

How Perfectionism Fuels Teen Anxiety

From the outside, it may look your teen is lazy, lacks a work ethic, or simply doesn't care; but on the inside, a teen struggling with perfectionism may be fighting a daily battle against nerves, anxiety, and an intense fear of failure

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Many teens believe that the better they perform in school, the more successful they will be in life. In some ways, this thinking makes sense. They are rewarded with good grades and high scores. They earn their way into honors and advanced placement courses, and those classes prepare them for college. The problem, however, is that constantly striving for perfection tends to backfire—especially with teens.

Perform a quick check: Is your teen a perfectionist?

It's perfectly reasonable for teenagers to have high standards and to work hard to meet their personal goals. Disciplined behavior can cross the line to perfectionism, however, when it interferes with social, emotional, and/or occupational functioning. The idea of being perfect can actually preclude teens from reaching their goals because it affects their learning process, both in class and on the field.

Check out these common symptoms of perfectionism in teens:

- Dissatisfied with a standard of work others view as acceptable (even exceptional)
- Procrastinates until 100% sure of what to do and/or how to earn a high grade on the assignment

- Avoids answering questions in class for fear of being wrong
- Risk averse
- Avoids starting tasks for fear that they will not do them “right” or “well”
- Gets very upset when grades are lower than anticipated
- Struggles to cope with mistakes
- Takes criticism personally
- Works slowly to avoid mistakes
- Fixates on neatness and appearance of work
- Starts over repeatedly to “get it right.”

Understand that perfectionism is fueled by, and fuels, anxiety

From the outside, it may look your teen is lazy or un-resilient, lacks a work ethic, or simply doesn’t care; but on the inside, a teen struggling with perfectionism may be fighting a daily battle against nerves, anxiety, and an intense fear of failure.

The most important thing to remember is that perfectionistic teens are actually worried kids. Anxious thoughts are driving their perfectionistic behaviors, and when results fall short of expectations, they experience even greater anxiety. It can be a difficult cycle to break.

Consider the role of external factors

It’s no secret that teens are under increased pressure today. The expectation to succeed, both in academics and in extracurricular activities, puts an enormous amount of stress on them. Surrounded by constant evaluation and aware of the value society places on high achievers, teens often have no choice but to be driven by perfection—often to the detriment of the learning process.

When teens strive to achieve, they are invested in the learning process. When teens strive for perfection, they become paralyzed by the fear of not measuring up in some way. Perfectionism comes with stiff consequences:

- Low achievement
- Inability to focus on and finish tasks
- Anxiety disorders
- Feelings of helplessness
- Depression
- Social isolation.

How to guide your teen away from perfectionism

Curbing perfectionist thinking takes time and practice, and Cognitive Behavioral Therapy is a great resource for helping teens learn to reframe distorted thinking and learn adaptive coping strategies. Below are some steps you can take at home with your teen:

- **Challenge perfectionist thoughts:** When teens learn to dissect the anxious thoughts that drive their behavior, they can reframe their thinking and create different outcomes.
- **Practice self-talk:** Talking back to the worry center in the brain helps teens work through the anxiety lurking beneath the surface. It also helps them refocus on the positive and take control over the situation.
- **Focus on the learning process:** Teens need to learn that the process of learning is far more valuable than the grade on the top of the page. Talk to your teen about his/her preferred learning styles, what can be gained from mistakes and failures, and how to apply new knowledge to future situations.
- **Empathize:** Teens hear a lot about what they should do and what expectations they need to meet. It helps them to hear that their stress and anxiety is understandable, and that you remember that need to perform. Open and honest communication about the pitfalls of adolescence helps normalize the process and relieves teens of the pressure to succeed.

It's natural for teens to get caught up in unreasonable expectations at times. It's also perfectly age-appropriate for teens to experience periods of anxiety. If your teen experiences anxiety that interferes with normal daily living, including academics and social relationships, however, it's important to get an assessment from a licensed mental health practitioner.

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