

TAMING THE INNER CRITIC

MANAGING PERFECTIONISM IN COLLEGE LIFE

Tara Cousineau, PhD

HMS | College Mental Health Series
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Objectives

- 1. Define Perfectionism & Recognize Contributing Factors**
- 2. Strategies to Manage the Inner Critic**
- 3. Integrating Self-Compassion, Values, Resilience**
- 4. When Referrals May be Needed**
- 5. Q&A**



Part 1: What is Perfectionism?



Perfectionism

Perfectionism is the paradox created by the need for belonging—and **fear of rejection**—paired with **unrealistic expectations** for achievement and approval that sap your energy or life force.



Perfectionism serves a protective function, typically learned earlier in life as a form of survival.



Even if perfectionism is in part heritable—about 30 to 40 percent, according to a study in Spain with 600 pairs of twins—there are many other factors in play and plenty of room to thrive.

Carmen Iranzo- Tatay et al., “Genetic and Environmental Contributions to Perfectionism and Its Common Factors,” *Psychiatry Research* 230, no. 3 (2015): 932–939.



3 Types of Perfectionism

**Paul Hewitt & Gordon Flett,
Researchers**

Multidimensional
Perfectionism Scale

(There is a spectrum.)

Self-Oriented Perfectionism

Sets high standards for self. Driven to excel. "I strive to be the best I can be." Can be hard on self, can always be/do better (never good enough); prone to burnout.

Socially Prescribed Perfectionism

The social environment is perceived as being excessively demanding. "I can't measure up. Others/society are too demanding." Critical and judgmental of self: Compare and despair.

Other Prescribed Perfectionism

Unrealistic imposition of standards on other people. "If I ask somebody to do something expect it to be done." Critical and judgmental of others.

Perfectionist Self-Presentation Style

A fixation on appearing flawless to others, or conversely, a need to hide any shortcomings or mistakes.



Hewitt, P. L., Flett, G. L., Sherry, S. B., Habke, M., Parkin, M., et al. (2003). [The interpersonal expression of perfection: Perfectionistic self-presentation and psychological distress](#). *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 84(6), 1303-1325. doi: 10.1037/0022-3514.84.6.1303

Kristen, A., Davidson, E., Blackburn, M., Molnar, D. S., Flett, G. L., Becker, A. L., Hewitt, P. L. (2025). [The Perfectionistic Self Presentation Scale – Short Form \(PSPS-SF\): Development and Validation](#). (Submitted)

Perfectionist Self-Presentation Style

Perfectionistic Self-Presentation Scale – Short Form (PSPS-SF)

Subscale Item

Nondisplay of Imperfection

Errors are much worse if they are made in public rather than in private
It would be awful if I made a fool of myself in front of others
I brood over mistakes that I have made in front of others

Nondisclosure of Imperfection

I should always keep my problems to myself
I should solve my own problems rather than admit them to others
I try to keep my faults to myself

Perfectionistic Self-Promotion

It is very important that I always appear to be “on top of things”
I must always appear to be perfect
I strive to look perfect to others



Prevalence of Perfectionism



- Steady increase among young people between 1986-2016, N= 40K), (Curran & Hill, Psychological Bulletin, 2019)
 - Socially-Prescribed Perfectionism associated with greater psychological distress
- 16 to 25-year-olds found that 85% of participants identified having perfectionist traits
 - largely focused on academic achievement (Alva et al., OxJournal 2022)

THE NEW YORKER 100

ANNALS OF PSYCHOLOGY

THE PAIN OF PERFECTIONISM

It's the fault people humblebrag about in job interviews, but psychologists are discovering more and more about the real harm it causes.

By Leslie Jamison

August 4, 2025



NBC NEWS WATCH

U.S. NEWS

Suicides put spotlight on how hard it can be for student-athletes to ask for help

"It's a fear about being judged. It's a fear of being seen as weak when you're supposed to be seen as a competitive athlete," one tennis player said.

— Lauren Bernett, Sarah Shulze and Katie Meyer were all top-performing student-athletes who died by suicide in the last two months.

Elise Wrabetz / NBC News; JMU; UW; Stanford



April 28, 2022, 2:01 PM EDT

By Elizabeth Chuck

The rate of suicide in NCAA collegiate athletes has increased over the last 20 years and over the last decade has become the second most common cause of death, after accidents. Whelan BM, et al. Suicide in National Collegiate Athletic Association athletes: a 20-year analysis British Journal of Sports Medicine 2024;58:531-537

World Psychiatry OFFICIAL JOURNAL OF THE WORLD PSYCHIATRIC ASSOCIATION (WPA)

World Psychiatry. 2024 Jan 12;23(1):152-154. doi: [10.1002/wps.21157](https://doi.org/10.1002/wps.21157)

The need to focus on perfectionism in suicide assessment, treatment and prevention

Gordon L Flett¹, Paul L Hewitt²

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PMCID: PMC10785971 PMID: [38214627](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/38214627/)

Perfectionists are people who not only want to be perfect; they also need to seem perfect. Several decades of global research on perfectionism have identified a host of worrisome realities. First, meta-analytic evidence indicates that perfectionism is on the rise among young people¹. Second, perfectionism is associated with mental health problems, but also with physical health issues and early mortality². Third, perfectionism is associated with heightened risk for suicide³, as illustrated by the results of a comprehensive meta-analysis³.

JOURNAL OF Personality

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The perniciousness of perfectionism: A meta-analytic review of the perfectionism–suicide relationship

