

Alzheimer's Family Caregiver Support: Perfectionism Can Be Bad for You

Author: Mark Matloff

Perfectionism. How can such a perfect-sounding word give us so much trouble? All too often, Alzheimer's family caregivers explode their personal stress levels by demanding too much of themselves.

The problem is that, for a caregiver, it is impossible to be completely perfect. There are just too many demands. And if we have unyielding perfectionistic expectations of ourselves, what will happen when we fall short? Unfortunately, when that happens, we can proceed to torment ourselves about our mistake.

So, what should we do about perfectionism? Understanding the psychology of perfectionism can help us cope with it. Perfectionism starts out innocently enough: a person desires to do better at something.

So far so good.

But, for many people, this desire to improve does not stop at that point. It can mutate into a driving demand with no toleration for any kind of mistake. Making a mistake leads the perfectionist to condemn him/herself. When he/she goofs, the perfectionist can think "I made a mistake - therefore I'm no good!" In this way, some people fall into the trap of mercilessly trashing themselves completely just for being human.

And blind perfectionists will then work like crazy just to avoid re-experiencing their own self-condemnation the next time they (inevitably) make another mistake. So the perfectionist falls victim to a cycle of making extraordinary personal demands, not meeting all of his/her demands, trashing him/herself with guilt, resolving to be better next time (in order to not feel guilty), and striving to meet yet a newer and harsher set of demands. Mix well and repeat.

Why do many of us become perfectionistic? Some of us seem to be born perfectionists. It is also likely that perfectionists have learned this style. It all depends on how you think about things.

Nonperfectionists can roll with the punches. They can still see themselves as being OK even when they make a mistake. They learn from their goofup, and hopefully improve next time. They can still strive to do better, but their self-worth is not tied up with having to be best, to do best, and to have the absolute best outcomes.

People who suffer from unbridled perfectionism, however, automatically and relentlessly put themselves down whenever they are anything less than perfect - which can be all of the time for us less-than-perfect humans.

Blind perfectionism can make caregiving harder. Caregivers have to deal with many ongoing demands of their lives, such as: taking care of their loved ones, their home, their finances, their family, attending to chores and errands, and dealing with constant challenges and demands that crop up. Remember that it is just not possible to be perfect under all these circumstances. And the consequences of rampant perfectionism are costly: guilt, anger, anxiety, even depression -- especially for Alzheimer's caregivers

So, what should a dedicated perfectionist do? It is possible to tame your perfectionistic attitude. Here are some ideas:

1. Develop a sane approach to your tasks. Understand that you do not have to relentlessly drive yourself to do everything perfectly. So what if all the dishes aren't done or the clothes put away right now? You'll get to it!
2. Understand and remind yourself often that it is impossible to be completely perfect.
3. Notice when you do something well, and relax your demand for it to be THE BEST. Strive to be good enough.
4. Catch yourself when you are being too harsh on yourself. Take a few breaths and back off.
5. Prioritize. Make a list of what you really need to do. Select which tasks are the most important ones to deal with now. Put your attention and energy into handling them.
6. Where possible, take breaks, even little ones. Give yourself opportunities to rest and recharge. Remember that caregiving is a marathon experience, not a sprint.
7. Appreciate the power of mistakes We can learn from our mistakes and thereby improve.
8. Get some assistance to help you take a break now and then. Perhaps your family, friends, local Alzheimer's Association chapter or Office on Aging can point you in the right direction.
9. If you are stuck in this perfectionistic pattern, consider consulting a mental health professional or ask your physician for some ideas.
11. Please remember that I am not suggesting that you give up on your caregiving tasks. It's a matter of changing your attitude about your tasks. You can strive to do your best and, at the same time, refuse to put yourself down for not being absolutely perfect.

Alzheimer's Family Caregiver Support is a series of articles to help empower someone who cares for a person with Alzheimer's disease. The material in this article is educational, and is not a substitute for professional advice.

With more than 28 years of professional experience, Mark Matloff, Ph.D. brings his skills and passion to helping people and agencies improve and thrive. Since his graduate research in gerontology, he has worked with Alzheimer's caregivers, the elderly, and a variety of caregiving agencies, in addition to his general adult outpatient private practice. He is a private practicing psychologist, author, speaker, consultant, and coach. His recent book, "Strength in Caring: Giving Power Back to the Alzheimer's Caregiver," is a resource for family members caring for a person with Alzheimer's disease.

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