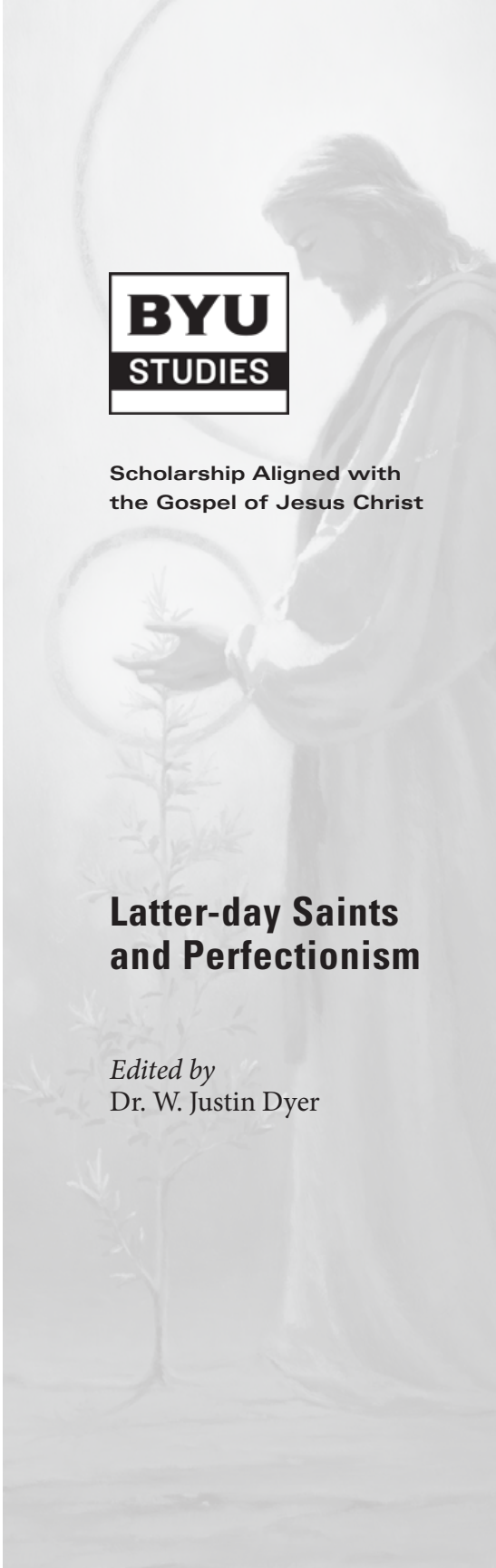

BYU STUDIES

Scholarship Aligned with the Gospel of Jesus Christ

Latter-day Saints and Perfectionism

Edited by
Dr. W. Justin Dyer

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Are Latter-day Saints Perfectionists?

Guest Editor's Introduction

W. Justin Dyer

> The truth is that you are *not* perfect, and neither is anyone else. And this is incredibly good news. —Arthur C. Brooks[1]

A while back, I was sitting in a university meeting at the beginning of another school year. A therapist was facilitating a helpful discussion on the growing concern of student mental health. When toxic perfectionism came up, the facilitator mentioned in an offhanded way that we have a particular problem with this at Brigham Young University (BYU) because of "the gospel." This statement was not much of a surprise given the seemingly common attitude that BYU students (and members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in general) struggle with perfectionism.

Some scholars have even suggested Latter-day Saints struggle more with perfectionism than those of other faiths. Paul L. Hewitt, Gordon L. Flett, and Samuel F. Mikail (arguably the preeminent scholars of perfectionism) claimed: "[Toxic] perfectionism . . . [is] a general societal pressure to be perfect, such as the collective social pressures to be perfect that have been identified in descriptions of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints."[2] In another instance Flett and Hewitt wrote: "It is generally accepted that perfectionism is elevated and highly salient

1. Arthur C. Brooks, "You're Not Perfect," *The Atlantic,* June 6, 2024, https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2024/06/perfect-flaws-happiness/678593/.

2. Paul L. Hewitt, Gordon L. Flett, and Samuel F. Mikail, *Perfectionism: A Relational Approach to Conceptualization, Assessment, and Treatment* (Guilford Press, 2017), 43.

among community members of Mormon faith in Utah. Several media stories have highlighted the pressures to be perfect in a part of Utah and labeled this 'toxic perfectionism.'"[3] Another therapist, author, and podcaster referred to Latter-day Saints as a "notoriously perfectionistic population."[4]

These attitudes are seemingly hard to argue with. Latter-day Saints accept scriptures such as "be ye therefore perfect" (Matt. 5:48; 3 Ne. 12:28). It's also hard to miss scriptures about fire and brimstone for those who do not obey the commandments (see Ps. 11:6; 2 Ne. 26:6; D&C 97:26). And our own experiences may even suggest that our religion contributes to an unhealthy perfectionism. Indeed, most, if not all, active Latter-day Saints have experienced stress over not measuring up while trying to accomplish all that is asked. And with many people in Western societies taking a dim view of religion in general, we might expect religion to be bad for mental health. Sigmund Freud famously compared religion to "a childhood neurosis,"[5] and Christopher Hitchens declares as the title of his book that "God Is Not Great," followed by the subtitle "How Religion Poisons Everything" (this was a #1 *New York Times* bestseller and has been listed as the "Editor's pick, Best Nonfiction," on Amazon.com).[6]

Given scholars' statements, our own experiences, and the cultural waters we swim in, it seems reasonable that religious people (and perhaps Latter-day Saints in particular) may be more likely to struggle with crippling perfectionism. At the same time, as I sat in that university meeting, I realized there had been no research that compares the perfectionism of Latter-day Saints to the perfectionism of members in other religions. Somewhat ironically, all the therapists and researchers who have said Latter-day Saints are higher on the scale of perfectionism than others have done so in the absence of any research.

I was aware of this lack of research because, for the last eight years, several colleagues and I have been studying the mental health of Latter-day Saint youth. We have been following over two thousand youth the

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3. Gordon L. Flett and Paul L. Hewitt, *Perfectionism in Childhood and Adolescence: A Developmental Analysis* (American Psychological Association, 2022), 167.

4. Donna Bevan-Lee, "Mormonism and the Pursuit of Perfection," Medium.com, November 16, 2019, https://medium.com/@donna.bevanlee/mormonism-and-the-pursuit-of-perfection-54646372c949.

5. Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion,* trans. and ed. James Strachey (W. W. Norton, 1961), 53.

6. Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (Twelve Books, 2007).

past six years (about half Latter-day Saint, half not), examining how their faith and family connect to their mental health.

When the BYU therapist facilitating the discussion implied that "the gospel" caused perfectionism, I realized that we hadn't yet analyzed the data on perfectionism from our study. So, during that meeting, I pulled out my laptop and, for the first time, began to crunch numbers on the perfectionism of Latter-day Saints, looking at how they compared to others. And when I looked at the initial results, it was clear the narrative we commonly hear was missing something important. It was also clear that a broad effort was needed to better understand perfectionism among Latter-day Saints.

This issue of *BYU Studies* is a response to that need for such a broad effort and contains the work of excellent scholars and practitioners examining the concept of perfectionism from a combined scholarly and Latter-day Saint perspective. Included is the most recent thinking on what perfectionism is, what causes it, what it causes, and what we can do about it. And, as Latter-day Saints, we are particularly interested in how the concept of perfectionism does and does not overlap with restored gospel truths about our potential for perfection.

What Is Perfectionism?

The article titled "Understanding Perfectionism" in this issue explores the definition of perfectionism, both its healthy and toxic forms. However, in brief, I note here that toxic perfectionism is not necessarily about having high standards, nor is it necessarily about not meeting one's standards. Toxic perfectionism is more about how we *feel about ourselves when we don't meet our standards or when we make mistakes.* This is a crucial distinction to have in mind throughout this issue. We see many people confused in how they think about perfectionism because (1) they are aware that high standards should be good, but (2) they realize there may be negative psychological and emotional consequences to not meeting high standards.[7] The key is to separate having high standards from how we feel about ourselves when we don't meet those standards. As scholar Brené Brown has said, "*Perfectionism is not the same thing as striving to be your best.* Perfectionism is not about healthy achievement and growth. Perfectionism is the belief that if we live perfect, look perfect, and act perfect, we can minimize or avoid the

7. See the articles by Goodman and McClendon in this issue for details about how perfectionism and obsessive compulsive disorder (including scrupulosity) overlap.

pain of blame, judgment, and shame. It's a shield. . . . *Perfectionism is not self-improvement.* Perfectionism is, at its core, about trying to earn approval and acceptance."[8]

You will find in this issue a helpful roadmap to understanding just what healthy and toxic perfectionism are and how to obtain the good while avoiding the bad. As quoted at the beginning of this introduction, the realization that we are not perfect is, if understood correctly, incredibly good news for us and can help us connect better with ourselves, others, and Deity.

The Evidence We Use

As scholars, we believe that high-quality evidence is crucial to our endeavor here. As has been said, "without data you're just a person with an opinion."[9] In this issue, we have attempted to use the best research that currently exists and push the research field forward by analyzing data we have collected. Several of the articles in this issue report analyses using the "Family Foundations of Youth Development" study.[10] This study began in 2016, when we surveyed youth who were approximately twelve to fourteen years old along with one of their parents. Data on these same youth were collected every other year (2016, 2018, 2020, and 2022). In 2016, youth in Utah were surveyed; then in 2018, youth in Arizona were added to the study; and in 2020, youth from California were added. All youth were surveyed again in 2022 and 2024. In order to obtain as unbiased a sample as possible, we worked with the marketing firm Data Axel to obtain the contact information of households with youth ages twelve to fourteen. From their database of millions of households, we requested a random sample of several thousand households within the geographic areas we were interested in. Our amazing student research assistants recruited participants by letter and by telephone calls. Individuals could participate only if they had been part of the random-selection process. We often had participants ask if their friends could also take

8. Brené Brown, *The Gifts of Imperfection: Let Go of Who You Think You're Supposed to Be and Embrace Who You Are* (Hazelden Publishing, 2010), 75, emphasis original.

9. W. Edwards Deming, quoted in Milo Jones and Philippe Silberzahn, "Without An Opinion, You're Just Another Person with Data," Forbes.com, updated March 15, 2016, https://www.forbes.com/sites/silberzahnjones/2016/03/15/without-an-opinion-youre-just-another-person-with-data/.

10. See "Family Foundations of Youth Development," Brigham Young University, accessed September 13, 2024, https://foundations.byu.edu (hereafter cited as Foundations data).

the survey. They were told they could not. We also did not advertise on social media or any other outlets. Only those randomly selected could participate. Over the years, parents and children received an incentive to participate—between $25 and $35 for their responses each year. In all, over two thousand youth and one of their parents have participated in the study. See the appendix for additional details about this study.

What is particularly important is that we have data on the same individuals at multiple time points. This allows us to better understand "chicken and egg" questions, such as determining how perfectionism may influence other things (religious participation, mental health, and so on) and how these other things influence perfectionism. Very little research on perfectionism is longitudinal, and thus, this issue contains some of the highest-quality research on perfectionism in general and on Latter-day Saints in particular. Through the diligence of our student research assistants, we have been able to retain over 70% of the sample over the years.[11] More details about the sample are available at foundations.byu.edu.

Given people's desire to look good, it is often asked whether self-reported data can be trusted. There are indeed concerns with accuracy of self-reported data, and it is important to acknowledge that most data used in the studies reported on in this issue rely on self-reported data. But to examine the intersections of perfectionism, mental health, and religiosity, the individual's own thoughts and feelings are what we were most interested in. It is difficult (if not impossible) to examine a person's perfectionism or mental health or connection to the divine without asking them about it. However, although there may be some misreporting, research has shown that religious individuals, and Latter-day Saints in particular, are the most likely to give accurate self-reports.[12] While religious individuals may feel more embarrassed about reporting things that do not make them "look good," they are more likely to accurately report those things. Thus, while we should acknowledge the limitations inherent in self-reported data, it is also important to acknowledge that the Latter-day Saints in our sample are, based on previous research, likely to report with a high degree of accuracy.

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11. As a comparison, a study of religion by Harvard and Notre Dame professors was able to obtain only a 53% response rate after just a single year. Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (Simon & Schuster: 2010), 558.

12. Mark D. Regnerus and Jeremy E. Uecker, "Religious Influences on Sensitive Self-Reported Behaviors," *Sociology of Religion* 68, no. 2 (2007): 145–63.

Outline of This *BYU Studies* Issue

This issue has twin purposes. One is to summarize and extend the best scholarly research on perfectionism, particularly about Latter-day Saints, who are a group often assumed to have higher levels of toxic perfectionism (an unwarranted and unfortunate assumption, as will be seen). The second purpose is to help Latter-day Saint youth, parents, teachers, and leaders understand this misunderstood concept and what they can do to help the youth thrive by building healthy perfectionism and avoid its toxic manifestations. Thus, we have had both a scholarly and lay audience in mind when writing these articles.

In the first article, titled "Understanding Perfectionism," the authors address the definitions of perfectionism used in research and therapy. Often when we use the term "perfectionism," we do so without much serious thought as to what it means and its healthy and unhealthy aspects. The authors of this article help us see what these aspects look like and lay the definitional landscape for the other articles.

Next, "Perfectionism Across Adolescence" focuses on youth and toxic perfectionism, examining how it changes from early adolescence to late adolescence. This article outlines how our society today may create particular problems for youth (toxic perfectionism appears to have increased over the last few decades) and which youth may be most vulnerable to those problems. It also examines how boys and girls differ in perfectionism and how social-media use, location, and sexual orientation may all relate to toxic perfectionism.

The three following articles examine family, religion, and mental health as both causes and effects of toxic perfectionism. "Parental Influence on Adolescent Perfectionism" outlines how parents may influence their children's perfectionism and what aspects of parenting relate most to Latter-day Saint youth's toxic perfectionism. "Perfectionism's Influence on Adolescent Mental Health" helps answer the critical question of why we should be interested in perfectionism in the first place. As the article demonstrates, the more our youth experience toxic perfectionism, the more likely they are to have serious mental health difficulties (see pp. 74–85). "Religion and Perfectionism" addresses how religion relates to toxic perfectionism. This is the first analysis of which we are aware that compares the perfectionism of Latter-day Saints and former Latter-day Saints to those of other faiths and no faith. Putting additional emphasis on the need to study perfectionism, this article demonstrates how toxic perfectionism may derail Latter-day Saint youth from the covenant path (p. 101).

The next article, "Healing from Toxic Perfectionism," approaches toxic perfectionism from a clinical perspective, while providing hope and outlining a process of healing. For those struggling with toxic perfectionism (or those helping others in their struggle), this article is a boon. McClendon explains that toxic perfectionism includes the distortion that our behavior affects our worth (pp. 130–33). The implications of her data are clearly echoed in Adam Miller's essay, "Love Is a Law, Not a Reward." McClendon concludes that we already have God's love, and we already have our infinite worth. Toxic perfectionism says, falsely, that God's love and our worth are earned and that the price we must pay is complete perfection. This price, of course, is one we can never pay, nor are we asked to pay it. In the history of the world, only a single sinless life was needed (see 1 Jn. 3:5), and that life was fully lived by Jesus the Christ, through whom we can heal, by degrees, and eventually learn to love as he loves and become as he is.

Conclusion

We think what we found in our research will surprise many Latter-day Saints (there were many surprises for us along the way). With the sustained secular winds that seem to blow against The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and religion in general, we need high-quality research and thinking that critically examines popular narratives about organized religion, which often mislead rather than inform. Such research shows how Latter-day Saints are influenced by perfectionism. We hope this issue of *BYU Studies* will be helpful to Latter-day Saints as they work to reduce toxic perfectionism and instead seek the healing and healthy ideas about perfection through Christ.

W. Justin Dyer, Ph.D. is a professor of Religious Education at Brigham Young University and fellow at the Wheatley Institute. His research includes how religion, mental health, and family relationships influence each other.

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Understanding Perfectionism

G. E. Kawika Allen, Jacelin Clayton, Emma Moore, and Debra Theobald McClendon

Perfectionism is a widely known personality characteristic, but it is not always understood. It can motivate and promote growth, or it can stifle and promote low self-worth with consuming negative thoughts and behaviors. Toxic perfectionism occurs when individuals demand perfection and become highly critical of themselves or others, turning normal mistakes into shame and self-hatred or hatred of others.[1] It often includes an all-or-nothing mindset—viewing a performance as either a total success or a total failure—with no in-between.[2] And even success is fleeting for toxic perfectionists because they find flaws in their apparently perfect performances or in the performances of others.[3]

Understanding perfectionism is important because it can influence the lives of individuals in profound ways. If it is not managed well, toxic perfectionism can lead to poor physical health, anxiety, depression, and other psychological disorders.[4] In this article, we review essential

1. Sungok Serena Shim and Kathryn L. Fletcher, "Perfectionism and Social Goals: What Do Perfectionists Want to Achieve in Social Situations?," *Personality and Individual Differences* 52, no. 8 (2012): 919, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2012.02.002.

2. Gordon L. Flett, Paul L. Hewitt, Kirk R. Blankstein, and Donna Pickering, "Perfectionism in Relation to Attributions for Success or Failure," *Current Psychology: A Journal for Diverse Perspectives on Diverse Psychological Issues* 17, nos. 2–3 (1998): 249, https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-998-1010-y.

3. Paul L. Hewitt, Gordon L. Flett, and Samuel F. Mikail, *Perfectionism: A Relational Approach to Conceptualization, Assessment, and Treatment* (Guilford Press, 2017), 18–22.

4. Martin M. Smith, Paul L. Hewitt, Simon B. Sherry, Gordon L. Flett, and Cassondra Ray, "Parenting Behaviors and Trait Perfectionism: A Meta-Analytic Test of the Social Expectations and Social Learning Models," *Journal of Research in Personality* 96 (February

aspects of perfectionism and provide an overview of the scientific study of perfectionism—its definitions, sources, and consequences.

Healthy Perfectionism

Many people associate perfectionism with highly negative outcomes; however, not all types of perfectionism are bad. Healthy perfectionism is when an individual sets high goals and strives for rewards, yet they are flexible and understanding if they do not reach all their set expectations.[5] These individuals have the skill to be satisfied with their progress and work toward their goals.[6] If they fall short of their goals, they can constructively evaluate their performance so that they will be able to perform better the next time they try something. Healthy perfectionism is linked to a desire to be responsible, hardworking, and thorough.[7] For example, a track athlete with healthy perfectionism may set challenging but realistic times they would like to hit. However, if they do not hit those times, they do not beat themselves up but analyze how they could do better in the next race and move on without obsessing over their failures. Thus, healthy perfectionism can be helpful as someone strives to achieve their goals because they can push themselves but continue to progress when setbacks occur.

Toxic Perfectionism

Thomas S. Greenspon distinguishes between the pursuit of excellence (healthy perfectionism) and toxic perfectionism. In his words, "The bright line that distinguishes perfectionism from striving for excellence is precisely [the] fear of mistakes. Nonperfectionists who push themselves to succeed may well be disappointed and hurt by failure; perfectionistic people are potentially devastated by it. . . . Striving for excellence is vitalizing and energizing, and it opens the possibility of continued growth. Perfectionism, by contrast, is deadening, bringing with it feelings of hopelessness and personal failure."[8]

2022): 1, article 104180, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrp.2021.104180; see also Fuschia M. Sirois and Danielle S. Molar, *Perfectionism, Health, and Well-Being* (Springer, 2016).

5. Murray W. Enns, Brian J. Cox, and Ian Clara, "Adaptive and Maladaptive Perfectionism: Developmental Origins and Association with Depression Proneness," *Personality and Individual Differences* 33, no. 6 (2002): 922, https://doi.org/10.1016/S0191-8869(01)00202-1.

6. Enns and others, "Adaptive and Maladaptive Perfectionism," 922.

7. Enns and others, "Adaptive and Maladaptive Perfectionism," 1034–42.

8. Thomas S. Greenspon, "Is There an Antidote to Perfectionism?," *Psychology in the Schools* 51, no. 9 (2014): 988, https://doi.org/10.1002/pits.21797.

