

Accepting Imperfection

For many able, high achievers, a tendency to perfectionism becomes a problem. Whilst aiming high and making the most of our abilities seem to be good things, the trap is to become entirely achievement-led. The danger is becoming 'addicted' to achievement with the result that we are never satisfied, never peacefully happy, always driven on to achieve the next thing and with a marked tendency to beat ourselves up if we don't achieve or do as well as we think we should. This can result in intense anxiety about achievement and keeping on top of things.

'Should' and 'must' are the key words here. Typical beliefs might be:

- I should make the most of my abilities.
- I must achieve my potential.
- I must do well or I will let other people down.
- Other people are less fortunate than me. Therefore I must use my abilities in the best possible way.
- I should be top.
- I should be able to cope.
- I should be happy – what have I got to complain about?
- I shouldn't be worried or afraid.
- I must do better than Tom, Dick and Harry.

Maybe tick the ones that sound familiar to you! Some of these beliefs lead to other negative thought patterns which then add to the turmoil.

Eg: I should be able to cope, seeing as I am so able. Why can't I stop worrying then? Am I really stupid?

Where does all this start?

The answer will be long ago. The beliefs that rule us become embedded very young. Some are really helpful, some are really unhelpful and some are a bit of a mix.

Professor Steve Peters, author of 'The Chimp Paradox' has this to say about what he calls 'The Fridge Door Syndrome':

It is the first day of school or even nursery, and the child is full of emotion. She or he is asked to paint a picture. When he/she meets his parent at the gate, emotions are still running high for both the child and the parent.

'What a beautiful painting!' cries the parent. 'It's fantastic! Aren't you clever? I am so proud of you. Let's take it home on put it on the fridge door for everyone to see.'

*The child now becomes a potential victim of Fridge Door Syndrome, and with recurrences of this scenario, it will become hard-wired. The child learns that he or she is valued because of what he/she has **achieved** and also that the rest of the world will value him or her in the same way. The message is. **'It is what you can achieve in life that will make you worthy.'***

This is one way, the 'perfectionism goblin' can get in. Another is having perfectionism modelled by a parent; the perfectionism pattern is passed on because that is what the child learns is acceptable and leads to acceptance and love. On the other hand, living in a chaotic or abusive family can be the trigger. Perfectionism can be a way of taking control, when we have come to distrust our environment very early in life. Any psychological way of taking control is a response to fear - fear of chaos, of being abandoned, of not being loved, for example. However, even if we don't know where our perfectionism has come from, we don't have to carry on living with it. Do we really want fear to rule our lives?

The downside of achievement

Obviously, believing in the value of achievement can be highly motivating. But believing, deep down, that that is what makes us worthy? Really? Supposing we have a talent for something that we actually hate and makes us unhappy? Supposing something stops us from achieving? eg. The money runs out for our music lessons, we have a terrible accident and can no longer play rugby. Supposing, although we're reasonably able, everyone else seems to achieve more than us? What then? How helpful is the belief?

And how will we know when to stop? When will enough be enough? Will we have to strive to achieve for the rest of our lives? Will Olympic Gold be enough? The Man Booker Prize? The Nobel Prize?

Of course, a tiny number of people will reach those goals. But most of us won't and if we are to be reasonably happy, we need to find a way of living with that reality. Even people who do achieve those incredibly unusual goals, have to deal with 'what next?' So you've got an Oscar/landed on the Moon/trekked solo to the North Pole? What next? Is the rest of your life going to be all downhill from this peak achievement or are you going to allow yourself to relax and enjoy things a bit more?