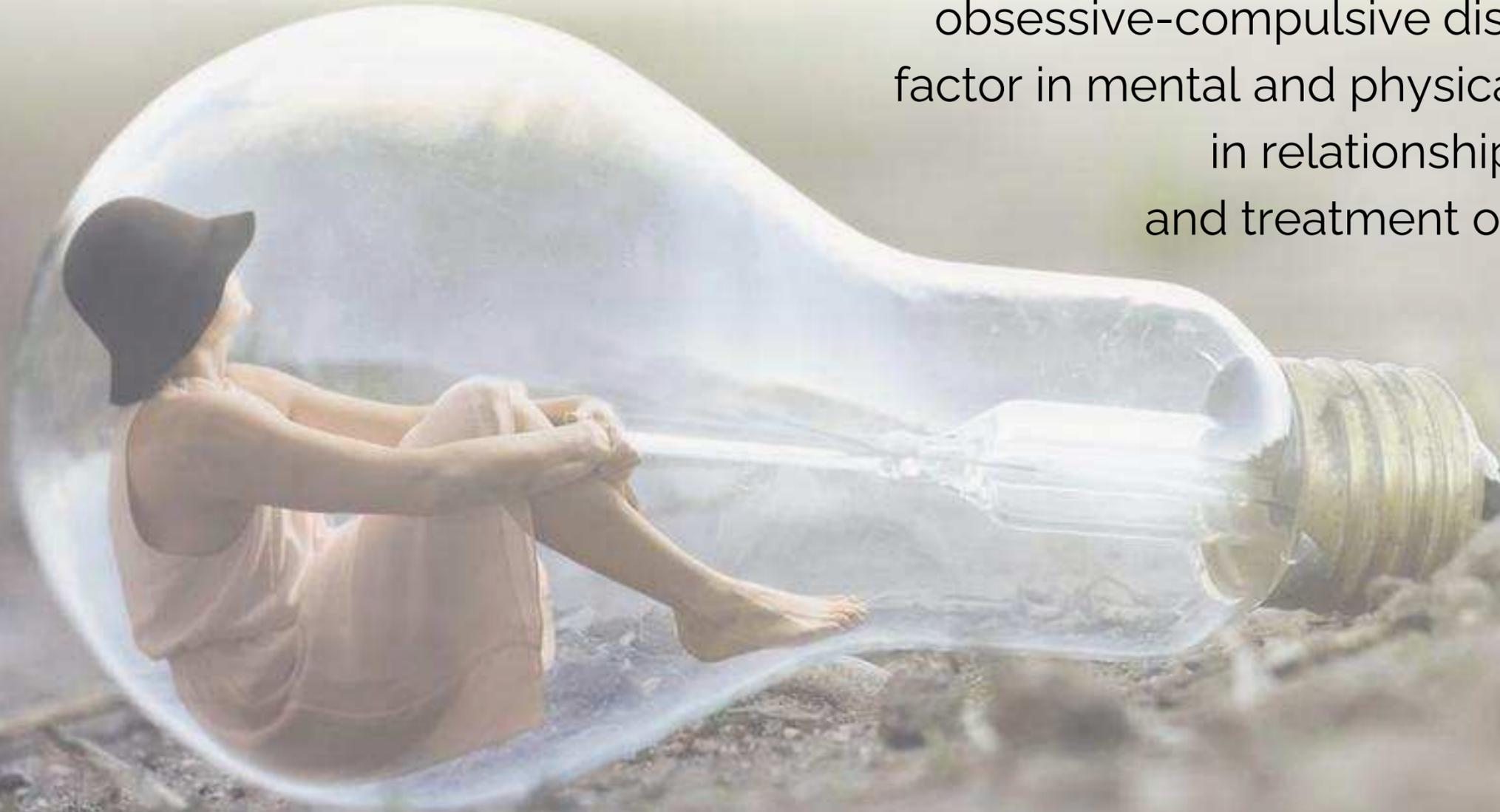
Martin M. Smith✉, Simon B. Sherry, Samantha Chen, Donald H. Saklofske, Christopher Mushquash, Gordon L. Flett, Paul L. Hewitt

