

Your Personal Coach

By
Kathleen Brehony, Ph.D.

Dear Kathleen,

My wife says I'm impossible to live with because I'm such a perfectionist. That's true, but I tell her that there is nothing wrong with trying to do things right. Can you help us solve this constant disagreement?

-- Barry L.

Dear Barry,

You and your wife are comparing apples and oranges. There are big differences between wanting to do things right and perfectionism.

Perfectionism is an addiction to flawlessness, to goals that are impossible to attain. These irrational beliefs and behaviors cause the perfectionist to be too dependent on the opinions of others, sensitive to criticism, and far too vulnerable to life's inevitable failures.

Insistence that everything turn out faultlessly causes perfectionists to be stressed-out and frustrated in our less-than-perfect world. Often that stress and frustration seep out into their relationships with family, friends, and co-workers.

Perfectionists run the risk of believing that their value – their worth as human beings – depends only on their accomplishments, or their ability to perform.

This is a sure-fire way to feel uptight and fearful. There is no room to breathe in this worldview; no way to let light into the darkness of such unrealistic expectations.

Think about what drives perfectionism. Psychologists believe that perfectionism is motivated by fear of punishment (for doing something wrong), or a powerful need to control one's life and environment. Does any of this sound familiar, Barry?

Our society often sees perfectionism as an ideal, and associates these attitudes with success. This simply isn't true. Psychological research has clearly shown that perfectionist attitudes actually *interfere* with success, and more often than not injure our self-esteem and rob us of the joy of living. It's awfully hard to learn and grow if you must always do everything right.

As if that weren't enough, perfectionism is the kiss of death to creativity. After all, how can you try new ways of doing things if you're afraid of a less-than-perfect outcome? What is a perfect painting?

Success and creativity need room to play, to fall short, to stumble upon new answers. Thomas J. Watson, the founder of IBM and a pretty successful guy, understood this principle. "The way to succeed is to double your error rate," he advised.

Remember that the alternative to perfectionism is not to do things in a slipshod way. One can still strive to do one's best-- even aim for excellence-- and improve with practice; those are not the same things as insisting on perfect outcomes.

Make crisp, rational distinctions between tasks that require an excellent – maybe even “near perfect” – performance and those that don't.

If you are a brain surgeon, your patients depend upon a brilliant surgery. If you are a pilot, your passengers are counting on your high level of skill and attention to details.

But that doesn't mean that you must apply this same goal of perfection to dusting your living room, hitting a backhand in tennis, or having a picnic on the beach.

So here are some suggestions for finding a healthy balance in your life:

- Set realistic, not irrational goals. When you've achieved those, then set new goals that stretch you so that you can continue to grow and improve.
- Find balance. Aim for perfection only at the things that really require it. Avoid the "all-or-none" thinking that is so characteristic of perfectionism.
- Let go. Give up the need to control all things and be satisfied with doing an excellent – if not perfect – job.
- Play. Learn to enjoy the process of trying new things without paying much attention to the outcome.
- Understand that your value as a human being has nothing to do with your perfect accomplishments.

I suggest that you and your wife sit down and talk about the ideas in this column. Can you come to some agreements about changes you both could make so that you can be together without this constant disagreement? Reflect on what poet and songwriter Leonard Cohen offers on the subject of perfection:

Ring the bells that still can ring,
Forget your perfect offering.
There's a hole in everything,
That's how the light comes thru.

-- Leonard Cohen "Ring the Bells That Still Can Ring."

Barry, let the light come thru. You'll be happier.

Send your personal coaching questions to kathleen@fullpotentialliving.com, call 473-4004, or direct questions to the Outer Banks Sentinel, P.O. Box 546, Nags Head, NC 27949

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