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Perfectionism linked to burnout at work, school and sports, research finds

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Concerns about perfectionism can sabotage success at work, school or on the playing field, leading to stress, burnout and potential health problems, according to new research published by the Society for Personality and Social Psychology.

In the first meta-analysis of the relationship between perfectionism and burnout, researchers analyzed the findings from 43 previous studies conducted over the past 20 years. It turns out perfectionism isn't all bad. One aspect of perfectionism called "perfectionistic strivings" involves the setting of high personal standards and working toward those goals in a pro-active manner. These efforts may help maintain a sense of accomplishment and delay the debilitating effects of burnout, the study found.

The dark side of perfectionism, called "perfectionistic concerns," can be more detrimental when people constantly worry about making mistakes, letting others down, or not measuring up to their own impossibly high standards, said lead researcher Andrew Hill, an associate professor of sport psychology at York St. John University in England. Previous research has shown that perfectionistic concerns and the stress they generate can contribute to serious health problems, including depression, anxiety, eating disorders, fatigue and even early mortality. The study was published online in the *Personality and Social Psychology Review*.

"Perfectionistic concerns capture fears and doubts about personal performance, which creates stress that can lead to burnout when people

become cynical and stop caring," Hill said. "It also can interfere with relationships and make it difficult to cope with setbacks because every mistake is viewed as a disaster."

The study found that perfectionistic concerns had the strongest negative effects in contributing to burnout in the workplace, possibly because people have more social support and clearly defined objectives in education and sports. A student can be rewarded for hard work with a high grade, or a tennis player can win the big match, but a stellar performance in the workplace may not be recognized or rewarded, which may contribute to cynicism and burnout.

"People need to learn to challenge the irrational beliefs that underlie perfectionistic concerns by setting realistic goals, accepting failure as a learning opportunity, and forgiving themselves when they fail," Hill said. "Creating environments where creativity, effort and perseverance are valued also would help."

Most people display some characteristics of perfectionism in some aspect of their lives, but perfectionistic strivings or concerns may be more dominant. The development of a personality profile that identifies perfectionistic concerns might be a valuable tool in detecting and helping individuals who are prone to burnout, the study noted.

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Provided by Society for Personality and Social Psychology

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