

The Problem With Being Perfect

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When the psychologist Jessica Pryor lived near an internationally renowned university, she once saw a student walking into a library holding a sleeping bag and a coffee maker.

She's heard of grad students spending 12 to 18 hours at a time in the lab. Their schedules are meant to be literally punishing: If they're scientists-in-training, they won't allow themselves to watch Netflix until their experiments start generating results. "Relationships become estranged—people stop inviting them to things, which leads them to spend even more time in the lab," Pryor told me.

Along with other therapists, Pryor, who is now with the Family Institute at Northwestern University, is trying to sound the alarm about a tendency among young adults and college students to strive for perfection in their work—sometimes at any cost. Though it is often portrayed as a positive trait—a clever response to the "greatest weaknesses" question during job interviews, for instance—Pryor and others say extreme perfectionism can lead to depression, anxiety, and even suicidal ideation.

The treatment for perfectionism might be as simple as having patients keep logs of things they can be proud of, or having them behave imperfectly in small ways, just to see how it feels. "We might have them hang the towels crooked or wear some clothing inside out," says Martin Antony, a professor in the department of psychology at Ryerson University in Toronto.