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# Inside the Minds of the Perfectionists

*Researchers Used to Blame Parenting but Studies Suggest a Genetic Link; Procrastination is a Problem*



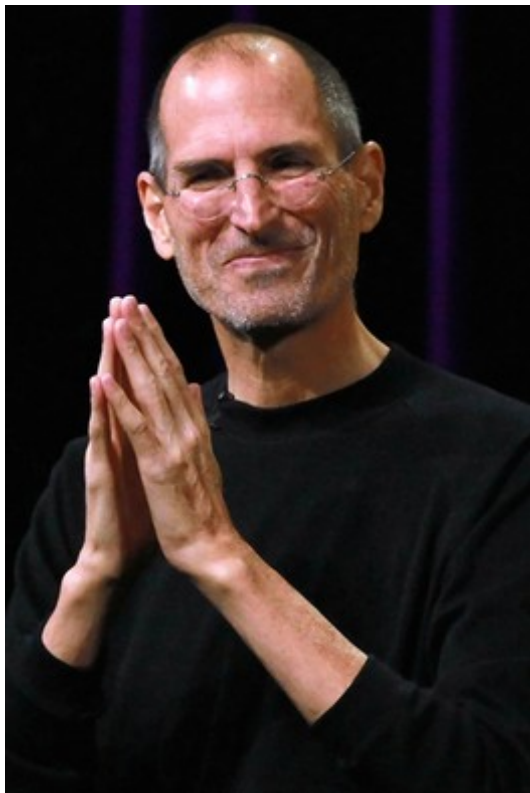
By MELINDA BECK



New studies on perfectionism show it may have a genetic link. Other studies suggest that parenting plays a role. But there are upsides and downsides to the findings. Melinda Beck has details on Lunch Break.

Christine Tsien Silvers says perfectionism runs in her family. Her mother, a detail-oriented computer scientist, emigrated from China to Minnesota and was "always taking classes to get a better job."

She earned a Ph.D. from MIT and an M.D. from Harvard. "But I also wanted to be the best mother possible," says Dr. Silvers, so she worked part-time, not full-time, emergency-room shifts to maximize her time



Getty Images

Apple founder Steve Jobs, at least at one point in his career, spent money to make even his computers' innards beautiful.

with her children, ages 3, 5 and 8.

Dr. Silvers, 42, now works from home in Marshfield, Mass., as the chief medical officer of a start-up company using her MIT dissertation to create mobile health monitors. She often gets up in the middle of the night "to do the work part of the work-life balance," she says. Still, she frets about everything she hasn't done, including organizing her house. "The list goes on and on, but I don't want to do a sloppy job on any of them."

Meanwhile, she is already seeing signs of perfectionism in her 5-year old son. "He loves to draw but he'll cry and cry if he thinks he's put a line in the wrong place," Dr. Silvers says.



Getty Images

James Brown was known to fine his backup singers if they didn't have a clean, pressed shirt, a shoe shine—or if they missed a beat.

Where does such



Everett Collection

Felix Unger of 'The Odd Couple,' played by Tony Randall, knew how annoying his fussbudget ways could be: 'I drive everybody crazy,' he said in season three.



WireImage

Barbra Streisand's latest album features unreleased songs from past decades that she thought were too flawed: 'If I didn't like that one word, I wouldn't release the record,' she said in an interview earlier this month.



Everett Collection

Tracy Flick, played by Reese Witherspoon in the 1999 film 'Election,' said: 'Some people say I'm an overachiever, but...they're just jealous.' She blamed her mother for her tendencies.



Getty Images

Martha Stewart set such high standards for cooking, crafting and entertaining that she drove legions of people to try to emulate her seemingly perfect ways.

perfectionism come from? Experts have long blamed parents who overemphasized achievement or made



Getty Images

'Madame Bovary' author Gustav Flaubert was famous for searching for 'le mot juste' (the right word). 'I am irritated by my own writing.'

their love conditional on meeting certain goals. But recent research suggests that the genes that parents pass along may play an ever bigger role.

