

*Perfectly Anxious: Common ways
perfectionism can interfere, and
how to manage it*

Brandon DeJong, Ph.D.

Simon Jencius, LCPC



What is Anxiety?

- Themes of anxiety
 - Strong fear elicited by something specific
 - Belief about the high degree of threat presented by that thing
 - Maladaptive attempts to cope with that threat

What is Anxiety?

- Physical symptoms (feeling sick, stomachache, headache)
- Avoidance, distraction, reassurance-seeking, compulsions
 - e.g. not going to school, isolating, difficulty with ADLs, or getting through the day
- Very reactive to stressors; irritable or angry

What is Anxiety?

- Anxiety typically starts off as useful and adaptive – it is good to have some anxiety!
 - Fight-or-flight response
 - Helps to motivate us

What is an Anxiety Disorder?

- These may present in different ways, but the common themes are
 - They cause kids to devote a disproportionate amount of time to dealing with their anxiety
 - They cause significant impairment in day-to-day functioning
 - They are not simply an extension of everyday worries (“I’m so OCD!”)

What is an Anxiety Disorder?

- When we understand how people think about these things, many of their “symptoms” make sense
- Safety behaviors:
 - Are negatively reinforced (we’re wired to do things that make us feel good/less bad)
 - Prevent the acquisition of new learning

What is an Anxiety Disorder?

- Safety behaviors:
 - Lead individuals to believe the non-occurrence of feared outcomes is due to the behaviors
 - Imply that the situation is dangerous to begin with

What is an Anxiety Disorder?

- Summary:
 - “There is something out in the world that I fear. I do things to make that fear go away, because the fear is unacceptable/intolerable. By doing these things, I teach myself that they are keeping me safe.”
 - As a result, a person keeps doing those things, but in ever-greater amounts, until they get in the way of functioning.

Perfectionism – what does it look like?

- Fear of making mistakes (“This means I am a failure.”)
- Avoiding situations where one would be evaluated (tests, assignments)
 - Note that this can be the opposite of what we might expect

Perfectionism – what does it look like?

- Holding themselves to a high/exceptional standard
- Procrastinating until certain they will do it “right” or “well”
- Not speaking up in class – might be wrong
- Upset with “lower” grades and taking criticism personally
- Starting things over repeatedly – need to get it right
- Focus on the appearance of their work (how neat/presentable it is)

Perfectionism – what are the feared outcomes?

- Uncertainty
- Danger
- Judgment from others
- Imprecision

“These are all so bad that I cannot experience them.”

Perfectionism – what are the feared outcomes?

- It's important to note that these are common – most individuals are motivated to not experience those outcomes
- **Problems occur when the desire to avoid discomfort becomes more important than the desire to reach a goal, or to do well**
 - → Holding impossible standards, and experiencing anxiety or depression when they are not met
 - → living one's life around the experience of distress

What is Exposure?

- Why does it work?
 - Habituation
 - Violation of Expectancies
 - Self-Efficacy

What is Exposure?

- What does it look like for perfectionism? Testing out predictions:
 - Intentional mistake-making
 - Limiting time spent on activities (more than normal)
 - Not reviewing work excessively
- → Tracking distress (SUDS)

What is Exposure?

- What does it look like for perfectionism? Sitting with thoughts:
 - This means I have reached my maximum potential – it's all downhill from here; this is proof I am inadequate
 - I can't take the risk of being imperfect
 - This imperfection means I'm inadequate
 - My self-worth is based on my achievement

What Can We Teach Parents?

- Decrease/eliminate accommodation
 - Giving in to demands
 - Providing reassurance
 - Decreasing their responsibility
 - Assist with or complete tasks

What Can We Teach Parents?

- Why do we accommodate?
 - It initially reduces anxiety
 - Fear of reaction if parents/family don't accommodate
 - Hard to tolerate child's distress
 - Effect on the relationship (be the bad guy, child feeling unloved)

What Can We Teach Parents?

- Reassurance
 - A child asking repetitive (or the same) and frequent questions
 - Looking for the “right” answer
 - Information-seeking vs. reassurance-seeking

What Can We Teach Parents?

- What should we do instead?
 - Engage in exposure instead of avoidance
 - Use reinforcement plans (AKA behavior modification plans)
 - Rewards for desirable behavior (want to see more of)
 - Planned ignoring for undesirable behavior (what we want to see less of)

Interested in hearing more?

Contact:

Brandon DeJong, Ph.D.
Clinical Supervisor
brandon.dejong@rogersbh.org
630-686-4555

Annie Jaworska
National Outreach Representative
annie.jaworska@rogersbh.org
224-423-3733

Rogers-Hinsdale Main #:
630-686-4544



Call or visit:

800-767-4411

rogersbh.org