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The Problem with Perfection

Jeff walked out of his supervisor's office feeling good—mostly. He had just received his evaluation after a year on the job. Jeff is a nurse leader who holds a significant position in his health system, and he is very motivated to do well at work. He felt good because his review was very positive; on nearly every question with quantifiable measures, his manager said he exceeded expectations. She awarded him the maximum salary increase, even though the organization was facing difficult financial challenges. His manager's less formal comments were largely positive, too. She and the rest of nursing leadership realized the difficulty of Jeff's job, and he received high marks for his many achievements after just 1 year.

But Jeff was disturbed by the comments his manager offered in the spirit of continuous improvement. She suggested that he delegate more and manage his own intensity so he wouldn't overpower others. She also said that, in her lengthy experience in the organization, it takes far more than 1 year to be truly effective in a role like Jeff's.

By the time Jeff and I spoke, a week had passed since his review. He started by telling me how positive the review had been, but he quickly steered our conversation to the parts he called "negative." As he spoke, I could hear increasing concern in his voice. I asked how his week had been since his review. He said that at the beginning, his wife wanted to celebrate with him and they'd had a great dinner out. Since then, he'd been unable to sleep and had been worrying about what his manager said about delegating and managing his intensity. He also mentioned that he had taken a couple of sick days to "avoid going to work."

Let's step back from Jeff's experience so we can learn from it. First, although his identity has been changed to protect his anonymity, this is a real situation and these are real responses. I offer Jeff's experience because it provides a good example of how hard we can be on ourselves when we do not receive a perfect score in our own eyes. By any measure, Jeff's review was exceptional. He also received honest feedback

on how to improve his already impressive accomplishments.

Although Jeff heard the many positive comments, he focused on the few statements that he considered negative. They triggered him emotionally, and as his emotions took over, he lost perspective about the proportion and value of what was actually said. He began to believe that neither he nor his manager thought he was doing as well as he should at work. This story and his worry kept him awake at night. As he became more tired, he was less and less able to evaluate the quality of the feedback to determine whether it contained even a grain of truth. He began to feel badly physically, too.

What was Jeff up to? Was he mentally or emotionally unstable? For our purposes, we're going to assume that Jeff is a capable and relatively emotionally healthy individual who, like all of us, has blind spots that can be managed. His particular blind spot is one that many of us share: *we are perfectionists, yet we are not perfect.* Events happen that we may interpret negatively, and then we believe our own "stories" and react to them.

In this case, Jeff's supervisor provided a performance review that was quite positive, a pay increase that could not have been larger, and a few comments to help Jeff grow. Jeff interpreted the latter comments as indicators of personal failure. He reacted by largely ignoring the positive feedback, not sleeping, and succumbing to the urge to hide by calling in sick.

It is very likely that Jeff is a perfectionist, unable to accept anything but perfect performance from himself and perhaps others. He has developed a bad habit over the years—emotionally reacting to his own interpretation of events without weighing the facts and without checking outside himself to see if his strong emotional reactions are warranted.

What are the costs of Jeff's perfectionism and his bad habit of interpreting and reacting, regardless of the facts? This behavior has an impact on:

- His effectiveness at work, especially if he is prone to calling in sick

Jeff is a capable and relatively emotionally healthy individual who, like all of us, has blind spots that can be managed.

- His effectiveness at work, especially if he is prone to calling in sick
- His self-confidence on and off the job
- His ability to focus on what's actually happening and what's truly important versus what captures his attention emotionally

What is the remedy for Jeff and all of us who can be emotionally hijacked by events like these?

1. **Notice when we are emotionally triggered.** It takes practice, but the more we slow down to notice that we have been emotionally ensnared, the faster we are able to identify what the trigger was, evaluate how it's making us feel, and determine whether our reaction is warranted. We aren't striving to be emotionless; we are seeking to understand when our emotions take over and when we are not able to keep events and our reactions in proper proportion.
2. **Notice that when we start interpreting and telling ourselves a story (e.g., "my boss doesn't think I'm doing a good job"), our emotions grow stronger.** We become more upset. Notice that we are getting upset because of our own story, not because of what really happened.

3. **Notice that there are consequences when we start interpreting and telling ourselves (and perhaps others) stories about what happened instead of what actually happened.** For example, if Jeff had told his wife that his manager was disappointed in his performance, he would have been telling her his story rather than what she actually said. His wife would have commiserated rather than celebrated. She might have even supported him in his need for time away from the job, and, just possibly, in a decision that he was going to leave the job. People who support us will be upset when we are upset; they will not want to hear that people don't value us. When we share these kinds of interpretations, we can garner lots of support that will salve our wounds. But this can actually do us a disservice. After we elicit outside support for our misinterpretations, we are less likely to step back and evaluate the accuracy of our initial reactions.

4. **Stop for a moment when we receive feedback that feels difficult.** Ask these questions: Is any part of this feedback accurate? If this feedback is negative, does it contain any truth? Can we see how someone might say or feel this way?
5. **We need to ask ourselves whether we can let our emotional reaction go, once we have considered these questions and also experienced whatever our emotional reaction is.** Maybe we're not yet ready. That's fine as long as we recognize that we're reacting emotionally and should not take action (like stay away from work or even quit) as a result. Eventually, we'll be ready to more accurately gauge our next best steps.
6. **Realize that if we are perfectionists from way back, it may be difficult to stop reacting abruptly, no matter how disciplined we are.** We need to give ourselves permission to slip occasionally. Slips happen; when they do, it's important is to restart our new practice of keeping feedback

in perspective and keeping ourselves on track.

As Jeff began to experience new ways of reacting, he started feeling much better about himself, both on and off the job. Ironically, he learned to ask for and receive feedback about his performance on a frequent basis. He began to treasure constructive suggestions from those whose opinions he valued. His own self-esteem increased greatly. He became skilled at hearing and evaluating others' thoughts, feeling his own emotions, and not being enslaved by either.

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