First published: 22 July 2017

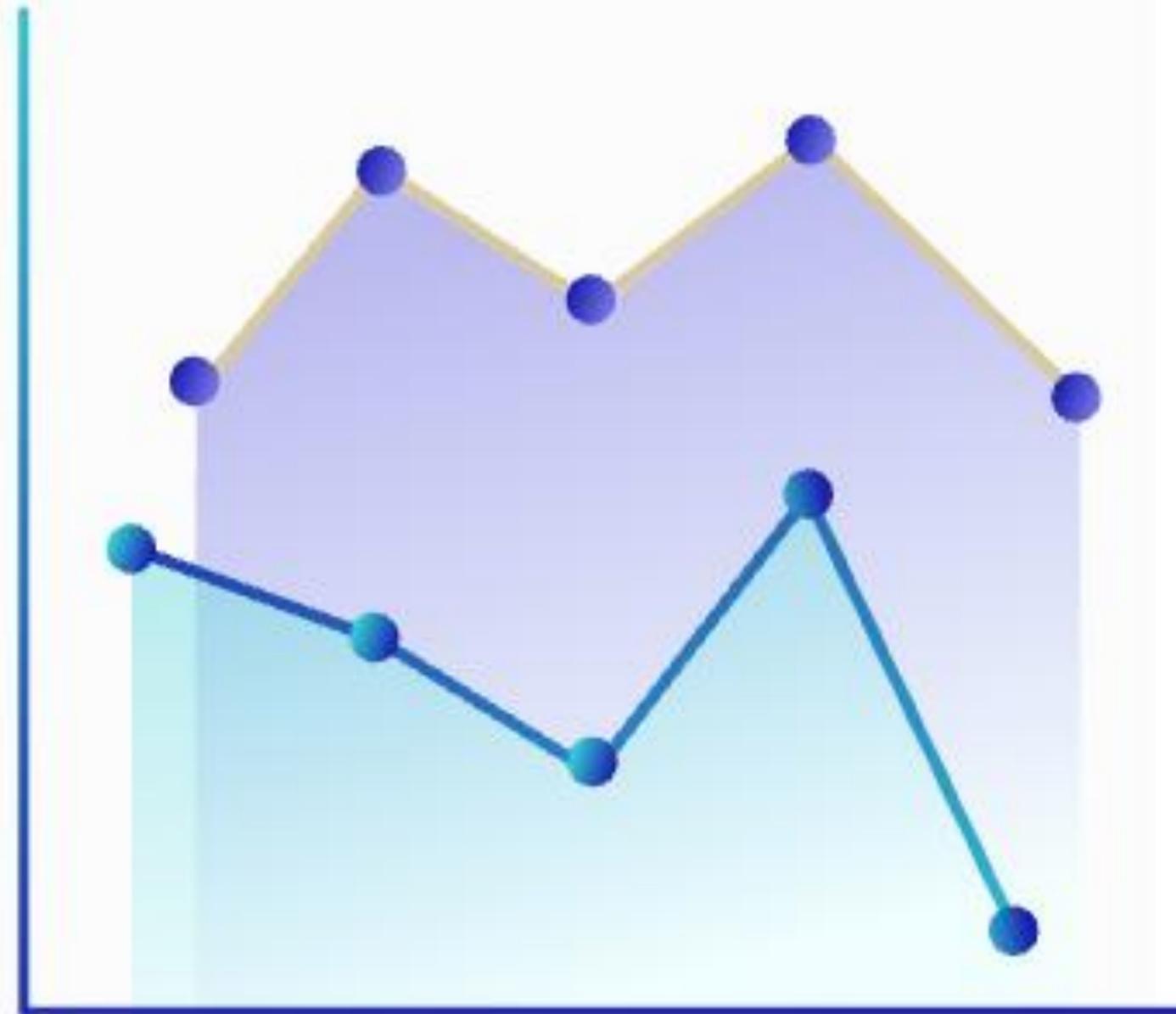
<https://doi.org/10.1111/jopy.12333>

Perfectionism is a transdiagnostic process.

It is a factor in psychological conditions such as anxiety disorders, depression, eating disorders, or obsessive-compulsive disorder. It is core vulnerability factor in mental and physical health outcomes, as well as in relationship, achievement, and treatment outcome problems.



A Point of Diminishing Returns



In goal attainment, aiming for excellence is a noble value—but perfectionism overcorrects and becomes counterproductive.

P. Guadreau

“Excellencism vs. Perfectionism”

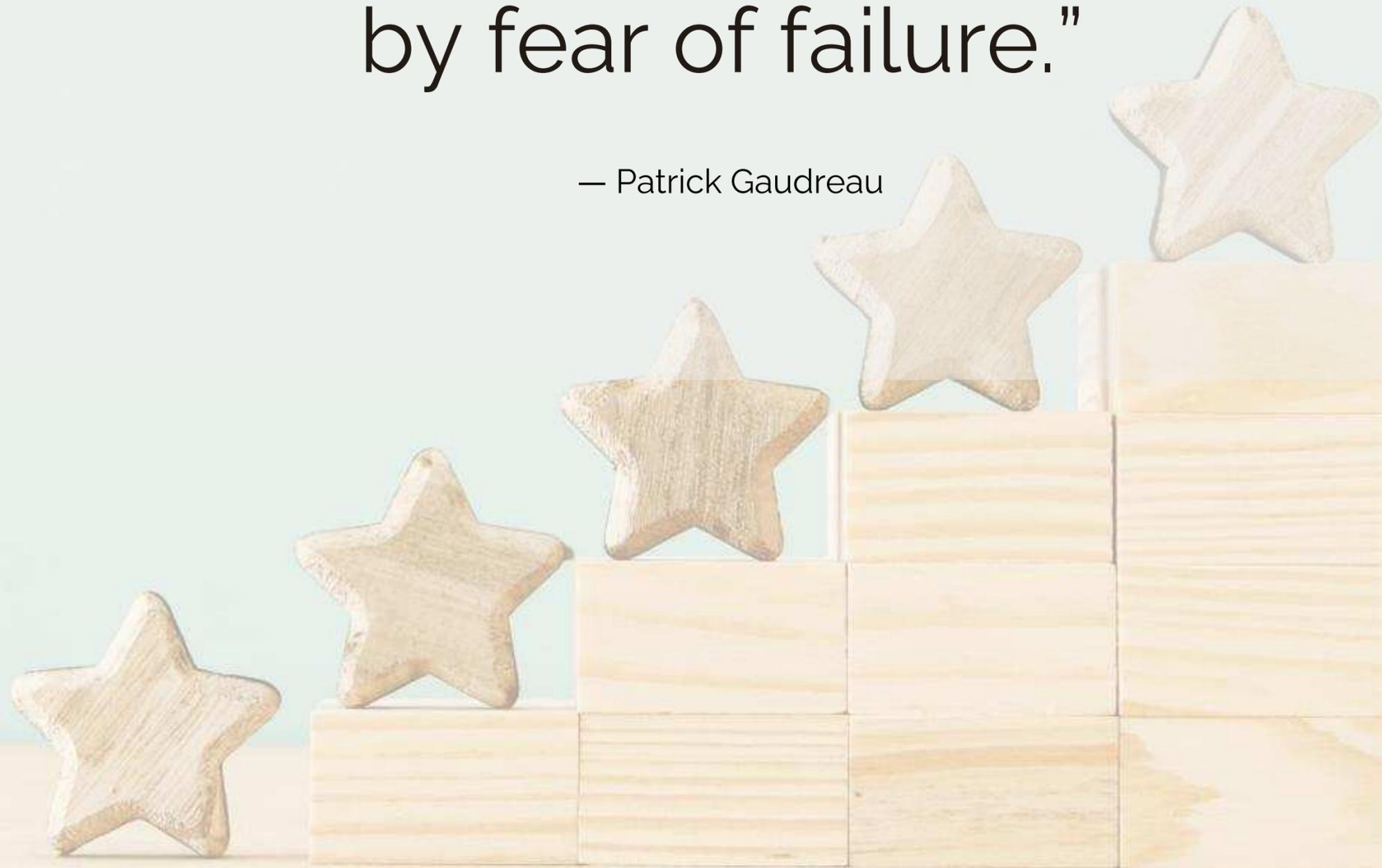


What's the difference?

“An **excellence striver** will still want to be a competent person and have very good performances, whereas a **perfection striver** will want to be a perfect person and have perfect performances.”

“Perfectionist strivers are motivated to attain success, but they are also daunted by fear of failure.”

— Patrick Gaudreau



Perfectionism Persists

A Workplace Study

Harari et al. (2018)

Meta-analysis identified two groups in aggregated studies of over 45K employees

Perfectionists do not get any further ahead than non-perfectionists or have greater life satisfaction.

Excellence-Seeking Perfectionism

Set high personal standards, are compulsive, and have exceedingly high standards at work, for themselves and others. Can be adaptive to a point.

Failure-Avoiding Perfectionism

Driven by fear, shame, or avoidance. Fixate on a fear that their work may not be good enough and that their reputation would suffer as a result. Often maladaptive leading to toxic teams and burnout.

Multi- Dimensional

External Factors

Cultural

Educational, institutional, religious, societal forces that promote ideals and exceptionalism over caring and inclusion.

