Introducing Dr Thomas Curran

Dr Thomas Curran is an associate professor at the department of psychological and behavioural science at the London School of Economics. He is a Social Psychologist and his primary research interest is in the area of the personality characteristic of perfectionism. Dr Curran has sought to understand the prevalence of perfectionism, how it develops and the impact this personality characteristic can have on mental health.

Top Twelve Take-Aways from Get a Grip Blog with Dr Thomas Curran

1. Decades of research and clinical case reports have indicated that that perfectionism contributes to a whole body of mental health problems including anxiety, depression and eating disorders. Across many studies the data is inconclusive that any gender differences in levels of perfectionism exist. Recent research conducted by Dr Curran and colleagues indicates that perfectionism in young people has increased in recent years, especially in the UK, US and Canada.

2. Dr Curran believes young people are more vulnerable to perfectionism because they are now encouraged to set high standards for themselves from a young age and are frequently tested in school. This along with social media where highly curated ‘perfect lives’ are relentlessly shared creates a fertile environment for perfectionism to take root.

3. There is evidence to suggest that some children are more likely to develop perfectionism than others; that there is perhaps a genetic predisposition or inherited vulnerability. Dr Curran’s work focusses on how environmental, such as cultural and societal, factors amplify the risk of developing perfectionism.

4. Three main forms of perfectionism have been studied:
   - Self-oriented perfectionism, where a person has very high self-imposed personal standards.
   - Socially prescribed perfectionism, where a person perceives there to be excessive pressure on them to be perfect and has a chronic need for the approval of others.
   - Other oriented perfectionism, where a person has extreme high standards of other people and makes harsh judgements of people who don’t live up to their exacting standards.

5. Although on the outside we see a perfectionist displaying conscientiousness, diligence, a hard work ethic and spending excessive time on perfecting things or tasks; at the root of perfectionism is a sense that the self is deficient. This sense creates a chronic need for external validation. The excessive work is, at some level, an attempt to repair the perceived defective self. Thus the perfectionist is in a constant day to day battle to achieve self-worth.

6. A classic feature of a perfectionist is the chronic need to seek other people’s approval and validation. This could be a generalised ‘other’ (i.e. no one specific, but approval from others in general) or specific people e.g. parents.

7. When this chronic need for validation and social media meet it can be very harmful as social media allows people to engage in an insatiable pursuit of more and more ‘likes’ and approval as well as exposing people to the endless judgements of others. Furthermore, using social media, ‘influencers’ and others present a unreal, carefully chosen selection of images which portray ‘perfect’ bodies, homes, friendships and lifestyles in general.

8. To the general question of whether social media is helpful or harmful to adolescent mental health, Dr Curran explains that there is very little good evidence to say either way. So far many studies have taken the measures of how much social media is viewed and looked for correlations with levels of happiness, wellbeing or mental health, however this is using the data in crude, aggregate terms but the picture seems to be much more complicated. Instead, Dr Curran suggests we should be asking ‘for whom, in which certain circumstances is social media helpful/harmful?’

9. Dr Curran, with colleagues, has conducted some recent research which indicates that the effects of social media, and social comparisons within social media in particular, are not harmful for everyone. However, if you score highly in perfectionism then you are much more likely to
have very negative reactions to using social media, especially if you feel you compare unfavourable or have high levels of social media use.

10. This research points to some practical advice for parents about social media use by young people:
   - Be careful in introducing social media if your child has low self-esteem and/or is very reactive to failure or perceived failure as social media is likely to amplify these tendencies.
   - Monitor how your child uses social media – is it to connect with others, share experiences and bring people together or is it to get ‘likes’ and validation?
   - Families should have explicit family values about on-line behaviour such as; we treat others kindly, we don’t make comparisons, we don’t seek ‘likes’; we are critical consumers of what we see on-line and so on.
   - Help children become ‘critical consumers’ of the information they see on-line, make sure they understand that ‘influencers’ and many people on-line carefully curate the information they post to give the impression of a perfect lifestyle.

11. Beyond social media, Dr Curran also gave two general ways to help prevent young people develop perfectionism:
   - Instead of having goals which are outcome focussed (e.g. obtaining a particular grade or achievement) encourage children to set goals over which they have control such as how much effort they put in, or how much learning they achieve. This way of understanding success is part of a concept called a ‘Growth Mindset’ (developed by Prof Carol Dweck at Stanford University).
   - Encourage children and young people to develop self-compassion. Often, when things have not gone the way we wanted them to we can be really harsh on ourselves and develop an ‘inner critic/bully’ who puts us down and can never be pleased. We would never be so unkind to a friend who struggled or made a mistake. To stop an ‘inner bully/critic’ developing in your child, teach them self-compassion. Ask your child how they would speak to a friend who was having difficulties. Would they be unkind, harsh, unforgiving and like a bully? Or would they show understanding and give support and encouragement? If they can be compassionate to others, encourage them to be self-compassionate too.

12. Dr Curran reminds us that children and young people will absorb what we value and what we do. So, modelling the growth mindset and self-compassion, sharing our flaws and vulnerabilities, not being afraid to fail, valuing effort and learning and being compassionate to ourselves and others will help protect our children against a wider culture that can foster perfectionism.

More from Dr Thomas Curran

See Dr Curran’s Ted Talk at:

www.ted.com/talks/thomas_curran_our_dangerous_obsession_with_perfectionism_is_getting_worse

Dr Curran is working on content for an educational resource for young people about perfectionism. He hopes it will be available next year.

If you would like to contact Dr Curran, he welcomed contact via his university email address:

T.Curran@lse.ac.uk