

Is Perfectionism the Grinch that is Stealing Your Health and Happiness?

There are looming misconceptions this time of year that everything must be perfect. Every tree, every gift, every card, every wrapping, every song, and every dinner party- everything must be perfect. Sadly all this need for perfection leads to lots of stress and disappointment.

For some this perfectionism is not just something that rears its ugly head during the holidays-but instead it is a way of life. There are children who are told that they must make perfect grades in order to be loved. Others are forced to be great athletes. Some are made to feel that they can't be loved unless they have the perfect body-anorexia and bulimia in the making.

I've even heard of educators encouraging parents to reward their child's attempts on new things rather than their perfect scores. Sadly the need for straight A's has some children afraid to try new things and learning is hampered.

I also find adults who are caught up in the trap of trying to be the perfect parent. These parents exhaust themselves in trying to be perfect. Sadly the drive for perfection robs them of the joy of parenting since they constantly operate in the high alert mode. Children pick up on this nervous tension within the home and sometimes repeat this pattern or live a life "walking on egg shells."

Perfectionists can sometimes be seen as procrastinators, but they are simply putting off a task for fear that it will not be perfect. Perfectionists constantly redo projects wasting valuable time. Unfortunately time is a limited commodity and they can find themselves running in a hamster wheel and rarely achieving the peace they so desire.

There has been research in the area of perfectionism over the years and there is debate about what is "adaptive" and "maladaptive." I appreciate the summary of this research by Etienne Benson entitled the Many Faces of Perfectionism found on the American Psychological Association's website. www.apa.org. In this article Benson summarizes work by many researchers including Psychologists, Hewitt and Flett.

Hewitt and Flett have developed the Tripartite Model of Perfectionism. This model divides perfectionism into three types: self-oriented perfectionism, socially prescribed perfectionism, and others oriented perfectionism.

People who struggle with “self oriented” perfectionism often set unrealistic goals for themselves and tie their self worth to these goals. They work non stop at high and unrealistic goals. When they fail to live up to their standards they are miserable. Their self esteem is shattered and they constantly give themselves “internal hate mail.”

“Socially prescribed perfectionists” are those who exhaust themselves while spending their entire lives trying to not let others down. They are only happy when they perceive that others around them are happy. Boundaries are difficult for them. It is easy to see how these individuals could fall prey to manipulation and mental abuse from others. I routinely recommend Joyce Meyer’s book ‘Approval Addiction’ to these individuals.

The third type of perfectionism is called “others oriented.” These individuals accept others only when they are perfect. There is no tolerance for others’ mistakes. Obviously these individuals have poor marriages and relationships.

Perfectionism does more than just make people miserable. It may even make them more vulnerable to cardio-vascular problems, addictions, abuse, unipolar depression, anxiety, anorexia, and even suicide.

I challenge you to surrender your unrealistic expectations of perfection. Counseling may help you to discover the root cause. Remember this holiday that we are celebrating the birth of Jesus- the perfect one. Since He is perfect we don’t have to be.