

A stickler for perfection?

While it is perfectly healthy to set high standards for oneself, perfectionism has its dark sides too.



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Vani is never satisfied with her performance. Even though her marks are in the top one per cent of her class and she has a host of extracurricular activities to her credit, Vani simply does not measure up to her own standards of success. Time and again, she feels she is not doing enough and is constantly comparing herself to someone who has done better.

Even though she topped the class in Chemistry, she is afraid her professor won't give her a stellar recommendation letter. When her dance teacher tells her she is ready to do her Arangetram, Vani is quick to point out that her footwork is not as precise as Ashwini's. Diffident of getting a mediocre review by dance critics, she keeps putting off her dance debut.

To most people, Vani comes across as a high-achiever who is intrinsically motivated to better herself. However, contrary to the image she projects, Vani is actually quite fragile emotionally. While it is perfectly healthy to hold yourself up to high standards, setting the bar exceedingly high and being scathingly critical of yourself can be damaging to your productivity and well-being. In fact, being a perfectionist can put you at risk for developing a variety of psychological problems ranging from eating disorders to depression to obsessive compulsive disorder, and, in extreme cases, to even committing suicide. Research-

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ers argue that there are two sides to perfectionism; while we may reap the benefits of holding lofty standards, we mustn't tip the line to feeling fearful that we are always falling short.

According to psychologists Paul Hewitt and Gordon Flett, perfectionists tend to view success and failure in black and white terms, wherein a person either completely succeeds or fails miserably. Thus, instead of viewing learning as a gradient with flaws as an endemic part of the process, they tend to narrow their focus and overstate the impact of mistakes. On the other hand, if we view victories or debacles as steps that take us either forward or backward, we are more likely to persist in the face of setbacks.

Different sides

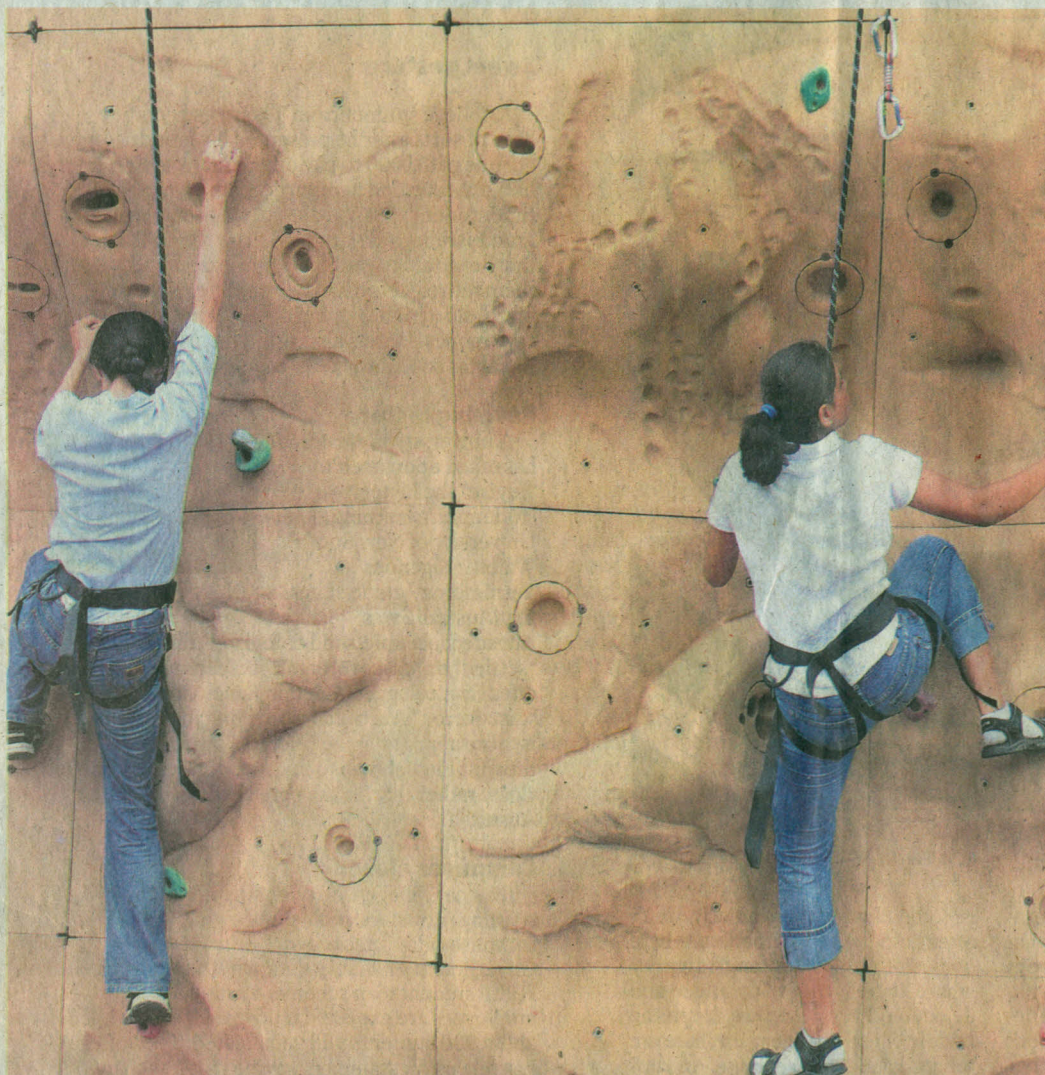
While perfectionism has its dark sides, psychologist Joachim Stoeber points out that it can have sunnier aspects. He differentiates between two dimensions of perfectionism. Perfectionist strivings refers to the setting of high standards of achievement, whereas perfectionist concerns relates to apprehensions re-