Economic

A consumer economy reinforcing ideals for material gain, success, status, wealth, etc. a

Parental Expectations

Pressure from parents to excel; perceptions of children that their worth is contingent on productive and progress.

Peer Pressure/Social Media

Over exposure to social media (and AI) and reliance on peers for information, acceptance and validation.

Multi-Dimensional

Internal Factors

Relational

Comparison, imposter feelings; unrealistic or rigid personal standards/goals fueling anxious striving; reputation management.

Emotional/Mental

Rumination on regrets, failures, mishaps leading to shame or embarrassment. A need to be the perfect/responsible child, sibling, friend, student, athlete, etc.

Spiritual

Grappling with developmental and existential questions of *Who am I? Do I or my efforts matter? Do I belong?*

Nervous System Sensitivities/Epi-genetics

Part 2: Strategies for Managing The Inner Critic





Healthy Striving

Finding a middle ground between high performance and rigid overachievement. When a person:

- Can **manage uncomfortable emotions** (fear, uncertainty, anger, frustration, rejection)
- Takes a **flexible in approach to goals**, has a growth mindset, and is willing to address failures as opportunities
- Has **a focus on process** rather than on a single outcome; adaptable; can see the larger picture
- Is able to **intentionally practice letting go** of minor irritations or disruptions
- **Recognizes when they need help** and can't do it all
- Cultivates a **stable sense of self-worth** and can bounce back (or forward) when challenges arise.
- **Engages in consistent self-care** and kind, encouraging self-talk; and redirect attention on the what is going well.

Therapy Approaches

In the psychological literature on perfectionism

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)

Acceptance Commitment Therapy (ACT)

Exposure Response Prevention (ERP) for OCD/OCPD

Practically applied approaches

Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT)

Interpersonal Therapy (IPT)

Mindful Self-Compassion / Mindfulness

Psychodynamic/Relational Therapies (Case Studies)

Somatic Approaches (e.g., PVT informed)

Internal Family Systems (IFS)

Others



“The psychotherapy relationship makes substantial and consistent contributions to outcome independent of the type of treatment.”
—Norcross & Lambert (2018)



My Approach

Is based on many years with high achieving clients/students and based on workshops with students: “Overcome Perfection Through Compassion” and “Befriending the Inner Critic.” It is practical and playful.

A main focus is on distress tolerance and emotional flexibility, and combines mindfulness, compassion-based therapy methods, parts work, and skills based in neuroscience.

Begin to EVOLVE

E: Embody the Present Moment

through awareness, listening to body, understanding the nervous system; distress tolerance/flexibility

V: Validate Your Experience

by recognizing thoughts, emotions, sensations as responses to stress

O: Open Your Heart

to inner parts, name them, tend and befriend and cultivate self-compassion

L: Love Your Inner Critic

by understanding the resistance to self-compassion and practicing curiosity and courage

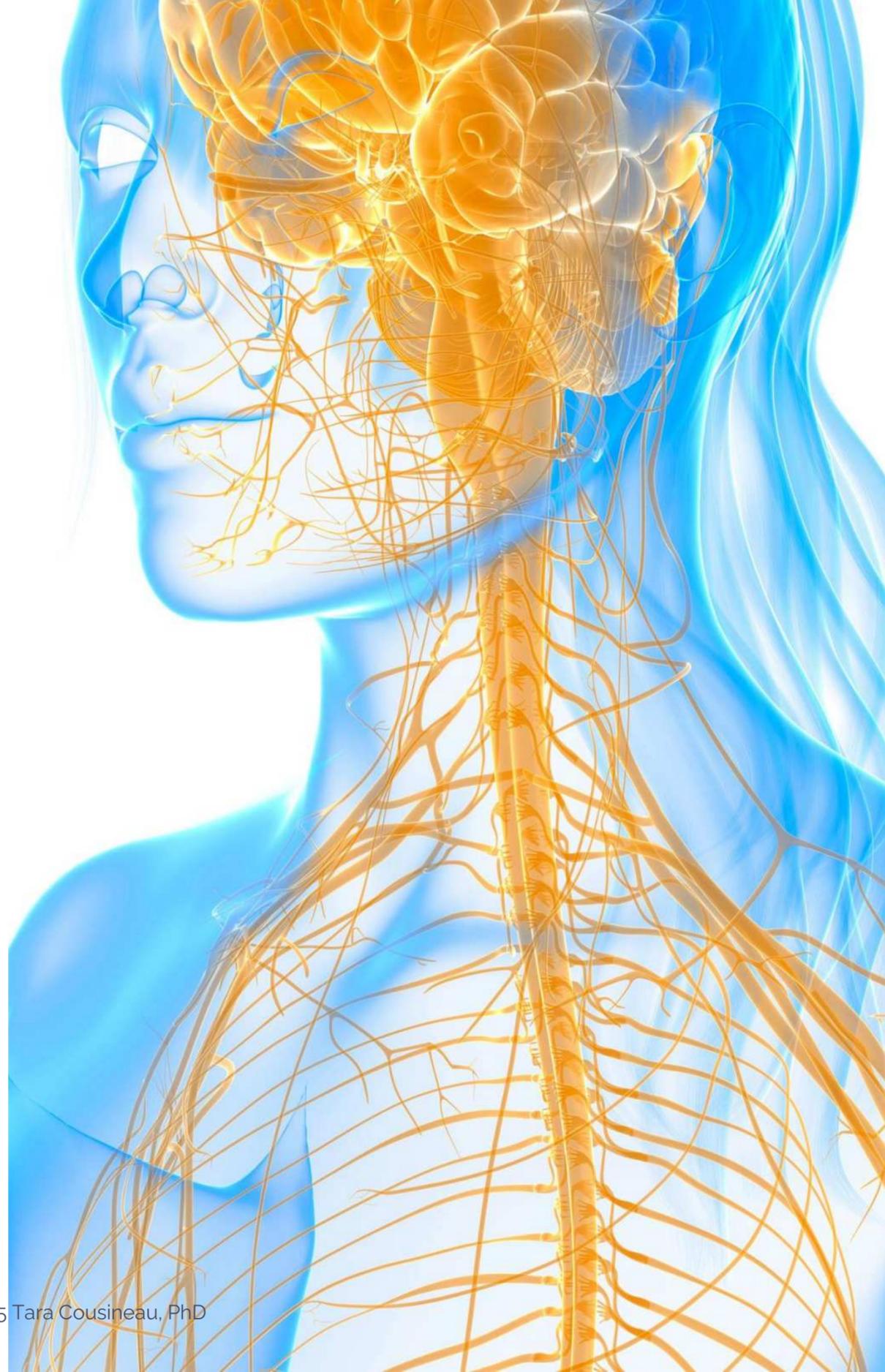
V: Making a Vow

by committing to change; putting in joyful effort, identifying values and clarifying purpose

E: Spark the Energy of Excellence

by finding the sweet spot of [belonging + energy flow] and become a happy achiever





Understand the Nervous System

Psychoeducation on the body: flight/flight /freeze responses, vagus nerve, attention networks, and the emotional motivation zones (Paul Gilbert, PhD), offer frameworks for students to understand and navigate their triggers and challenges without shame.

