

We're Not Perfect

Written by Richard Ferguson, Ph.D.
Thursday, 18 January 2018 13:51 -



As much as the media would like us to believe, we're not perfect, nor should we expect to be. However, every day we are bombarded with images and stories about perfect looks, perfect homes, perfect performances and yes, even perfect runner. From these constant reminders of need to be perfect we internalize that we are just sub-par if we're not perfect. Fashion magazines send the message that females must have the perfect body to be considered attractive and males must be muscular with washboard abs. Parents stress to their children that they must get all "A's" so they can get into the most prestigious college or university. Coaches are constantly seeking the perfect play or perfect routine. The message is loud and clear: you must be perfect. But is this idea of perfection really healthy, both mentally and physically?

Many people have internalized the idea that they need to strive for perfection and the striving for perfection is certainly a factor in being successful in work and sports. However, it's one thing to strive for perfection, but it's another storey if you feel as though must always achieve perfection. Humans are not perfect and no one will be perfect all the time. It's simply irrational to think in perfectionistic terms. You may think the perfectionist would make the ideal runner, but often it just doesn't pan out that way. Yes, the perfectionist trains very hard, sets high goals and has unparalleled dedication to running. Sure, all these traits can lead to running success, but ironically they can all destroy a runner if they are taken too far.

With the expectations of perfection a runner will train harder and longer, both of which are fantastic, but there will come a point of greatly diminishing returns. Overtraining can set in and chronic fatigue, both mental and physical, leads to lower levels of performance and a reduced capacity to train. How does the perfectionist respond to the fatigue and poor performance? He or she reverts to what gave them success in the first place, that being train more and train harder. Rest is not an option because rest means you are not working toward getting better, and for the perfectionist, that can lead to a high level guilt.

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The running perfectionist will tend to blame themselves personally for every poor workout, every poor race and every sluggish recovery run. At some point the running perfectionist begins to tie their self-image and self-worth to their running. As result, poor performance equates to the perfectionist being a poor person, at least in their mind. Because their self-concept is so closely tied to running they begin to have high levels of fear of failure.

Even when the running perfectionist does run well, they don't really enjoy it. Nothing is ever good enough and there doesn't seem to be any level of satisfaction. The perfectionist must do even better. The pressure of perfectionism robs the runner of enjoyment from running and makes them feel miserable no matter how their running is going.

Perfectionism is an insidious psychological phenomenon which is often seen in numerous aspects of everyday life. Again, society often rewards it, but it can also destroy a person. So just how can a runner avoid getting caught in the detrimental vortex of perfectionistic thinking? While much perfectionism develops during childhood and may be the result of parenting behavior, perfectionism can develop even in adulthood, so some suggestions may be warranted even for the most experienced runners. First, it's always a concern when self-worth is totally defined by running. We are all disappointed when we don't run as well as we had hoped, and it is frustrating to put in many hours of training and have a poor race performance. However, a bad race doesn't make a bad person. All humans are valued individuals. Remind yourself that there are many people that care deeply about you no matter how fast you run. Also, think about all the other positive aspects of life besides running, like being a good parent, civic leader and friend to others. Is too much of your sense of self tied to your running?

When you have success, even if it's a good training run, be sure to enjoy it. Never feel guilty that you "should have done better". When you go out and work hard and give it your absolute best shot, then savours the experience. Look back on your training and you may see that true enjoyment comes in the form of preparing for a big race, not just running well in the race itself. Work on truly enjoying the process of what you are looking to accomplish and not just the product, because process does indeed lead to product. There is a lot to said for "enjoying the journey".

If you do have perfectionistic tendencies then the word rest may be a dirty word in your vocabulary. Without proper mental and physical rest even the most talented runner will suffer from chronic fatigue and compromised performance. For any motivated runner the real struggle may be having the discipline to rest, not the discipline to train. Examine your attitude about rest. Has your training mileage become more important than your racing performance? Do you feel deep guilt if you miss a run? If you do have these thoughts, work on developing a

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mindset that blends the dedication of hard training with the discipline of proper rest. By doing so you may see your race performance improve and your day to day energy levels increase.

When you notice that you're getting a bit too perfectionistic about things, talk to some one about it. No, this doesn't mean seeing a mental health professional. It may be as simple as verbalizing your thinking to a coach, friend or spouse. Not only should you verbalize when you struggle with being too much of a perfectionist, but you should also verbalize your successes. When you run well don't be afraid to be a little big headed and talk it up. This doesn't mean you need to be a braggart, but work on enjoying the positives of a good performance and sharing the positives with others. Doing so can actually help raise your enjoyment as well. Genuinely enjoy and the all the great moments running brings to your life. It really is OK to feel good about what you do

Even though you may believe perfectionistic thinking is a must for success, it can be counter productive because it breeds overtraining, frustration and decreased enjoyment. While it may take some honest self evaluation, easing up on the perfectionism may just allow you to run faster, feel better and enjoy your running even more.

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