Three Types of Toxic Perfectionism

Scholars often examine three types of toxic perfectionism—self-oriented, other-oriented, or socially prescribed perfectionism.[9]

Discrepancy Perfectionism

Self-oriented perfectionism (also called *discrepancy perfectionism*) is when an individual demands perfection of themselves with irrationally high goals and aspirations. The individual then focuses on the inevitable discrepancy between their goal and their actual performance.[10] For example, they might set a standard to get one hundred percent on every exam because they know that they are capable of achieving that score. Then the toxic perfectionist will shame themselves for not achieving that goal and tie their personal worth to it. They would consider themselves "unlovable" if they did not get one hundred percent. Instead of looking at all the questions they got correct, they would focus only on the questions they got wrong.

A person with discrepancy perfectionism frequently struggles through difficult lose-lose scenarios. When they don't meet their standard, they say: "I'm not good enough." This leads to counterproductive behavior and self-criticism. However, if they manage to meet their personal standard (temporarily), they say: "My goals weren't high enough." They assume their standards were not demanding enough and, therefore, increase their standard![11] The target is ever moving (often referred to in common language as "moving the goalposts"), and the person is trapped in negative emotions and behaviors.

The Almost Perfect Scale–Revised (used in the Foundations data referenced in this issue) measures discrepancy perfectionism by asking individuals how much they agree or disagree with the following statements:

- "Doing my best never seems to be enough."
- "I often feel disappointment after completing a task because I know I could have done better."

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9. Smith and others, "Parenting Behaviors and Trait Perfectionism," 1–2.

10. Smith and others, "Parenting Behaviors and Trait Perfectionism," 2; Joachim Stoeber and Patrick Gaudreau, "The Advantages of Partialling Perfectionistic Strivings and Perfectionistic Concerns: Critical Issues and Recommendations," *Personality and Individual Differences* 104 (2017): 379, http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2016.08.039.

11. Roz Shafran, Sarah Egan, and Tracey Wade, *Overcoming Perfectionism: A Self-Help Guide Using Cognitive Behavioral Techniques* (Robinson, 2010), https://www.google.com/books/edition/Overcoming_Perfectionism/Q6SeBAAAQBAJ.

- "My performance rarely measures up to my standards."
- "I am hardly ever satisfied with my performance."[12]

Discrepancy perfectionism is associated with shame. One researcher explained the feelings of the discrepancy perfectionist: "We are not good enough for ourselves because we don't fit with our own image of perfection. We cannot forgive ourselves for not being what we wish to be, or rather what we believe we should be. We cannot forgive ourselves for not being perfect."[13]

Not being able to forgive oneself for the perceived discrepancy between the real and the person's ideal has a significant impact on one's sense of worth. Researchers have noted that unhealthy perfectionists "seem to suffer from a misperception of their worthiness, rather than lacking confidence in their academic performance. . . . This suggests that when working with toxic perfectionist students, counselors should differentiate between self-esteem (worth) and self-efficacy (ability), and focus attention on the former."[14] Discrepancy perfectionism is therefore not so much a question of having high standards, or even of being able to meet one's standards; it's about how a person feels about themselves when they don't meet the standards.

Other-Oriented Perfectionism

Those with other-oriented perfectionism demand those around them to strive for perfection or to be perfect.[15] For example, an individual may refuse to marry their significant other because of a minor character flaw. Other-oriented perfectionists often have difficulties building close relationships with people because they are always demanding perfection from others. An example could include an overly controlling boss or parent who demands perfection of their employees or children. Again, it is not necessarily about having high standards for others; it is about destroying relationships when the person does not meet their standards of perfection. This other-oriented perfectionist behavior discourages

12. Robert B. Slaney, Kenneth G. Rice, Michael Mobley, Joseph Trippi, and Jeffrey S. Ashby, "The Revised Almost Perfect Scale," *Measurement and Evaluation in Counseling and Development* 34, no. 3 (2001): 139, table 1.

13. Don Miguel Ruiz, *The Four Agreements: A Practical Guide to Personal Freedom* (Amber-Allen Publishing, 2011), 30.

14. Slaney and others, "Revised Almost Perfect Scale," 130–45.

15. Smith and others, "Parenting Behaviors and Trait Perfectionism," 2.

people around them from trying anything new. Statements that correspond to other-oriented perfectionism include the following:

- "If I do not set very high standards for people I know, they are likely to end up second-rate people."
- "I think less of people I know if they make mistakes."
- "If someone I know cannot do something really well, they shouldn't do it at all."[16]

Socially Prescribed Perfectionism

Lastly, socially prescribed perfectionism is when individuals believe they must be perfect for someone else.[17] For example, a child may believe that if they do not win their sporting event, their parents will not love or approve of them. These individuals have major concerns that making mistakes will lead to being viewed negatively by others.[18] They are overly critical of themselves when evaluating performance and needlessly seek validation from others.[19] Socially prescribed perfectionism is measured in the Performance Perfectionism Scale[20] by asking people to respond to how much they agree or disagree with statements such as the following:

- "People always expect more, no matter how well I perform."
- "People always expect my performances to be perfect."
- "People view even my best performances negatively."
- "People criticize me if I do not perform perfectly."[21]

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16. Joachin Stoeber, "How Other-Oriented Perfectionism Differs from Self-Oriented and Socially Prescribed Perfectionism," *Journal of Psychopathology and Behavioral Assessment* 36, no. 2 (2014): 336, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10862-013-9397-7.

17. Smith and others, "Parenting Behaviors and Trait Perfectionism," 2.

18. Stoeber and Gaudreau, "The Advantages of Partialling Perfectionistic Strivings and Perfectionistic Concerns," 379.

19. Jana C. Gäde, Karin Schermelleh-Engel, and Andreas G. Klein, "Disentangling the Common Variance of Perfectionistic Strivings and Perfectionistic Concerns: A Bifactor Model of Perfectionism," *Frontiers in Psychology* 8 (2017): 2, 160, https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2017.00160.

20. Edward C. Chang, "Conceptualization and Measurement of Adaptive and Maladaptive Aspects of Performance Perfectionism: Relations to Personality, Psychological Functioning, and Academic Achievement," *Cognitive Therapy and Research* 30 (2006): 677–97, https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1007/s10608-006-9060-7.

21. Andrew P. Hill, Paul R. Appleton, and Sarah H. Mallinson, "Development and Initial Validation of the Performance Perfectionism Scale for Sport (PPS-S)," *Journal of Psychoeducational Assessment* 34, no. 7 (2016): 659, table 1.

Social interactions weigh heavily on someone with socially prescribed perfectionism. They may tease others at their own expense and often adopt a "self-deprecating style of humor." They likely have low self-esteem, which "makes sense if you're living in a world where your every move is being analyzed and you constantly feel like you can't measure up."[22] Since "social situations carry huge interpersonal weight," socially prescribed perfectionists are people pleasers who deal with a great deal of discouragement.[23]

Illustration of Toxic Perfectionism

Unhealthy perfectionism presents differently for different people. Research suggests that perfectionistic people are likely to have perfectionistic behaviors in some, but not all, areas of their lives.[24] Some areas of perfectionistic behavior include physical appearance, relationships, work, school, health, time management, sports, and academics. The two most common areas where toxic perfectionism occurs are work and academics.[25] Some people may be grounded and flexible in most areas of life but struggle in one specific area, like one client who struggled with academic discrepancy perfectionism. He was a newlywed university student in his early twenties.

> My experience with academic perfectionism established an inflexible and toxic standard of perfection. Learning from my mistakes was not enough. Rather, I had to never make a mistake in the first place. I would obsess about every assignment, project, and exam to ensure I would lose as little points as possible. I became so obsessed with academic perfection that I believed anything less than 100 percent was a personal and moral failure. When I missed even a single point on an assignment, my entire day was ruined. I would spend all day obsessing about that point and what I did wrong. My negative thoughts would bully me. For example: "I should have known the correct answer on

22. Stress & Resilience Institute, "5 Styles of Perfectionism," accessed September 17, 2024, https://stressandresilience.com/5-styles-of-perfectionism/.

23. Aliya Ojuade, "The Boundless Desire for Perfection: Exploring Socially Prescribed Perfectionism," *Medium,* March 1, 2023, https://aliyao.medium.com/the-boundless-desire-for-perfection-exploring-socially-prescribed-perfectionism-28aef86f4b12.

24. Joachim Stoeber and Franziska S. Stoeber, "Domains of Perfectionism: Prevalence and Relationships with Perfectionism, Gender, Age, and Satisfaction with Life," *Personality and Individual Differences* 46, no. 4 (2009): 530–35, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2008.12.006.

25. Stoeber and Stoeber, "Domains of Perfectionism," 532–33.

> that exam," "I should have studied that topic in more depth," or "How could I have been so lazy and not studied harder?" As I continued to ruminate, I would calculate how many points I could miss in the future and still earn an "A" in the class (without any curve); make a new study plan that put even more pressure on myself; and seek reassurance from my wife, parents, and friends.[26]

Others may struggle with more widespread perfectionistic concerns. To illustrate the insidious nature of toxic perfectionism in a person's life, here's an account from a single female in her early twenties attending medical school. Observe how the toxic discrepancy and socially prescribed perfectionism painfully and destructively attacked and infiltrated every aspect of her life.

> I hear a lot of people talk about perfectionism and how it's having high expectations and being self-critical, but I've realized my perfectionism actually takes over more than I thought it did. I procrastinate small tasks and filling out forms for as long as possible because I don't want to get confused or make mistakes on them that will cause problems. I can't answer questions in class because I can't bear to answer incorrectly. I don't like studying because it means I didn't just remember it or understand it the first time and I'm just being reminded of my own ignorance. I also don't like studying because if I put in a lot of work and don't get a 100 percent, it means I did something wrong or am not intelligent enough or don't work hard enough and it's ultimately more disappointing than not studying and getting an 87. It's better to say I didn't try than to say I failed—because imperfect performance is failure because it means either imperfect/insufficient effort (character) or imperfect/insufficient intelligence (ability). I can't choose the wrong study method or focus on the wrong material. I can't choose the wrong show to watch or food to eat. A wrong choice is always wasting time and I can't get it back and there would have been a correct way to spend it.
>
> Everything I do says something about my character or abilities that can be analyzed and judged by myself and/or others. The words I say, the tone I use, the expressions I make, my posture, the habits I have, the clothes I wear, the movements I make, the way I breathe, the thoughts I have, the decisions I make, the foods I eat, my appearance and weight, the way I perform various tasks, my preferences . . . all are under constant scrutiny. I can't afford to make a small mistake. Not because a small mistake will kill me, but because it will torture me. I can't look too long

26. Client story used with permission.

> in the mirror or try to make my handwriting nice or attempt a craft or learn a new skill or play any sports or sing anymore because it will never be RIGHT.
>
> There's a dissonance between who I think I am/should be and the way I behave that drives me crazy.
>
> My entire identity is being smart and doing well in school. If I don't do the best and don't do well, I don't have anything else. I don't think I could (or would want to) live if it were proven that I'm not smart. I have to do the best and do perfectly on everything I decide to try because if I don't, I'm NOTHING. I'm less than other people, I'm dirt and absolute garbage. What's the point of me?[27]

We each seek to become the best versions of ourselves. Yet the type of toxic perfectionism illustrated here discourages and paralyzes the sufferer.

Consequences of Perfectionism

In the following sections, we discuss consequences and causes of perfectionism. We do so with the caveat that, in the social sciences, it is difficult (sometimes impossible) to establish a causal link between two things. As one of the blind peer reviewers for this volume put it, "It's not rocket science, it's far worse!" There are a multitude of factors that can be involved in these processes. However, what we present provides an outline of research on the potential consequences and causes of perfectionism.

Several notable mental health benefits are associated with healthy perfectionism, also called adaptive perfectionism. Individuals with healthy perfectionism appear to have better mental health compared to those without healthy perfectionism (either nonperfectionists or those with maladaptive perfectionism).[28] Healthy perfectionists are less likely to suppress their emotions and tend to have the skills to reframe the meaning of difficult situations in a way that helps them regulate negative emotions.[29] Although individuals with healthy perfectionism likely have concerns over making mistakes, they can use those concerns to help them achieve ambitious goals while maintaining low levels of

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27. Client story used with permission.

28. Sarah K. Nelsen, Alper Kayaalp, and Kyle J. Page, "Perfectionism, Substance Use, and Mental Health in College Students: A Longitudinal Analysis," *Journal of American College Health* 71, no. 1 (2023): 257–65, https://doi.org/10.1080/07448481.2021.1891076.

29. Kenneth G. Rice and Clarissa M. E. Richardson, "Classification Challenges in Perfectionism," *Journal of Counseling Psychology* 61, no. 4 (2014): 646, https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1037/cou0000040.

psychological distress.[30] Healthy perfectionism is not necessarily associated with higher levels of stress,[31] because adaptive perfectionists are more able to adapt to environment and relationship changes compared to maladaptive perfectionists and nonperfectionists. This means that often those with healthy perfectionism may be more confident in taking advantage of experiences and opportunities around them. In addition, "adaptive perfectionists also demonstrated clearer goals and firmer beliefs in meaning and directedness in their lives."[32]

On the other hand, toxic or maladaptive perfectionism is detrimental to one's well-being and mental health. Individuals with discrepancy and socially prescribed perfectionism set unrealistically high standards and are never satisfied with their performance.[33] They expect to reach their goals every time they perform and may become obsessed with this attainment to the detriment of their mental, physical, and emotional health. Thus, they never feel confident in their ability to achieve, and they commonly have feelings of inadequacy.[34] For example, an individual may set a goal to do one hundred push-ups in a week when they can do only twenty right now. Because this is an excessively high goal, the goal will probably not be met. The unhealthy perfectionist's reaction is not simply disappointment that they didn't meet their goal. They will be extremely critical and develop a belief that they are weak, not athletic, and not a worthwhile person. Another important thing to consider is that toxic perfectionism is more concerned with avoiding errors than trying to do things well. This can lead to constant feelings of fear and harsh personal criticism.

In contrast to healthy perfectionism, toxic perfectionism is almost always associated with higher levels of stress.[35] This could largely be due to the unrealistic expectations, worry, and shame associated with discrepancy and socially prescribed perfectionism. Furthermore, toxic

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30. Rice and Richardson, "Classification Challenges in Perfectionism," 646.

31. Edward C. Chang, Angela Watkins, and Kira Hudson Banks, "How Adaptive and Maladaptive Perfectionism Relate to Positive and Negative Psychological Functioning: Testing a Stress-Mediation Model in Black and White Female College Students," *Journal of Counseling Psychology* 51, no. 1 (2004): 93–102, https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0167.51.1.93.

32. Hyun-joo Park and Dae Yong Jeong, "Psychological Well-Being, Life Satisfaction, and Self-Esteem Among Adaptive Perfectionists, Maladaptive Perfectionists, and Nonperfectionists," *Personality and Individual Differences* 72 (2015): 168, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2014.08.031.

33. Enns and others, "Adaptive and Maladaptive Perfectionism," 922.

34. Enns and others, "Adaptive and Maladaptive Perfectionism," 922.

35. Chang and others, "How Adaptive and Maladaptive Perfectionism Relate," 97.

perfectionism is associated with feelings of depression and hopelessness,[36] low self-esteem,[37] and in some cases suicidality.[38] Because toxic perfectionists do not grant themselves grace when their objectives are not reached, they never feel that they measure up and have a constant fear of failing.[39] Compared to healthy perfectionists and nonperfectionists, toxic perfectionists have the lowest levels of life satisfaction.[40]

Allen and Wang's research delves into the negative effects of various factors such as toxic perfectionism and scrupulosity on the mental health of members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The study reveals that toxic perfectionism, characterized by excessively high standards and perpetual feelings of inadequacy, correlates with decreased satisfaction with life, heightened anxiety, and increased depression. This relentless pursuit of perfection and the fear of falling short contribute to feelings of inadequacy and psychological distress, as individuals constantly worry about not meeting their own or God's expectations.[41]

This compelling, uncomfortable anxiety reaction is what keeps many Latter-day Saints stuck in a destructive cycle of anxiety. For example, an individual shared how their perfectionism led to high anxiety and disconnected them from God: "I felt trapped with anxiety. I looked to find relief from the anxious feelings that surrounded my fears and doubts. . . . The anxiety mounted because even though I knew deep down inside I really should be okay and acceptable to God, I couldn't feel it because of the adrenaline that was flowing through my body. Because of this physiological process, I couldn't fully feel peace and was unable to relax and let the Spirit 'really' talk or whisper to me."[42]

While toxic perfectionism may motivate some to achieve, it may demotivate others. Although we often think of perfectionists as high achieving, some toxic perfectionists simply stop trying. For them, failure

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36. Enns and others, "Adaptive and Maladaptive Perfectionism," 921–35.

37. Park and Jeong, "Psychological Well-Being," 168.

38. Karlijn W. J. de Jonge-Heesen, Sanne P. A. Rasing, Ad A. Vermulst, Rutger C. M. E. Engels, and Daan H. M. Creemers, "How to Cope with Perfectionism? Perfectionism as a Risk Factor for Suicidality and the Role of Cognitive Coping in Adolescents," *Journal of Rational-Emotive & Cognitive Behavior Therapy* 39 (2021): 201–16, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10942-020-00368-x.

39. Rice and Richardson, "Classification Challenges in Perfectionism," 646.

40. Park and Jeong, "Psychological Well-Being," 168–69.

41. G. E. Kawika Allen and Kenneth T. Wang, "Examining Religious Commitment, Perfectionism, Scrupulosity, and Well-Being Among LDS Individuals," *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 6, no. 3 (2014): 257–64, https://doi.org/10.1037/a0035197.

42. Client story used with permission.

equates to worthlessness; therefore, the stakes for trying are far too high. If they avoid trying, they avoid failure. Thus, many toxic perfectionists simply avoid doing anything at which they might fail. Indeed, they may purposefully procrastinate or turn in school assignments late, giving an excuse (outside of their abilities) for why their performance wasn't perfect. As one clinician put it, "Some perfectionistic people are overwhelmed by doubt and indecision and find it difficult to bring any task to a conclusion. In some cases, this has led to a profoundly discouraged state of withdrawal and underachievement."[43]

Who Is at Risk for Toxic Perfectionism?

Women have higher levels of some types of perfectionism compared to men.[44] This is especially true when we consider socially prescribed perfectionism,[45] as more women feel that they do not measure up to the standards that they believe they are held to. This may be related to self-image and concern around physical appearance, which women are more likely than men to associate with their self-worth.[46]

Comparing Caucasian American, Asian American, and African American individuals, Asian Americans report the highest rates of perfectionism. Specifically, "Asian American students tend to be more wary of making mistakes and to harbor more self-doubt than Caucasian [and African American] students possibly in response to the high demands placed on them by their parents and increased criticism when those expectations are not fulfilled."[47] Furthermore, Asian Americans and African Americans report feeling higher levels of parental expectations compared to Caucasian Americans.[48] Again, a family's higher

43. Thomas S. Greenspon, "Is There an Antidote to Perfectionism?," 987.

44. M. D. Musumeci, C. M. Cunningham, and T. L. White, "Disgustingly Perfect: An Examination of Disgust, Perfectionism, and Gender," *Motivation and Emotion* 46 (2022): 337, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11031-022-09931-8.

45. Musumeci and others, "Disgustingly Perfect," 337.

46. Alba Moya-Garófano and Miguel Moya, "Focusing on One's Own Appearance Leads to Body Shame in Women but Not Men: The Mediating Role of Body Surveillance and Appearance-Contingent Self-Worth," *Body Image* 29 (2019): 62, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bodyim.2019.02.008.

47. Jennifer R. Castro and Kenneth G. Rice, "Perfectionism and Ethnicity: Implications for Depressive Symptoms and Self-Reported Academic Achievement," *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology* 9, no. 1 (2003): 73, https://doi.org/10.1037/1099-9809.9.1.64; see also S. Sue and S. Okazaki, "Asian-American Educational Achievements: A Phenomenon in Search of an Explanation," *American Psychologist* 45, no. 8 (1990): 913–20.

48. See Castro and Rice, "Perfectionism and Ethnicity," 70, table 1.

expectations and negative or unsympathetic response to failure can be a factor that leads to toxic perfectionism.[49]

What Causes Perfectionism?