Researchers at the Michigan State University Twin Registry have been examining aspects of perfectionism in female twins, ages 12 to 22. Identical twins share 100% of their genetic makeup; fraternal twins share 50%; all the twin-pairs in the registry shared the same upbringing. In one study of 292 twins, published in January in the journal *Depression and Anxiety*, the identical twins had much more similar scores on measures of perfectionism and anxiety than the fraternal twins did, suggesting that their genetics had a stronger influence than their environment.

A second study of 340 twins published in the *International Journal of Eating Disorders* this month, found that the identical twins were also more alike than the fraternal twins in the degree to which they idolized the bodies of models and celebrities. Even when the researchers adjusted the findings for differences in body weight, the identical twins were still more alike in body-image issues than twins who only shared the same upbringing.

In both studies, the environmental influences the twins didn't share, such as having different activities and groups of friends, had a greater influence on their attitudes than the home environment they did share. In short, perfectionism "appears to be greatly due to genetic risk factors as well as the unique experiences people have outside the home," says Jason Moser, as assistant professor of psychology at Michigan State and lead investigator of the anxiety study.

While scientists are still a long way from identifying which specific genes are involved in perfectionism, "This suggests that there is a significant biological component that we need to understand more," says Dr. Moser.

Perfectionism isn't a psychological condition—there isn't even an official definition. Some people see it as a point of pride to push themselves to achieve and pay close attention to detail. But experts say that perfectionism can become toxic when people set standards that are impossibly high and believe they are worthless if they can't meet them.

That type of dysfunctional perfectionism often leads to discouragement, self-doubt and exhaustion, and it is at the core of many mental health issues, including depression, anxiety, obsessive-compulsive disorder, eating disorders, marital problems, workaholism, procrastination, insomnia and suicide.

"Our research shows that successful perfectionists are successful in spite of it, not because of it," says Tom Greenspon, a psychologist in Minneapolis and author of "Moving Past Perfect" and other books. "If you worrying more about how you are doing than what you are doing, you'll stumble."

Dr. Greenspon and other psychologists still believe that perfectionism is instilled in upbringing. "Somewhere along the line, you got the message that you are not good enough—which doesn't necessarily mean what your parents intended," he says. (Example: a kid who got 780 on his SATs and having his mother say, 'What happened to the other 20 points?' ")

Other experts think that genetics may set a range or a predisposition for perfectionism, but that environment and experiences can affect it greatly. Amy Przeworski, a psychologist at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, says she sees children as young as three who are distraught when their shoe laces are different length. She says parents can help diffuse such early tendencies—"but sometimes parents have to deal with their own anxieties first."

One method she uses for adults and children alike is called exposure therapy: "Make small mistakes and do not fix them," she says. Tie your shoes unevenly. Leave a comma or a period out of a paper. "People are not big fans of this at first," she concedes. "But they do learn that a small mistake doesn't make a whole project worthless." A recovering perfectionist herself, Dr. Przeworski says she is crocheting a blanket that is full of dropped stitches.

Other techniques from cognitive behavioral therapy include learning to recognize when they are being overly conscientious, weighing the pros and cons and learning to prioritize. "Cultivate curiosity instead of negativism when things go wrong. Ask, 'What can I learn from this?'" advises psychologist Melissa McCreery, who coaches professional women and business owners at TooMuchonHerPlate.com



Gary Hovland

A person who insists on getting every detail perfect, such as the hostess who keeps hungry guests waiting while arranging the dining table down to the last detail, can be difficult for non-perfectionists to relate to or live with.

Some "recovering perfectionists" devise their own strategies. Elizabeth Raub, a technical writer and editor in Charleston, S.C., uses timers for projects. "I decide on a reasonable time and when the timer is up, I move on. As a result, she says, "I get more done and the quality is actually far better than when I uses was going cross-eyed picking every word apart."

Dr. Greenspon says he doesn't give assignments ("people get too wrapped up in trying to do them perfectly"). But he does encourage patients to explore where their perfectionism came from, and he finds that when parents and offspring discuss it together, they often clarify years of misheard messages.

Last week, Dr. Silvers asked her mother, Bernarda Tsien, Lisle, Ill., if she considered herself a perfectionist. "She immediately laughed and said she

used to be, but stopped because it was too much work!"

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