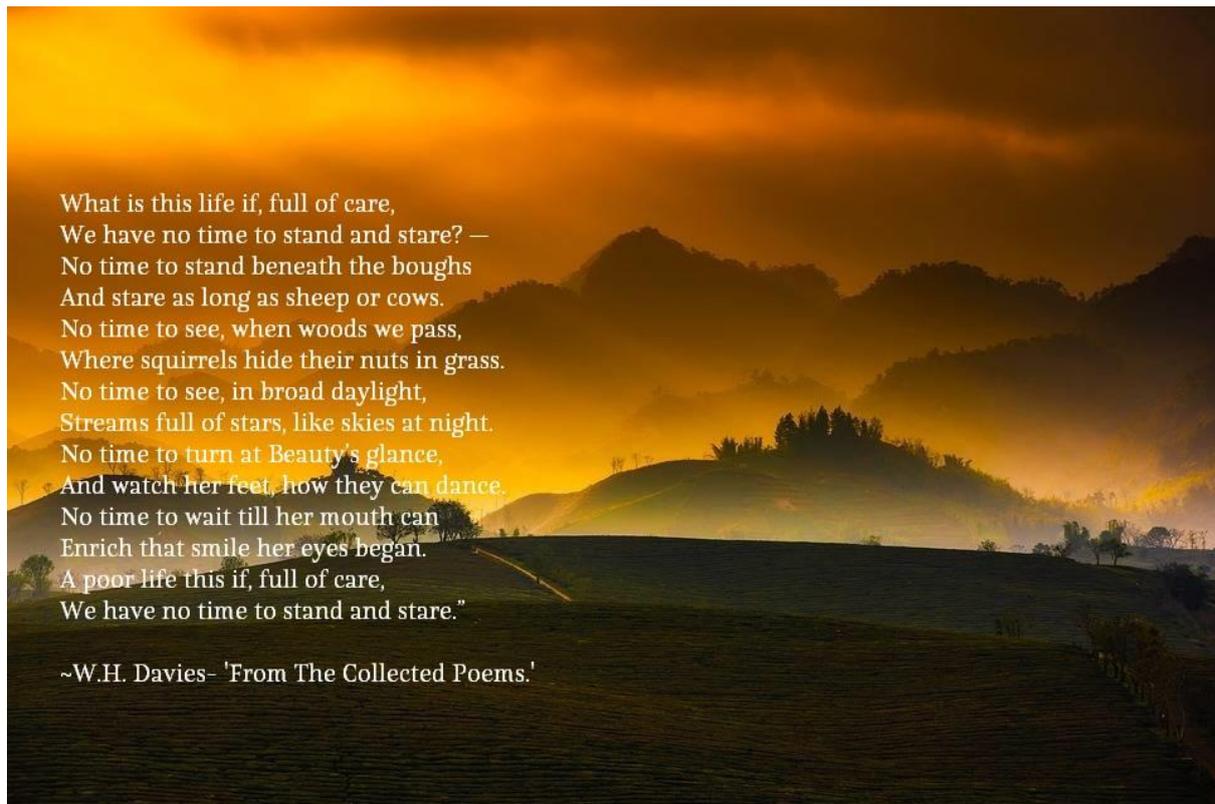
It is normal to 'do our best'. The problem is when our best never feels like it is good enough and our standards are so high that we can never be at peace! We can become workaholics and control freaks.

Life is full of uncertainty, imperfection and striving but failing. We can make an impact on our destiny in lots of ways, including doing our best, but we **cannot control** it, however hard we try.

These wise words of Dr Edith Eger, Auschwitz survivor and author of bestsellers 'The Choice' and 'The Gift' might give us pause for thought, if we are going down the perfectionism route.

"...if you're perfectionistic, you are going to procrastinate, because perfect means never...It doesn't take courage to strive for perfection. It takes courage to be average. To say, 'I'm okay with me.' To say, 'Good enough is good enough'."

So might the following poem, which is called 'Leisure':



Lightening up

So how do we lighten up a bit? Is it possible to simply change our beliefs – the rules that we have come to live by?

We can start by taking a good, hard look at them. Start now.

What are your rules? What feels like it's engraved on your heart? What 'Should' you do? What 'Must' you do? These are your **rules**. For example:

- I must always do my best.
- I should always get top marks.
- I must please Mum and Dad.

Do you have **assumptions** that you live by too?

Assumptions tend to be 'If...then...' statements. For example:

- If I don't work very hard and do my best, I don't deserve to do well.
- If I don't get a good degree, I won't get a good job.
- If I do badly, I will let people down.

Make a list of your rules and assumptions.

Now take a good hard look at them. What good are they doing you? What harm?

Take each one and list the good things it gives you. eg. *'I must fulfil my potential.'*

Benefits

- Motivation
- A better future (I think!)
- A feeling of satisfaction
- I'll please my parents
- I'll feel life has been worthwhile

Now list what harm it's doing you:

Harm

- I feel stressed and driven
- I feel guilty if I don't do my absolute best
- I feel jealous and stupid when others do better than me
- I don't want to carry on playing the violin, but I feel I have to
- I feel a bit trapped – like I don't have choices
- I worry a lot
- When I get ill, I feel I have to get back to work asap.
- I tend to skimp on sleep

Now see if you can adapt your belief so that you keep the benefits but reduce the harm it's doing you. eg.

'It's a good thing to aim to fulfil your potential. But there is no measure of what that is. I will do the things I enjoy to the best of my ability but I won't let that cause me to behave negatively eg. Not looking after my health, judging myself against others, allowing myself to follow agendas that others impose upon me.'