While all the causes of perfectionism are unknown, several factors can lead to perfectionistic tendencies, including high expectations from society, controlling parenting styles, and conditional parental love.[50]

Societal Expectations

Regarding the influence of society, trends in the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom show that the rate of perfectionism has continuously increased between 1989 and 2017.[51] Generations today are much more likely to have perfectionism than generations were in the past. These increased rates seem to be on the rise because social and economic expectations are growing harder to maintain.[52] For example, societal pressures and expectations to succeed in employment and career, as well as the fear and anxiety around potential failure in one's life, can contribute to heightened distress. Furthermore, Americans tend to have higher rates of perfectionism compared to Canadians or British individuals. The highly individualistic culture that the United States embodies is suspected to be the reason for this, as it pushes individuals to be motivated by their opinions and strive for independence.[53] Individuals seeking more independence and further accomplishments may increase the likelihood that they will experience the negative effects of perfectionism, including pressures to compete in a very demanding

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49. Joey Fung, Grace Cai, and Kenneth Wang, "Personal and Family Perfectionism Among Asian and Latinx Youth," *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology* 29, no. 2 (2023): 235–36, https://doi.org/10.1037/cdp0000555.

50. Gordon L. Flett, Paul L. Hewitt, Joan M. Oliver, and Silvana Macdonald, "Perfectionism in Children and Their Parents: A Developmental Analysis," in *Perfectionism: Theory, Research, and Treatment,* eds. Gordon L. Flett and Paul L. Hewitt (American Psychological Association, 2002), 89–132, https://doi.org/10.1037/10458-004.

51. Thomas Curran and Andrew P. Hill, "Perfectionism Is Increasing over Time: A Meta-Analysis of Birth Cohort Differences from 1989 to 2016," *Psychological Bulletin* 145, no. 4 (2019): 419, https://doi.org/10.1037/bul0000138.

52. Thomas Curran and Andrew P. Hill, "Young People's Perceptions of Their Parents' Expectations and Criticism Are Increasing over Time: Implications for Perfectionism," *Psychological Bulletin* 148, nos. 1–2 (2022): 122–24, https://doi.org/10.1037/bul0000347.

53. Curran and Hill, "Perfectionism Is Increasing over Time," 412–13.

society or a desire to be the best at work, sports, and education. As Greenspon describes,

> We live in a perfectionistic culture. The individualistic, competitive side of us contributes to an environment in which second best—the Silver Medal—is considered to be a kind of failure. Tightened economic circumstances have intensified fears that we will lose out if we are not constantly pushing to do better. Our children should only go to the best schools, graduate from the best colleges, and get the best jobs and careers. We worry that failure to be the best, even at preschool age, spells doom for the future. Too often, the result of all of this is that people are valued for their achievements rather than for their character.[54]

Parental Influence

In conjunction with the influence of society, parenting is an important source of perfectionism. Individuals with healthy perfectionism are likely that way because their parents were not overly demanding in their children's accomplishments. Parents of children with healthy perfectionism are usually kind, caring, helpful, and inspiring to their children. They praise the child's efforts and the child's process and express love that is not conditioned on the child's performance. This could lead a child to believe that they are capable and have worth regardless of how they perform. Furthermore, they may feel more motivated to keep working toward goals because they believe that they can accomplish them.[55]

In her review article, Jane Adams suggests that a secure parent-child attachment (one in which the child knows the parents care for and support them) fosters healthy perfectionism, leading individuals to exhibit confidence, competence, and a willingness to take risks.[56] This secure-attachment style is associated with positive self-perceptions and balanced perspectives on strengths and weaknesses. Parents who use behavior-centered remorse (as opposed to shame, which can be

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54. Thomas S. Greenspon, "Is There an Antidote to Perfectionism?," 986.

55. See Ariel Ko, Paul L. Hewitt, Daniel Cox, Gordon L. Flett, and Chang Chen, "Adverse Parenting and Perfectionism: A Test of the Mediating Effects of Attachment Anxiety, Attachment Avoidance, and Perceived Defectiveness," *Personality and Individual Differences* 150 (2019): article 109474; Enns and others, "Adaptive and Maladaptive Perfectionism," 922, 932.

56. Nooshin Pishva and Mohammad Ali Besharat, "Relationship Attachment Styles with Positive and Negative Perfectionism," *Procedia: Social and Behavioral Sciences* 30 (2011): 402–6, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2011.10.079.

psychologically harmful to a person's overall view of themselves) can motivate children to apologize or make amends for their behavior without feeling inherently flawed, promoting healthier interpersonal relationships and reducing the burden of self-criticism.[57]

Moreover, parents who model the acceptance of imperfections—imperfections of themselves and others—is crucial for children developing healthy perfectionism, allowing them to set realistic goals, adjust expectations, and prioritize long-term well-being over immediate perfection.[58] In contrast, children with overly controlling parents may develop toxic perfectionism in response to the parents' particularly high expectations or criticisms, which can push them to have an acute need for approval, inadvertently leading to perfectionism.[59]

Another cause of perfectionism is conditional parental regard, which is when a parent extends love and approval when their child complies with expectations but does not express love when the child does not meet expectations.[60] This teaches children that their worth is contingent on their ability to live up to the expectations of others, which can cause socially prescribed perfectionism.[61] Some researchers propose "that perfection is a defensive response to feelings of inferiority or feelings of not mattering to other people."[62] They come to view achieving perfection as a defense against criticisms and thus a protection of their self-worth.

Children may develop toxic perfectionism because they were raised by parents who were extremely rigid with specific expectations and were not sensitive to their children when goals were not accomplished.[63] For example, if a child got a B on their exam, the parent may express disapproval and tell them that such a grade is not acceptable or that they are not smart. Furthermore, some parents overprotect or micromanage

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57. Milica Nikolic, Eddie Brummelman, Bram Orobio de Castro, Terrencee D. Jorgensen, and Christina Colonnesi, "Parental Socialization of Guilt and Shame in Early Childhood," *Scientific Reports* 13 (2023): article 11767.

58. Hewitt and others, *Perfectionism: A Relational Approach,* 96–117; Smith and others, "Parenting Behaviors and Trait Perfectionism," 13.

59. Curran and Hill, "Young People's Perceptions of Their Parents' Expectations and Criticism," 109.

60. Thomas Curran, Andrew P. Hill, and Luke J. Williams, "The Relationships Between Parental Conditional Regard and Adolescents' Self-Critical and Narcissistic Perfectionism," *Personality and Individual Differences* 109 (2017): 17–22, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2016.12.035.

61. Curran and others, "Adolescents' Self-Critical and Narcissistic Perfectionism," 18.

62. Hewitt and others, *Perfectionism: A Relational Approach,* 36.

63. Enns and others, "Adaptive and Maladaptive Perfectionism," 922.

all their children's actions.[64] This connection of helicopter parenting leading to toxic perfectionism in children can be described as a parent controlling with shame or love withdrawal, not respecting their child's privacy, or excessively monitoring all their children's activities. While parents may have good intentions to be involved in their children's lives, they need to grant appropriate autonomy to their children.

Alan E. Craddock and his colleagues conducted a study investigating the negative association of religious dysfunctional perfectionism (RDP) with family dynamics. The findings revealed significant associations between perceptions of RDP and high levels of family rigidity, enmeshment, and disengagement.[65] This suggests that individuals experiencing RDP often come from family environments characterized by strict rules, excessive involvement, and emotional detachment. Participants high in RDP tended to describe their family of origin as highly rigid and structured, fostering perceptions of God as primarily rule-enforcing and punishing rather than loving and gracious. Consequently, individuals may develop unhelpful self-evaluative criteria, feeling worthy only if they adhere perfectly to rules to earn God's love and avoid punishment. Counseling interventions could involve challenging these rigid beliefs and promoting a more balanced and less punitive understanding of God.

Another potential impact on the development of discrepancy and socially prescribed perfectionism is social learning. This is when children see these perfectionistic behaviors in their parents and develop similar patterns of thinking as they model what their parents do.[66]

Mark Ogletree's chapter in this issue goes into greater detail on the negative association between mental health and toxic perfectionism, but here we mention practicing mindfulness as a useful strategy. Mindfulness is characterized by a nonjudgmental awareness of present experiences and can reduce chronic worry and rumination associated with toxic perfectionism. Mindfulness and learning self-compassion serve as a protective factor against negative affect and distress, ultimately promoting mental well-being.[67]

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64. Enns and others, "Adaptive and Maladaptive Perfectionism," 923.

65. Alan E. Craddock, Wendy Church, Fleur Harrison, and Alexandra Sands, "Family of Origin Qualities as Predictors of Religious Dysfunctional Perfectionism," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 38, no. 3 (2010): 205–14, https://doi.org/10.1177/009164711003800305.

66. Smith and others, "Parenting Behaviors and Trait Perfectionism," 13.

67. Emmanuelle Awad, Souheil Hallit, and Sahar Obeid, "Does Self-Esteem Mediate the Association Between Perfectionism and Mindfulness Among Lebanese University

Perfectionism and Religion

The intersection of perfectionism and religion has garnered significant attention in contemporary research, revealing multifaceted dynamics that influence mental health outcomes. Studies such as those by Sarah L. Nachimson, and Jeffrey S. Ashby and Judy Huffman, and G. E. Kawika Allen and Kenneth T. Wang illuminate how healthy perfectionism connects with religious contexts, emphasizing how adaptive perfectionism may support the high moral standards advocated by religious groups and how both are related to enhanced life satisfaction and diminished depressive symptoms.[68] Among Jesse M. Crosby's undergraduate college student survey, adaptive perfectionism was related to *intrinsic religiosity,* which is defined as the religion itself being the motivating factor for one's religious practice. The high standards of a religion are the source of motivation for behavior. *Extrinsic religiosity* "involves utilizing religion to achieve other interests, such as solace, sociability, or security."[69] A person with higher extrinsic religiosity sees their religion "as a means to an end."[70] Another study further extends this exploration, unveiling intriguing insights regarding the impact of adaptive and maladaptive perfectionism on psychological adjustment within specific religious communities, such as the Latter-day Saint community.[71] Together,

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Students?," *BMC Psychology* 10 (2022): 256, https://doi.org/10.1186/s40359-022-00964-9; see also Madeleine Ferrari, Keong Yap, Nicole Scott, Danielle A. Einstein, and Joseph Ciarrochi, "Self-Compassion Moderates the Perfectionism and Depression Link in Both Adolescence and Adulthood," *PLOS ONE* 13, no. 2 (2018): 1–19, article e0192022, https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0192022.

68. Sarah L. Nachimson, "Adaptive and Maladaptive Perfectionism in Jewish Adults: Associations with Religious Practice, Intrinsic Religiosity, and Subjective Well-Being" (PhD diss., Hofstra University, 2021), 1–108; Jeffrey S. Ashby and Judy Huffman, "Religious Orientation and Multidimensional Perfectionism: Relationships and Implications," *Counseling and Values* 43, no. 3 (1999): 178–88, https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2161-007X.1999.tb00141.x; Allen and Wang, "Examining Religious Commitment," 257–264.

69. Nachimson, "Adaptive and Maladaptive Perfectionism," 19; Jesse M. Crosby, Scott C. Bates, and Michael P. Twohig, "Examination of the Relationship Between Perfectionism and Religiosity as Mediated by Psychological Inflexibility," *Current Psychology* 30, no. 2 (2011): 117–29; see also Leslie J. Shapiro, *When Religion and Morals Become OCD: Understanding and Treating Scrupulosity* (Bloomsbury, 2023).

70. Crosby and others, "Examination of the Relationship," 186.

71. G. E. Kawika Allen, Kenneth T. Wang, and Hannah Stokes, "Examining Legalism, Scrupulosity, Family Perfectionism, and Psychological Adjustment Among LDS Individuals," *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 18, no. 4 (2015): 246–58, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13674676.2015.1021312; Kenneth T. Wang, G. E. Kawika

these studies provide a comprehensive understanding of the intersection of perfectionism and religiosity, shedding light on its implications for mental health and well-being.

In the study by Nachimson, the positive facets of adaptive perfectionism within an intrinsic religious belief are prominently evident.[72] This alignment with high moral standards advocated by religious groups reinforces individuals' sense of purpose and dedication to their spiritual beliefs.[73] Nachimson's findings resonate with prior research that showed the positive correlation between religious commitment and healthy perfectionism.[74] Specifically, heightened cognitive and behavioral religious commitment corresponds to adaptive perfectionism, leading to enhanced life satisfaction and diminished depressive symptoms.[75] Allen and Wang further suggest that the robust moral framework inherent in Latter-day Saint teachings may be associated with adaptive perfectionism, which may contribute to overall well-being among religious individuals.[76]

Ashby and Huffman explored the relationship between religious orientation and multidimensional perfectionism, uncovering significant implications. They found that holding high personal standards, a characteristic of perfectionism, was correlated with higher levels of self-esteem and self-efficacy. Their findings suggested that intrinsic religiosity may be associated with healthy aspects of adaptive perfectionism and protective against maladaptive perfectionism.[77] Alignment with intrinsic religious beliefs, as proposed by Allport, inundates one's life with motivation and meaning,[78] indicating that perfectionism within the context of intrinsic religiosity may serve as a significant source of motivation and purpose.

Allen, Hannah I. Stokes, and Han Na Suh, "Perceived Perfectionism from God Scale: Development and Initial Evidence," *Journal of Religion and Health* 57 (2018): 2207–23, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-017-0405-1.

72. Nachimson, "Adaptive and Maladaptive Perfectionism in Jewish Adults," 1–107.

73. Nachimson, "Adaptive and Maladaptive Perfectionism in Jewish Adults," 11, 21.

74. Allen and Wang, "Examining Religious Commitment," 257–64; Ashby and Huffman, "Religious Orientation and Multidimensional Perfectionism," 178–88.

75. Allen and Wang, "Examining Religious Commitment," 262; Ashby and Huffman, "Religious Orientation and Multidimensional Perfectionism," 186.

76. Allen and Wang, "Examining Religious Commitment," 261.

77. Ashby and Huffman, "Religious Orientation and Multidimensional Perfectionism," 186–87.

78. Gordon W. Allport, "The Religious Context of Prejudice," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 5, no. 3 (1966): 455, https://doi.org/10.2307/1384172.

Shapiro's study explores the strengths associated with perfectionism in individuals with OCD within the context of religion. Individuals with OCD may exhibit perfectionistic tendencies driven by the conflict between the impulsive id and the inflexible superego, particularly in matters related to religious beliefs and practices. This internal conflict serves as a driving force for obsessions and compulsions, reflecting a level of critical thinking deeply intertwined with religious ideals.[79] Shapiro's findings resonate with Allen and Wang's research, suggesting that individuals with OCD may scrutinize the intention behind actions, a behavior indicative of their perfectionistic inclinations, especially in matters of religious morality.[80]

Allen and Wang's study explores the positive effects on mental health within the Latter-day Saint community, revealing a positive association between intrinsic religious commitment and life satisfaction among Latter-day Saint individuals. Most of the sample, classified as adaptive perfectionists, demonstrated elevated levels of intrapersonal commitment (private religious life), interpersonal commitment (public religious behavior), self-esteem, and satisfaction with life, emphasizing the potential for healthy perfectionism to contribute to positive outcomes within the Latter-day Saint context.[81] These findings challenge the notion that perfectionism is inherently detrimental and instead highlight its potential to foster a faith-driven approach to life and well-being within the Latter-day Saint community.

Allen, Wang, and Stokes's study further investigates the positive facets of perfectionism within the Latter-day Saint community, yielding findings regarding its impact on psychological adjustment. The correlation between the pursuit of high standards and enhanced self-esteem and life satisfaction among Latter-day Saint individuals suggests that adherence to rigorous moral and behavioral standards serves as a source of personal fulfillment and contentment within the Latter-day Saint context. It is not religious commitment that correlates with distress and maladaptive perfectionism but rather "strong legalistic beliefs with the distorted focus on never being good enough."[82] Scrupulosity and shame could be avoided if therapists, parents, and church leaders

79. Shapiro, *When Religion and Morals Become OCD,* 1–9.
80. Allen and Wang, "Examining Religious Commitment," 258.
81. Allen and Wang, "Examining Religious Commitment," 258–62.
82. Allen and others, "Examining Legalism," 255.

teach a more accurate definition of grace—avoiding the idea that God's acceptance and approval must be earned with behavior. Legalism, or the idea that one must earn God's love, is strongly associated with scrupulosity.[83] Additionally, the research highlights the significant psychological relief experienced by Latter-day Saint individuals with scrupulosity when engaging in psychotherapy interventions, underscoring the potential for therapeutic interventions to alleviate the detrimental effects of scrupulosity.[84]

Expanding upon previous research, Wang and his colleagues introduced the Perceived Perfectionism from God Scale, shedding light on the likely negative effects observed among individuals who perceive that God is constantly displeased with their performance.[85] This study indicates a positive association between religious commitment and perceived standards from God, echoing earlier findings regarding the relationship between intrinsic religiosity and healthy perfectionism.[86] They also found an association between perceived discrepancy from God, or religiously prescribed perfectionism, and scrupulosity. The way an individual perceives the nature of their God significantly impacts a believer's mental health.[87] Moreover, Allen and his colleagues' investigation among Latter-day Saint individuals highlights the intricate dynamics between perfectionism, scrupulosity, intrinsic spirituality, and psychological well-being within the religious context. The role of intrinsic spirituality as a buffer against the detrimental effects of scrupulosity underscores the protective function of intrinsic spirituality in maintaining a healthy relationship with religious beliefs and practices.[88]

Muse's study provides further insights into mental health help-seeking attitudes and intentions among members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, highlighting a proactive approach to

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83. Allen and others, "Examining Legalism," 252–54.

84. Allen and others, "Examining Legalism," 248.

85. Wang and others, "Perceived Perfectionism from God Scale," 2221.

86. Wang and others, "Perceived Perfectionism from God Scale," 2219.

87. Wang and others, "Perceived Perfectionism from God Scale," 2220.

88. G. E. Kawika Allen, Abigail Norton, Sara Pulsipher, David Johnson, Benson Bunker, "I Worry That I Am Almost Perfect! Examining Relationships Among Perfectionism, Scrupulosity, Intrinsic Spirituality, and Psychological Well-Being Among Latter-Day Saints," *Spirituality in Clinical Practice* 10, no. 4 (2023): 316–25, https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2021-71838-001.

addressing mental health concerns within the religious community.[89] The significant role of clergy members in providing psychological support underscores the importance for religious leaders to learn how to address mental health concerns and provide support to members of the Latter-day Saint community.

Similarly, Corrigan's study among Christian clergy suggests that adaptive self-oriented perfectionism is associated with enhanced self-efficacy, intrinsic motivation, personal control, and resourcefulness, contributing to overall mental well-being.[90] Peer and McGraw's study among members of the Church of Jesus Christ further found some positive relationships between adaptive perfectionism and mental health, such as compassion, nonjudgmental attitudes, and positive perceptions of parental reactions to their adherence to religious commandments.[91] Steffen's study on perfectionism and life satisfaction in religious individuals highlights the positive relationship between intrinsic religiosity and increased life satisfaction, further emphasizing the potential psychological benefits associated with intrinsic religious beliefs.[92]

In their comprehensive review of the literature on religion, mental health, and Latter-day Saints, Dyer and his colleagues highlighted several positive relationships between intrinsic religious commitment and adaptive perfectionism with mental well-being among Church members.[93] Latter-day Saints with adaptive perfectionism had lower levels of depression and anxiety. In contrast, poorer mental health among Latter-day Saints was related to scrupulosity, legalism, abandonment by God, and maladaptive perfectionism. Additionally, adaptive perfectionism is

89. Paula Park Patten Muse, "Factors Influencing Mental Health Help-Seeking Attitudes and Intentions in Members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints" (PhD diss., Palo Alto University, 2020), 88–94.

90. Caroline Waters Corrigan, "The Relationships Among Perfectionism, God Image, Religious Coping Style, and Vocational Burnout in Christian Clergy: An Empirical Investigation" (PhD diss., Wright Institute, 1998), 222, 227.

91. Samuel O. Peer and James S. McGraw, "Mixed-Method Study of Perfectionism and Religiosity Among Mormons: Implications for Cultural Competence and Clinical Practice," *Issues in Religion and Psychotherapy* 38, no. 1 (2017): 75–100, https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/irp/vol38/iss1/12/.

92. Patrick R. Steffen, "Perfectionism and Life Aspirations in Intrinsically and Extrinsically Religious Individuals," *Journal of Religion and Health* 53 (2014): 945–58, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-013-9692-3.

