

Too much of a perfectionist?

While a commitment to doing something well is commendable, an obsession with the output may be disastrous



BACKPACKER'S GUIDE

USHA RAMAN

Last fortnight, I had written about the dangers of the kind of social comparison that is fuelled by social media, that ends up making us feel like our lives are so much less interesting than everyone else's. But that (as always) was only part of the picture.

A recent study by American scholars Thomas Curran and Andrew Hill, published in the *Psychological Bulletin* (December 28, 2017) and reported in the *New York Times* last month (January 18), notes that millennials tend to exhibit high levels of "self-oriented perfectionism as well as other-oriented perfectionism", and some of this is attributable (no surprises!) to their engagement with social media.

The good and bad

But isn't perfection a good thing? Shouldn't we all try to do things as perfectly as we can, and to be as perfect as we can? Yes, but the operative words here are "as we can".

We all know, deep inside, that the word "perfectionist" is not always used in the most positive sense.

There's an implied criticism there, the idea that someone who is a perfectionist is difficult, hard on herself as well as on others, and uncompromising to a fault. Focusing on perfection can lead to work of very high quality, but it can also sometimes lead to the work just not getting done.

This can happen in two ways. In our anxiety to smooth out every small wrinkle, we might just end up taking way too long, missing deadlines and completing the task (if at all) much after it is of any use. Or, the anxiety can paralyse us completely, keeping us from ever starting on the task.

When it comes to college assignments, I have seen students affected in both ways. Some students keep going over and over a project, never satisfied with what they have done, wanting to get nothing less than the perfect score, and end up losing out

because they submit late. Others set the bar too high and then don't jump because they think they may not clear it. So, in not wanting to turn in a less-than-perfect assignment, they don't turn it in at all.

Clearly, there are some areas where perfection is desired, even demanded. Like in a stage performance, or a surgery. Like in precision engineering or the composition

of a pharmaceutical product. However, such perfection is achieved after several attempts, and often, with collective effort.

In college assignments, what is usually asked for is a dedication to process rather than product. It is assumed that if you have done the work sincerely, the output will take care of itself. So, while a commitment to doing something right is

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great, an obsession with the output may not be always so good, especially if it ends up causing you to miss deadlines or not turn it in at all.

Curran and Hill, in their study, found that young people tend to get bitten by the perfectionism bug because they are constantly comparing themselves with others (on social media), and as a result, place very high demands on themselves, and often on others as well. This can clearly lead to stress that comes from unrealistic expectations.

So, it is back to those operative words. To do the best you can. In the best way you can. Nothing less than that is acceptable. And nothing more is needed.

The author teaches at the University of Hyderabad and edits Teacher Plus.
usha.bpggll@gmail.com

