LIFE

People Don't Understand How Debilitating Perfectionism Is

Perfection is not always a good thing.

By **Olga Alexandru** • May 18, 2021

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[Image Description: A person sits with their head in their hands while leaning against a wall] Via Pexels

A person sits with their head in their hands while leaning against a wall

When most people hear the word perfection they think that it's the gold standard, the best you can be. For me, it's a word filled with shame, anger and pain.

Perfection is often seen as something to strive for in our society, but its damaging nature is not really understood. **Perfectionism** is not thinking you're perfect at everything. It's trying so hard to reach an impossible standard and having such unrealistic expectations that set yourself up to fail time and time again.

My perfectionism has changed over the years. It has morphed from being attached to **school and good grades** to affecting my ability to do new things and the way I see myself. I would get stuck writing a certain section because I couldn't find the right words or the sentences weren't coming out the way I had planned. I would panic and then freeze not being able to write anymore. I would make myself sick with thoughts of not being good enough, of being terrible in fact. Of being the worst. I would then have to talk myself

down and try to get something written down to hand in. And the cycle would repeat over and over again.

Recently my partner and I thought it would be fun to learn to **paint with watercolors**. I had bought him a set for Christmas last year and we were finally getting around to trying it. Neither of us is visually artistic so we thought it would just be a fun activity to do to pass the time. My partner watched a YouTube video and was following along with the instructor. Me, being the stubborn one, decided to just freestyle it. Big mistake. As I painted I could see that what I had envisioned in my head was not translating to paper. I couldn't figure out why it was so terrible and child-like. Or why I was so upset.

After we finished I had to couldn't stop crying because I hated what I'd created *so much*. This might seem like an extreme reaction. And it was. But I couldn't help it. I knew that I should give myself a break because this was the first time I was trying to paint. But my brain wouldn't let me. I berated myself over and over again for being terrible at painting which then led to me feeling ridiculous for expecting perfection from myself. It spiraled pretty quickly and it completely ruined our day.

The unrealistic expectations I have for myself are so painful to deal with. On the one hand, I know logically I can't be good at everything I try the first time but it doesn't stop the negative self-talk from coming.

This has negatively impacted my life in so many ways. I find it extremely difficult to try new things I know I won't be good at whether that's arts and crafts or something else. What other people would see as a learning adventure I see as a nightmare. People don't understand how painful it is when I make a mistake. They will try something new and laugh if they do it badly or wrong, chalking it up to being a beginner, while I sit and stew and how awful I am. They often don't understand why I'm making such a big deal about things or why my reaction is so disproportionate to the event. It

feels awful to be scared of trying new things for fear of my perfectionism spiraling out of control. It makes me feel isolated and misunderstood. Like a failure.

My perfectionism often leads me to **procrastinate**. My newly purchased guitar winks at me, daring me to pick it up. At the beginning of lockdown last year I bought it hoping to finally have time to learn properly. I downloaded an app and even had lessons over Skype. It was fun getting back into a hobby I had as a teenager. Until it wasn't. If I was practicing and I couldn't do the thing I needed to do I would put my guitar away for a day, a week or even a month. Because if I wasn't practicing I couldn't be terrible. I would have to psyche myself up to pick it up again even though it was something I found fun most of the time. The fear of 'doing it wrong' and getting upset put me off doing it at all.

I'm slowly learning to cope with it better now. I celebrate my achievements with my therapist when I do something new and push past my discomfort. I give myself time limits telling myself I only have to do something for ten minutes, an hour, however long and then I can stop. This helps.

It's getting easier to be kinder to myself though it still feels like an uphill battle most days. And some days I can't fight and I just have to let myself feel my feelings. I know my expectations are still unrealistic but I'm working through that. I'm putting one foot in front of the other and trying to accept myself as I am.

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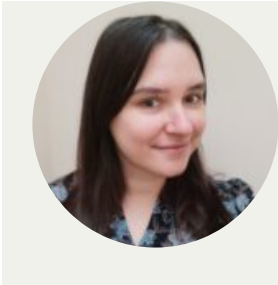
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