93. William Justin Dyer, Daniel K. Judd, Megan Gale, and Hunter Gibson Finlinson, "Religion, Mental Health, and the Latter-Day Saints: A Review of Literature 2005–2022," *Religions* 14, no. 6 (2023): 1–21, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14060701.

associated with "greater intrinsic religiosity, experiencing God's grace, and less legalism."[94]

Negative aspects of perfectionism within religious contexts have been extensively studied, as evidenced by research such as that conducted by Nachimson and discussed by Craddock and his colleagues.[95] Toxic perfectionism within religious spheres can manifest as dysfunctional tendencies, which inhibit the positive expression of religious beliefs and practices. Crosby and his colleagues further elaborate on this, noting that maladaptive perfectionism among religious individuals correlates with psychological inflexibility, "a rigid and inflexible style of responding" to thoughts and emotions. It is a variable that can link maladaptive perfectionism to detrimental psychological outcomes, such as poor health, anxiety, depression, and more.[96] Moreover, Steffen's findings suggest that adaptive perfectionism mediates negative outcomes associated with extrinsic religiosity, with intrinsic religiosity positively linked to life satisfaction and extrinsic religiosity negatively linked to life satisfaction, particularly when mediated through maladaptive perfectionism.[97] These studies underscore the importance of addressing the negative effects of perfectionism within religious realms to promote mental health and well-being.

Notably, Christian religions, characterized by their emphasis on high standards and expectations, suggest a potential connection between perfectionism and religiosity. These findings underscore the need for comprehensive assessments of perfectionism and religiosity to understand their nuanced affects on mental health within religious communities.

Allen, Wang, and Stokes provide insights into the possible negative effects of various factors—including legalism, scrupulosity, and family perfectionism—on the mental health of Latter-day Saints. The study suggests that excessive scrupulous fear of sinful activity and punishment from God indicates strong legalistic belief and promotes the desire to earn God's favor, resulting in heightened feelings of guilt and shame for

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94. Dyer and others, "Religion, Mental Health, and the Latter-Day Saints," 12.

95. Craddock and others, "Family of Origin Qualities as Predictors of Religious Dysfunctional Perfectionism," 205–14; Nachimson, "Adaptive and Maladaptive Perfectionism in Jewish Adults," 1–107.

96. Jesse M. Crosby, Scott C. Bates, and Michael P. Twohig, "Examination of the Relationship Between Perfectionism and Religiosity as Mediated by Psychological Inflexibility," *Current Psychology* 30 (2011): 120, https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-011-9104-3.

97. Steffen, "Perfectionism and Life Aspirations," 947, 956–57.

every mistake.[98] With a strong, distorted belief in God's punishment, individuals can become obsessed with pleasing God and "overly fearful of making mistakes."[99]

Additionally, the research reveals that family maladaptive perfectionism intensifies the connection between scrupulosity and shame, suggesting that environments characterized by high levels of toxic family perfectionism exacerbate feelings of shame associated with scrupulosity. Moreover, the study emphasizes that strong legalistic beliefs, particularly those focused on never being good enough for the family, are correlated with distress; this finding highlights how this distorted view of God—rather than religious commitment itself—contributes to negative emotional outcomes and potential psychological difficulties.

Gender differences were also observed, with men exhibiting "higher levels of scrupulosity and guilt compared to women," potentially indicating that Latter-day Saint men fear God and God's punishment for offensive behaviors, which could negatively affect their religious commitment.

Additionally, toxic perfectionism and scrupulosity are identified as predictors of heightened fear and anxiety. The mediation analyses further suggest that these fearful tendencies negatively impact psychological functioning and life satisfaction among Latter-day Saint individuals, leading to a fear-driven pattern of living characterized by excessive worry and self-criticism. Ultimately, this fear-driven approach detracts from a faith-based approach to religiosity and diminishes overall well-being and satisfaction with life.[100] These findings underscore the importance of addressing toxic perfectionism and scrupulosity within religious contexts to promote mental health and well-being among Latter-day Saint individuals.

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98. Although *guilt* and *shame* are often used synonymously, they are typically treated as distinct in research. Shame is typically defined as feelings of self-hatred, self-loathing, and worthlessness. Guilt is typically defined as a recognition that what a person did was wrong, often accompanied by feelings of remorse. While shame is conceptualized as negative, guilt (without shame) is often conceptualized as a healthy recognition for wrongdoing.

99. Allen and others, "Examining Legalism," 254.

100. Allen and Wang, "Examining Religious Commitment," 258–62; Jonathan S. Abramowitz, Jonathan D. Huppert, Adam B. Cohen, David F. Rolin, and Shawn P. Cahill, "Religious Obsessions and Compulsion in a Non-Clinical Sample: The Penn Inventory of Scrupulosity (PIOS)," *Behavior Research and Therapy* 40, no. 7 (2002): 825–38, especially table 1 on page 830.

A study of Latter-day Saints by Allen and colleagues explored how toxic perfectionism and scrupulosity were negatively related to psychological well-being and religious dynamics. Toxic perfectionism was found to be positively associated with scrupulosity and anxiety about God, indicating that individuals experiencing scrupulosity are more likely to exhibit anxious attachment to God, leading to avoidance behaviors. Moreover, individuals with toxic perfectionism or scrupulosity may experience detrimental effects to their overall religiosity, spirituality, and well-being. Their religious obsessions or compulsions can impair their relationship with God and their self-esteem.[101] These findings have implications for Church administrators, suggesting the importance of assisting members struggling with scrupulosity and toxic perfectionism.

Conclusion

Much has been discussed in this chapter regarding perfectionism, mental health, and religiosity. However, there remains a lack of knowledge and research regarding these aspects. This chapter hopefully illustrates the importance of this topic and stimulates additional interest of other educators, scholars, and researchers to continue moving this research forward. Based on the work of so many outlined in this chapter, several practical implications when working with individuals and families who struggle with unhealthy perfectionism should be considered. First, parents and professionals should help perfectionists differentiate between the tendency to have high standards and the tendency to never feel satisfied with one's performance.[102] Utilizing psychological flexibility in response to high standards rather than lowering the standards may be a better option for decreasing the impact of perfectionism.[103] A person who espouses psychological flexibility and is adaptive to their difficulties is striving to be faithful and still recognizes that they can be susceptible to disappointments and discouragements. Holding space for both is key

101. Allen and others, "I Worry That I Am Almost Perfect!," 317, 320–22.

102. Allen and others, "Examining Legalism," 255; Allen and Wang, "Examining Religious Commitment," 262.

103. Allen and Wang, "Examining Religious Commitment, Perfectionism, Scrupulosity, and Well-Being," 258; Crosby and others, "Examination of the Relationship," 125–26.

to well-being and growth.[104] In addition, assisting these individuals to possess a more accurate perspective of the nature of God and their relationship with him could allay the effects of toxic perfectionism.[105]

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104. Allen and others, "Psychological Adjustment Among LDS Individuals," 255; Allen and Wang, "Examining Religious Commitment, Perfectionism, Scrupulosity, and Well-Being," 262.

105. Allen and others, "Examining Legalism," 255.

Perfectionism Across Adolescence

W. Justin Dyer

"Was I Always This Anxious?"

As a sixteen-year-old on my first date, I had such a nervous tightness in my stomach that, at one point, I ran to the bathroom to throw up. I'd always been somewhat nervous, but it had never bothered me much before. Yet from that time on through my teenage years, any time there was something new happening, I would inevitably have to throw up.

As a youth, I was somewhat balanced between being extroverted and introverted. I truly enjoyed interacting with people, though not for too long. As my mid- to late teens hit, anxiety started to play more and more of a role in what I chose to do and what I avoided. I wouldn't have thought about it in such terms, but anxiety was subtly beginning to direct my choices.

Then, in my early to mid-twenties, after I was married and in graduate school, I had my first panic attack. Like most people with their first panic attack, I had no idea what was happening and thought it might be a heart attack. I called the doctor, but the symptoms soon subsided. Across my twenties, those attacks became more frequent until I learned how to deal with them.

Although anxiety is separate from (though related to) perfectionism, I hope this autobiographical example is useful to illustrate a point—that is, mental and emotional difficulties often develop gradually over time. While someone may have been a happy-go-lucky youngster without a care in the world (much like me as a child), over time, the incredibly complex interaction of nature and nurture can result in increasing mental and emotional difficulties, including perfectionism.

As with my experience, it is not uncommon for these kinds of difficulties to appear in mid- to late adolescence and progress on into emerging adulthood (age eighteen to late twenties). In fact, research finds that half of all lifetime disorders—such as anxiety, mood, impulse-control, and substance use—"start by age 14, and three-fourths by age 24."[1] In other words, if one develops such a disorder, it will most likely happen during the teenage and young-adult years.

With our Foundations data,[2] we were able to examine how, from age twelve to eighteen, perfectionism changes over time. Figure 1 shows how perfectionism, on average, slightly increases across the teenage years. As described in the article titled "Current Empirical Research," the two kinds of perfectionism we primarily deal with in this volume are discrepancy perfectionism (constantly feeling you are not meeting your expectations) and socially prescribed or social perfectionism (feeling the need to be perfect or other people will not love and respect you).[3] Figure 1 shows only discrepancy perfectionism, though social perfectionism follows a nearly identical course.

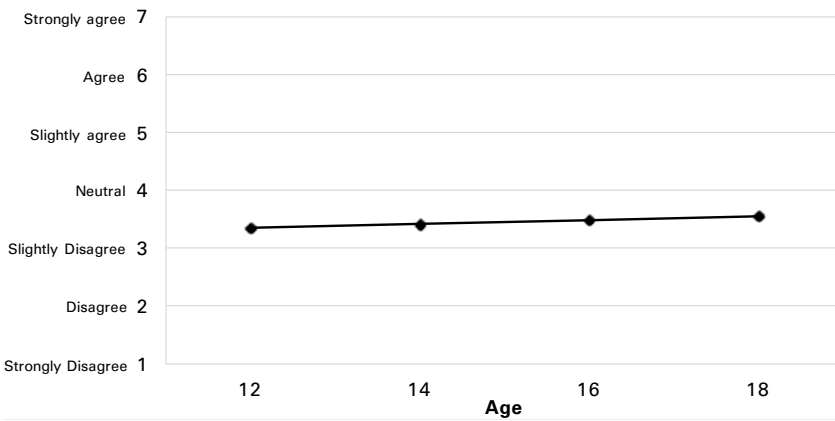

Figure 1. Average Discrepancy Perfectionism from Age 12 to 18.

1. Ronald C. Kessler, Patricia Berglund, Olga Demler, Robert Jin, Kathleen R. Merikangas, and Ellen E. Walters, "Lifetime Prevalence and Age-of-Onset Distributions of DSM-IV Disorders in the National Comorbidity Survey Replication," *Archives of General Psychiatry* 62, no. 6 (2005): 593, https://doi.org/10.1001/archpsyc.62.6.593.

2. "Family Foundations of Youth Development," Brigham Young University, accessed September 13, 2024, https://foundations.byu.edu. See also the introduction herein, pp. 6–7.

3. The Allen and others article in this issue also referred to other-oriented perfectionism, which is expecting perfection from others. However, the Foundations data did not survey this type of perfectionism.

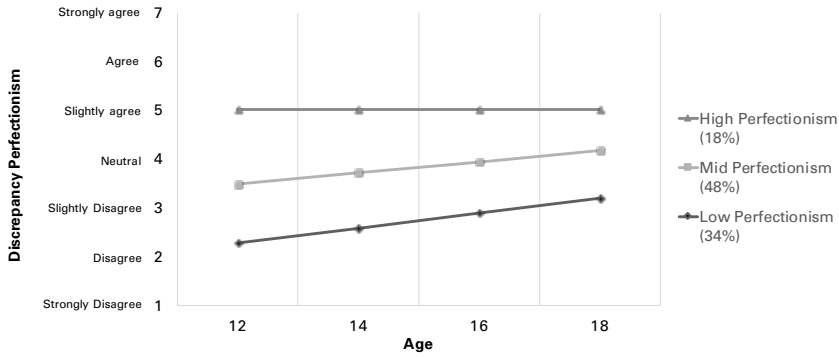

Figure 2. Discrepancy Perfectionism from Age 12 to 18.

At age twelve, the average youth score on the perfectionism statements is between a three and a four. This means that, for the most part, they don't agree with the perfectionism statements (for the statements, see pp. 13–15), though they don't necessarily disagree either. From age twelve to eighteen, the average score *slightly* (though statistically significantly)[4] increases, with participants answering closer to "neutral" and farther away from "slightly disagree."

These averages are helpful, yet they can be misleading as well. Youth likely vary substantially in their perfectionism and how it changes over time. To capture some of these differences, we did an analysis to identify various perfectionism trajectories that exist within our population of youth. While this still doesn't capture all the different ways perfectionism may change over time, the statistics suggest this is an accurate summary.

Figure 2 shows three groups: low, mid, and high perfectionism. We show only discrepancy perfectionism here because, again, social perfectionism tracks closely with it. Those who score low mostly disagree with the perfectionism statements and then increase to where they only slightly disagree. About 34% of youth fall into this category. The mid-perfectionism group (which accounts for 48% of youth) begins between slightly disagree and neutral but increases until they are just above neutral, pushing toward slightly agreeing at age eighteen. The high-perfectionism group slightly agrees with the perfectionism statements, and this stays steady throughout their adolescence. This group accounts for 18% of youth.

For the most part, the risk a youth had for discrepancy perfectionism was also the same level of risk for social perfectionism. We grouped

4. Statistical significance does not necessarily refer to the size of the increase. Rather, it refers to to the likelihood that the increase we observed was simply due to chance.

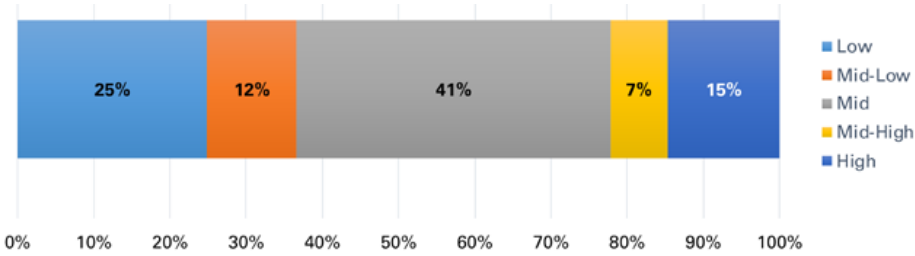

Figure 3. Youth Perfectionism.

youth into various categories depending on their risk for discrepancy perfectionism and social perfectionism: low (low on both types), mid-low (low on one, mid on the other type), mid (mid on both types), mid-high (mid on one type, high on the other), or high (high on both types). Twenty-five percent were low in both discrepancy and social perfectionism, 12% were low on one type of perfectionism and mid on the other, 41% were mid on both types of perfectionism, 7% were high on one type and mid on the other, and 15% were high on both discrepancy and social perfectionism. This indicates that about 37% are low to mid-low on perfectionism with 22% (about one in five) high in at least one type of perfectionism (see fig. 3). These percentages are for the overall sample. In later analyses in this article and in subsequent articles, we examine how these percentages are different, each depending on a host of characteristics. Differentiating these attributes helped us identify those youth who are most at risk for perfectionism.

Why Might Perfectionism Increase Across Adolescence?

Adolescence is a time when the body experiences accelerated development in almost all areas, including physical size and brain structure, along with the rapidly changing hormonal jungle that youth must navigate.[5] Adolescents' social environments are also changing[6] as they encounter more ideas from outside of their families, enter more adultlike social situations, gain more freedom as they begin to drive and work, and begin to reorient their relationships with parents and siblings. During all

5. Frances E. Jensen with Amy Ellis Nutt, *The Teenage Brain* (Harper, 2015), 20–21, 60–62.

6. Sarah-Jayne Blakemore, "Adolescence and Mental Health," *Lancet* 393, no. 10185 (2019): 2030–31, https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(19)31013-X.

this change, youth are also developing a new sense of self.[7] While this is thrilling to those who find joy in the process of developing their identity, some youth struggle to feel comfortable in their sense of self.

Youth prone to perfectionism may particularly struggle with developing an identity in today's world, where they are presented with nearly limitless options. Not that long ago, a person's family was the source of almost all the information a person received and the source of nearly all the options a person would have for developing their identity. The information they received was limited to what was available in the household (parents, siblings, and perhaps some books) and local community. Education was limited to what the family or the local community could provide, which was often limited to what books or newspapers they could acquire. It's hard today to imagine a time when all the information an adolescent received (or anyone received) was limited to the few people and the books that were immediately around them (and, of course, there was a time without even books!). Correspondence to obtain new information by purchasing a book or making an inquiry would likely take weeks. For most youth at that time, choices in education and career were restricted to those presented to them in their families or the few options available to them within the community.

Today, a person can access new information and new ideas instantaneously. And in tandem with this new access to information, the creation of new ideas has exploded. Imagine what it would have taken one hundred years ago, or even fifty years ago, to make an idea accessible to more than just a few people. Now an idea can be produced, placed online, and accessed instantly by nearly anyone, anywhere. Along with this, youth today are subject to a constant cacophony of ideas about what makes the "best" life.

These numerous options and ideas can enable and empower youth to choose pathways that best fit their unique talents. When options were more limited in the past, people who didn't quite fit the mold may have had few or no alternatives to find a path where their unique abilities could be used. Research has found that when someone is forced into a single path, they are less motivated and less satisfied by that path.[8]

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7. Susan Branje, Elisabeth L. de Moor, Jenna Spitzer, and Andrik I. Becht, "Dynamics of Identity Development in Adolescence: A Decade in Review," *Journal of Research on Adolescence* 31, no. 4 (2021): 908–27, https://doi.org/10.1111/jora.12678.

8. Erika A. Patall, "The Complex Role of Choice in Human Motivation and Functioning," in *The Oxford Handbook of Human Motivation,* ed. Richard M. Ryan (Oxford University Press, 2019), 135–55.

Having more than one option to choose from can lead a person to experience greater motivation and enjoyment in their choice.

However, what also seems clear from research is that too many options may cause paralysis, and this may be particularly true for youth prone to perfectionism. Scholars have used the term *choice overload,* suggesting that "although the provision of extensive choices may sometimes still be seen as initially desirable, it may also prove unexpectedly demotivating in the end."[9] Indeed, when individuals are presented with extensive choices, they are often more dissatisfied with the choices they end up making.[10] Some scholars have suggested that the plethora of choices in today's world may actually increase dissatisfaction and even depression. In his article "The Tyranny of Freedom," Barry Schwartz noted: "I think it is only a slight exaggeration to say that for the first time in human history, in the contemporary United States large numbers of people can live exactly the kind of lives they want, unconstrained by material, economic, or cultural limitations. This fact . . . might lead one to expect clinical depression in the United States to be going the way of polio. Instead, what we find is an explosive *growth* in the number of people with depression."[11]

In addition, numerous choices regarding one's identity have increased in recent years, and these are not just traditional choices such as education, marriage, and career. From a young age, people are now expected to make decisions about their gender, their sexuality, and their online involvement, each of which have immense ramifications for one's life. Indeed, these decisions could shape all other decisions in their lives. Thus, as children age into adolescence, they are beset by the incredible number of options available. For those who feel they must be perfect, this may pose a debilitating challenge.

Although there is limited research on how the world today may affect the perfectionism of our youth, we can draw some connections. For discrepancy perfectionism (a hyper-focus on not meeting one's expectations), the number of options available to teens can make them even more dissatisfied with their choices. Part of that dissatisfaction may

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9. Sheena S. Iyengar and M. R. Lepper, "When Choice Is Demotivating: Can One Desire Too Much of a Good Thing?," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 79, no. 6 (2000): 996, https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.79.6.995.

10. A simple example is a study that found that people were more satisfied with the chocolate they choose when they were presented with fewer choices of chocolate than with many choices. Iyengar and Lepper, "When Choice Is Demotivating," 1003.

11. Barry Schwartz, "Self-Determination: The Tyranny of Freedom," *American Psychologist* 55, no. 1 (2000): 85, https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.55.1.79, emphasis original; see also Hazel Rose Markus and Barry Schwartz, "Does Choice Mean Freedom and Well-Being?," *Journal of Consumer Research* 37, no. 2 (2010): 344–55.

