

Perfectionism among young people significantly increased since 1980s, study finds

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The drive to be perfect in body, mind and career among today's college students has significantly increased compared with prior generations, which may be taking a toll on young people's mental health, according to research published by the American Psychological Association.

This study is the first to examine group generational differences in [perfectionism](#), according to lead author Thomas Curran, PhD, of the University of Bath. He and his co-author Andrew Hill, PhD, of York St John University suggest that perfectionism entails "an irrational desire to achieve along with being overly critical of oneself and others."

Curran and Hill analyzed data from 41,641 American, Canadian and British college students from 164 samples who completed the Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale, a test for generational changes in perfectionism, from the late 1980s to 2016. They measured three types of perfectionism: self-oriented, or an irrational desire to be perfect; socially prescribed, or perceiving

excessive expectations from others; and other-oriented, or placing unrealistic standards on others.

The study, published in the journal *Psychological Bulletin*, found that more recent generations of college students reported significantly higher scores for each form of perfectionism than earlier generations. Specifically, between 1989 and 2016, the self-oriented perfectionism score increased by 10 percent, socially prescribed increased by 33 percent and other-oriented increased by 16 percent.

The rise in perfectionism among millennials is being driven by a number of factors, according to Curran. For example, raw data suggest that social media use pressures young adults to perfect themselves in comparison to others, which makes them dissatisfied with their bodies and increases social isolation. This has not been tested and further research is needed to confirm this, said Curran. The drive to earn money, pressure to get a good education and setting lofty career goals are other areas in which today's young people exhibit perfectionism.

In another example, Curran cited college students' drive to perfect their grade point averages and compare them to their peers. These examples, according to Curran, represent a rise in meritocracy among millennials, in which universities encourage competition among students to move up the social and economic ladder.

"Meritocracy places a strong need for young people to strive, perform and achieve in modern life," said Curran. "Young people are responding by reporting increasingly unrealistic educational and professional expectations for themselves. As a result, perfectionism is rising among millennials."

Approximately half of high school seniors in 1976 expected to earn a college degree and by 2008, that number had risen to over 80 percent. Yet, numbers of those earning degrees has failed to keep pace with rising expectations, according to Curran. The gap between the percentage of [high school seniors](#) expecting to earn a college degree and those with one doubled between 1976 and 2000 and has continued to rise.

"These findings suggest that recent generations of [college students](#) have higher expectations of themselves and others than previous generations," said Curran. "Today's young people are competing with each other in order to meet societal pressures to succeed and they feel that perfectionism is necessary in order to feel safe, socially connected and of worth."

The increase in perfectionism may in part be affecting the psychological health of students, said Hill, citing higher levels of depression, anxiety and suicidal thoughts than a decade ago.

Hill urged schools and policymakers to curb fostering competition among [young people](#) in order to preserve good mental health.

More information: "Perfectionism Is Increasing Over Time: A Meta-Analysis of Birth Cohort Differences From 1989 to 2016," by Thomas Curran, PhD, University of Bath, and Andrew Hill, PhD, York St. John University. *Psychological Bulletin*, published Dec. 28, 2017.

Provided by American Psychological Association
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