This is not easy. You will have been living with the beliefs and assumptions you have for a very long time. But they can be changed. Like anything new, practise will help. Sometimes the new belief will feel like a breath of fresh air - 'Ah, now I see - I don't have to live like that! I always thought I did but, you know what? I don't! Thank goodness! Phew!'

But often, it will be much harder. We will have to remind ourselves again and again that we are living a new creed, we will have to work hard at 're-wiring' ourselves and we may have to explain ourselves to people who matter to us.

With this work, it can help to look at where the beliefs came from. Are they really beliefs you want or have you inherited them and have therefore simply absorbed them? Sometimes they will be beliefs that have been handed down from generation to generation. Can you see a belief pattern, when you look back at your family history?

For example:

- This family is better than other families and it's essential that we remain better.

- In this family, work is more important than enjoying yourself.
- We were put on this earth to make the most of our talents. What's the point of life if we don't?
- This family has pulled itself up from very humble origins – so make sure you don't slip back down again!

Other ways to help yourself.

1. Writing a 'manifesto' and a 'mission statement.'

When you have worked through the rules and assumptions that you think are causing you problems, it can help to write yourself a 'manifesto' of your adapted rules, which you can keep re-visiting. You can adapt it over time, as your thinking grows and develops. Of course there are some beliefs that the majority of people hold to be true - the vast majority of us don't think killing people is a good thing, and that's why we lock people up who do it! But even within that belief, there are variations. Some people believe killing is never, ever acceptable whereas others believe it's OK in self-defence or to protect the innocent and so on. If you had to state a universal belief about killing people, you would probably find it impossible. So...it is possible to feel free to make your own, unique 'manifesto' or statement of beliefs - and to change it as necessary as you learn and grow – so long as you keep within the laws of the land!

It can also help to write yourself a brief 'mission statement'. In a nutshell, at this moment, having worked through your beliefs and assumptions, what do you think your 'mission' is? What are you here for, in your view?

Warning: If your 'mission' feels like a great weight - think again! You need a mission which excites and enthuses you, which makes you feel like you can fly! If it feels like a great weight, before long, it could well crush you.

2. Looking for your original essence

The perfectionist has often lost sight of who they were to start with. At some point, the perfectionism goblin got in and, in an evil, goblinish sort of way, trapped the child in a web of striving to achieve, in which he or she is now thoroughly entangled.

A way to freedom can be to think back to what it was like before the goblin got you!

Ask yourself these questions about yourself as a child. Try to think back to a time before the perfectionist goblin got you!

When I was little, I loved.....

I always wanted to.....

I dreamed of being.....

I loved to.....

I experienced joy when.....

I felt free when.....

I felt most relaxed and at ease when.....

Given the choice, I would spend my time.....

My friends were (describe them, not list their names!).....

With my friends I felt.....

I havesiblings and I am the..... (oldest/youngest etc)

With my siblings I felt.....

With my mum I felt.....

With my dad I felt.....

Physically, I felt.....

I struggled with.....

I was scared of.....

I often felt.....

Things people said about me were.....

When someone hurt my feelings, I would.....

If I hurt someone's feelings I would.....

When I was scared, I would.....

When I was happy, I would.....

When I was sad, I would.....

When I was angry, I would.....

If my parents were upset with me, I would.....

Look at your answers. What do you see that is the same as now? What is different? What have you lost, that you want to stay lost? What have you lost, that you want to regain? Can you see where the goblin got in and how? Knowledge is power - if you can see where it got in, you can begin to show it the way out - with a good kick up the backside, frankly!

Maybe doing this exercise will give you something new that you want to add to your 'manifesto'!

3.Mindfulness Meditation

Something else that can help, is learning mindfulness meditation. Why? Because it will help to learn to focus on the here and now. The perfectionist is motivated by fear - and fear is future-based. Right now, whatever our situation, we are 'here'. We are not dead. We might be cold, uncomfortable, hungry or in pain - we might have just failed all our exams or not got the job we wanted - or the whole lot - but we are here. We are surviving. 'Coping' is happening, even if we are sobbing our hearts out or feel as if we cannot face another day. Our next moment will probably happen but it may not - so the only actual reality is the here and now, which we are occupying however feeble we feel. If we can accept that, and learn to live moment by moment by moment, we can squish the perfectionist goblin who traps us by insisting that it's all about the future. The goblin says it's all about striving - and striving is about goals – but goals are about a future which may or may not happen.

No one is saying we should not have goals – having realistic goals can be very motivating - but we can hold goals more lightly than the perfectionist goblin tells us to. We do not have to let our fear of the future destroy our enjoyment of the now.

