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Mind Matters: Too Perfect?

Irene S. Levine
United States
28 March 2008

The pursuit of scientific truth leaves a smaller margin for error than most other pursuits, so scientists are expected to be exacting. Supervisors and colleagues demand it, and we demand it no less of ourselves. The perfectionist mindset emphasized throughout our academic training reinforces the tendencies that led many of us to choose science in the first place. That's not necessarily a good thing.

"No one is perfect, ...
that's why pencils
have erasers." --
Author Unknown

done well enough then moving on--requires more wisdom and self-discipline than trying to do it better. It can be hard to accept that a quality usually held up as a virtue can in fact be a vice--but awareness is the first step toward defusing a potential career killer.

PERFECTION ISN'T PERFECT

To perform optimally--whether designing an experiment, preparing a publication, or executing any of the small tasks necessary to move your career forward--you need to invest the right amount of time and energy into your work to achieve high-quality output. If you find yourself working obsessively and achieving little, perfectionism may be inhibiting your productivity.

The myth of perfection

Perfectionists can be so short-term goal-directed that they can't see to either side or very far in front of them. They focus so hard on producing perfect work that they lose sight of the bigger picture. If you're a perfectionist, you may start working on a grant proposal months before the deadline yet fail to finish it on time. Projects may never seem to end because you analyze and reanalyze data and never get around to writing it up. And when you do start writing, you may get scooped because your manuscript is never good enough. You may even move from

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laboratory to laboratory, hoping to find a professional home that's more prestigious or has higher standards of performance--or because your professional relationships at your last lab were strained.

"I call myself 'quasi-perfectionistic,' or maybe a reformed perfectionist, because I know this is the way I started my career, tending to design massive experiments that addressed all possible variables simultaneously for best possible control, doing pilot study after pilot study until the procedures were refined to a high level, then writing and rewriting the manuscripts," Andrew Mickley, a professor of psychology and chair of the Neuroscience Program at [Baldwin-Wallace College](#) in Berea, Ohio, writes in an e-mail.

"I don't think my own quasi-perfectionistic tendencies have hurt my career, but I can recollect at least one collaborator who essentially was unable to let go of manuscripts. He would write and re-write and then, when I finally thought we were home free, he would decide to reorganize the paper and the process would start all over again.

"Consequently, I never worked with him again. I did follow his career and he ended up going into science management--where, I suspect, he is now continuing to drive his colleagues and junior scientists crazy."

Being perfect

Perfectionists generally aren't very happy campers, wherever the campground. Resentment and frustration build because they don't consider their goals unreasonable and they can't understand why their projects never come to fruition. They rarely experience the gratification that comes from a job well done--or done at all. They may feel overworked even though they, their projects, and their colleagues would be better off if their workdays were shorter.

Perfectionists are also prone to hold others to unachievable standards, so most people disappoint them, which can strain relationships with colleagues.

Perfectionism can also harm people's health and personal lives. Because they are compelled to do ever better and never to err, they are under constant, self-imposed stress. According to *Perfectionism: A Double-Edged Sword*, a [source book on perfectionism](#) prepared by the [University of Texas, Austin, Counseling & Mental Health Center](#), the tolls of perfectionism include impaired health, troubled interpersonal relationships, and low self-esteem. Depression is common among perfectionists.

GETTING OVER IT

Here are a few steps you can take to get past your damaging perfectionist tendencies.

Set priorities and deadlines.

Perfectionists have trouble determining what's important and what isn't because they hold themselves to the same standard of perfection for every task. So set priorities and minimize your investment of time and energy in the less important things. The less time you spend on the informal talk, the more you will have to prepare a high-impact presentation for that national meeting.

Decide you need to finish a job by a certain time, and when that time comes, get it off your desk or bench whether you're happy with it or not. This will help your productivity and give you practice letting go of things before they're perfect.

Learn to settle for good enough.

"You can be happier by reframing your expectations and embracing an imperfect life," writes psychologist and stress expert Alice D. Domar in [Be Happy Without Being Perfect: How to Break Free from the Perfection Deception](#). But for many of us, that's easier to say than to do. When my son was young, he desperately wanted to play ice hockey like the professionals he had seen on television. He left the rink crying before he gained the maturity to realize that

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hockey required time and effort to master and set a lower standard for himself, at least in the short term. Many of us still have an inner child who demands perfection.

"Expect some tough transitions while you begin to shed your perfectionism," writes Domar. "Be patient with yourself and know that slip-ups are part of the normal process of change." And don't forget to celebrate your accomplishments. Pat yourself on the back for letting things go and for working quickly and smartly. Lowering your standards can be a nice accomplishment.

Assess yourself and ask for help.

Rigorous self-assessment is the first step toward learning to settle for "good enough," as it is with many things. So think hard about your standards and your performance but don't stop there; check in with other people, too. Figure out whether your approach to your work is dictated by professional standards or by your own psychological needs. Check your approach against the work of accomplished colleagues (in and outside your research group) and revise your standards if they don't match up.

Remove those blinders and look all around; your environment might be making things worse. A nit-picking supervisor will only exacerbate your perfectionist tendencies. He or she will also drive you crazy. It's important to have a work environment that brings out the best, not the most perfect, in you. So surround yourself with friends and colleagues who have a realistic outlook. Look for people who are successful but have achieved balance in their lives.

What helped Mickley emerge from his early, toxic perfectionism? It was a mentor who pointed out that at the rate he was headed, he would probably publish one paper, albeit an important one, per decade. "But, of course, that was not going to allow me to demonstrate the productivity needed for tenure, grant awards, or even a very coherent or satisfying career," he says. This dialogue made him re-evaluate his approach and shift to the "good is good enough" approach he embraces today.

If you don't trust your own ability to tame your perfectionism, it's okay to ask your lab manager or mentor for help so he or she can make sure you set your priorities right and get things done on time. Let someone else read your manuscript or grant application; if they think it's great, send it out for review, even if you aren't completely happy with it.

WHEN PERFECTIONISM LEAKS OUT OF THE LAB

Many scientific tasks need to be error-free. But if perfectionism pervades every aspect of your life--from finding Mr. Right, to choosing a perfect outfit in the morning, to picking the right dish from the menu every time, to cleaning your apartment--you may have obsessive tendencies. You may want to speak with a mental health professional to assess what is causing you to set standards that are beyond your or anyone else's reach.

For additional reading on overcoming perfectionism: [Perfectionism: A Double-Edged Sword](#)

Irene S. Levine is a freelance journalist whose work has appeared in many of America's leading newspapers and magazines. Trained as a psychologist, she works part-time as a research scientist at the Nathan S. Kline Institute for Psychiatric Research in Orangeburg, New York, and she holds a faculty appointment as a professor of psychiatry at the New York University School of Medicine. She resides in Chappaqua, New York.

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Image (top): PhotoDisc Professional Science

DOI: 10.1126/science.caredit.a0800044

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