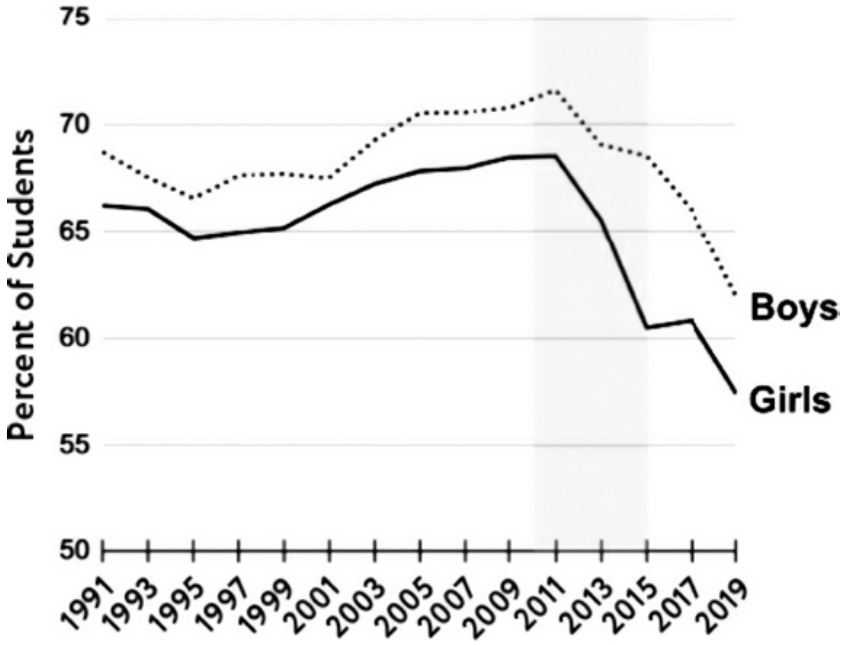

Figure 4. Percentage of High-School Seniors Satisfied with Themselves. Jonathan Haidt, *The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood Is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness* (Penguin Publishing, 2024), 155.

come from the fact that, whatever road they choose, there will be difficulties, and it may not be as positive an experience as they were made to believe. When they see so many online images and videos of others succeeding and enjoying themselves, they might expect the same types of success. This may create the feeling that, as one of our perfectionism items states, "My performance rarely measures up to my standards."

Data from the Monitoring the Future study[12] seem to confirm that the most recent generation is indeed more dissatisfied with themselves. Figure 4 shows the percentage of high-school seniors who said they were satisfied with themselves. The data show that beginning in about 2013, both boys' and girls' sense of satisfaction with themselves began to drop. Jonathan Haidt, in his book *The Anxious Generation,* attributes this to the constant comparisons youth are making between themselves

12. "Monitoring the Future," University of Michigan, accessed September 13, 2024, https://monitoringthefuture.org; see also W. Justin Dyer, "Data from the Monitoring the Future Survey," https://foundations.byu.edu/00000189-049a-de3d-a3ed-c5bbcde40001/importance-of-religion-and-religious-service-attendance-by-generations.

and those on social media and credits the recent uptick in perfectionism to these comparisons.[13]

With the plethora of options and an online world that tells them how wonderful and successful they will be if they select a particular option, the reality is that their choice may not produce the continuous "high" they expected, and as a result, they may feel they have not been successful. It should be noted that adults can fall into this as well. Adults, too, see friends online who post their successes in real estate or an investment, in starting a particular diet or exercise program, in doing this or that type of meditation, or in taking a certain cruise. Adults may also get the feeling that what they are doing is not good enough, or if they didn't have the expected success, they may feel that they don't quite measure up.

Regarding social perfectionism (feeling the need to be perfect for others), limitless choice may also come with limitless criticism (real and perceived) of those choices. And this is especially true in a world where polarization has reached an all-time high. In 1978, if you chose to be a Democrat, you could expect about 50% of Republicans to not feel very favorably towards you. Today, Democrats can expect over 80% of Republicans to not feel very favorably towards them. The same trend also applies to Democrats' favorability toward Republicans.[14] As I'm writing this, the Republican and Democratic nominees are in the midst of vying for the White House. Most people are aware that if we indicate our support for either of these candidates on social media, we will likely receive criticism—and often very personal criticism.

Consider that if you wanted to criticize a person for their choice of political party in 1978, you'd have to call them on the phone, write them a letter, or track them down to tell them in person. Today, you can have dozens, if not hundreds or thousands, of people ready to criticize you directly from wherever they happen to be: in a shopping line, at work, at school, in the bathtub—and the list goes on. And it's not just you who can see others' criticism of your choices. Often, all those connected to your online social networks can see those criticisms. Thus, as some have argued,[15] it would not be surprising if the recent increase in perfectionism

13. Jonathan Haidt, *The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood Is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness* (Penguin Press, 2024), 155.

14. Jean M. Twenge, *Generations: The Real Differences Between Gen Z, Millennials, Gen X, Boomers, and Silents—and What They Mean for America's Future* (Atria Books, 2023), 337.

15. Kristupas Ceilutka, "The Discontents of Competition for Recognition on Social Media," *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 49, no. 4 (2023): 409–30, https://doi.org/10.1177/01914537211072883; Nina Harren, Vera Walburg, and Henri Chabrol, "Studying Social

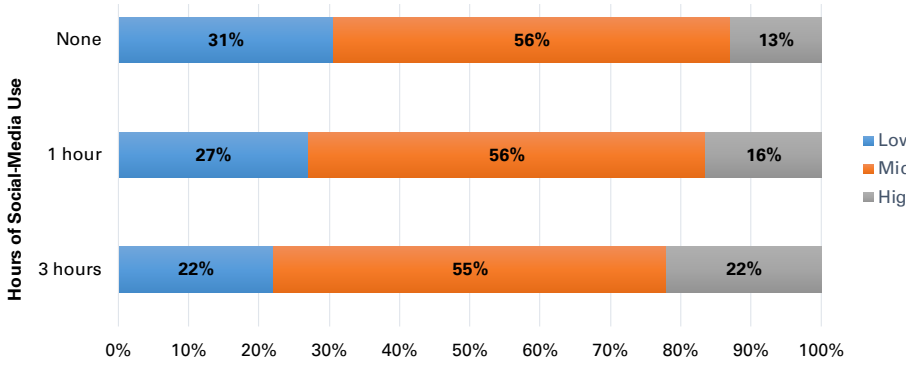

Figure 5. Youth Perfectionism by Daily Social Media Use.

in our society stems from the rise of social media. As youth age and make more decisions, they may likely respond affirmatively to the social-perfectionism statement "If I do not do well all the time, people will not respect me." This "doing well" likely also translates into "choosing well."

It may also be that the cancel culture of today's world instills an overarching fear that if we do not do well, not only will others not respect us, but they may also try to damage our reputations. The barrage of "fail" videos (in which we could include videos of people who make mistakes in public, such as at political events and Senate and House hearings) likely sends a signal to our society that if you make a mistake, your reputation is at risk.

In the Foundations data, we did indeed find a significant link between social media use and perfectionism. Figure 5 shows that 22% of those who use three hours of social media daily are high in perfectionism, compared to 13% of those who use no social media (about 10% of our sample used social media three or more hours a day). When we examined whether one caused the other, the results were inconclusive. But it is important to note the finding that perfectionism and social media use tend to go together.

Again, many youth thrive with increased choices and responsibilities. However, for some, the fear of not measuring up to one's own standards, as well as the dangers of not measuring up to others' standards, may create something of a paralysis when making decisions and taking on increased

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Media Burnout and Problematic Social Media Use: The Implication for Perfectionism and Metacognitions," *Computers in Human Behavior Reports* 4 (August–December 2021): article 100117, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chbr.2021.100117.

responsibilities. It may seem much safer to not engage in "adulting" and stay in a protected place where they are cared for. The popular band AJR sings about leaving home for the first time, pleading with their parents:

> Oh no, don't throw out my Legos.
> What if I can't let go? What if I come back home, back home?
> Can we keep my Legos at home?
> 'Cause I wanna move out, I don't wanna move on.[16]

Perfectionistic thoughts such as "I can't meet my expectations, and it's dangerous to try!" may play into this tug-of-war between wanting to move out and not wanting to move on to adult roles.

Researchers have suggested other aspects of today's culture that may also influence perfectionism. Since the 1970s, many Western cultures seem to have turned away from the importance of membership in groups, such as religion and family, and toward a "competitive individualism," where an individual's identity is valued based on comparison to others rather than value coming from being part of something larger than oneself.[17] While overemphasis on group membership comes with its own problems, an overreliance on individualistic pursuits and success to determine value can create a hyper-self-focus. Some may conclude they are losing in the war of constant comparisons. And while correlation does not necessarily denote causation, we have seen a rise in perfectionism alongside the rise of a more individualistic culture.[18]

What I've outlined here is not meant to paint a picture of an impossible task for youth; many are able to navigate their adolescence well and thrive. However, the pileup of overlapping challenges likely plays into more and more youth developing perfectionism over time as they try to meet their own and society's standards.

Perfectionism by Gender

When discussing perfectionism, it is often important to examine how boys and girls may be different. Research has found that, on average, girls struggle more with mental health than boys.[19] In our data, we found that

16. "Don't Throw Out My Legos," lyrics by Adam Metzger, Jack Metzger, and Ryan Metzger, sung by AJR, album *Neotheater,* AJR Productions, April 26, 2019.

17. Thomas Curran and Andrew Hill, "Perfectionism Is Increasing over Time," *Psychological Bulletin* 145, no. 4 (2019): 410–29, https://doi.org/10.1037/bul0000138.

18. Curran and Hill, "Perfectionism Is Increasing," 410.

19. Ronald C. Kessler and Jane D. McLeod, "Sex Differences in Vulnerability to Undesirable Life Events," *American Sociological Review* 49, no. 5 (1984): 620–31, https://doi.org/10.2307/2095420.

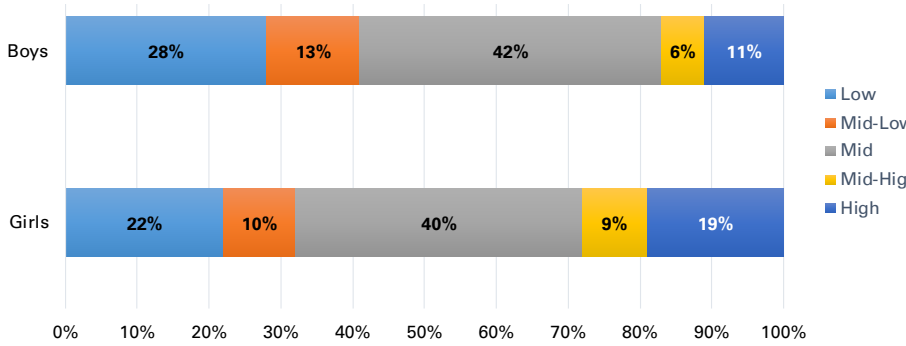

Figure 6. Youth Perfectionism by Gender.

girls were more likely (statistically, significantly more likely) to be in the high-perfectionism group than boys. Figure 6 depicts the percentage of girls and boys along a continuum of perfectionism.

We find that nearly twice the percentage of girls are in the high perfectionism group than boys. While just over one in ten boys are high perfectionists, the probability for girls is nearly one in five. Including those who are mid-high, data suggest that more than one in four girls are high perfectionists on either discrepancy or social perfectionism, and one in five are high perfectionists on both types.

There have been several decades of research on why girls and boys differ in their levels of mental health, with girls more likely to experience mental health difficulties associated with perfectionism such as depression and anxiety.[20] Various explanations include the fact that girls are more likely to experience certain traumatic life events, such as physical and sexual assault.[21] Girls are also more likely than boys to be negatively affected when someone in their social network is experiencing stress.[22] Social media may also affect girls to a greater degree than boys. Although there is still much to learn, two scholars summarizing this area

20. Katherine M. Keyes and Jonathan M. Platt, "Annual Research Review: Sex, Gender, and Internalizing Conditions Among Adolescents in the 21st Century—Trends, Causes, Consequences," *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* 65, no. 4 (2023): 384–407, https://doi.org/10.1111/jcpp.13864.

21. See Narges Farahi and Morgan McEachern, "Sexual Assault of Women," *American Family Physician* 103, no. 3 (2021): 168–76, https://www.aafp.org/pubs/afp/issues/2021/0201/p168.html; see also UN Women and United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Statistics Division, *Progress on the Sustainable Development Goals: The Gender Snapshot 2024,* https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2024-09/progress-on-the-sustainable-development-goals-the-gender-snapshot-2024-en.pdf.

22. Kessler and McLeod, "Sex Differences in Vulnerability," 627–29.

of research indicate: "Evidence is relatively consistent that at least some potential adverse effects of social media are stronger among girls compared with boys."[23] While not ignoring the boys, it may be especially important to engage with the unique concerns of girls who appear to be at particular risk for mental health difficulties, including perfectionism.

Perfectionism by State

It's also useful to ask whether perfectionism may vary depending on the part of the country one lives in. The Foundations data come from Utah, Arizona, and California. Some areas of the country have higher rates of mental health difficulties than others, and it may be that perfectionism is influenced by the state a person is from. For example, Utah has been noted for higher rates of mental health difficulties,[24] though no research has examined perfectionism across states.

Utah sits in the middle of what is known as the "suicide belt," an area of the country with higher suicide rates (see fig. 7). Many of the highest suicide rates in the country are in the Intermountain West with the inclusion of the Dakotas. States in this area share suicide-risk factors, including high altitude,[25] high percentage of Whites and Native Americans (racial groups most at risk for suicide), more rural population (rural areas have higher suicide rates), and a higher percentage of gun ownership.[26] Looking at figure 7, it may be expected that Utah

23. Keyes and Platt, "Annual Research Review," 389.

24. "Antidepressants in Utah," Mormonr, B.H. Roberts Foundation, accessed September 20, 2024, https://mormonr.org/qnas/kxclp/antidepressants_in_utah/research#re-0YzDlN-FyaOWb.

25. High altitude is consistently related to higher suicide rates. While the mechanism is not fully known, studies have shown that lower oxygen at higher altitudes has been connected with higher depression. Shami Kanekar, Chandi Sheth, Hendrick Ombach, Jadeda Brown, Michael Hoffman, Robert Ettaro, and others, "Sex-Based Changes in Rat Brain Serotonin and Behavior in a Model of Altitude-Related Vulnerability to Treatment-Resistant Depression," *Psychopharmacology* 238, no. 10 (2021): 2867–81, https://doi.org/10.1007/s00213-021-05902-y; Kadi T. Nguyen, Chloe A. Gates, James E. Hassell Jr, Christine L. Foxx, Stephanie N. Salazar, Amalia K. Luthens, and others, "Evaluation of the Effects of Altitude on Biological Signatures of Inflammation and Anxiety- and Depressive-like Behavioral Responses," *Progress in Neuro-Psychopharmacology and Biological Psychiatry* 111 (2021): article 110331, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pnpbp.2021.110331.

26. Firearms are a highly lethal way to end one's life. The more prevalent they are within a community, the more likely those who desire to end their lives will gain access to a firearm. See Matthew Miller, Deborah Azrael, and David Hemenway, "Household Firearm Ownership and Suicide Rates in the United States," *Epidemiology* 13, no. 5 (2002): https://doi.org/10.1097/00001648-200209000-00006.

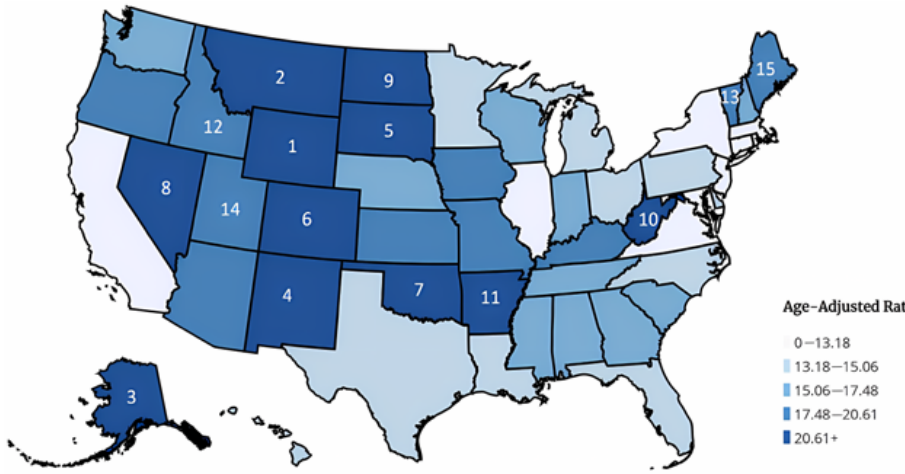

Figure 7. Suicide Rates by State, 2021. Fifteen Highest Suicide Rate States Noted. Source: CDC National Center for Health Statistics, Stats of the States, "Suicide Mortality by State," 2021, https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/pressroom/sosmap/suicide-mortality/suicide.htm.

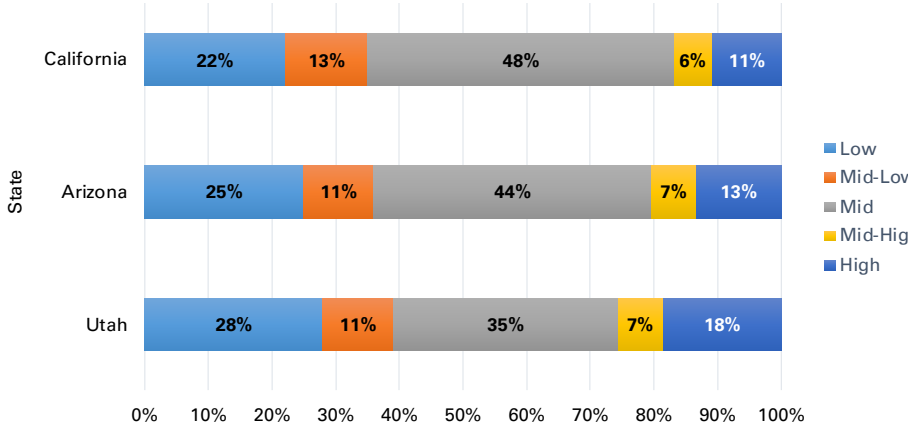

Figure 8. Youth Perfectionism by State.

and Arizona would have higher rates of perfectionism compared to California, given their higher rates of suicide (see fig. 8). Our data demonstrate this with 18% of those in Utah being high in perfectionism compared to 13% in Arizona and 11% in California (the comparisons of California to Utah were statistically significant). Thus, our data follow national trends, finding Utah to have greater reports of mental health difficulties than California. In a seeming paradox, Utah has a higher proportion of those who are at *low* risk than California or Arizona (the comparison of Utah and California being statistically significant).

Some have wondered whether religion may play a role in the suicide rates in Utah, thinking that stress from religion may lead some people to greater depression and hopelessness.[27] However, it has also been found that religion can provide protection against mental health problems.[28] The article titled "Religion and Perfectionism" in this issue treats this most directly. And, while higher than the national average, Utah is actually low in suicide for its region (see fig. 7). There is likely a confluence of risk and protective factors in Utah that make the vulnerable particularly susceptible to perfectionism while providing protection for others.

Perfectionism by Sexual Orientation

Another attribute related to mental health is sexual orientation. Research consistently finds that sexual and gender minorities (SGM: those that are not heterosexual and/or those who identify as transgender, nonbinary, and so on) have higher rates of mental health difficulties.[29] In the Foundations data at Wave 4, 16.7% of respondents identified their sexual orientation as something other than "straight/heterosexual," with 9.2% identifying as bisexual, 2.9% as gay or lesbian, 2.8% as unsure, and 1.8%

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27. See Gregory A. Prince, *Gay Rights and the Mormon Church: Intended Actions, Unintended Consequences* (University of Utah Press, 2019); W. Justin Dyer, review of *Gay Rights and the Mormon Church: Intended Actions, Unintended Consequences,* by Gregory A. Prince, *BYU Studies Quarterly* 59, no. 1 (2020): 223–29, https://byustudies.byu.edu/article/gay-rights-and-the-mormon-church-intended-actions-unintended-consequences-2.

28. See Harold G. Koenig, Tyler J. VanderWeele, and John R. Peteet, "Section II: Mental Health," in *Handbook of Religion and Health,* 3rd ed. (Oxford University Press, 2024), 45–235.

29. Charlotte Wittgens, Mirjam M. Fischer, Pichit Buspavanich, Sabrina Theobald, Katinka Schweizer, and Sebastian Trautmann, "Mental Health in People with Minority Sexual Orientations: A Meta-Analysis of Population-Based Studies," *Acta Psychiatrica Scandinavica* 145, no. 4 (2022): 357–72, https://doi.org/10.1111/acps.13405.