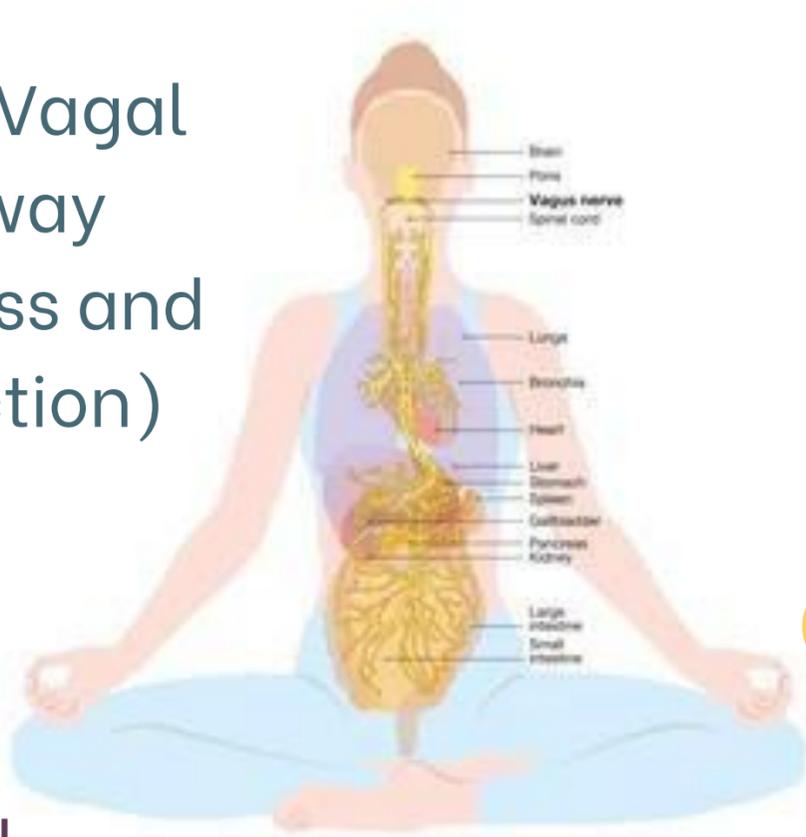
The Autonomic Nervous System (ANS) Ladder

Parasympathetic Nervous System | **Sympathetic Nervous System**

Rest & Digest | Freeze

Fight/Flight

Ventral Vagal
Pathway
(safety and
connection)

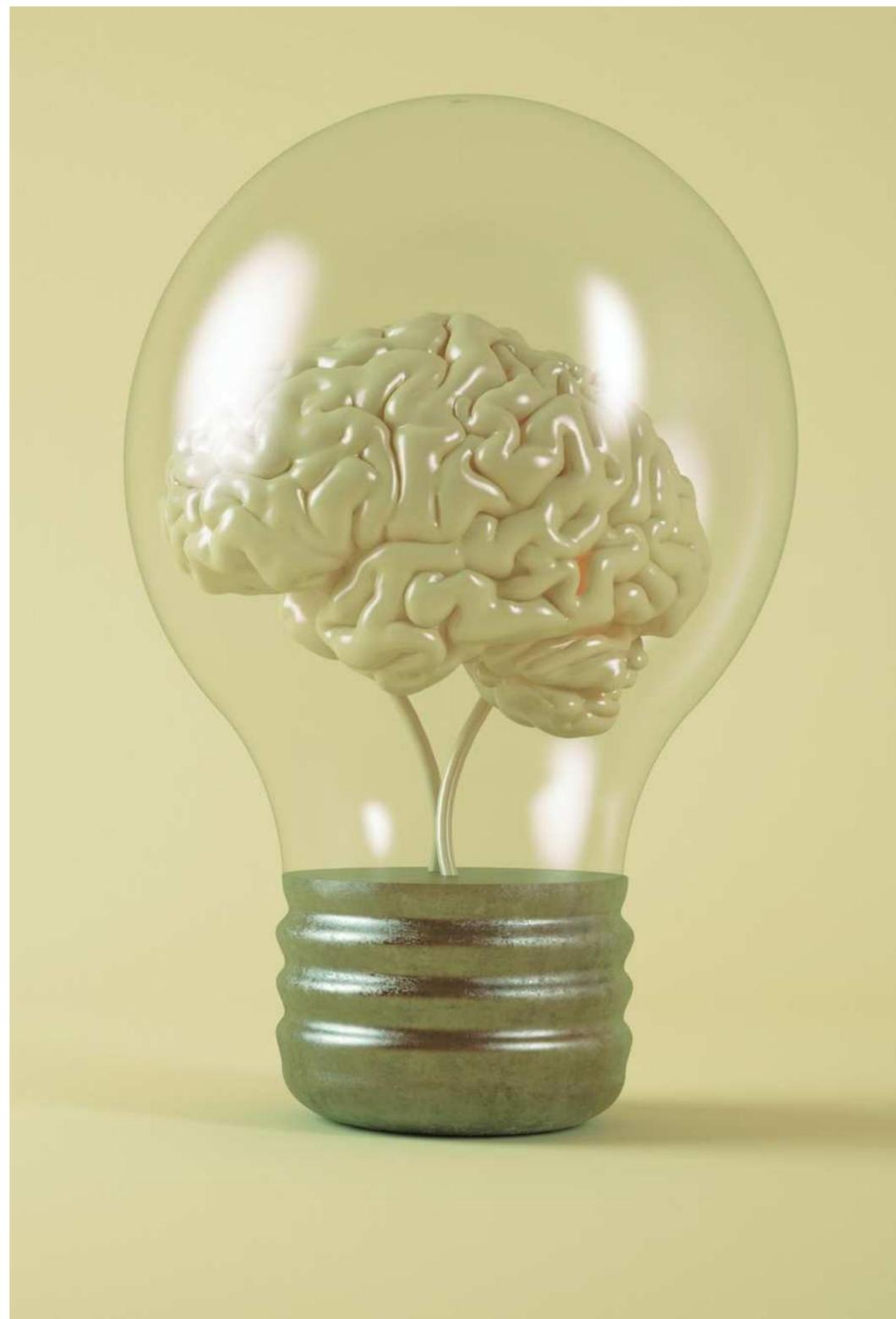


Sympathetic
Pathway
(mobilization)

