**The Middle Way – by Lance G. King**



**Part 2 – Pressure and Perfectionism.**

In Hong Kong in the 2011 TIMSS test eighth graders performed very well in Maths but only 26% said they valued the subject and only 19% said that they liked Maths. Professor Leung of Hong Kong University expressed concern with this trend:

 “Students are expected to meet the expectations of their parents and society, however, interest is very important because we are now talking about lifelong learning. Without interest, students will turn away from learning once there are no longer exams.” (Li, 2013)

One student response to high academic pressure is perfectionism. A **perfectionist** is a person who is **constantly striving for perfection by setting excessively high performance standards and then pushing themselves to achieve them. For a perfectionist, life is about continual judgement and** comparison with others, an endless report card on their performance. Perfectionism can be a very destructive force and bring about anxieties, depression and eating disorders but it can also be the force that produces great art, great music, great achievement in all fields.

Studies have shown that Asian students in the US:

* appear more vulnerable to depression when demonstrating perfectionistic tendencies (Jaimin, 2008); and
* report more concern over mistakes and show a higher correlation between perfectionism and GPA scores than Caucasian and African American students (Castro, 2003)

There appear to be two distinctly different forms of perfectionism displayed by high achieving students which have almost opposite effects on those students’ mental health:

- ***normal*** perfectionists are those who find real pleasure in their labours and from painstaking effort but who felt quite free to be less precise in some contexts than in others

*-* ***neurotic*** perfectionists are those who feel constantly unsatisfied and frustrated because in their own eyes they never seem to do things well enough (Hamachek, 1978).

Since 1978 these two forms of perfectionism have been redefined as ***self-oriented*** and ***socially prescribed*** perfectionists.

* *Self-oriented* perfectionists set high personal standards for themselves and evaluate their own performance against these standards,
* *Socially prescribed* perfectionists perceive that significant others in their lives hold excessively high standards for them (Neumeister 2004).

Both types of perfectionist are pushing themselves to the very highest possible level but in one perfectionism is a very positive force and in the other very negative.

*Self-oriented perfectionism* is positively associated with self-control, resourcefulness and constructive striving (Flett, et al. 1991,). Self-oriented perfectionists demonstrate a desire for self-improvement, setting both mastery and performance goals, they practice adaptive achievement behaviours and tend to make healthy attributions for successes and failures.

 In contrast *socially prescribed*perfectionism is found to correlate with depression, low self-esteem and self-harm Blatt, 1995 . Socially-prescribed perfectionists demonstrate a fear of failure, they set performance goals, practise maladaptive achievement behaviours, tend to minimise their own successes and blame themselves for any failures (Neumeister 2003).

The question then is how do these two forms of perfectionism arise?

In 2004, Neumeister investigated how these two dimensions of perfectionism (socially-prescribed and self-oriented), develop within gifted college students and influence their achievement motivation and their attributions for successes and failures. All the students studied who scored high for perfectionism attributed that tendency to a lack of experience with failure in their early school years and to the actions of their parents. The main distinction came between the socially-prescribed perfectionists who believed their perfectionism developed due to pressure they experienced from their perfectionist parents and the self-oriented perfectionists who attributed their perfectionism to social learning due to their parents modelling of perfectionist behaviours (Neumeister, 2004a).

What this clearly shows is that a child’s style of perfectionism is a direct result of parents’ actions. As parents this is something we need to be very aware of and very careful about.

To put it another way, if parents are putting great pressure on their child to be perfect but they don’t model such behaviour themselves then their child might well become a socially-prescribed perfectionist, one with a deep fear of failure who suffers greatly with anxiety and depression.

But if parents model perfection in all that they do themselves then children will simply copy that behaviour and become a self-oriented perfectionist, with a desire for self-improvement, who sets their own goals and makes healthy attributions for successes and failures.

“Children of performance goal parents are significantly more likely to exhibit dysfunctional perfectionism than children of learning goal parents,” and are more likely to have “a combination of high concern about mistakes, parental expectations, parental criticism, and doubts about actions” (Ablard & Parker 1997).