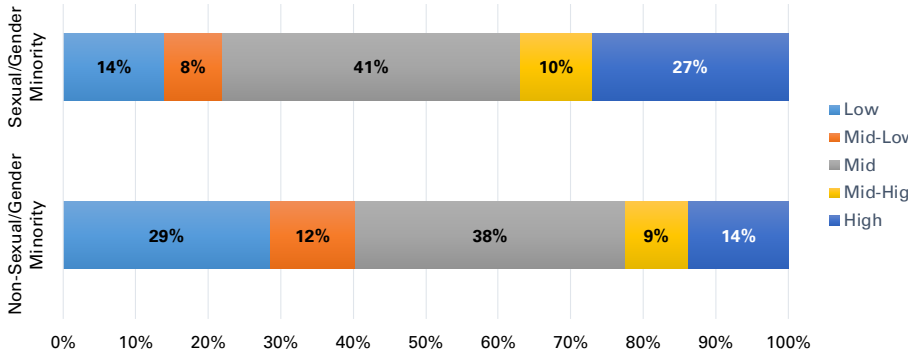

Figure 9. Youth Perfectionism by Sexual and Gender Minority Status.

as "other." Regarding gender identity, 2.2% identified as transgender, and 4.8% identified as nonbinary or as "other." In all, there were 182 SGMs in the Foundations data at Wave 4.

Figure 9 shows how SGMs differ from non-SGMs in their perfectionism. For SGMs, 14% are low in perfectionism, whereas 29% of non-SGMs are low in perfectionism. For SGMs, 27% are high in perfectionism, whereas 14% of non-SGMs are high in perfectionism. This stark contrast is, unfortunately, in line with the previous research on the higher rates of mental and emotional difficulties for SGMs.

There has been very little research on sexual orientation and perfectionism. One master's thesis identified a small sample (six participants) of gay men who self-identified as perfectionists. One theme was that the participants felt their perfectionism developed as an effort to conform. The author states that these men had "a desire to prove to themselves and others that they were perfect, in order to minimize and hide what society had deemed to be imperfect—their sexual orientation."[30] It may be that higher levels of perfectionism are associated with those whose situation or life experiences are seen as outside the norm. In reaction to feeling different, they can develop a sense that others are judging them and will not accept them if they are not conforming to the norm. They may also have adopted the expectations of the norm, and being outside of that, they may consistently feel like they are not measuring up.

30. Jessica Anne Steadman, "The 'Perfect' Gay Man: An Exploration of Perfectionism with Gay Men in New Zealand" (master's thesis, Massey University, 2021), 113, http://hdl.handle.net/10179/17598.

Conclusion

Today's society provides nearly endless opportunities for youth to choose a life path. There is, however, an element of "for better or for worse" about this. Many youth thrive with the plethora of options and are able to ignore the critics and cynics on the side. However, other youth may struggle profoundly to feel like they have chosen the right path and may quickly feel invalidated if others express disapproval of their choices. Toxic perfectionism can easily become a serious difficulty for youth. Indeed, as we saw from the data in this chapter, nearly one in four youth were high in at least one form of toxic perfectionism. In "Perfectionism's Influence on Adolescent Mental Health" herein, we'll see how damaging this can be to their mental health. In "Religion and Perfectionism" herein, we'll see how this can be damaging for their religious participation.

While the article herein titled "Healing from Toxic Perfectionism" more fully addresses what can be done about perfectionism, it is important for parents and leaders to understand the experiences of youth today, which are vastly different from what they experienced as youth. As noted earlier, certain groups are at greater risk, including girls, SGM youth, and those in certain regions of the United States. Not all youth have the same risk factors, and we can be sensitive to those most at risk for perfectionism. Further, helping *all* youth understand and see their social environment more clearly can enable them to recognize healthy and unhealthy behaviors in online and personal interactions and plot a safer course around toxic perfectionism.

Part of seeing more clearly will be helping youth derive their sense of worth from an eternal, rather than a temporal, source. For each youth to know that the worth of their soul is "great in the sight of God" (D&C 18:10), and that their worth does not fluctuate based on their choices or their behavior, provides an anchor when (almost inevitably) other sources of validation fail. When faced with multiple options about who they are and choices about what they should do, if the parents and Church leaders of these youth teach that their worth is never on the line, youth and young adults can move beyond their inevitable mistakes and along the covenant path, confident in God's never-ending love.

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Parental Influence on Adolescent Perfectionism

Jenet Erickson, Olivia Forsberg, and McKenna Schmidt

I (primary author) will never forget a poignant moment in the mother's lounge at church when our first child was about nine months old. Two other mothers with younger babies were in the lounge at the same time, and we talked as our babies nursed, then played. As I watched the two younger children crawl around, I became acutely aware that our daughter, who had not yet started to crawl, was clearly behind these other children. A panicky feeling overtook me as I wrestled with what it meant to me that these children appeared to be ahead of mine. I felt embarrassed about my unsettled feelings, sensing that even worse than the panic were my own potential feelings of disappointment in my child. All at once I felt confronted with the uncomfortable reality that as young as she was, my own identity and feelings about myself were wrapped up in her successful developmental attainments. I had quickly turned her into evidence of my goodness and capacity, instead of valuing her unique development.

That was, of course, not my last experience with such feelings. Across parenting, I found myself sometimes using my children to reinforce my view of myself. I had to confront how natural it was for me sometimes to pressure them to act, think, and feel in specific ways to comply with my high expectations for them so that I could feel validated as a mother. I found that some of my own perfectionism, my need to be exceptional to prove my own value and worth, seeped into my way of relating to my children. I needed them to be exceptional in order to feel sufficient myself.

These can be very natural feelings for parents. After all, parenting is an intensive, lifetime investment in the development and well-being of

another. We care deeply about what we are investing in! But when we begin to use our children and their development as a way of addressing our own needs for achievement and validation, we lose track of truly seeing and valuing them. Our own struggle with perfectionism then becomes theirs.

The purpose of this article is to understand and address this struggle. Much has been said about the negative impact of toxic perfectionism and the importance of assessing and treating perfectionist behaviors. But how and why does toxic perfectionism develop in someone? What role, if any, does parenting play in that process? We all know individuals who have excessively high expectations of themselves and others, who fear a lack of acceptance unless they meet those standards and then self-punish when they inevitably fail. We may struggle with perfectionism ourselves. Why do we develop this orientation toward ourselves and others? What role does our family life play in that process?

Evidence suggests that inborn personality traits do play a role in a person's susceptibility to perfectionistic tendencies.[1] But those personality traits develop within a relational context. Thus both nature and nurture likely play a role. From the beginning of life, we are shaped by the interactions we have with others. Family relationships in particular play a critical role in shaping the way we understand ourselves and others. Thus, it is not surprising that a body of research suggests that experiences in family life, beginning early, can play a role in the development of toxic perfectionism.[2]

Yet parenting does not happen within a bubble. Research studies indicate a significant increase in toxic perfectionism among young adults internationally in the past decade. As Thomas Curran and Andrew P. Hill conclude, "Recent generations of young people perceive that others are more demanding of them, are more demanding of others, and are more demanding of themselves."[3] This perfectionism increase parallels

1. Paul L. Hewitt and Gordon L. Flett, "Perfectionism in the Self and Social Contexts: Conceptualization, Assessment, and Association with Psychopathology," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 60, no. 3 (1991): 456–70, https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.60.3.456.

2. Paul L. Hewitt, Gordon L. Flett, and Samuel F. Mikail, *Perfectionism: A Relational Approach to Conceptualization, Assessment, and Treatment* (Guilford Press, 2017), 96–119.

3. Thomas Curran and Andrew P. Hill, "Perfectionism Is Increasing over Time: A Meta-Analysis of Birth Cohort Differences from 1989 to 2016," *Psychological Bulletin* 145, no. 4 (2019): 410, http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/bul0000138.

a dramatic uptick in other mental health challenges, including anxiety and depression, which suggests an important cultural component that is increasing mental health risks for adolescents and young adults.[4]

Researchers have explored what factors might be contributing to perfectionism's significant increase. Curran and Hill found that several cultural changes influence perfectionism, including the rise in "competitive individualism" (the idea that success is the result of individual effort and ability competing for limited resources), the "doctrine of meritocracy" (the idea that merit can earn you the perfect life and lifestyle), and "anxious and controlling practices" by parents who see their child's failures as their own.[5] These cultural factors appear to have an impact on children's perfectionism by shaping parents' ways of relating to their children. Parental behavior is, in fact, a key contributing factor for this increase in perfectionism.[6]

Our weaknesses as parents, including the ways our parenting might negatively impact our children, might be every parent's greatest fear. We sense the profound dependence our children have on us to nurture, provide for, and protect them. Yet every parent's weaknesses are consistently exposed: we don't love perfectly, we don't correct appropriately, and we don't always guide and teach carefully enough. Recognizing our imperfections, we can't help but fear what seems to be the inevitable reality that we will cause them at least some suffering and possibly even contribute to them developing some harmful ways of coping with life, including toxic perfectionism. Ironically, our fear that we might cause our children unhealthy coping patterns, like perfectionism, may cause us to be more perfectionistic about our parenting!

While it is clear that perfectionism tends to run in families,[7] it would be wrong to assume that parents with perfectionistic children are necessarily parenting poorly and blame them exclusively. The development of toxic perfectionism appears to be a complex process. A child's genetically based temperament partially shapes their experience of relationships

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4. Curran and Hill, "Perfectionism Is Increasing," 420–21; see also Jonathan Haidt, *The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood Is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness* (Penguin Press, 2024).

5. Curran and Hill, "Perfectionism Is Increasing," 412–13.

6. Curran and Hill, "Perfectionism Is Increasing," 414; see also Hewitt, Flett, and Mikail, *Perfectionism: A Relational Approach,* 114–15.

7. See Gordon L. Flett, Paul L. Hewitt, Joan M. Oliver, and Silvana Macdonald, "Perfectionism in Children and Their Parents: A Developmental Analysis," in *Perfectionism: Theory, Research, and Treatment,* ed. Gordon L. Flett and Paul L. Hewitt (American Psychological Association, 2002), 89–132, https://doi.org/10.1037/10458-004.

with family members by drawing out specific responses from parents (dependent on the parent's personality), which in turn shapes a child's development and orientation to self and others. For example, infants who are hard to soothe and somewhat withdrawn tend to elicit fewer positive responses from parents and others than infants who are easy to soothe and have a happy disposition. Research studies suggest that children are active participants in their own development, responding to parenting based on their temperament and shaping the way they develop and manifest perfectionism.[8]

Yet there are things we can do to avoid creating a dynamic in our families that may contribute to the development of toxic perfectionism. Both previous research and our current study show that parenting can shape a child's genetically based tendencies and strengthen the likelihood that children either do or do not develop perfectionistic traits. We begin by reviewing what previous research found regarding the link between parenting and children's development of toxic perfectionism. We then present our own analyses of the Foundations data (see the introduction of this issue) and what our findings mean for parents today.

Review of Previous Research

Research on the development of toxic perfectionism indicates at least three important ways that parents may influence the development of perfectionism in children: (1) modeling perfectionism, which children imitate; (2) interacting with children in ways that require them to achieve a certain standard to experience love and connection; and (3) parenting in a way that is either coercive or neglectful, leading children to use perfectionism as a way of attaining a sense of control.

Modeling Perfectionism

First, from a social-learning perspective, parents influence the development of toxic perfectionism by modeling perfectionistic patterns that children observe and imitate.[9] Research findings indicate that when children observe their parents criticizing themselves for not reaching a specific standard, or when they observe parents being unaccepting of themselves

8. Arnold H. Buss and Robert Plomin, *A Temperament Theory of Personality Development* (Wiley-Interscience, 1975), 210, 215–17.

9. Albert Bandura and Carol J. Kupers, "Transmission of Patterns of Self-Reinforcement Through Modeling," *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 69, no. 1 (1964): 1–9, https://doi.org/10.1037/h0041187.

or their efforts unless they meet a certain high standard, the children may imitate the same behaviors.[10] The fact that parents are the primary and most influential socializers of children, as well as the natural tendency of children to "idolize" their parents, makes children especially susceptible to imitating their parents, including their patterns of toxic perfectionism.[11]

This appears to be particularly true for passing on the self-oriented form of toxic perfectionism. *Self-oriented perfectionism,* also named *discrepancy perfectionism,* is defined by having excessively high expectations of ourselves and punishing ourselves with shame (including feelings of worthlessness) when expectations are not met. Self-oriented perfectionism includes a discrepancy focus, or a focus on the discrepancy "between the standards one has for oneself and one's actual performance."[12] *Socially prescribed perfectionism* is defined by the perception that we must meet specific standards in order to receive approval and be worthy of love from others. *Other-oriented perfectionism* is holding on to high expectations for other people.[13] Toxic perfectionism often involves manifesting multiple forms of perfectionism, but it may be discrepancy perfectionism that passes on through parent modeling and child imitating.

Observing and imitating discrepancy perfectionism may be especially likely if the child is the same sex as the parent exhibiting the behaviors. Some research finds that daughters are more likely to develop discrepancy perfectionism when their mothers exhibit perfectionistic

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10. Buss and Plomin, *Temperament Theory,* 91–93; see also Thomas Curran, Andrew P. Hill, Daniel J. Madigan, and Annett V. Stornæs, "A Test of Social Learning and Parent Socialization Perspectives on the Development of Perfectionism," *Personality and Individual Differences* 160 (July 2020): article 109925, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2020.109925.

11. Martin M. Smith, Paul L. Hewitt, Simon B. Sherry, Gordon L. Flett, and Cassondra Ray, "Parenting Behaviors and Trait Perfectionism: A Meta-Analytic Test of the Social Expectations and Social Learning Models," *Journal of Research in Personality* 96 (February 2022): 2, article 104180, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrp.2021.104180.

12. Robert B. Slaney, Kenneth G. Rice, Michael Mobley, Joseph Trippi, and Jeffrey S. Ashby, "The Revised Almost Perfect Scale," *Measurement and Evaluation in Counseling and Development* 34, no. 3 (2001): 133.

13. For all the types of perfectionism, see table 1.1 in Gordon L. Flett and Paul L. Hewitt, *Perfectionism in Childhood and Adolescence: A Developmental Approach* (American Psychological Association, 2022), 20–21; see also exhibit 1.1 in Gordon L. Flett and Paul L. Hewitt, "Perfectionism and Maladjustment: An Overview of Theoretical, Definitional, and Treatment Issues," in Flett and Hewitt, *Perfectionism: Theory, Research, and Treatment,* 11.

behaviors, while sons are more likely to imitate their father's toxic perfectionism.[14] Some have hypothesized that because mothers tend to spend more time directly interacting with their children, a mother's toxic perfectionism may influence both sons and daughters who observe and imitate her patterns more than the father's.[15] But in fact, research studies show evidence for both the fathers' and mothers' perfectionism leading to adolescent perfectionism tendencies.[16]

Still, children with perfectionistic parents do not necessarily develop perfectionistic tendencies, let alone toxic perfectionism. Some children appear to be much more susceptible to developing toxic perfectionism, whether or not their parents model perfectionism. In particular, evidence suggests that a child who has the core personality trait of "conscientiousness" may be more susceptible to discrepancy perfectionism as an extreme form of aiming for achievement.[17]

Psychological Control

Another way parents shape the development of toxic perfectionism in children appears to be more influential than either parent modeling or a child's personality characteristics. From infancy, family relationships provide the primary and essential source of interaction through which one's understanding of self and of others develops. Every infant emerges from the womb with one task they must accomplish. They must establish a bond of deep emotional communication with someone they experience as consistently attentive, responsive, and attuned to them.[18]

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14. Angela Z. Vieth and Timothy J. Trull, "Family Patterns of Perfectionism: An Examination of College Students and Their Parents," *Journal of Personality Assessment* 72, no. 1 (1999): 49–67, https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327752jpa7201_3.

15. L. Caitlin Cook and Christopher A. Kearney, "Parent and Youth Perfectionism and Internalizing Psychopathology," *Personality and Individual Differences* 46, no. 3 (2009): 325–30, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2008.10.029.

16. See Paul R. Appleton, Howard K. Hall, and Andrew P. Hill, "Family Patterns of Perfectionism: An Examination of Elite Junior Athletes and Their Parents," *Psychology of Sport and Exercise* 11, no. 5 (2010): 363–71, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2010.04.005; and Kristie L. Speirs Neumeister, Kristen Kay Williams, and Tracy L. Cross, "Gifted High-School Students' Perspectives on the Development of Perfectionism," *Rooper Review* 31, no. 4 (2009), 198–206, https://doi.org/10.1080/02783190903177564.

17. Joachim Stoeber, Kathleen Otto, and Claudia Dalbert, "Perfectionism and the Big Five: Conscientiousness Predicts Longitudinal Increases in Self-Oriented Perfectionism," *Personality and Individual Differences* 47, no. 4 (2009): 363–68, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2009.04.004.

18. Allan N. Schore, *Affect Regulation and the Origin of the Self: The Neurobiology of Emotional Development* (Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1994), 12, 22; see also Allan N.

This primary bond lays the foundations for self-awareness, regulation of emotions, and the capacity for social understanding. From within the security of these responsive relationships, children develop a sense of security about the world, the capacity for a resilient and stable self-concept, and the sense of being both valuable and valued by others.

Without this foundation, children may suffer with "an unrelenting longing for acceptance, relational connection, and the sense that [they] matter."[19] The foundational role of early relationships in shaping sense of self and value to others underscores why most perfectionism theorists suggest that the unrelenting need for acceptance and approval that is part of toxic perfectionism is often rooted in insecure and destabilizing experiences with family members early in life.[20] The importance of secure and responsive family relationships continues throughout development. Beyond infancy, parenting continues to play an important role in helping children fulfill the human need for security, belonging, and being loved and valued just because they exist—not because of what they achieve or become. Parenting that does not consistently fulfill these inherent needs increases the likelihood that children will develop toxic perfectionism.[21]

Research findings suggest that when parents have high expectations for their children, frequently express criticism or disappointment, and then withdraw love when expectations are not met, children are more likely to develop toxic perfectionism.[22] In fact, evidence suggests that high expectations along with consistent criticism create the conditions that make toxic perfectionism.[23] Children learn that in order to receive their parents' love and affection, they must meet their high expectations for success. Failure to do so is met by criticism (often personally deprecating criticism). As a result, children internalize that they are expected to meet expectations for high performance, but they also internalize

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Schore, "Effects of a Secure Attachment Relationship on Right Brain Development, Affect Regulation, and Infant Mental Health," *Infant Mental Health Journal* 22, nos. 1–2 (2001): 7–66, https://doi.org/10.1002/1097-0355(200101/04)22:1%3C7::AID-IMHJ2%3E3.0.CO;2-N.

19. Hewitt, Flett, and Mikail, *Perfectionism: A Relational Approach,* 101.

20. Hewitt, Flett, and Mikail, *Perfectionism: A Relational Approach,* 97–103.

21. Hewitt, Flett, and Mikail, *Perfectionism: A Relational Approach,* 114–19.

22. Robert B. Slaney, Kenneth G. Rice, and Jeffrey S. Ashby, "A Programmatic Approach to Measuring Perfectionism: The Almost Perfect Scales," in Flett and Hewitt, *Perfectionism: Theory, Research, and Treatment,* 83; see also Flett and Hewitt, *Perfectionism in Childhood and Adolescence,* 146–55.

23. Flett and others, "Perfectionism in Children and Their Parents," 99–101.

the negative perception that they will never meet those expectations. W. Hugh Missildine described these children as having parents who relentlessly encouraged them to do better, but instead of rewarding them for improving, their parents continually expected the children to set and reach even higher standards.[24] As a result, these children learned that they could never really be good enough.

Researchers use the term "psychological control" to describe this pattern in parenting. Psychological control is characterized by withdrawing love, shaming, and other insidious strategies to pressure children to act, think, and feel in specific ways to comply with the parents' high standards.[25] At its heart, psychological control is about controlling a child's behavior by telling them (directly or indirectly) that if they don't meet the standards, or if they make mistakes, they are no longer lovable, wanted, or of worth. The child becomes incredibly anxious about doing anything and may even withdraw from activities so they do not make a mistake and thus prove their worthlessness.

