

# THE PITFALLS OF PERFECTIONISM

*Kelly Harper, graduate researcher*

It's a common misconception: Perfectionists are typically viewed as hard-working, high-achieving, self-confident individuals. However, according to clinical psychology student Kelly Harper, perfectionism can come with costs.

Existing research highlights two types of perfectionists — adaptive and maladaptive. Adaptive perfectionists maintain high standards and feel pride in their accomplishments without berating themselves for mistakes. Maladaptive perfectionists employ similarly high expectations, but they focus on shortcomings and often feel anxious or unhappy with their performance.

Harper, whose findings have been featured in the online publication PsyPost, is examining the motivations behind maladaptive perfectionists' behavior, as well as their interpersonal problems, through the UNCG Depression Treatment and Research Program. The program, directed by her advisor Dr. Kari Eddington, focuses on improving the lives of individuals living with depression via innovative research and clinical services.

"I really want to help perfectionists. They are the ones who typically come in for psychotherapy," the doctoral student says. "They are at a higher risk for any number of psychological problems — depression, anxiety, eating disorders, and personality disorders."

Harper, who won the UNCG Outstanding Thesis Award in 2016, says maladaptive perfectionists have the highest levels of depression, social difficulties, and stress. They're self-critical and often pursue goals based on external pressures rather than internal motivations, leading them to feel less pride in their work.

For her thesis, to determine if perfectionists worked harder than non-perfectionists, she had undergraduates perform a simple computer task while wearing electrodes. Cardiac and respiratory data revealed perfectionists didn't expend more effort on the task than other participants, in contrast to previous findings based on self-reporting. But maladaptive perfectionists did perceive the task as more difficult and felt worse about their performance.

Harper has also analyzed how perfectionists feel about their daily accomplishments and why they pursue goals. In her most recent study, she surveyed 130 undergraduates about their daily progress toward goals, over a two-week period. She found maladaptive perfectionists pursued goals to satisfy others and felt more guilt, even if they were making progress.

But identifying behaviors and motivations is only part of her research. She also wants to create better treatments. Currently, psychologists use cognitive behavioral therapy, but this strategy doesn't always have a specific focus on the sensitivity, hostility, neediness, and tendency toward conflict maladaptive perfectionism can create. Maladaptive perfectionists, Harper says, could benefit from cognitive behavioral therapy focused more specifically on social difficulties or more socially focused therapy.

For her dissertation, Harper, who's already been published in the multidisciplinary journal PlosOne, hopes to collect data three times daily from 150 undergraduates on social interactions, how they feel about those interactions, and how they believe they will impact their future social experiences. She predicts maladaptive perfectionists will report more negative interactions and that they'll blame themselves, which in turn will lead to an expectation of future negative social experiences and higher levels of loneliness.

The research is important, she says, because psychologists who understand maladaptive perfectionists' approaches to social interactions can design better treatments.

"I hope my findings will be used to help perfectionists learn skills that will result in improved mental health," she says. "These are skills that will make life better."

*By Whitney J. Palmer • Photography by Mike Dickens*  
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