

Perfectionism and New Year's Resolutions
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"Happy New Year!" everyone screamed, as soon as the clock struck 12:00a.m. The family hugged and kissed each other warmly. Parker was already wearing their pajamas for a quick escape to bed. It wasn't a school night, but midnight is still pretty late to stay up. A few minutes later, Parker lay in bed snug as a bug, while at the same time dreading what was to come the next day.

"What's your New Year's Resolution?" Parker's buddy asked innocently on the phone the next day.

"Hm. I don't know. I'm not sure I'm going to make one this year" Parker answered.

"No resolution? Come on Parker, it's tradition. There must be something you want to do better this year. I'm going to try and score 90% or higher on all my math tests for the rest of this school year. How about you?" the buddy persisted.

"Ok, I'll do the same." Parker responded reluctantly.

"Fantastic! We can track each other's progress and compare test scores. It'll be great!" Buddy said enthusiastically.

However, Parker was not enthusiastic at all. Parker Perfectionist was already starting to feel the pressure. Parker started worrying about what would happen if they couldn't achieve their goal; Buddy might not want to be their friend anymore, they might fail the math class, and never earn a high school diploma. Parker decided to play some video games, so they wouldn't have to think about it anymore.

Perfectionism is a mindset or a set of beliefs that can turn into rules for living. Perfectionism comes from pressure to meet expectations and is often motivated by fears of failure. That sense of failure is often defined by rigid, all-or-nothing thinking. Parker Perfectionist might think "If I score less than 90% on my math test, then I failed". Perfectionism wants us to think that a single failure defines *who* we are, rather than thinking of that failure as a disappointing but one-time occurrence. Perfectionism makes us criticize ourselves and worry constantly about failure.

So what can Parker do to manage their Perfectionist? First of all, Parker needs to **set a more realistic goal**. Yes, achieving 90% or above on all their math tests would be amazing. However, who among us could realistically achieve that? And does Parker *need* to achieve that? Where did that 90% benchmark come from anyway? And why is 90% so important? Parker looked at the score on their most recent math test. It was 68%. A more realistic and helpful goal for Parker would be to **focus on developing a growth mindset**. This new focus works towards progress, instead of perfection. Parker's Perfectionist wants them to see less than 90% as a failure, whereas a growth mindset would see it as a temporary setback and an opportunity to learn from errors.

One evening after dinner, Parker sat down to review their math lesson from that day. This was a smaller step Parker committed to doing, along with working on their growth mindset.

Parker looked at the numbers on the page. 180 degrees in trigonometry made Parker think about turning 18 years old, and what a failure they will be after high school if they can't score 90% on this test. Hold on! Pause! Parker's Perfectionist was taking over!

So how can Parker combat the Perfectionist? The first step is just **recognizing** when the Perfectionist is having an influence. When the Perfectionist demands perfection, it can create a lot of anxiety for its host. It is expected that people have big feelings around things they care deeply about, like achieving desirable grades. However, youth with ADHD or Learning Disabilities may experience increased levels of worry because of the way their minds are organized and their past experiences in school. Parker can **acknowledge these feelings, permit these feelings**, then gently push their focus back to the task at hand for whatever time remains in the 15 minutes.

Sometimes the Perfectionist whispers unwanted and unhelpful messages to Parker, like "You're gonna fail" or "You can't do this". Parker can try **replacing those whispers with more encouraging messages**, like "I can get through this" or "I will complete this 15 minute task".

*Before Parker knew it, the 15 minutes were done. They had done it! They had committed to 15 minutes of math review after every school day, and they had achieved it today. Even though they didn't get as much review done as they wanted, Parker still **celebrates** finishing this small step towards achieving their goal.*

Progress will not always be forward. For youth with ADHD, the ability to complete tasks effectively changes from day to day. For example, procrastination can be an ongoing struggle. Some perfectionists will procrastinate to delay the possibility of failure, which can add to the struggle. It can also be extra challenging for a person to persist when they are grappling with a task because of a Learning Disability; the perfectionist will ask "why even start?" However, progress can be made with small steps forward. The more Parker does his 15 minute review, the easier it will generally get. It is important to **notice and reward these small steps** in the desired direction. By noticing more accomplishments, we become more flexible in our thinking and may start to develop some more helpful thinking habits.