The developmental needs of children mean that parents are essential to influence, guide, and direct children's behavior. Behavioral control, in which parents set clear rules and monitor children's activities, is essential. Psychological control, however, is an attempt to place limits on children's thoughts and feelings. It is not asking a child to help with chores, but telling them what they should feel about it, and that if they do not feel the same way as the parent, they are bad. Examples of psychological control are using manipulation to control behavior, demanding obedience and withholding acceptance of a child when they do not meet the desired standard, using harsh punishments that do not align with the offense, showing a lack of empathy, not appreciating a child's individuality, and setting unattainable expectations.

Psychological control is the parenting characteristic most strongly linked with the development of toxic perfectionism in children, particularly the socially prescribed form.[26] The link makes sense given that it is

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24. W. Hugh Missildine, *Your Inner Child of the Past* (Pocket Books, 1963), 84–85.

25. See Brian K. Barber, "Parental Psychological Control: Revisiting a Neglected Construct," *Child Development* 67, no. 6 (1996): 3296–319, https://doi.org/10.2307/1131780; and Bart Soenens and Maarten Vansteenkiste, "A Theoretical Upgrade of the Concept of Parental Psychological Control: Proposing New Insights on the Basis of Self- Determination Theory," *Developmental Review* 30, no. 1 (2010): 74–99, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dr.2009.11.001.

26. Bart Soenens, Andrew J. Elliot, Luc Goossens, Maarten Vansteenkiste, Patrick Luyten, and Bart Duriez, "The Intergenerational Transmission of Perfectionism: Parents'

characterized by the perception that others hold excessively high standards for us, that they are judging us harshly, and that we must meet these standards in order to receive approval and be loved.

For parents who withdraw love as a means of control, scholar Leon Kass insightfully notes, "Their [children's] capacity for trust and love has been severely crippled by the betrayal of the primal trust" all children place in their parents "to provide that durable, reliable, and absolutely trustworthy haven of permanent and unconditional love in an otherwise often unloving and undependable world."[27] When children do not experience a sense of permanent, unconditional love, they may unconsciously develop the need to appear or be perfect—to compensate for not feeling inherently accepted and valued and to manage the anxiety associated with that unmet need. Hewitt and others conclude that "many perfectionists have an inordinate need for control" as a way of avoiding any possibility of failure or revealing their weaknesses to others.[28] Evidence suggests that this need may be rooted in early insecure relationships or traumatic experiences where they did not experience a sufficient sense of security in the world or a sufficient sense of their own worth in relation to others.[29]

As illustrated by the example shared at the beginning of the article, parents' own "maladaptive perfectionism"[30] plays an important role in shaping psychological control. Blinded by the need to meet their own expectations, these parents may not attune to their children's unique needs and desires. Instead, toxic-perfectionist parents tend to put their own desires and expectations on their children, especially those the parents feel unable to achieve. When children do not meet their expectations, they will withdraw love and express disappointment because their children have kept them from meeting their own expectations for

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Psychological Control as an Intervening Variable," *Journal of Family Psychology* 19, no. 3 (2005): 358–66, https://doi.org/10.1037/0893-3200.19.3.358.

27. Leon R. Kass, "The End of Courtship," *Public Interest* 126 (Winter 1997): 47.

28. Hewitt, Flett, and Mikail, *Perfectionism: A Relational Approach,* 19.

29. Hewitt, Flett, and Mikail, *Perfectionism: A Relational Approach,* 107–8, Flett and Hewitt, *Perfectionism in Childhood and Adolescence,* 170–72; see also Allan Mallinger, "The Myth of Perfection: Perfectionism in the Obsessive Personality," *American Journal of Psychotherapy* 63, no. 2 (2009): 103–31, https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.psychotherapy.2009.63.2.103.

30. Bart Soenens, Maarten Vansteenkiste, Bart Duriez, and Luc Goossens, "In Search of the Sources of Psychologically Controlling Parenting: The Role of Parental Separation Anxiety and Parental Maladaptive Perfectionism," *Journal of Research on Adolescence* 16, no. 4 (2006): 539, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1532-7795.2006.00507.x.

themselves. Their focus on meeting expectations and getting approval for their attainments may keep them from seeing or feeling empathy for their children's unique talents and perspectives. Children who express difference, either by wanting different goals or by not having the same capacities, will feel threatening to the parent's sense of self and need to achieve. This parental psychological control may prevent a child from forming their own personal identity and autonomy.

Whether children adopt toxic perfectionism may also be shaped by the gender of the parent who exhibits the psychological control. Some evidence suggests that fathers with maladaptive perfectionism tend to use a more domineering style in expressing their psychological control, while mothers with maladaptive perfectionism are more likely to use less overt control or aggression. As a result, studies show that children's development of toxic perfectionism is more strongly related to their father's type of psychological control, rather than their mother's.[31]

Another negative impact on children comes when parents use psychological control as a way of managing their own separation anxiety. Evidence suggests that parents with this anxiety will psychologically control their children as a way to promote dependency.[32] Any autonomous behavior by the child feels threatening to the parent, and parents then often resort to "guilt-induction and conditional approval" to keep them from becoming more independent.[33]

Parenting Styles: Authoritarian, Authoritative, and Permissive

Since Diana Baumrind's landmark work identifying three distinct parenting styles, research has consistently confirmed the impact of parental style on a host of outcomes for children. The three parenting styles are authoritarian, authoritative, and permissive. Authoritarian parents are characterized by high standards, low acceptance, and unresponsiveness to children's distinct individual needs; authoritative parents are characterized by high standards with high levels of warmth and responsiveness to children's individual needs; permissive parents are characterized by low control, low standards, and high levels of acceptance.[34]

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31. Soenens and others, "Intergenerational Transmission of Perfectionism," 362–63.

32. Soenens and others, "In Search of the Sources," 540–41.

33. Soenens and others, "In Search of the Sources," 542.

34. Diana Baumrind, "Authoritative Parenting Revisited: History and Current Status," in *Authoritative Parenting: Synthesizing Nurturance and Discipline for Optimal Child Development,* ed. Robert E. Larzelere, Amanda Sheffield Morris, and Amanda W. Harrist (American Psychological Association, 2013), 11–34, https://doi.org/10.1037/13948-002.

In other words, authoritarian parents are highly demanding, directive, and controlling while also more emotionally detached and less warm than other parents. Authoritative parents do have some demands, direct some activities, and provide clear and firm guidelines. However, they combine this with reasoning, warmth, and some flexibility. Authoritative parenting is considered ideal because the structure, involvement, and guidelines combined with warmth and acceptance provide the nurturing needed to help children develop self-esteem, self-regulate, be independent and cooperative, and pursue achievement. These children are more likely to "reach for the stars" yet also recognize their inherent self-worth aside from what they achieve or what may befall them. Permissive parents are accepting and responsive but avoid directing or setting standards, making it hard for children to experience the structure needed to control impulses, develop maturity in being independent, and pursue their desired achievements.

One might assume that children in an authoritarian environment would be more likely to develop perfectionism. Some evidence seems to point in this direction.[35] But other evidence suggests that authoritarianism can also be linked to positive or adaptive forms of perfectionism rather than just maladaptive forms. Psychological control differs from authoritarianism because of its orientation toward love withdrawal rather than just control, infusing a different form of anxiety in a child that makes them more susceptible to maladaptive perfectionism.[36] Thus, it is the combination of authoritarian parenting with psychological control that can lead to a child's development of toxic perfectionism—not just the authoritarian parenting style on its own.

Unhealthy Emotional Bonds and Family Rigidity

The third way parents may shape the development of toxic perfectionism in children is through the level of coercion and flexibility and the level of warmth and closeness in the family's way of operating. David Olson's Circumplex Model identifies two dimensions of every family system that help define the level of health: cohesion and flexibility.[37] Cohesion is a measure of a family's ability to build a sense of reliance and closeness with one another while also protecting the sense of autonomy and

35. See Flett and others, "Perfectionism in Children and Their Parents," 117–18.

36. Soenens and others, "Intergenerational Transmission of Perfectionism," 360.

37. David H. Olson, "Circumplex Model of Marital and Family Systems," *Journal of Family Therapy* 22, no. 2 (2000): 144–67, https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-6427.00144.

self-development. Families that fall on the extremes of cohesion (excessively cohesive or not cohesive at all) are characterized as either emotionally enmeshed or emotionally disengaged.

Enmeshment is defined by excessive dependence on one another for emotional support, a lack of emotional independence, and a lack of separation between parents and children. Family members in an enmeshed family are emotionally reactive to one another in unhealthy ways. In addition, the parents' overreliance on children for emotional support compromises children's ability to form individual thoughts and behaviors separate from their parents. On the other extreme, disengagement is defined by little sense of closeness or emotional connection and an inability to turn to or rely upon one another. Family members in a disengaged family do not feel that they can share themselves or their feelings, nor do they feel they can turn to other family members for support in times of need.

Evidence suggests that both enmeshment and disengagement may be linked to the development of perfectionism.[38] Families who are enmeshed have very blurry psychological boundaries, inherently increasing the likelihood of psychological control to shape the way individuals relate to one another and thus increasing the risks of maladaptive perfectionism. On the other hand, children in a disengaged family may develop perfectionism to gain basic attention, response, and engagement or to secure approval and belonging.

The second dimension defined by the Circumplex Model is flexibility. Flexibility is a measure of the family's ability to be flexible to the need for change but also structured enough to maintain coherence across change. Families that fall on the extremes of flexibility are characterized as either rigid or chaotic, both of which are linked with increased difficulties for children. Extremes of rigidity and chaos may shape a child's need to exert control over their life. Children in a rigid family environment may learn that in order to attain approval or acceptance, they must rigidly adhere to expectations, developing both discrepancy perfectionism and socially prescribed perfectionism. Parental psychological control is often linked with ridigity and unhealthy emotional bonds. Those in a chaotic environment may develop perfectionism as a way of getting some control over a situation that feels very out of control, imposing higher standards on themselves in reaction to the chaos and lack of predictability.

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38. Alan E. Craddock, Wendy Church, and Alexandra Sands, "Family of Origin Characteristics as Predictors of Perfectionism," *Australian Journal of Psychology* 61, no. 3 (2009): 136–44, https://doi.org/10.1080/00049530802239326.

Together, these findings provide evidence for all three ways that parenting influences the development of toxic perfectionism in children: modeling maladaptive perfectionism; using psychological control by requiring children to achieve a certain standard in order to receive love and connection; and allowing extreme levels of unhealthy cohesion (neglectful or enmeshed) and flexibility (permissive or rigid) within a family unit.

Our Analyses

In our analyses, we evaluate how these three potential ways can manifest themselves in Latter-day Saint families with youth. Family variables were used to predict the level of toxic perfectionism a youth manifests—either low, medium, or high.[39] The level of perfectionism was a combined measure of both discrepancy perfectionism and socially prescribed perfectionism. A youth who was low in toxic perfectionism was low in both discrepancy and socially prescribed perfectionism. A youth who was medium in toxic perfectionism was high in either discrepancy or socially prescribed perfectionism and low in the other. A youth who was high in toxic perfectionism was high in both discrepancy and socially prescribed perfectionism. The family variables that were used to predict whether a youth exhibited low, medium, or high levels of toxic perfectionism included the following: parent psychological control, parent warmth, parent verbal hostility, parent anxiety, interparental conflict, and family functioning (rigidity, chaos, enmeshment, disengagement).

The findings of these analyses build on previous research findings while focusing on Latter-day Saints. The analyses confirm that family patterns and dynamics do play a role in the development of toxic perfectionism among Latter-day Saint youth and young adults. Findings from our analyses on each of the three ways through which parenting potentially influences the development of toxic perfectionism are presented here.

In terms of children developing perfectionism by imitating their parents' perfectionism, fathers' and mothers' discrepancy (self-oriented) perfectionism increased the likelihood that boys would exhibit high levels of toxic perfectionism but did not increase the likelihood of toxic perfectionism for girls. In our analyses, boys were nearly six times as likely to imitate high levels of discrepancy perfectionism when their

39. See the appendix for sample details. High, medium, and low levels of perfectionism were defined as in the article by Dyer in this volume.

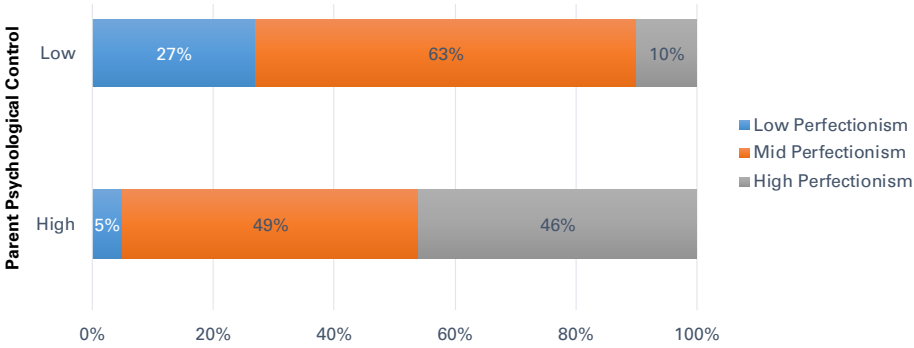

Figure 1. Girls' perfectionism when both mother and father psychological control is high and when both are low.

parents exhibited discrepancy perfectionism. Specifically, only 2.2% of boys were high in perfectionism when their parent was low in discrepancy perfectionism, yet when the parent was high in discrepancy perfectionism, 12.8% of boys were high in perfectionism. Parents' socially prescribed perfectionism did not predict perfectionism in either boys or girls.

Although girls' perfectionism did not appear to be directly related to parents modeling perfectionism, both mother and father psychological control were strongly related to their daughters' perfectionism. A mother's high psychological control predicted daughters exhibiting medium levels of toxic perfectionism rather than low. A father's psychological control appeared to exert even stronger influence. Fathers' high psychological control predicted daughters exhibiting a high level of toxic perfectionism compared to a medium level of toxic perfectionism. In other words, a father's psychological control seemed to tip daughters over into the highest levels of perfectionism.

When considering mother and father psychological control together, we found that 46% of girls whose parents were both high on psychological control had high perfectionism. This is compared to just 10% of girls being high in perfectionism when both parents were low in psychological control. In other words, high parental psychological control in both parents increased the likelihood of daughters being high in toxic perfectionism by nearly five times (see fig. 1).

While boys seemed to be most impacted by their parents' experiencing and modeling discrepancy perfectionism, girls seemed to be most impacted by parents who withdrew love, shamed, or used other emotional strategies to pressure children to act, think, and feel in ways that

complied with the parents' standards. Boys tended to develop toxic perfectionism just because their parents were toxic perfectionists. But girls developed toxic perfectionism because of how their parents related to them in psychologically controlling ways.

In terms of the third method of parental influence, the current analyses found that the level of flexibility and cohesion in a family also predicted the development of toxic perfectionism in children. Specifically, greater family chaos and less family structure predicted youth having higher levels of toxic perfectionism compared to youth in nonchaotic families. Similarly, families who were disengaged and less cohesive were more likely to have youth with higher levels of toxic perfectionism. Youth who reported the highest levels of toxic perfectionism were in families with more chaos, more disengagement, and less flexibility when compared with youth exhibiting the lowest levels of toxic perfectionism. Family enmeshment did not emerge as an independent predictor of toxic perfectionism in youth.

A closer look at gender differences between boys and girls indicated that parents' rigidity was linked with girls' increased likelihood of exhibiting high toxic perfectionism, but rigidity was not linked with boys' increased toxic perfectionism. Girls in a more rigid family were over four times more likely to exhibit high levels of toxic perfectionism than girls in more flexible families.

Boys, on the other hand, appeared to be more impacted by chaos in family life. Boys were more likely to exhibit high levels of toxic perfectionism when their home life was chaotic rather than structured. It may be that girls in a rigid family environment perceive that in order to receive approval they must meet rigid expectations, leading to the development of toxic perfectionism. Boys, on the other hand, may develop perfectionism as a way of gaining control in a chaotic, unpredictable family situation.

But both girls and boys exhibited increased risk for high perfectionism when members of their family were disengaged with one another. It seems that emotional disconnection and the perception that family members cannot be relied upon for support contributed to both boys and girls setting excessively high expectations of themselves out of fear of not being attended to or accepted. This finding seems to confirm the importance of secure, warm, and responsive relationships as fundamental to the development of a stable sense of self and the idea that the self is inherently valuable and valued by others. As predicted by previous research, it appears that maladaptive perfectionism may be a way for children to cope with insecure and less predictable family environments.

Interestingly, neither an authoritarian parenting style nor a permissive parenting style increased the likelihood of maladaptive perfectionism in youth. It appears that parents might be highly demanding and directing, or more detached and less warm with their children, but unless it is linked with psychological control, children are not more likely to develop toxic perfectionism.

To summarize, the families of youth with the highest levels of perfectionism were characterized by higher mother and father psychological control, more family chaos, more family disengagement, and less family flexibility. Boys appeared to be more susceptible to toxic perfectionism just by having perfectionistic parents, but they did not appear to be as impacted by psychological control. Girls, on the other hand, appeared to be strongly impacted by parents' psychological control (especially the fathers' psychological control) in developing and exhibiting toxic perfectionism. More rigidity in family life was also predictive of girls experiencing higher levels of toxic perfectionism, while a chaotic home environment was linked to higher levels of toxic perfectionism for boys. Boys and girls both appeared to be equally impacted by lower levels of family cohesiveness and emotional disengagement. A sense of belonging, emotional connection, and closeness appears to be protective for both boys and girls in reducing the likelihood of toxic perfectionism.

Discussion

What do these findings mean for us as Latter-day Saint parents and youth? For one thing, it's important to realize that our own toxic perfectionism can impact our children. When our children see us self-criticize or be unaccepting of ourselves or our efforts to meet high standards, they may imitate the same behaviors, especially our sons. The sense that we are inherently loved and valued by God, and the acceptance of ourselves and our efforts, gives children permission to feel the same for themselves and establishes healthy patterns for them to imitate and follow.

Our children are also impacted by how we engage with them, including how we communicate acceptance, belonging, and love as they develop. When we use psychological control by withdrawing our love, shaming them, or trying to induce feelings of shame, we use their inherent dependence on us for their sense of worth and belonging to manipulate and control them. These forms of psychological control may be especially hard on girls, who may develop toxic perfectionism in an effort to try to secure from us a sense that they are valued and belong. We may not recognize we are doing this, especially because our own

perfectionism may blind us to how we pressure our children to do or feel things in certain ways in order to meet our own expectations for ourselves as parents or in order to alleviate our own sense of anxiety.

The sense of predictability and structure we create in our family life is also important for developing a resilience to toxic perfectionism. Boys, in particular, seem to benefit from a sense of order and predictability, rather than a sense of chaos and lack of structure. But when we are too rigid or controlling, not allowing enough flexibility in adjusting to the need for change, our children may internalize the rigidity and develop a perfectionistic orientation in order to feel acceptable. This may be particularly true for girls.

Most importantly, children benefit from a sense of closeness in family life. Examples of this include knowing what is going on in one another's lives, relying upon each other for support, caring about how one another are doing, and desiring to spend time together. Efforts to help our children feel close to us and to one another are worth it. For most of us, this means deeply internalizing the meaning of the wise statement, "Never let a problem to be solved become more important than a person to be loved."[40]

Our deep sense of responsibility for our children's well-being, their choices, and even their salvation can make it hard not to focus on what we see as their problems. It can be very natural for us to force compliance with what we think will be best. This often involves continually pointing out where they fall short; we are certain that if we just fixate on their problems, they will change and do what they should. We may not realize that, as a result of this criticism and control, our children may sense that our love for them is conditioned on them successfully meeting our expectations and that we depend on them to manage our sense of self or our anxiety. They may sense that our desires for them are tied up in our own sense of acceptability and goodness rather than what *they* truly need and desire.

Parenting seems to be a remarkable process of learning what it means to truly love. Sooner or later, we will sense that truly loving means wanting to see and know our children in their unique divinity as children of God. We will learn to attune ourselves to the space they need to sort out their own development and integrity in coming to know God and themselves. In doing so, we help them move out of a toxic space, in which they must prove their lovability by meeting expectations, and into a healthier space for growth, in which they are loved from the beginning

40. Thomas S. Monson, "Finding Joy in the Journey," *Ensign* 38, no. 11 (November 2008): 86.

and allowed to seek and pursue their own life's journey—not out of conforming to another's desire but because they have learned to identify and follow what they feel is best. In this new space, parents can learn to love and accept them just as they are in each moment.