Dorsal
Pathway
(immobilization)

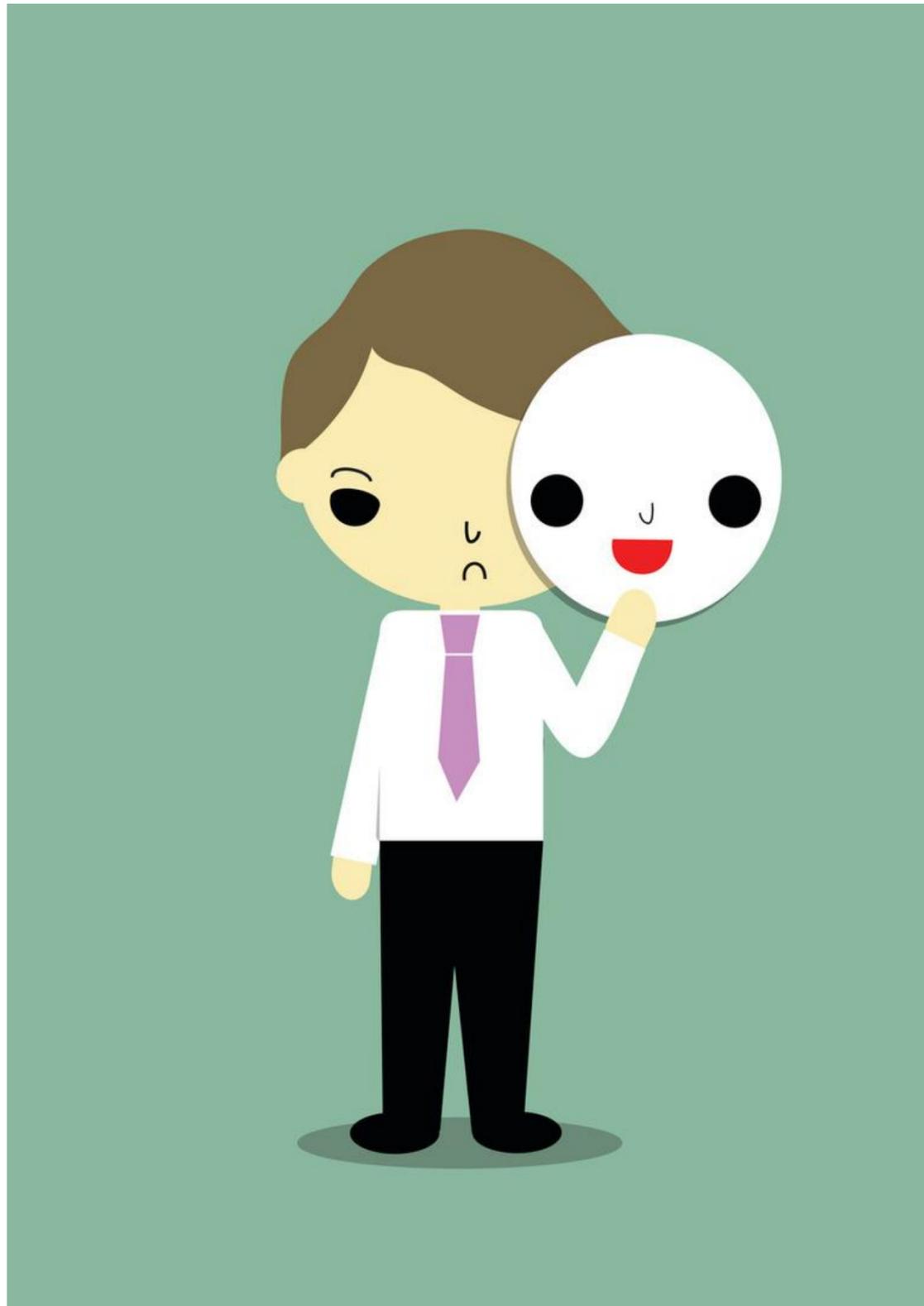
Vagus (wandering) Nerve





Identify the Negativity Bias

It's hard to cultivate a kind mind if you aren't aware of the negativity bias inherent in base model of the human brain. We all have it. It doesn't mean you are a pessimist or negative person! Yet, it fuels the inner critic!



Notice the Inner Critical Voices

An inner critic is an internal voice (or voices) that typically arises earlier in life in response to difficult circumstances, stress, or trauma, or is an internalized message from other people, family, or societal pressures and is associated with nervous system dysregulation.

Inner Critical Voice



You LOSER!



I should have known better!

I don't have what it takes!



Reflection Prompt

Say Hello to Your Inner Critic

Think of a recent moment when you beat yourself up over something.

Describe the words, tone/attitude and feelings/sensations when you judge yourself.

What might this inner critic be protecting you from, or how might it try to motivate you?

Name this part of yourself.





Inner Judge



Inner Joy Thief

YOU

Inner Bully



Inner Detective



Inner Nitpicker

5 Archetypes

Part 3: Integrating Self-Compassion, Values & Resilience



Why it's hard to befriend ourselves

"I'm letting myself off the hook!"

"It's soft or weak to be kind to myself!"

