

SCENE

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Lonne Sterling and Christine Michaels, Licensed Mental Health Counselors (LMHC) and Certified Employee Assistance Professionals (CEAP) and the co-founders of the Center for Change of Florida, have worked in the mental health, employee assistance and substance abuse fields for over 25 years. Their Center provides clients with outpatient counseling and area businesses with Employee Assistance Program (EAP) services. Together they have established a reputation as dynamic professionals, each bringing unique and varied experiences to their practice.

The Center services a diverse client population dealing with a broad range of mental health issues, such as mood disorders, relationship and family problems, anger and stress management, grief and loss, addictions, eating disorders and relapse prevention. The Center's staff is highly skilled, utilizing a brief, solution-focused, therapeutic approach and techniques such as EMDR and Hypnotherapy.



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Perfectly Imperfect

"I have not failed. I've just found 10,000 ways that won't work"

Thomas Alva Edison

David Burns, M.D., noted author and psychiatrist, defines perfectionists as people whose "standards are high beyond reach or reason ... who strain compulsively and unremittingly toward impossible goals, who measure their own worth entirely in terms of productivity and accomplishment."

Perfectionism is not the healthy pursuit of excellence. Whereas, perfectionists believe that the highest standards of performance must always be achieved, healthy strivers take genuine pleasure in trying to meet high standards. The healthy striver has *drive* while the perfectionist is *driven*.

Perfectionism takes a great toll on us by interfering with our daily functioning. Perfectionists are likely to experience decreased productivity, impaired health, troubled personal relationships and low self-esteem. They are vulnerable to depression, substance abuse, performance and social anxiety, self doubt, obsessive thinking and compulsive behaviors, body image problems and eating disorders, fears of disapproval, ridicule and rejection, loneliness, impatience, frustration, anger and suicidal thoughts.

Our thinking maintains our perfectionistic behavior; our behavior reinforces our perfectionistic beliefs.

Perfectionists engage almost exclusively in biased thinking which creates negative emotional states. Psychologists have labeled these styles of thinking Cognitive Distortions. Common distortions include: all or nothing thinking, filtering, jumping to conclusions, personalizing and blaming, catastrophizing, discounting the positive, over-generalizing, should statements and emotional reasoning.

Perfectionists engage in repetitive styles of behavior to reinforce their distorted beliefs. Such styles include: excessive checking and reassurance seeking, repeating and correcting, continual organizing and list making, indecisiveness, procrastination, not knowing when to quit, giving up too soon, failure to delegate, hoarding and excessive need for control.

So, how do we differentiate between healthy and unhealthy standards of behavior? For example, how would we characterize a belief such as *it is important to strive to do an excellent job?* Perfectionist or appropriate? The answer depends on several factors: the **excessiveness** of the standard (i.e. can this goal be met?); the **accuracy** of the belief (i.e. is it true that this standard must be met?); the **costs and benefits** of imposing the standard (i.e. does it help me to have this belief or standard?); and the **flexibility** of the standard or belief (i.e. am I able to adjust my standards and change my beliefs when necessary?).

According to psychologists, Hewitt and Flett, there are three main types of perfectionism.

- **Self-Oriented:** the tendency to have self-imposed standards that are unrealistically high and impossible to attain resulting in self-criticism and the inability to accept one's own mistakes and faults.
- **Other-Oriented:** the tendency to demand that others meet your

unrealistically high standards and an unwillingness to delegate tasks to others for fear of being disappointed by a less-than-perfect performance.

- **Socially Prescribed:** the exaggerated belief that other people have unreasonable expectations that must be met by us to gain social approval.

What causes perfectionism? It is believed that although some people are more genetically prone to perfectionism, a larger segment of this population has learned to be perfectionists through reward and reinforcement, punishment, modeling, information and instruction.

- **Reward and Reinforcement:** Society seems to reward and value only its "stars". Just take a look at the present glut of reality shows rewarding only those who meet the very highest of standards in intelligence, attractiveness and prowess.
- **Punishment:** Throughout our lives, most of us experience criticism and other forms of negative consequences for behaving imperfectly. However, if individuals are punished excessively for the smallest of transgressions, they are more likely to develop the rigid belief that they cannot make a mistake.
- **Modeling:** This is the process of observing the behavior of others and attempting to do things similarly. Many perfectionists report that they grew up around those who were overly perfectionistic, e.g. parents and siblings.
- **Information and Instruction:** Exposure to all types of information in all venues contribute to our exaggerated beliefs.

It takes courage to overcome perfectionism for it means accepting our imperfections and humanness. We recommend trying some or all of the following strategies:

- Identify your perfectionistic thoughts and behaviors and list possible alternatives
- Make a list of the costs/benefits of trying to be perfect
- Become aware of your cognitive distortions and how they impact your life
- Challenge your thinking; examine the evidence that confirms or contradicts your beliefs
- Choose more realistic or helpful ways to view the situation
- Be realistic about what is possible. Set yourself up for success not failure
- Set strict time limits on each activity and move on when the time is up
- Accept mistakes as opportunities for growth and personal empowerment
- Deal with criticism by acknowledging your faults and asserting your right to be "perfectly imperfect".