



HARVARD COURSE IN READING & STUDY STRATEGIES

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THE WORLD OF A PERFECTIONIST

by

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Often without realizing it, people who procrastinate are perfectionists. In an attempt to prove that they are good enough, they strive to do the impossible, thinking that they should have no problem at all reaching their lofty goals. They usually put unrealistic demands on themselves and then feel overwhelmed when they are unable to meet them. Discouraged, they then retreat from the demands by procrastinating.

Most procrastinators don't even understand how they could possibly be considered perfectionists when everywhere they turn they find evidence of how they have messed up. Said Gary, a self-employed gardener, "I always do things in a half-baked way. I do a rushed job at the last minute and sometimes I don't even see projects through to completion. How in the world can I be a perfectionist?"

Perfectionism resides not so much in top-notch, perfect behavior, as it does in unrealistic

attitudes. As psychologist David Burns has pointed out, people who are high achievers generally are not intractable perfectionists. The champion athlete, the extremely successful business person, and the Nobel prize-winning scientist usually know that there will be times when they will make mistakes or when they will have a bad day and their performance will suffer a temporary setback. Although they strive for high goals, they are also able to tolerate the frustrations and disappointments of sometimes failing to meet those goals. They know that they can improve their efforts, and they work hard to do so.

In contrast, the perfectionistic procrastinator usually expects more of him- or herself than is realistic. The woman who hasn't exercised in years wants to be in top physical condition in two weeks. The first-time novelist wants the first draft of his writing to be of publishable quality.

A young man wants every phone call to land a date, a salesman expects to turn every customer into a sale. As a result, the high standards that are intended to motivate these people toward accomplishment often become impossible standards which hinder their efforts. An important question to ask yourself is: Are you setting standards for yourself that enable you to make progress, or are your standards so high that you become discouraged, frustrated, and get stuck? It's not how high your standards are that make you a perfectionist, it's how unrealistic and inhibiting they are for you.

There are several beliefs cherished by perfectionists who procrastinate; and, although these beliefs may seem noble, and even reasonable, they can make a person's life extremely unsatisfying and pave the way for procrastination rather than progress.

Mediocrity Breeds Contempt. For some procrastinators the thought of being ordinary can be so intolerable that they want everything they do to be outstanding. They wish not only for ideal careers and relationships, but also to make a masterpiece of the letter they write or the garden they plant. If you expect your everyday performance to be up to the level of your ideal picture of yourself, then whatever you do is bound to seem mediocre in comparison.

Since mistakes and flaws are an inevitable part of the human condition, people who believe that "mediocrity breeds contempt" can find comfort in procrastination. As we suggested earlier, when a mediocre or ordinary performance can be attributed to the last-minute rush, a person can continue to believe that he or she still has a great deal of "potential" to be tapped. This allows a perfectionist with little self-esteem to maintain some self-respect in spite of an average performance. Procrastination provides an excuse for mediocrity. It makes mediocrity seem temporary, an artifact of a half-hearted effort. As such, procrastination preserves the hope that if you ever did make an all-out effort, you wouldn't be mediocre at all.

Excellence Without Effort. The perfectionist believes that if one is truly outstanding, even difficult things should be easy. Creative ideas should flow ceaselessly! Studying should be pure intellectual joy! Decisions should be made quickly, and with total certainty! Using such impossible standards for comparison, the person who must work hard, or even exert a moderate amount of effort to get something done, is likely to feel inferior.

Suppose a student is faced with some homework problems. If he or she cannot tolerate the process of groping for the answers to the problems, the student will have trouble with the work. Said a physics major, "If I can't solve the problem instantly, I feel stupid. I understand the concepts and I'm pretty smart, so I should be able to see the answer right away – I get so mad at myself that I can't stand sitting there. I go out and play video games."

The expectation that one should be able to catch on instantly, no matter how complex the material, brings many procrastinators to a grinding halt. Their disappointment at having to work hard prevents them from making the effort required to grapple with the material and master it. Instead, they avoid it by delaying. In the long run, their need to be smart keeps them ignorant. After all, if you can't stand not knowing, you can't learn.