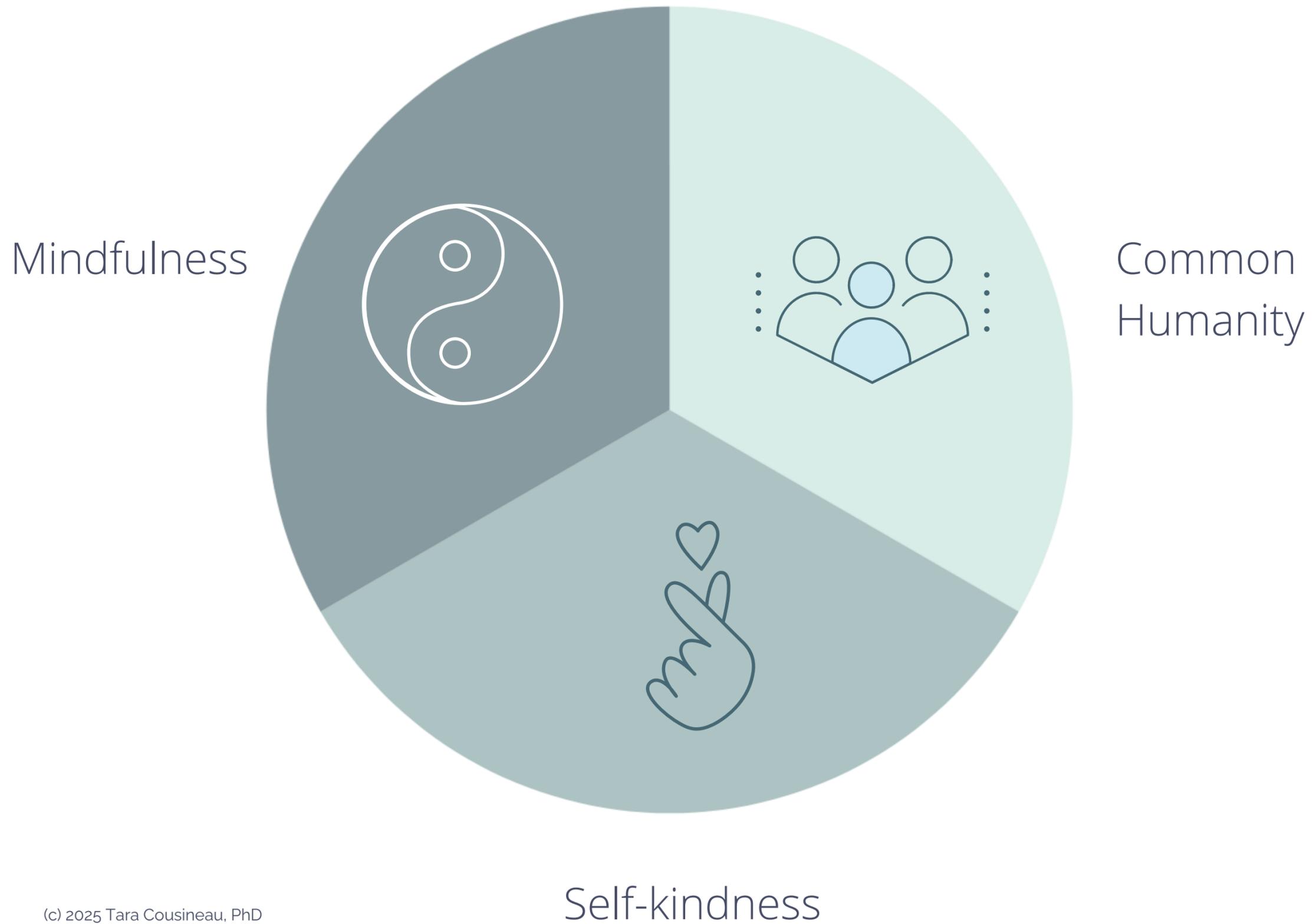
"I don't know how."

- We have a tricky brain that prioritizes fear, danger, criticism, survival, etc.
- We take things personally.
- We are habituated to pleasing, performing, perfecting, and producing.
- It's hard to slow down.

Befriending Hack

- What might you say to a friend who was struggling in a similar way?
- What words might you say? What tone or gesture?
- What words might you need to hear to feel understood and supported?

Self-compassion



self- compassion break

Mindfulness/Awareness

"This is a moment of distress/struggle."

"My nervous system is telling me something."

"This is hard." "Ouch."

Common Humanity

"Moments like this happen to everyone."

"I'm not alone with this experience."

Kindness or Power Statement

"You are allowed to rest."

"I've got this."

"You've done hard things before."

"It's ok to ask for help, to speak up."

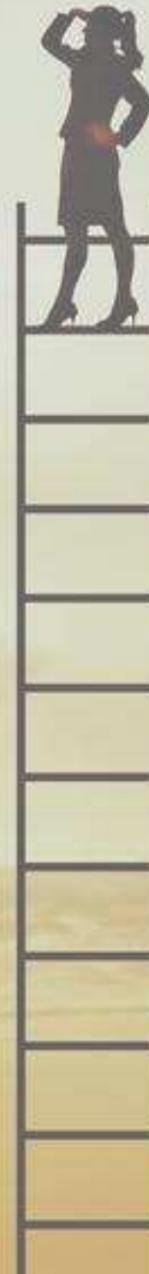
Neff & Germer, *The Mindful Self-Compassion Workbook* (2018)

Cultivating inner strengths such as mindfulness, self-compassion, and gratitude fosters resilience and agency, especially when facing challenges in work and in life.



Banishing the inner critic isn't the goal. Instead, we turn toward it with curiosity caring. We begin to flip the script and develop our inner humanity.

~Tara Cousineau



O₁ L₁ D₂

W₄ A₁ Y₄ S₁

D₂ O₁ N₁ T₁

O₁ P₃ E₁ N₁

N₁ E₁ W₄

D₂ O₁ O₁ R₁ S₁

Cultivating Progress over Perfection



H. E. A. L.

Rick Hanson, PhD



Daily Practice

Have a beneficial experience:

Notice it or create it.

Enrich it:

Stay with it, feeling it fully.

Absorb it:

Receive in yourself; remember it.

Link it: Soothe painful
psychological material.

Daily Practice

G

One GRATITUDE that you are thankful for today. This can mean basic gratitude for the shoes on your feet or the water that you drink, yet it has to be relevant to your day.

L

One new beneficial thing you LEARNED today. This may be about yourself, or something new that you learned from others or in observation of your world.