Perfectionists can sometimes get stuck in a loop where a person believes their performance determines their self-worth, and their self-worth is determined by their performance. A shift is required to help perfectionists see their efforts through a growth mindset; to replace their negative messaging with encouraging self-talk; and to notice and celebrate small steps forward. By recognizing when the Perfectionist is present and how it is hijacking our thoughts, the Perfectionist can begin to have less of an influence.

Further Readings for Parents:

Anxiety Canada (2022). *Help your child overcome perfectionism*. Here to Help BC.
<https://www.heretohelp.bc.ca/infosheet/helping-your-child-overcome-perfectionism>

Yee, Alana (2018, November 17). *Being strength-minded: An introduction to growth mindset*. Foothills Academy. <https://www.foothillsacademy.org/community/articles/growth-mindset>

When Perfectionism Stems from ADHD (AttitudeMag, October 2023):
<https://www.additudemag.com/perfectionism-adhd-not-good-enough-anxiety/>

NOTES

Procrastination

- is a technique to conquer the perfectionist
- provides immediate relief from the perfectionist but can cause other problems

Perfectionism

- is a mindset (a set of beliefs that have turned into rules for living)
- comes from a pressure to meet expectations
- is motivated by fears of disappointment
- sees failure as an identity rather than a one time event

Characteristics of perfectionism

- all or nothing thinking
- unrealistic standards that come out of nowhere
- perpetual self-criticism and worry about failure

How to combat Perfectionism

1. Increase awareness of when your perfectionist is taking over
2. Develop understanding of why the perfectionist has popped onto the scene
3. Cultivate agency/take action
 - to take action, we need to change the story and permit the feelings to complete the task
 - what might be a more encouraging and more kind way to talk yourself through completing the task?

(e.g., exer

Perfectionist:

- Set realistic goals
- Work toward progress not perfection
- Seek support from others before you're under too much pressure
- Make to-do lists with small, broken down tasks to do each day
- Reward yourself
- Set time-limits for each part
- Work on self-acceptance

P&P

-avoidance might mean missed opportunities for success and social connection
-over time these can take a toll

-feelings of success are brief but worries about the future are higher

-mistakes are not evidence of unworthiness

Perfectionism loop= my performance dictates my worth, my worth is dictated by my performance

The Pledge.

Know what's needed for a given task.

Don't deliver Gold when only Bronze is needed.

When stuck, generate options, ask "how can I make it easier for myself?"

Asking for help is a marker of caring about yourself and your work.

Resource and put in strong supports for ambitious goals.

Be kind to yourself in times of stress.

Be fair to yourself always.

OMITTED

New year can signal a fresh start or a new beginning. For many of us, new year is traditionally a time when we are tempted or maybe asked to make a resolution. It's common to be asked "What's your resolution this year?" These resolutions may come out of a healthy and commendable desire to be our best selves and live our best lives, but what happens when your perfectionist wants to be involved in your resolution?

Setting an unrealistic goal may perpetuate a cycle of procrastination...

To even better manage their Perfectionist, Parker can break their new goal into **many, smaller steps**. Parker knows the next math test will be on January 25th. To help them prepare for the math test, Parker decides to do 15 minutes review of math right after dinner every school night. In that 15 minutes, Parker will recall what happened, what they did, go over some of the work done and handouts from that day, complete 1 or 2 math questions from the day, and ask any questions to a parent. To make sure that 15 minutes happens every school night, Parker makes a checklist of all the following steps:

Tells a parent about the new plan

Bring home my math book, notes, handouts everyday after school

Set a time for 15 minutes so I know when math review time is finished

Worrying about an unknown future is not helpful to Parker's present moment. Staying focused on the task is even more challenging for people with ADHD.

Parker could then ask **why is the Perfectionist here right now?** One reason could be to distract them. It can be extra challenging for youth with ADHD to stay focused on an uninteresting task. Is the Perfectionist helping Parker avoid their anxiety around math?

People with ADHD may perseverate over the small details of a task, and end up getting stuck.