Episode 7: 3 reasons why perfectionism is ruining your life

Hi Guys!

Welcome to Episode 7 of *The Resilient Type* podcast!

A study conducted between 1989 and 2016 found that perfectionism in the US, UK and Canadian population was increasing. Maybe you *don't* identify yourself as a perfectionist, but the truth is, a lot of us are perfectionists and we don't even know it!

So, today, I'm going to shed light on what perfectionism really is, highlight 3 ways perfectionism might be negatively impacting your life, explain why it's important to overcome perfectionism and how to actually start doing it. By the end of this episode, you'll understand what perfectionism is and why it's an issue, be able to identify how perfectionism is showing up in *your* life, and have the information you need to start taking control of your perfectionism.

Before we get started, let me know if you're tuning in! Take a screenshot, share it on Instagram and don't forget to tag me @empoweredmillennialgirl!

When faced with the interview question, "What's your biggest weakness?" we've all pretended to pause and think for a second before sighing, "I think I'd have to say it's my perfectionism, Debra." Tell me I'm wrong.

Now I'm not going to go into the best responses to this question or start giving you interview advice, but I'd just like to point out that having the "perfect" answer is in itself an example of perfectionism. The meaning of perfectionism in the context of this interview answer is actually incorrect.

So, what is perfectionism?

What perfectionism really is

Perfectionism isn't the same as having a "high attention to detail." Perfectionism is a personality trait where a person strives for perfection at any cost, and it often goes hand in hand with being highly critical of yourself and worrying about how others perceive you, often causing all-or-nothing thinking. Not exactly something I'd be broadcasting to a potential employer!

Let me break it down for you. If you're a perfectionist, here are the key criteria:

- Fear of failure or judgement
- Epic procrastinator
- Extremely focused on results
- Highly critical

- Unrealistic standards (perfection)

If you meet most or all of these points, you're probably a perfectionist.

Technically speaking, there are 2 types of perfectionism – adaptive and maladaptive perfectionism. Adaptive perfectionists pursue success, generally complete tasks on time and have a high standard for their work. These people also know their limits and they *don't* let their results affect their happiness. Going forward, I'm going to call them "high achievers".

The problems really start to occur when perfectionism becomes maladaptive – when someone becomes so concerned with "perfect" performance that nothing's good enough, and they start applying their extremely high standards onto other people. Maladaptive perfectionism can cause someone to actually avoid tasks due to fear of making a mistake or not being able to complete it to their impossibly high standards. That's the type of perfectionism I'll be talking about in this episode.

3 ways perfectionism might be negatively impacting your life

There are 3 key ways perfectionism might be negatively impacting your life:

1. Your self-esteem is impaired.

If you have 5 things on your to-do list and you complete 3, would I be right in thinking you're getting hung up on the 2 things that you didn't complete? Because perfectionists focus on 100% compliance, anything less than that is seen as a failure, even if progress has been made and genuine barriers may have prevented a better result.

Consider the type of language you use when discussing your results. Do you use a lot of "should" statements e.g. "I should have worked harder" or "I should have done better"? This type of self-talk sets unrealistic expectations and it sounds sort of disciplinary, which causes feelings of failure and inadequacy, and that leads to low self-esteem.

Perfectionists tend to be extremely critical and judgemental, especially towards themselves. But the thing is, this type of attitude isn't motivating, and when you're unable to accept your weaknesses, you'll never feel good enough! When you're aiming for perfection, you're setting yourself up to fail.

2. Your fear of failure is holding you back.

How many times have you decided not to do something because you were scared of failing? Maybe you were scared to apply for a new position in case you were rejected, or

maybe you really want to invest in an online course, but you're afraid you won't be able to get results.

This fear of failure is holding your back from pursuing your dreams and also preventing you from having new learning experiences that could potentially change everything for you! What would you do if you knew you couldn't fail? Visualise what you really want. How will it feel when you've achieved it? Sit with that for a minute.

It's natural to avoid challenges, but we have to be willing to fail to progress and get what we want in life. It'll take courage and resilience to move past your fears, but I know you can do it!

If you want to be open to new experiences, you'll need to move from all-or-nothing thinking, an indication of a fixed mindset, to a growth mindset. You can learn more about developing a growth mindset in Episode 6.

3. You're getting more and more burnt out.

If you're a perfectionist, you're more likely to do nothing rather than do something that isn't flawless. This may be because you're stuck in a comparison mindset, believing that to compete and succeed, your work needs to be perfect.

When you *do* decide to work until something is perfect, this could mean spending 5 hours on a job application that a high achiever would have spent 2 hours on, or, in my case, working long hours every day and prioritising work over everything else. When I was teaching, I would be burnt out at the end of every term because I was literally working 65 hours a week!

Not only is the time spent working excessive, but being a perfectionist is exhausting. You can't keep working like this indefinitely. When you work without taking breaks and neglect your self-care, you eventually burn out, and you'll be forced to rest for longer.