4. Target-checking and 'thinking dartboard'.

Whilst on the subject of goals, we can also do a 'target-check' I suggest setting targets rather than goals, because targets allow some room for manoeuvre. Imagine a dart board. Yes, it's great to hit the bullseye – but the other spaces on the board also have worth! When setting targets, therefore, it's really useful (and a kick in the bum for the perfectionism goblin!) to '**think dartboard**'! OK, so you may have a bullseye that you're aiming for – but what else would also have worth and value if you missed it?

Also, do a reality check on your targets. Are they achievable? Or are they ridiculously exacting? Are they so far-fetched that they are not goals but dreams?

A dream is just a wish – something you long for but which is outside your control.

A target is something that is within your control – a task you might set yourself that might increase the chances of your dream being fulfilled. It is specific and targeted and achievable. Remember that does not mean it will definitely be achieved – nor that you are a complete loser if you fail to achieve it!

'Yesterday is history, tomorrow is mystery. But today is a gift – that is why it is called the present.'

Kung Fu Panda includes a great scene about this:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BwqSraJpqfs>

5. Believing that you cannot do better than your best.

If you are reading this, you probably have a **rule** that states: I must do my best.

Yes?

So how often have you explicitly and deliberately not done your best?

Not often, I'll bet. Unless you have been deliberately lazy or have cheated, I'll bet you have approached each new task with as much fervour as you could summon up at the time.

In Neuro-linguistic Programming, one of the underlying principles is ***that we do our best with the resources we have available at the time.***

So...sometimes we're tired, sometimes we're out of sorts, sometimes we've just had a row with someone, sometimes we're going down with colds. We cannot *always* be the best we can possibly be, so 'doing our best' will vary – and that's not under our control. Other factors will affect what our 'best' looks like. If we are low on resources, then we will do the best we can with what we've got – but it may not be as good as it would be when we are brim full of resources – and there's nothing we can do about that!

I have had conversations with clients who have said, 'Ah yes, but if I'd prepared better/had been less tired/had worked harder etc etc, then my resources would have been better!'

Well, you are welcome to beat yourself up in that way if you prefer – but ask yourself how that is helping you. The past is past and 'if onlys' are a waste of time and energy. If you are arguing that you will be better motivated in the future, you may be right – but you still won't be able to control whether you have a bad night/go down with the flu/don't actually manage to do all the work you are imagining you will do! Remember that perfectionism is about the desire to be in control – but we are *not* in complete control of life, no matter how hard we try.

Maybe if you had another go, you could *achieve better*. But that doesn't mean you could have done better last time. You did your best with the resources you had available at the time – and no one, be they a Nobel Prize winner or an Olympic medallist, can do better than that.

6. Practise accepting the imperfect.

Try some of these:

- Whatever is on your 'to do' list for the day – leave one thing undone and watch the world not ending. Or divide your list into things you think you **MUST** do and things that you **MAY** do. Practise feeling OK about not doing the things on your **MAY** list.
- Build in pure fun slots – things that you will really enjoy but have no achievement attached.
- Meditate – and notice how impossible it is to do it perfectly! Your mind will wander. Bring it back to the meditation, however many times it takes. It is impossible to meditate 'perfectly' but it is still enormously beneficial.
- Avoid extremes, even if they seem good for you, like exercise or a new diet. Moderation and balance are much more healthy. If you find yourself getting pernickety about achieving moderation, step back and notice that. Moderation has fuzzy, imperfect edges.
- Try playing with some children and allow them to lead the play. Do not take charge!

- Watch some really funny stuff on 'Youtube'. Laugh! Notice how much comedy is about things going wrong! Begin to laugh at yourself – gently.
- When you are tired and think you must just finish one last thing, don't do it!
- Play a game for fun, not to win.
- Wear an outfit that doesn't seem quite right. Notice the world not ending!

7. Embrace Uncertainty

Perfectionists (on the whole) desperately want to be in control of things – themselves, other people, the world. They therefore put in huge amounts of effort to get things to be exactly as they want them to be and find it intolerable when they are not. Understandably, they end up being hugely driven people. They seem unable to let things be – they are constantly nagging both themselves and other people.

It can be helpful to start very deliberately accepting uncertainty. There is a saying that nothing is certain in life except death and taxes – and in my own experience, even those things are fraught with uncertainty! Taxation keeps changing and death comes out of the blue and in strange and unexpected ways. The perfectionist may do well to remind themselves regularly that:

Everything is uncertain – no matter how much effort you put in!

So chill!