

Depression - The Prison of Perfectionism

“But what’s wrong with trying to do your best?” asked my depressed client when I suggested that he had perfectionistic standards for his own and others’ behavior. I let him know that there is a difference between “doing one’s best” and perfectionism. Perfectionists are people who don’t accept even their own best efforts as good enough, and who live in a prison of constant comparison with others, leading to lots of negative internal self-evaluation. In addition, they (often unknowingly) put perfectionistic standards on others and are thus experienced as hyper-critical by their loved ones. They have often grown up in environments wherein they felt unable to please one or both parents. Psychological research has demonstrated that the personality trait of perfectionism tends to be relatively stable over time, and that those who frequently fall short of their own standards are more at risk for becoming depressed. In contrast, those who have very high standards for their own behavior **without self-criticism** are less likely to become depressed. These high-achieving individuals are determined to do their personal best, but do not tend to occupy themselves with comparisons and are not crushed by periodic failure. Rather, they are comfortable with erring/being wrong in small and big things alike and recover quickly, putting their learning experiences to good use and talking openly about their past mistakes in both private and professional arenas. So, if you want to buffer yourself and those you love against depression, lighten up and stop being your own worst enemy. Rather, be your own best friend!