<u>**Why it's important to overcome perfectionism**</u>

If these 3 reasons aren't enough, perfectionism has also been linked to a number of health issues. Research consistently shows that perfectionist traits tend to predict issues like anxiety, depression and stress. If you want to read more about this, I'll link a study from 2018 on the Show Notes page. Interestingly, self-criticism has been shown to contribute to depression, and one of the best ways to protect yourself against anxiety and depression is something that perfectionists usually lack – self-compassion.

Speaking from experience, stress is usually the default for perfectionists. Perfectionists often become workaholics in their pursuit of perfection and need to avoid failure. If you can relate to this, think about a time when you *weren't* stressed. Instead of enjoying the moment, did

you panic and find more things to do so that you'd feel stressed again? I know I've done this. Over time, stress can become almost comfortable, but ongoing stress has also been shown to lead to various health issues, like an increased risk of diabetes, heart attack and even infertility. Ask yourself, is perfectionism really worth risking your health for?

How to overcome perfectionism

So now that I've got you on board, you're probably wondering how do you *overcome* perfectionism?

The major thing is to work on your mindset. Let go of comparison. Once you let go of a comparison mindset, you can work towards your goals without being feeling bound to meet impossible standards that will burn you out if you try to achieve them. You can do this by practicing mindfulness, using compassionate self-talk, and challenging negative self-judgments. Be reasonable. No one and nothing is perfect and striving for perfection is a losing game, but that doesn't mean you shouldn't put in a *reasonable* effort. Doing your best is still worthwhile.

Having a growth mindset can help you become more open to learning experiences and taking calculated risks, while being comfortable with the fact that failure is a possibility. Having a growth mindset also encourages you to value effort. Perfectionists' worth is tied to their desire to look and *be* perfect, but performance isn't something you can fully control. Instead of basing your self-esteem on your performance, why not base it on things you *can* control, like valuing the effort you put in?

Remind yourself that done is better than perfect. Try not to put things off, avoid overthinking, and don't go back to make changes to your work unless you really need to. I used to do this a lot with blog posts, but editing blog posts after they were published was taking me away from more important tasks like writing new posts! When something's done, it's done. Leave it alone.

My perfectionism was rife back in 2018. When I first started my blog, I would literally spend *hours* agonising over the perfect photo to post on Instagram. I was scared of people judging or criticising me and writing nasty comments, so I'd analyse every aspect of a photo, pick it apart, and if there was even one minute thing wrong with it – like my eyebrows out of place or some crumbs on the floor – I'd either have to Photoshop it or take a new photo. It had to be perfect or I'd wouldn't post anything!

Obviously, this wasn't a sustainable approach, so one day, I decided to post a photo that wasn't "perfect" to see what would happen. I prepared myself for the worst, and do you know what happened? Absolutely nothing. No one cared! Challenging myself like this has helped me a lot in overcoming my perfectionism. Is there something that you can try to challenge your perfectionism?

Scientifically speaking, [perfectionism can be "treated" with cognitive behavioural therapy](#) (CBT). CBT is often used by coaches and psychologists to help their clients with mindset and mental health issues. This is the method of finding the thoughts and actions that are resulting in problems, and then getting rid of them. Of course, confronting your flaws can be uncomfortable, but, over time, you can learn to accept that you aren't perfect and find satisfaction in your personal growth.

In conclusion, there's nothing wrong with having high standards, and there are definitely benefits to working hard and being an adaptive perfectionist or high achiever. Finding the sweet spot between adaptive and maladaptive perfectionism, however, is tricky. Right now, you may be the latter – pursuing perfection and holding yourself and/or other people to unrealistically high standards – and over time, this can negatively impact your mental and physical health. It isn't impossible to overcome perfectionism, but it will take time and effort to change your thinking. The question isn't: How do you overcome perfectionism? The real question is: Do you want to do the work?

To recap, here's what we've covered in this episode:

- Perfectionism is a personality trait where a person strives for perfection at any cost. Symptoms include fear of failure or judgement, procrastination, being overly focused on results and highly critical, having unrealistic standards, as well as all-or-nothing thinking.
- Perfectionism may be causing low self-esteem, holding you back from making positive change, and contributing to ongoing burnout.
- It's important to overcome perfectionism because there's a strong link between perfectionism and mental health issues like anxiety, depression and stress. Prolonged stress can also cause physical issues like diabetes, heart attack and even infertility.
- You can overcome perfectionism by letting go of your comparison mindset and adopting a growth mindset, reminding yourself that done is better than perfect, challenging your perfectionism, and working with a coach or psychologist who uses cognitive behavioural therapy.

Thanks for joining me today. I hope you've found this episode helpful!

If you've got any questions, hit me up on Instagram. You can find me @empoweredmillennialgirl. I'd love to chat!

Talk soon!

Enjoying the podcast? Let's make it official! Subscribe and leave a review so more people can find the show. It would mean the world to me. And if you want to read today's Show Notes, head over to empoweredmillennialgirl.com! Thanks for tuning in!