

## Helping Perfectionist Teens

Jesus says, "Be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Mt. 5:48). Unfortunately many understand this passage within a Western cultural notion of perfection meaning, "without flaw." Being without flaws is unattainable, yet many young people today are on a futile and potentially fatal quest to be perfect. For these perfectionistic teens, making a small mistake is the gravest of sins. As one teen told me recently after making a small error causing him to make a 98 percent on a test, "I'm better than that. I should have aced it." Translation: I must be perfect. I'll accept nothing less from myself.

The anxiety epidemic among youth is no surprise to you by now. What surprises many is that perfectionism is usually a form of anxiety in high-achieving teens. And that anxiety, left untreated, can lead to many other problems including adrenal fatigue, depression,

other physical ailments, and in some cases suicide. As parents, we want our children to be good. Of course we want them to do well. We don't, however, want them to sacrifice their futures, their health and possibly their lives attempting to be perfect.

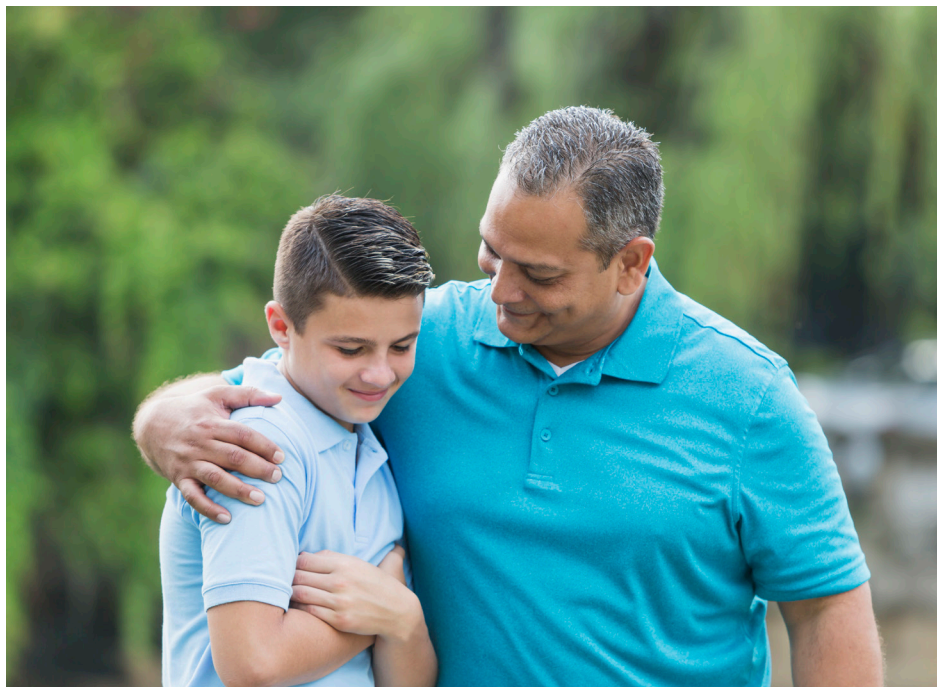
How would one, as a parent or a teacher, recognize perfectionism in a teen?

- The teen who does most things absolutely perfectly (cleanliness of their room seldom falls in this category, sorry!).
- The homework, worth few, if any, points must be completed with exacting standards.
- A teen berating herself because she "should've gotten that one two-point question correct. I studied it for days!"
- The boy who knows the answer, but won't raise his hand in class because he is afraid he'll get it



wrong.

- The teen who turns in an assignment with a depressed look on her face making the teacher think she is submitting subpar work only for the teacher to be blown away later by the quality of the work done.
- The kid who is always seeking reassurance that he's "good" and that he "did nothing wrong" and says "I'm sorry" incessantly and unnecessarily.
- The kid who is always going to confession. In religious circles this is often referred to as "scrupulosity."



In each of these cases, anxiety is the culprit. It may not *seem* like anxiety on the surface, but it is. Against a cultural backdrop where a growing number of teens are losing interest in academic achievement, getting their driver's licenses and religious affiliation, a perfectionistic teen might seem heroic or even saintly! That's why perfectionistic anxiety is hard to identify, because on the surface it seems good.

### What do parents need to know about Perfectionistic Anxiety?

- **It's about the anxiety.** These are often worried, *chronically worried*, kids whose sympathetic nervous systems are overtaxed, likely for years because of their inability to relax.
- **It's not all driven by adults.** Plenty of teens drive themselves sick despite their parents and others in their lives encouraging them and attempting to give them permission to "take it easy."
- **Perfectionism can be reinforced by religious beliefs.** Beliefs held from a young age can mask the anxiety as anxiety, instead of a virtuous work ethic.

### How can adults help Perfectionistic Teens?

- **Acknowledge your own definition of "success."** Complete this sentence "I'll feel successful as a parent if/when my teen \_\_\_\_\_."
- **Have more frequent, shorter conversations.** Always say 50 percent less than you feel like

saying. This is an important subject that needs to be talked about more frequently among parents and teens.

- **Ask your teen: "What does it mean to you to be successful? What role does contribution make in your definition?"** Listen to the answers and ask follow-up questions.
- **Normalize mistakes and imperfection.** When a perfectionistic teen makes a mistake this is an opportunity to help him reframe a mistake as "normal" instead of "catastrophic" and "life threatening."
- **Be vulnerable.** Admit your own mistakes and when appropriate share with your teen what those are.
- **Acknowledge and affirm attempts to deal with their imperfection.** "I can tell you've stopped this project at the "good enough" point so you could study another subject. I'm proud of you."
- **Help teens prioritize and sequence tasks.** Though everything feels urgent, it's not all equally important nor equally time sensitive.
- **Don't cater to their perfectionistic impulses.** Don't go out of your way to accommodate their perfectionism. Set boundaries. Set and enforce end times on work.

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