfection academically, socially, physically, and emotionally. Instead of feeling joy in their progress, they often experience depression, anxiety, and a constant fear of failure.

The original Greek word for “perfect” is *tel ios*, which means complete. The infinitive form of the word is *teleiono*, which means “to reach a distant end, to be fully developed, to consummate, or to finish.” The Savior’s injunction to be perfect implied a wholeness or completeness that would only be fully attained through the resurrection. President Joseph Fielding Smith further clarified this concept in saying. “Salvation does not come all at once: we are commanded to be perfect even as our Father in Heaven is perfect. It will take us ages to accomplish this end, for there will be greater progress beyond the grave, and it will be there that the faithful will overcome all things, and receive all things, even the fullness of the Father’s glory.” (Gospel Doctrine, 5th Edition SLC: Deseret Book, 1939. pg. 132)

Elder Bruce R. McConkie, a member of the Quorum of the Twelve, also elaborated on the process of becoming perfect, saying, “Nobody becomes perfect in this life. Only the Lord Jesus attained that state, and he had an advantage that none of us had. He was the Son of God, and he came into this life with a spiritual capacity and an inheritance that exceeded beyond all comprehension what any of the rest of us was born with.” (Devotional Speeches of the Year, Provo UT: BYU Press, 1976. pg. 399-400)

Understanding the difference between a healthy quest for wholeness, growth, and development, as opposed to a frantic drive for perfectionism and absolutely flawless performance, is important in good mental health. The Book of Mormon teaches us that “men are that they might have joy.” (2 Nephi 2:25) Wholeness, growth, and righteous personal development lead to joy. Perfectionism, on the other hand, is strongly associated with depression, anxiety, fear and frustration.

Psychologists who have studied the link between perfectionism and emotional distress have identified mental distortions that perfectionists use to interpret their experiences. Perhaps the most common is an all-or-nothing attitude. Perfectionists see themselves either as successes or failures with no in-between. They forget that growth occurs “line upon line and precept upon precept.” (Eccl. 9:11, Mosiah 4:27)

A second distortion is basing self-worth on the tyranny of the “shoulds” and “musts”. Perfectionists feel that they must never make a mistake and should always perform perfectly in order to be a worthwhile person. The Gospel of Jesus Christ teaches us that a loving Father in Heaven values us for our worth and provides the atonement as an opportunity to return to Him.

Perfectionists experience excessive shame in making mistakes, and they are overly sensitive as to what others think. Success is measured by validation from others and meeting external performance standards. Striving for wholeness, however, recognizes that individuals have unique challenges as well as gifts. Appropriate goals are derived from inner awareness, and one can find joy in small, personal triumphs. Perfectionists punish themselves for making mistakes, and growth may be paralyzed by shame. Individuals striving for wholeness can recognize and learn from mistakes, let go, and move ahead. They are able to use mistakes as part of the learning process

Excelling in all areas of performance is a trap for perfectionists. They believe that unless they do well in every area of their lives, they are inadequate and unworthy. We learn from the scriptures that “all have not every gift given unto them.” (D&C 46:11) It is not required that we develop a fullness of all gifts in this life. We are all given weakness to teach us compassion and humility. (1 Cor. 1:27, 2 Cor. 12:10, Ether 12:27)

The Lord asks that development occur in wisdom and order. We are not asked to “run faster than we have strength.” (Mosiah 4:27, D&C 10:4) Remembering that we are not required by the Lord to be the “swift” nor the “strong”, reduces the risk for depression, anxiety, and mental distress. Through “staying in the race,” (3 Nephi 15:9, Matt 24:13, Eccl 9:11, Moses 4:27) trusting the atonement, and believing in our inherent lovability, we are able to continue the quest for eternal perfection rather than sinking into despair because of perfectionism.



PERFECTIONISM

- 1.) Unreasonable goals
- 2.) Self-worth based on achievements
- 3.) Can't feel satisfied
- 4.) Based on comparisons with others
- 5.) Feels unloved and invalidated unless performing well; cannot share mistakes without excessive shame
- 6.) Excessive fear of failure which is chronic and pervasive
- 7.) External standards for success
- 8.) Goals exceed present performance by a great degree
- 9.) Cannot find pleasure in progress toward the goal; Focus is only on the outcome
- 10.) Emphasis is on keeping life under control

WHOLENESS

- 1.) Obtainable, realistic goals
- 2.) Self-worth inherent
- 3.) Can self-reward
- 4.) Recognizes individual uniqueness
- 5.) Accepts self as valuable while acknowledging human weakness
- 6.) Can accept failure as part of the learning process
Keeps trying
- 7.) Goals derived from inner awareness
- 8.) Goals reflect growth to next stage of progressive development
- 9.) Enjoy the “journey”
- 10.) Emphasis on keeping life in balance