The Quest for a Perfect Life - Hazardous to Your Health?

Perfectionism can get in the way of having a fulfilling, successful life. Gordon Flett, Ph.D., Professor at York University and holder of a Canada Research Chair in Personality and Health has researched and written about the health risks of perfectionist behavior. He has also studied how perfectionism can damage relationships.

Dr. Flett recently shared his thoughts on this topic with RAP.

Q: What has been the most surprising finding of your research on perfectionism?
A: I think it would have to be the negative impact of perfectionism in terms of health problems. It is important for people to know that perfectionism can be deadly in terms of health consequences due to the stress and the lack of self-care involved. In fact, a 2009 study done in Canada by researchers who used our measures showed over seven years that perfectionism predicts early mortality.

Q: What else do you wish more people understood about perfectionism?
A: How destructive perfectionism is in general—especially socially prescribed perfectionism. And because perfectionism involves standards, and standards are relevant to many life domains (e.g., relationships), the negative effects of perfectionism are far reaching.

Q: Is there a way to avoid socially prescribed perfectionism?
A: I think socially prescribed perfectionism can be difficult if not impossible to avoid. But what is most needed is learning to place less importance on meeting other people’s expectations. Along with that, people need adaptive ways of coping with pressure. That’s especially applicable for those in occupations where the demands to be perfect are real and part of the occupational role.

Q: Your research reports that physicians, lawyers and architects, whose occupations

(Continued on page 2)
Perils of Perfectionism: Q & A with Gordon Flett

(Continued from page 1)

emphasize on precision—and also those in leadership roles—are at higher risk for perfectionism-related suicide. You cite recent cases of prominent perfectionists who died by suicide. Are there some warning signs that a person may be at a higher risk for perfection-related suicide?

A: The issue of warning signs is a tricky one since perfectionists are over-represented among those people who took their lives without apparent warning. I would say in general that people who are being very socially isolated are at risk. If there is someone who should be showing signs of stress and distress, but is not, they are likely high in the tendency that we call perfectionistic self-presentation and they are hiding their distress. People should try to proactively reach out to them. But the lack of overt warning signs is one reason we highlight the need for prevention.

Q: What are some practical ways individuals prone to perfectionism can enhance their resilience and reduce levels of risk?

A: An important key is learning to be self-compassionate rather than self-critical. Stress relief (e.g., relaxation training) is also beneficial. We also advocate the importance of developing the growth mindset that [Stanford University psychologist] Carol Dweck talks about, so that mistakes are seen as learning and growth opportunities rather than indications of personal limitations.

Q: Where can readers learn more about this topic?

A: I have a new chapter [written with Paul L. Hewitt, Ph.D.] in an edited book on flourishing in life. Our chapter outlines why perfectionists typically don't flourish, and provides life advice about what they need to do in order to thrive. (See Resources column)