A

One small ACCOMPLISHMENT. This doesn't need to be something grand. It can be ordinary acts of self-care for yourself or care for another.

D

One moment of DELIGHT that touched you today. Consider anything that made you smile, laugh, brought you joy, or was pleasing to your senses.

Part 4: When Referrals May Be Needed



A Problem in Living

“One reason is that the ultimate goal for many is the perfect life, or at least to portray the perfect life to others, and this, in and of itself, is fraught with difficulty . . . Another reason is that without a doubt, a central challenge is that people must learn to live with their failures and mistakes along with the consequences of these failures and mistakes. Thus, in some sense, perfectionism poses a problem in living with oneself.”

—Gordon and Flett (2020)



- Perfectionistic individuals in psychological pain face **heightened suicide risk** due to overlapping traits and behaviors.
- They often **hide emotional distress (“psychache”)** behind a perfect front while experiencing intense hopelessness.
- Display **all-or-nothing thinking** and engage in persistent rumination.
- Tend to be **unwilling or unable to seek help**, reinforcing isolation.
- Perfectionism may be **ego-syntonic** (preoccupations align with the person's values) and not seen as problematic.

- Show **high levels of planfulness and control**, which can make suicidal thoughts more likely to become actions.
- May **use their information-seeking tendencies** to research and refine suicide methods online.
- **Risk is especially elevated after a prior suicide attempt**, when feelings of humiliation and failure amplify distress and self-criticism.

Consider referrals to specialists or higher level of care (e.g., intensive outpatient or residential programs; hospitalization) based on clinical assessment and functioning (duration and intensity of symptoms) with collaboration/consultation with mental health staff.

- Suicide Risk
- Clinical Depression and Anxiety
- OCD/OCPD (2-9% of population): Intensive CBT and/or Exposure Response Prevention (ERP) to address intrusive perfectionist thoughts/preoccupation with orderliness, control, and specific perfectionist behaviors.



Part 5: Q&A



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www.taracousineau.com

www.perfectionistsdilemma.com

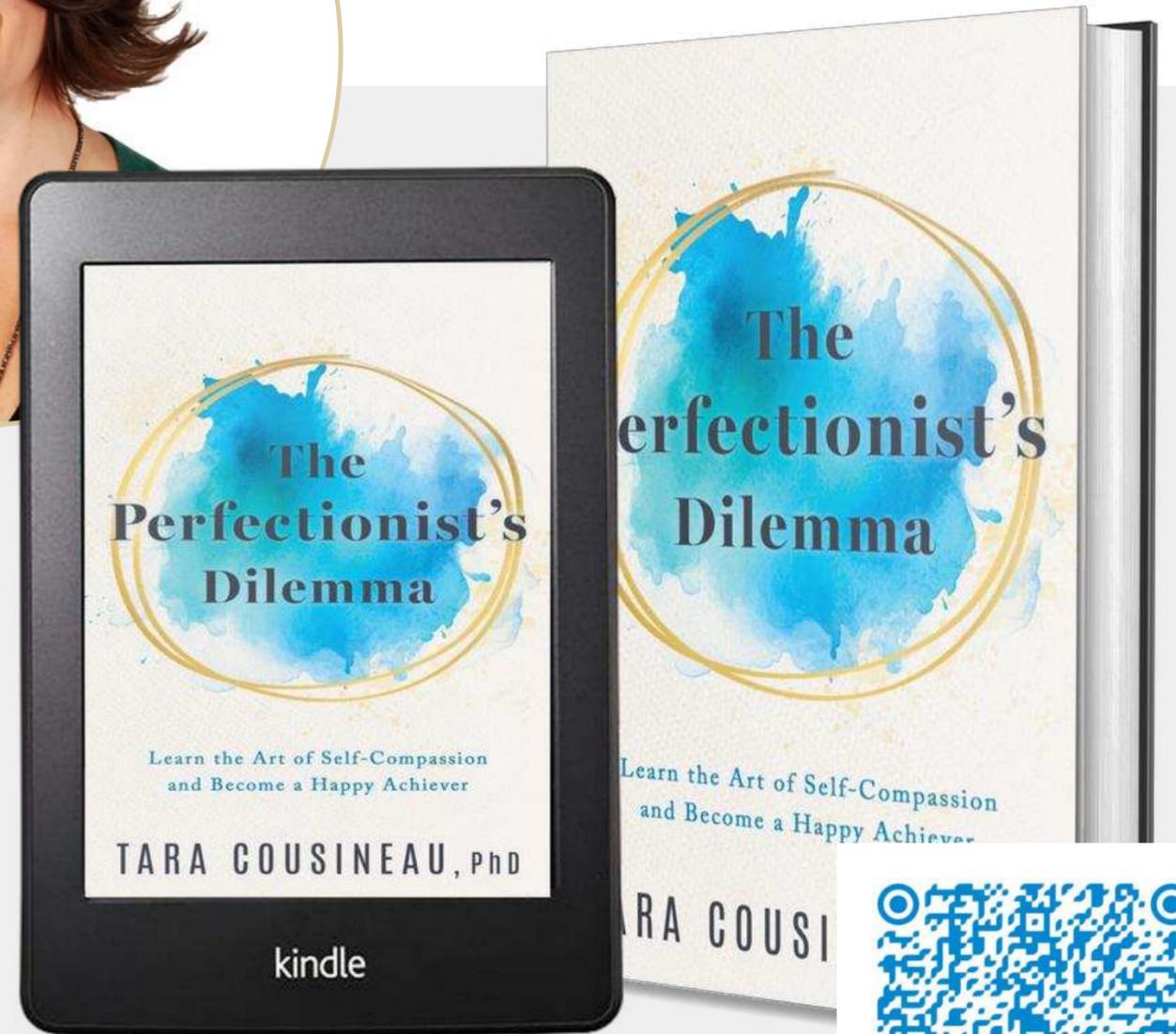
www.linkedin.com/in/taracousineau/

The Peaceful Perfectionist on Substack

Rewire Your Inner Critic Course

Inner Critic Quiz!

<https://www.kindminds.co/quiz/>



REWIRE YOUR INNER CRITIC

TRANSFORM
SELF-DOUBT INTO
SELF-LEADERSHIP

with Dr. Tara Cousineau



Silence the Voice That Keeps You Awake at Night
— Without Years of Therapy or Complex Techniques!