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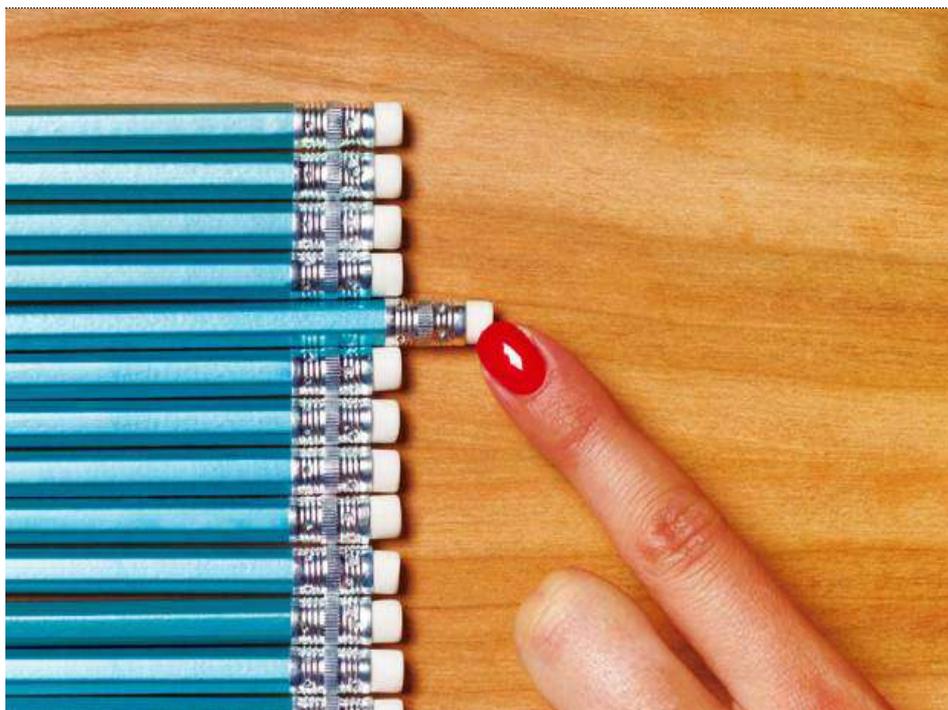
The dark side of perfectionism

Are you constantly disappointed with yourself? Donna Needs, coach and training consultant, fills us in on the downside to striving for perfection



As told to Louisa Wilkins

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Source: Getty Images

“There’s a difference between striving for excellence and striving for perfection. Someone might be an interior designer, for example, and be constantly trying to improve her skills and knowledge – that’s excellence. But when someone sets themselves unattainable, unrealistic goals, that’s perfectionism.

“With women, perfectionism can often focus on appearance – wanting the perfect body, the perfect tan, the perfect ageless skin, the perfect clothes... it’s a goal that they can never achieve, which is stressful. When a goal like this becomes an obsession, it takes energy and time from other areas of their lives, such as their relationships.

“Another area of life I see perfectionism causing problems is in parenting. If you expect perfect grades and accomplishments from your children, it can be extremely stressful for them. If they are good at something, and you give them a chance to pursue it, that’s encouraging excellence. But forcing children to strive to be perfect can cause them to be anxious about getting the results they think you want. Tiger Woods is a good example of this... he was forced into golf and to be the best, and eventually his life exploded.

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“Perfectionism leads to a nasty, self-imposed cycle of setting yourself up for unrealistic expectations and, consequently, disappointments, which can be really damaging to your sense of self-esteem. With my clients, many of the biggest issues stem from perfectionism.

“For women, it often stems from people-pleasing – they grow up wanting to be the perfect daughter and then later want to be the perfect wife, the perfect mother, the perfect employee... the perfect woman. As little girls, they thought, ‘I’m going to be sweet, and good, and quiet and everyone will think I’m cute.’ But when they grow up, these attitudes and behaviours may not serve them any more as people just walk all over them.

“Often, they have tried to be the perfect employee –the hardest working, putting in the longest hours, being the nicest colleague... eventually this can lead to serious physical and mental diseases and illnesses. When I have clients who are struggling with this inner desire to be perfect, I tell them that the first step is to start recognising the signs of their thinking, or behaviour.

“If you’re constantly feeling disappointed by others, and by yourself, notice that it is a common feeling for you... Do you feel disappointed with your weight and with your body? Do you feel disappointed by your husband and kids? Do you feel disappointed with yourself, wishing that you would do better at work, or exercise more? If you are constantly feeling disappointed, ask yourself if you are setting yourself unattainable goals and expectations. Also identify what your body is telling you... are you feeling anxious, or depressed because of these unachievable goals?

“Joylessness is also a good indication... if you can go through your checklist and say, ‘I’ve got a good job, a husband, kids, etc but I still feel unhappy’, it could be due to many things, but perfectionism is definitely one of them.

“If your answers to these questions point to an issue with perfectionism, seek help. It’s a hard pattern to break as it’s almost like an addiction. The process involves looking at your life and your values and making sure you are living a life that is true to those values. Next you have to start learning how to be realistic with your goals. Another thing is learning to develop an attitude of gratitude – feeling true gratitude for something – and unconditional love for someone... about being grateful for your health, for having a roof over your head and for the basics of life that we forget sometimes.

“Lastly, we need to talk positively to ourselves – we all have gremlins, little voices in our heads telling us negative things about ourselves... Perfectionists have more than other people. We need to turn them around so they are kind voices, so that you can stop sabotaging yourself.”

Donna Needs is a coach and training consultant at Whitehorse Consulting. For more, visit www.whitehorse-consulting.biz (<http://www.whitehorse-consulting.biz>)



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