garding making mistakes and how we might be viewed or evaluated by others. Even though the two facets of perfectionism tend to be strongly correlated, where most people are either high or low on both aspects, some exhibit a contrasting profile. While perfectionist strivings are associated with positive outcomes, perfectionist concerns are maladaptive.

Thus, it is probably alright, or, even psychologically healthy, to set the bar high for yourself, as long as it is within achievable limits. Stretching yourself to meet your own high standards may result in positive outcomes, provided you are comfortable with falling along the way. Every time you encounter an obstacle or fail to meet your goals, you are not unduly concerned with how you might be viewed by others. Instead, you pick yourself up and continue to plod on. According to Joachim Stoeber and Julian Childs, perfectionist strivings are associated with increased levels of motivation for attending school, doing academic work and overall subjective well-being.

If, on the other hand, you worry incessantly about how others might perceive you, you are likely to fall prey to perfectionism's poisonous potions. If you keep agonising over your impending failure, you are likely to have high perfectionist concerns. Besides plummeting levels of academic confidence, Stoeber and Childs write that perfectionist concerns are linked to "fear of failure, stress, depression, anxiety and somatic complaints."

Clinical psychologist Anthea Fur-



sland and her colleagues offer guideposts on how to mitigate the negative effects of perfectionism. The first step is to recognise the behaviour in yourself. Do you worry incessantly about falling short? If you keep procrastinating on a task for fear of doing poorly, or never complete a job or take an inordinately long time for a project, then you may be exhibiting some at-risk signs.

The next step is to identify the areas in your life where you might be a perfectionist, and then allow yourself to cut some slack. For example, if you obsess over your term papers and proofread them at least three times, you may set yourself a reasonable goal where you will check your papers only once.

This also involves telling yourself that while you will try not to make mistakes, it's okay if you do. Likewise, if you are a compulsive packer who makes umpteen lists and checks and rechecks the contents of your suitcase before travelling, you may decide to make a list only once, never mind if you forget a few items and not recheck the packed contents.

And, if you land up for a trek without your scarf and gloves, you can buy, borrow or even rent woollens. Think of mistakes as opportunities to unleash your creativity and come up with spontaneous solutions. Finally, lighten up and laugh at your foibles. The cliché "To err is human" does indeed capture the essence of what it means to be us.

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