

Inside the Mind of a Teenage Perfectionist

Assume that my perfectionist tendencies arose from a desire to capture my parents' attention. They were unhappy together, my father traveled often for work, and my mother didn't work but was never around. Being ignored fostered in me the belief that I was unworthy of love and inspired leviathan efforts to compensate for whatever fundamental flaw made me so undesirable.

During childhood my perfectionism manifested itself in multiple ways. I kept my possessions in pristine order. I was capable of spending up to an hour on my ponytail before school in the morning, making sure there were no "bumps." Drawing classes were very difficult for me because there was always the irresistible opportunity to erase and do it better, my frustration mounting each time. I only enjoyed activities at which I immediately excelled, and in those I needed to shine. Emotionally, I couldn't afford to be mediocre. In my mind, unremarkable equaled forgettable.

The perfectionism escalated during my preteen years, around the time my parents separated. I had by this time gotten used to being the adult in my family. I loved my parents, but they had no idea what they were doing. In the absence of direction from them, I set very high standards for myself, trying to play my role as perfectly as I could to compensate for how badly they played theirs. Maybe if I was good enough, I could buoy our sinking ship.

Over the course of my freshman year of high school, I gave up on fixing my family and instead focused on transcending it. I now expressed my perfectionist tendencies in my academic performance. I had always been a good student, but I began to hear in my teachers' praise the possibility for acceptance and approval in the larger world. I decided that good—no, perfect—grades were my ticket out of my family and into a better life beyond it.

I began taking my academic drive to emotional extremes. Every time I couldn't understand a new math lesson, I dissolved into tears of frustration. Realizing that I had missed a ten-point question on my ninth-grade geometry exam, I walked calmly to an empty classroom, lay down on the cold hardwood floor, and cried for half an hour in intense despair. I spent two weeks on every English paper and became a ruthless self-critic, to the point that my mother, who had by then benefited from a considerable amount of therapy, felt compelled to say to me frequently, "I would love you just as much if you got all Cs." I remember appreciating the sentiment, but comments like this were no help at all. Cs. As if.

Around the same time I began to slough off extracurricular activities I had previously enjoyed but didn't feel directly furthered my cause. Ballet went out the window—if I didn't have prima ballerina potential, why bother even putting on the shoes? As a result I put on weight and then became extremely critical of my body. Because I liked sweets and wasn't a size two (I wore an intolerable six) or a natural athlete, I was worthless.

Sleep also began to take much lower priority. My junior year of high school, I got an average of 5.5 hours per night. Frequently I felt angry with my family for turning in hours before me, leaving me up alone. Didn't anybody else work around here? And yet I savored the difference between my grueling existence and the more civil pace of their lives. They didn't understand, I told myself, what it really takes to get ahead. Only I had the vision and willpower to compete in the real world, only I was getting the hell out of there.

To their credit, the adults in my life did try to awaken me from this state, but they went about it ineffectively. My mother got me a therapist of my own, but he focused on my anger toward my parents—the unhappiness others had caused me—rather than bringing to my attention the ways I was perpetuating it and helping me come up with a game plan to overcome it. My teachers, who knew the amount of pressure I put on myself, tried to help by recommending that I just take a few easier classes. For someone set on getting into a top college, this was a totally unrealistic option.

I think it would have helped to be around adults who did not consistently undervalue themselves, like my mother, or berate themselves for making tiny mistakes, like my father. I wish someone had asked me to make a list of all of the things in my life at that moment that that made me happy. I probably would have put something like “doing my best work” at the top, and then struggled to find other things to list. I might have seen then that, beyond the occasional movie with friends, I had lost the ability to enjoy myself. I wish I had been asked to make another list of all of the things I didn’t have that I thought would make me happier. On this list probably would have been getting into the college of my choice, being thinner, and feeling less scared of sex and dating and drinking, which my classmates had gotten into as early as age thirteen. I wish someone had asked me my reason for including each item on the list. It is clear to me now that behind them all was the enduring desire to be acceptable and belong. I wish someone had asked me to come up with a list of ways I could achieve this underlying goal without depending on external validation.

The perfectionism of my teen years ended up costing me a great deal—time, youth, pleasure, health, and joy. I spent so much time on my schoolwork in high school and so little time hanging out that I found the social aspect of college life totally intimidating. I went into burnout mode, became anorexic, and had to take a year off after the first semester. “Getting sick”—starving myself—was a way of lowering everyone’s expectations of me without necessarily failing. It was simultaneously an act of conformity—to societal ideals about eating and weight—and rebellion, an aspect of adolescence I had never allowed myself. Anorexia was my way of rejecting the way things played out. I just quit. Furthermore I felt that life, having let me down, had no right to demand anything of me ever again. Things only began to change when I started forcing myself to face the pain and anxiety I had suppressed for so long and go on nonetheless. I had to learn to play the game even on the days when I don’t feel like a natural.

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