Going It Alone. Perfectionists feel that they must do everything by themselves, believing that it's a sign of weakness to relieve themselves of any responsibilities by delegating or by getting assistance. There is no flexibility to consider what might be best for the situation, no room to admit that sometimes you just don't have the answer or that you can't do it all by yourself. Even when it would be more efficient to get help, many perfectionists are bound and determined to work, and suffer, in isolation. Then, when the burden becomes too heavy, procrastination becomes their one source of relief. Unable to do everything all by themselves, they resort to delay.

There is a Right Way. This is one of the most cherished notions held by perfectionists. They believe that there is one correct solution to a problem and that it is their responsibility to find it. Until they've discovered the right solution, they are reluctant to take any course of action or commit themselves to anything. So, rather than take the risk of making the wrong choice, they do nothing.

Consider the case of Charles and Brenda. When they married, they talked about moving from their small town in Ohio to a larger community, but they couldn't decide on the best place to live. Brenda felt the decision would change the course of their lives forever. She wanted to be absolutely sure they were doing the right thing before they moved, so she made long lists of pros and cons for each of the towns they were considering. No matter how many factors they considered, however, Brenda couldn't feel certain that any location would be the perfect place to live, work, and raise children, so they ended up not moving anywhere.

Brenda thought that if she could just find the one right answer, there would be no drawbacks, no cons to consider along with the pros. But is there one right answer, one risk-free solution for Brenda and Charles? They'll have to uproot and readjust wherever they go. They'll like some things and not others about any city they choose. But Brenda fears that if she makes a wrong decision, she will be judged badly for it. She believes that people will think less of her, because her ability to know what's right will clearly be in doubt.

Holding back from making a commitment serves another purpose for Brenda and Charles: It keeps all of their options open. As long as they don't actually decide where to live, any part of the country represents an ideal possibility. They can imagine a better life watching the leaves turn in the New England autumn, hiking along the California coast, enjoying gracious Southern living, or skiing in Colorado. As long as they keep on dreaming, they don't have to face unpleasant, imperfect realities.

I Can't Stand to Lose (Or: What, Me Competitive?) On the surface, it appears that many procrastinators are not competitive. Their constant delaying takes them out of the running, so they don't really compete – or do they? Randy, a contractor who often delays submitting bids until it is too late, made a typical comment: "I'm not interested in competing for jobs with millions of other people. I'll find a job without going through that conventional rigamarole – I like to run on my own track."

The truth is that many perfectionists hate losing so much that they avoid any activity that would bring them into direct competition with others. If Randy, for instance, stopped delaying and actively bid, he risks finding out where his company really stands in relation to the competition. If he didn't come out on top, he would feel inadequate and foolish, because to him not being perfect is failing.

A variation of this competition theme is played by people who "choose to lose." They procrastinate to such an extent that they guarantee failure, yet still imagine that they could have won if they had tried – like the bachelor who brags about all the hot romances he could have if only he had the courage to make phone calls. Underlying the idea "I can't stand to lose" is the more basic perfectionistic notion, "I should never lose." People who believe this can protect themselves from facing the reality of their imperfection by procrastinating. They can't lose because they never really enter the race.

All or Nothing. The all-or-nothing view of life is common among perfectionists who procrastinate. A person who believes that he or she must do everything usually has difficulty appreciating any progress made toward a goal: As long as the project is incomplete, it seems that nothing at all has been accomplished. No wonder it's so tempting to give up in despair before reaching the end!

The all-or-nothing notion can affect a person's initial formulation of goals, leading him or her to attempt to do everything at once

because anything less seems insufficient. For instance, we asked Steve to select a goal that he wanted to accomplish during a two-week period of time. Initially, he planned to work out at his health club every day for the two-week period. Although he had joined the club more than a year earlier, he had never once used his membership. It took some work, but we finally convinced Steve that the goal of going to the club every day was pretty unrealistic. Reluctantly, Steve modified his goal, deciding that he would be doing well if he went to the club six times over the two-week period. Two weeks later, Steve was very discouraged because he had only used the gym three times. Even though Steve worked out three times more in two weeks than he had during the entire previous year, he felt as if he'd accomplished nothing.

