

Getting it together.

Why the perfectionist can't find happiness

Perfectionism, intolerance for human flaws can be a severe obstacle to personal contentment. Some of our best sources of happiness—love, relaxed play, and creativity—are less available to the person who hates imperfection.

Loving requires tolerance and self-acceptance. Playing in a related way means being able to set aside perfectionistic inhibitions. Creative thinking requires an ability to replace a usually-critical mind with an attitude of uncritical openness. All of these are handicapped by a perfectionist's hyper-sensitivity to human errors.

Recent studies by medical and psychological scientists have concluded that an inability to relax can be dangerous to our physical and emotional health. But how can you relax when your mind is filled with lists of unfinished tasks, unmet deadlines, and personal shortcomings? You can't. In order to truly relax we must be able to rest for a while on our past accomplishments. We must be able to cruise with our successes.

BUT THE PERFECTIONIST looks at his achievements and sees only the flaws, the unfinished parts. He can't relax when there are still so many imperfections to be removed. He can't appreciate the pleasure and self-contentment when he is so aware of (and so sensitive to) his own frailties. And he feels the same way about other people, too.

The perfectionistic boss, for example, demands detailed flawlessness in his employees' work. He is slow to praise but quick to criticize. In fact, he probably sees his use as keeping his workers on their best behavior by carefully finding and pointing out the mistakes. He applies the same perfectism to the behavior of his own bosses as well, feeling particularly irritated that such imperfect people have authority over him.

In a similar way, the perfectionistic teenager is hypercritical of his parents and teachers, the very people who taught him his perfectionistic attitudes in the first place.

With increasing maturity, he has become more sure, and is more aware of the fragility of the business figures that he once admired. The respect of childhood gives way to wisdom of adulthood and even open criticism of the seemingly flawless results and character flaws of his elders.

NO HUMAN ACTIVITY is safe from the effects of perfectionism. Even lovers can suffer from an exaggerated sensitivity to the imperfections of their love relationship.

Volunteers

This column describing volunteer needs in Oakland County is cosponsored by the Joint League of Birmingham and the Oakland County Volunteer Bureau.

Inquiries regarding volunteer needs listed here should be made to the Oakland County Volunteer Bureau at 643-7272. Requests for a volunteer listings also should be made through the volunteer bureau.

SOUTHFIELD COMMUNITY SCHOOL CENTER needs office and telephone assistants immediately for a short term assignment. Help is needed to direct calls within the office, provide class information, assist in registration, and type forms and material.

The office is open 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. Monday through Friday, and 6:30 to 9 p.m. Monday through Thursday.

AMERICAN CANCER BREAST DETECTION CENTER in Southfield needs many volunteers for their ongoing program including speakers to help contact groups and individuals to work with community organizations, outlining areas to contact. Office help is also needed. Hours are flexible.

COMMON GROUND in Birmingham is a crisis center, particularly oriented to youth-related concerns but serving anyone in need. Individuals are needed to train as counseling volunteers and as greeters. Sensitivity to another person's needs is important. Training is given in additional areas such as public relations and office duties.

FAMILY FOCUS in Birmingham is a program dedicated to the problems of child abuse and neglect and related family situations. Maturity is essential and volunteers are sought college age and up, male and female.

Volunteers should be prepared to contribute four hours on a weekly basis for approximately eight months. Needed are family aides, coordinators for 24-hour crisis telephone, speakers, office help and volunteers in the visual arts department. Training classes will begin in mid-September and October.

Sweet Adelines to sell goodies

The South Oakland County chapter of Sweet Adelines, Inc. will hold a bi-annual bake sale and flower boutique on Saturday, Sept. 11, at Livonia Mall at Seven Mile and Middlebelt roads from noon to 8 p.m.

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For some this may show up as a kind of by-product, intolerance of even the tiniest flaw in their partner. While others, seeking to create the best of romantic feelings, the danger they flirt with is that they can turn their love affair into such a serious, exhausting task that it feels more like a job.

For all perfectionists, the problem is they are setting out to do an impossible thing. Perfection, the complete absence of flaws, is just not available to us.

In an attempt to cope with the reality, perfectionists have tried a number of substitutes and diversions.

Some, for instance, have taken the tack of concentrating all of their efforts on one narrow facet of their lives, devoting so much attention and energy that they come very close to perfecting their achievement. The cost of such an approach is very high. They have so finely focused their activities that everything else is virtually excluded.

SOME PERFECTIONISTS, trying to manage their extreme intolerance of flaws, adopt an anti-perfectionistic attitude. They intentionally fill their lives with imperfections: lateness, inexactness, carelessness, unfinished projects.

(Others try to cope with their failure to be perfect by setting out to accomplish impossible tasks. They try to make big changes in unchangeable institutions, or they marry alcoholics with the assumption

By BOB TRENZ, Ph.D.



and appreciation of highly-valued parents, the child will begin to feel all right about the inadequacies and will develop a sense of competence and self-acceptance. But if, instead, the child senses that his or her parents are impatient with inability, he or she will be anxious to be rid of the flaws.

Parents who can hardly wait for their infant to grow up and become a human being are likely to produce perfectionistic children, impatient with their own clumsiness.

that they will reform them. Failing at these efforts, the perfectionist can rationalize no one could succeed at such a hopeless task, thus taking some of the sting out of their imperturbance.

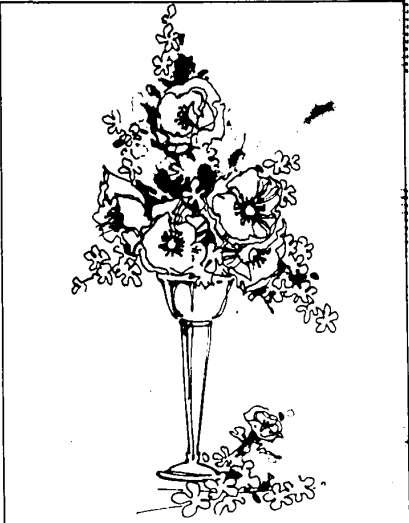
Even the best of these diversionary attempts to moderate our perfectionistic attitudes provides only temporary or small relief. To really free ourselves from perfectionism we must first understand that it is essentially self-rejection.

WITHIN EVERY ADULT are the remnants of the clumsy, helpless, incompetent infant. Imagine the plight of that infant: Surrounded by competent giants, the child can't help but be aware of existing insecurities. Needing to be loved and cared for by these giants, the young one tries to please, to emulate, but the best effort is a poor approximation.

Here is the crucial part: If the infant's inadequate attempts are met with the love

come our own positive parents, recognizing the lovable nature of our clumsiness, allowing others to see behind our competent front.

Bob Trenez is a Rochester marriage counselor and psychologist. Questions for Dr. Trenez may be sent to the Rochester Observer & Eccentric, 410 N. Main, 44002.



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Rosemary Tripp will be here to help you coordinate colors for a table setting or a room, Friday, September 17, 11 a.m. to 9 p.m.

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