With an all-or-nothing attitude, you can become discouraged for any of the following reasons:

You don't accomplish everything you set out to do.

You don't do things exactly as you had planned.

You do something well, but not perfectly.

You don't get as much recognition as you feel you deserve.

In situations like these, you can feel as though you have nothing because what you do have isn't exactly what you had expected or hoped for. If you can only be satisfied with perfection, you are doomed to be disappointed. As one perfectionist put it, "It's either gold or it's garbage."

Perfection is an ideal that is relinquished very, very gradually. Even if you can agree intellectually that perfectionistic standards are unrealistic and counterproductive, you may still find it hard to accept the fact that you aren't now, and never will be perfect.

One reason the goal of perfection is so hard to give up is that the foundations for unrealistic expectations are set early in life. Family experiences lead children to develop the idea that they must be perfect.

For most perfectionists, accomplishment represents much more than simply achieving goals or being remarkable. In many of their families, being outstanding seemed to be the most reliable strategy for earning recognition, acceptance, and love – accomplishments were valued above all else, and being second best seemed of no value at all. Other perfectionists never enjoyed the satisfaction of winning approval. Although accomplishments were highly valued, their ability to achieve was doubted, criticized, or undermined. In this situation, they may try to dispel doubts by striving to be perfect, believing that if they're ever going to earn respect and love, perfection is their last hope.

MULTIPLE-CHOICE QUESTIONS

Select the best answer for each question and enter it on your worksheet.

1. As a rule, people who are perfectionists often
 - (a) make sure that they behave or perform excellently.
 - (b) avoid procrastination and underachievement.
 - (c) have unrealistically high goals.
 - (d) possess unusual natural talents.
2. Perfectionists tend to believe that
 - (a) asking for help is a sign of weakness or failure.
 - (b) it is only human to have a few flaws or failures, as long as you do one thing perfectly.
 - (c) a great performance is usually the result of dedication and hard work.
 - (d) the stronger the competition the better one's performance.
3. The goal of perfection is hard to give up because
 - (a) being perfect is so rewarding.
 - (b) perfectionists often meet their own high standards.
 - (c) there really is only one way to do things right.
 - (d) the foundations of unrealistic goals are set early in life.
4. The author's main point is that
 - (a) perfectionists and procrastinators go through similar difficult experiences in achievement situations.
 - (b) perfectionism is rooted in unrealistic attitudes and beliefs, and as a result perfectionists may end up procrastinating.
 - (c) perfectionists believe that if only they had more time they could accomplish their goals.
 - (d) procrastinators believe that if only they had more time they could accomplish their goals.
5. The authors suggest that successful achievers
 - (a) might do better not to work so hard.
 - (b) hold strong beliefs in the value of excellence.
 - (c) have an ability to tolerate failure and learn from their mistakes.
 - (d) often have contempt for mediocrity or half-hearted efforts.

SAMPLE SUMMARIES

Jane B. Burka and Lenora M. Yuen observe that perfectionism can, paradoxically, lead to procrastination. They find that perfectionists tend to have unrealistic expectations and beliefs, including that "mediocrity breeds contempt," that excellence should be effortless, and that there is only one right way to do things. The authors make the case that these problematic beliefs and expectations can lead perfectionists to put things off because they become discouraged and/or because they try to avoid failure.

OR

Jane B. Burka and Lenora M. Yuen observe that perfectionism can, paradoxically, lead to procrastination due to discouragement or to someone's trying to avoid failure.

Supporting Points:

Perfectionists might have trouble completing tasks on time because, for example,

- they have unrealistically high standards.
- they are intolerant of flaws or mistakes.
- they consider needing help to be a sign of weakness or failure.
- they believe there is only one right way to do things.