This is not an easy process. As parents, we can be tempted to believe that if we just get the right formula, the right rules, the right structure, and the right answers, we will be able to parent perfectly and create a problem-free path for our children; we will have become all we think we should be as a parent. But that orientation can obscure what it really means to parent another soul. We must come to know them fully without fear, and then try to fallibly step forward, often reaching through the dark to accept them and provide the love they need to guide them in their own learning process.

Elder Dieter F. Uchtdorf captured this powerfully when he described healthy parenting:

> Building faith in a child is somewhat like helping a flower grow. You cannot tug on the stem to make it taller. You cannot pry open the bud to get it to blossom sooner. And you cannot *neglect* the flower and expect it to grow or flourish spontaneously.
>
> What you can and must do for the rising generation is provide rich, nourishing soil with access to flowing heavenly water. Remove weeds and anything that would block heavenly sunlight. Create the best possible conditions for growth. Patiently allow the rising generation to make inspired choices, and let God work His miracle. The result will be more beautiful and more stunning and more joyful than anything you could accomplish just by yourself.[41]

Ironically, perhaps, much of what we yearn for in family life and what contributes most to our children's healthy development comes through accepting the inherent fallibility within ourselves and our children as we try to "provide rich nourishing soil," "remove the weeds," and "create the best possible conditions for growth." Even our best efforts are a journey of growth rather than a quest for perfection. Our imperfections actually become gifts in binding our hearts together as we love one another through the experience of learning, making mistakes, and learning some more. Perhaps, then, the greatest gift we give our children is allowing ourselves to be human, allowing them to be human, and loving in the face of our inherent vulnerability and need for growth.

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41. Elder Dieter F. Uchtdorf, "Jesus Christ Is the Strength of Parents," *Liahona* 47, no. 5 (May 2023): 58, emphasis original.

The promise of our covenant relationship with God is that we can leave behind the perfectionistic effort to continually prove that we are lovable and that we meet the assumed requirements to be acceptable. We can give up the project of managing our own image, or that of our children, and instead join God in the work of truly loving our children by doing what is needful and right to enable their growth. When we are not blinded by our own perfectionism, we can better see and know our children, understand what they are experiencing, and have greater clarity in offering what they truly need, rather than trying to get our own picture of perfection. The research on toxic perfectionism confirms this direction.

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Perfectionism's Influence on Adolescent Mental Health

Mark D. Ogletree

Years ago, I was sitting in my counseling practice with a sixteen-year-old young man. He was a great teenager with many positive qualities. However, on this particular summer day, he came in a somber mood. I asked him what was bothering him. He began to share some of his problems with me. In my opinion, none were out of the ordinary. Nevertheless, I could see his lips begin to quiver, and then he broke down in tears. When he could compose himself, he uttered, "I know that God hates me." And with that declaration, I knew that we had much to address in this particular session. I wanted to assure this young man that (1) God did not hate him, (2) the God he worshipped actually knew him and loved him, and (3) he needed to extricate himself from the gripping jaws of toxic perfectionism that plagued him daily.

This young man was defeated by constant thoughts that he was broken beyond repair and that he would never attain the life he had hoped for. Not only that, this young man believed that he needed to be perfect in order to be loved, not only by God but also by his friends and family. Unfortunately, each mistake this young man made caused him to feel horrible about himself. And this toxic perfectionism was spilling over into other aspects of his mental health, creating feelings of depression and anxiety.

The Anatomy of Perfectionism

Scholars Kawika Allen and Kenneth Wang have divided perfection into two categories: adaptive (healthy) and maladaptive (toxic). Healthy perfectionism is about "striving and setting high standards," whereas toxic

perfectionism relates to feelings of shame and worthlessness when mistakes are made (compared to a person simply feeling disappointed in their performance).[1] Perfectionism has also been defined as "a disposition to regard anything short of perfection as unacceptable."[2] And since no one is perfect, or can be perfect, toxic perfectionists[3] live in a constant state of frustration and feeling inferior. Again, not all perfectionism is bad. Sometimes perfectionism, in a religious framework, can inspire an individual to be more committed to their faith. On the other hand, when people feel they are never able to meet religious standards or ideals, they are more likely to lower their religious commitment (see "Religion and Perfectionism" herein).[4]

Unfortunately, many religious adolescents experience toxic perfectionism. As noted in "Perfectionism Across Adolescence," more than one in ten adolescent boys are classified as high perfectionism, and the ratio is even higher for adolescent girls. These adolescents are unusually hard on themselves when they make mistakes. They often compare themselves to their peers—especially the ones they admire—and feel that they always come up short. Most often, these adolescents feel that they have no worth. Latter-day Saint adolescents, and adults, may perceive their self-worth as derived from external accomplishments, such as social media "likes," wealth, relationships, social status, travel, and even busyness. This can certainly become a catalyst for a host of mental health issues among contemporary adolescents.

Victor Frankl wrote about the early Christians in *Man's Search for Meaning,* "I doubt that they ever had it in mind to become saints. If that were the case, they would have become only perfectionists rather than saints."[5] Perhaps Frankl was alluding to the concept that intentionally trying to become a perfectionist could actually be damaging to our character. An obsessive preoccupation with being perfect, unfortunately,

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1. Kenneth T. Wang, G. E. Kawika Allen, Hannah I. Stokes, and Han Na Suh, "Perceived Perfectionism from God Scale: Development and Initial Evidence," *Journal of Religious Health* 57, no. 6 (2018): 2207–23, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-017-0405-1.

2. *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary,* "Perfectionism," last updated August 26, 2024, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/perfectionism.

3. When the term *toxic perfectionist* is used, it indicates a person who experiences high toxic perfectionism *at the moment,* and not that an individual will unalterably be high in toxic perfectionism.

4. Wang, "Perceived Perfectionism," 2209.

5. Viktor E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning: An Introduction to Logotherapy* (Washington Square Press, 1963), 158.

leads to an unhealthy view of perfectionism! When we are obsessed with being perfect, we spend all our time and effort on this unrealistic goal rather than worshiping God.

As scholars have pointed out, this "tendency to demand of others or of oneself an extremely high or even flawless level of performance, in excess of what is required by the situation, . . . is associated with depression, anxiety, eating disorders, and other mental health problems."[6] Moreover, "perfectionism entails an extreme concern over shortcomings in performance, [and] fear of failure is a constant concern."[7] Those who suffer from perfectionism often engage in all-or-nothing thinking, where there is no middle ground for evaluating their performance. They are either great or terrible—producing the best possible performance or failing the project completely.[8] Perfectionist thinkers often magnify their mistakes and minimize their accomplishments. They feel embarrassed or even guilty when their performance is not at the highest level. Of perfectionism, author Darla Isaacson wrote, "That is the best recipe for unhappiness I can think of because it places impossible and unrealistic expectations on ourselves and everyone else. Satan tells us it is possible to be perfect now if we just think harder, try harder, work harder, and do more. He also tells us that other people should too, and it is our job to help them be perfect."[9]

Latter-day Saint toxic perfectionists live with tremendous pressure to become perfect and often never feel good enough. They feel that they must do everything perfectly in order to be loved and accepted by God, their family, or their friends.[10] Unfortunately, perfectionists will always fail because their expectations are so high; they really have no chance of becoming what they think they should be.

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6. *APA Dictionary of Psychology,* "Perfectionism," American Psychological Association, updated April 19, 2018, https://dictionary.apa.org/perfectionism.

7. Allan D. Rau, "'Be Ye Therefore Perfect': Beyond the Perfectionist Paradigm," *Religious Educator* 12, no. 3 (2011): 38, https://rsc.byu.edu/vol-12-no-3-2011/be-ye-therefore-perfect-beyond-perfectionist-paradigm.

8. Roger Covin, David J. A. Dozois, Avital Ogniewicz, and Pamela M. Seeds, "Measuring Cognitive Errors: Initial Development of the Cognitive Distortions Scale," *International Journal of Cognitive Therapy* 4, no. 3 (2011): 297–322.

9. Darla Isackson, "Satan's Counterfeit Gospel of Perfectionism," *Meridian Magazine,* August 15, 2019; https://latterdaysaintmag.com/satans-counterfeit-gospel-of-perfectionism-2/.

10. Rau, "Be Ye Therefore Perfect," 38.

Latter-day Saints, Perfection, and Mental Health

It is no wonder that perfectionism can lead to a series of mental and physical difficulties and challenges, including the following:

- anxiety
- depression[11]
- obsessive-compulsive disorder[12]
- suicide[13]
- eating disorders[14]
- insomnia[15]
- relationship issues[16]
- stress
- family dysfunction[17]

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11. Gordan L. Flett and Paul L. Hewitt, "Perfectionism and Depression," in *Perfectionism in Childhood and Adolescence* (American Psychological Association, 2022), 219–43.

12. Jessica Lunn, Danyelle Greene, Thomas Callaghan, and Sarah J. Egan, "Associations Between Perfectionism and Symptoms of Anxiety, Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder and Depression in Young People: A Meta-Analysis," *Cognitive Behaviour Therapy* 52, no. 5 (2023): 460–87, https://doi.org/10.1080/16506073.2023.2211736.

13. Marianne E. Etherson, Marin M. Smith, Andrew P. Hill, Simon B. Sherry, Thomas Curran, Gordon L. Flett, and others, "Perfectionism, Mattering, Depressive Symptoms, and Suicide Ideation in Students: A Test of the Perfectionism Social Disconnection Model," *Personality and Individual Differences* 191 (2022): article 111559, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2022.111559.

14. Katherine A. Halmi, Suzanne R. Sunday, Michael Strober, Alan Kaplan, D. Blake Woodside, Manfred Fichter, and others, "Perfectionism in Anorexia Nervosa: Variation by Clinical Subtype, Obsessionality, and Pathological Eating Behavior," *American Journal of Psychiatry* 157, no. 11 (2000): 1799–805, https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.ajp.157.11.1799.

15. Ralph E. Schmidt, Delphine S. Courvoisier, Stephane Cullati, Rainer Kraehenmann, and Martial Van der Linden, "To Imperfect to Fall Asleep: Perfectionism, Pre-Sleep Counterfactual Processing, and Insomnia," *Frontiers in Psychology* 9 (2018): article 1288, https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.01288.

16. Gordon L. Flett and Paul L. Hewitt, "Perfectionism and Maladjustment: An Overview of Theoretical, Definitional, and Treatment Issues," in *Perfectionism: Theory, Research, and Treatment,* ed. Gordon L. Flett and Paul L. Hewitt (American Psychological Association, 2002), 5–10.

17. Alan E. Craffock, Wendy Church, and Alexandra Sands, "Family of Origin Characteristics as Predictors of Perfectionism," *Australian Journal of Psychology* 61, no. 3 (2009): 136–44, https://doi.org/10.1080/00049530802239326; G. E. Kawika Allen, Kenneth T. Wang, and Hannah Stokes, "Examining Legalism, Scrupulosity, Family Perfectionism, and Psychological Adjustment Among LDS Individuals," *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 18, no. 4 (2015): 246–58, https://doi.org/10.1080/13674676.2015.1021312; see also Cecil O. Samuelson, "What Does It Mean to Be Perfect?," *New Era* 36, no. 1

The Connection Between Perfectionism and Mental Health

Years ago, I was teaching high school students in Mesa, Arizona. At the end of the year, a female student came to my office and confided in me that she was contemplating suicide. I was stunned. This girl was considered beautiful, a gymnast, a cheerleader, an athlete, and a straight-A student. She was the girl that so many wanted to be like. Yet, because of her toxic perfectionism and horrible view of herself, she wanted to end her life. This was mind-blowing to me. Thankfully, she did not take her life. Instead, she received the mental health help she needed, and today, she is a happy and well-adjusted adult. This story is a reminder that everyone has their own personal struggles, and those who appear to have "everything together" could have challenges that others cannot see, comprehend, or imagine.

Regardless of how faithful Latter-day Saint adolescents may be, anyone who experiences toxic perfectionism is at risk for poor mental and emotional health. In our data from the Family Foundations study, our research team identified two types of perfectionism: (1) discrepancy perfectionism, which can be identified by the phrase "I hate myself if I am not perfect"; and (2) socially prescribed perfectionism, which can be identified by the phrase "Others will hate me if I am not perfect." When Latter-day Saints try and fail to meet their own unrealistic expectations, they risk becoming exhausted, avoidant, depressed, or anxious.[18]

We will now address how the following mental health issues are influenced by and influence an individual's perfectionism, potentially wreaking havoc on the psyche of our youth. Anxiety, depression, self-worth, suicidal ideation, and addictions will be explored.

One of the most important questions about the connection between perfectionism and other mental health difficulties is which comes first—perfectionism or other mental health difficulties. For example, if anxiety precedes perfectionism, then we would want to make sure

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(January 2006): 10–13, https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/new-era/2006/01/what-does-it-mean-to-be-perfect.

18. Shawn Edgington, P. Scott Richards, Martin J. Erickson, and Aaron P. Jackson, "Perceptions of Jesus Christ's Atonement Among Latter-day Saint Women with Eating Disorders and Perfectionism," *Association of Mormon Counselors and Psychotherapists* 32, no. 1 (2008), https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/irp/vol32/iss1/4/; Kristine Doty, "Cultural Considerations for Social Work with Mormon Women Diagnosed with Depression," keynote address at Mental Health Symposium, Utah Valley University, Orem, Utah, January 31, 2013, https://www.uvureview.com/news/toxic-perfectionism/.

to address this initial influence to interrupt the development of perfectionism. However, if perfectionism comes first, then we've identified an important avenue by which adolescents today develop anxiety, and we can target perfectionism as a source of these difficulties. It may also be that perfectionism and anxiety feed off each other in a negative cycle—perfectionism increasing anxiety and then anxiety increasing perfectionism.

To determine which comes first, we used what are referred to as "cross-lagged" statistical models to analyze the Foundations data (see the appendix for sample details). In these analyses, we looked at the connection between anxiety and perfectionism across time. In some cases, perfectionism identified in the early teen years could predict later anxiety (or other mental health difficulties). Moreover, in many cases, it was supposed that anxiety (or other mental health difficulties) identified in the early teen years could predict later perfectionism. Because we can observe change over time in perfectionism and other aspects of mental health, we have added confidence in the direction of effects (perfectionism influencing anxiety or anxiety influencing perfectionism). We might refer to these as "chicken and egg analyses" as we try to determine to what degree one affects the other. In these analyses it is examined whether toxic perfectionism at one point is related to an increase in mental health difficulties at the next point (and vice versa). However, it is important to note that these analyses do not prove one causes the other. Though these analyses do not prove that one causes the other, they do help us understand the likely direction of effects. All cross-lagged and regression models control for the child's gender (male or female), the parents' income, and whether the child is from Utah or Arizona.

Anxiety

Anxiety disorders are now the most prevalent mental health ailments that American adolescents face. According to the U.S. Center for Disease Control, one in eleven (9.4%–9.8%) will experience anxiety during adolescence.[19] Another 2010 survey found that that 31.9% (one in every three to four) of adolescents experience some form of anxiety disorder.[20] Those

19. Rebecca H. Bitsko, Angelika H. Claussen, Jesse Lichstein, Lindsey I. Black, Sherry Everett Jones, Melissa L. Danielson, and others, "Mental Health Surveillance Among Children—United States, 2013–2019," *MMWR Supplement* (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2022), 1–42, http://dx.doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.su7102a1.

20. National Institute of Mental Health, "Any Anxiety Disorder," accessed October 22, 2024, https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/any-anxiety-disorder; Kathleen Ries

with anxiety disorders have a difficult time controlling their thoughts of fear and failure. This is more than the average garden-variety worry that most of us encounter throughout our lives. Some types of anxiety can keep an adolescent from functioning at a high level or even at normal levels in some cases. Anxiety such as this can be debilitating, smothering, and paralyzing.

In The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, an internal 2018 study among Latter-day Saint youth revealed that about 29% of Latter-day Saint youth struggle with clinical levels of anxiety. In the United States, 28% of Latter-day Saint youth struggle with clinical anxiety, compared to Chile, 32%; France and Belgium, 16%; South Africa, 46%; Taiwan, 18%; and New Zealand, 32%. Without question, anxiety is alive and well among Latter-day Saint youth.[21]

How can anxiety and perfectionism interact? Is perfectionism a catalyst for anxiety? A statistical analysis revealed that in our study, there is a solid correlation between anxiety and perfectionism (.47; see table 1). It would appear on the surface that perfectionism could be a catalyst for anxiety.

Table 1. Correlations Between Perfectionism and Anxiety

	Discrepancy	*Social*	*Combined*
Anxiety	.43	.39	.47

Figure 1 indicates a couple patterns of interest. What comes first, anxiety or perfectionism? In our analyses, anxiety at age twelve impacts socially prescribed perfectionism at age fourteen, which in turn impacts anxiety at age sixteen, which in turn impacts socially prescribed perfectionism at age eighteen. Socially prescribed perfectionism at age sixteen also impacts anxiety at age eighteen. For discrepancy perfectionism, after age twelve, an entirely reciprocal relationship was found, with discrepancy perfectionism and anxiety each predicting each other across ages fourteen to eighteen. Anxiety and perfectionism seem to feed off of each other, with anxiety in early adolescence feeding socially prescribed perfectionism but not the other way around.

Merikangas, Jian-ping He, Marcy Burstein, Sonja A. Swanson, Shelli Avenevoli, Lihong Cui, and others, "Lifetime Prevalence of Mental Disorders in U.S. Adolescents: Results from the National Comorbidity Survey Replication—Adolescent Supplement (NCS-A)" *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry* 49, no. 10 (2010), 980–89, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaac.2010.05.017.

21. D. Todd Christofferson, "Trust in God," The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Seminaries and Institutes Devotional, January 2024, https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/broadcasts/miscellaneous-events/2024/01/13christofferson.

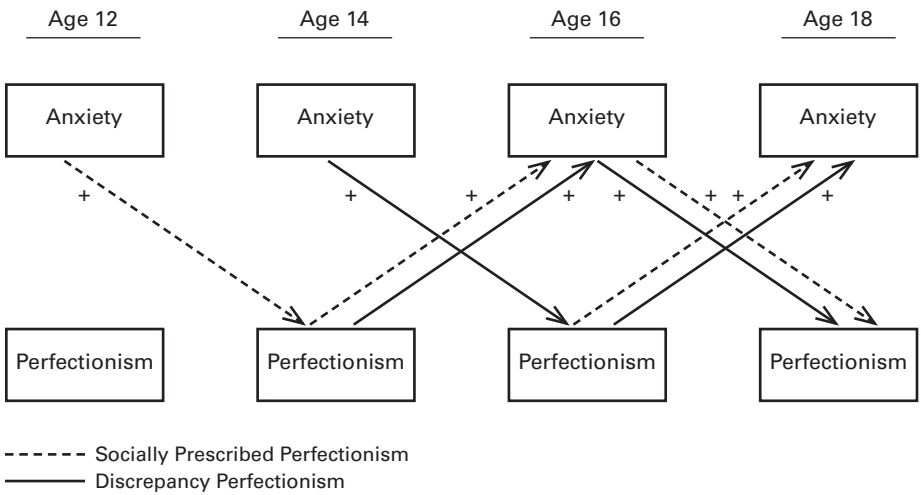

Figure 1. Relationship Between Toxic Perfectionism and Anxiety Across Adolescence.

Depression

Most adolescents who struggle with anxiety also experience some form of depression. One study reported that "15.9% to 61.9% of children identified as anxious or depressed have comorbid anxiety and depressive disorders and that measures of anxiety and depression are highly correlated."[22] Somewhere between 15% to 20% of adolescents in the United States will experience major depressive disorder.[23] Another study reported that between 2010 and 2015, there was a 56% increase of major depressive episodes among adolescents.[24] In comparing U.S. adolescents

22. Erika U. Brady and Phillip C. Kendall, "Comorbidity of Anxiety and Depression in Children and Adolescents," *Psychological Bulletin* 111, no. 2 (1992): 244, https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.111.2.244.

23. Boris Birmaher, Neal D. Ryan, Douglas E. Williamson, David A. Brent, Joan Kaufman, Ronald E. Dahl, and others, "Childhood and Adolescent Depression: A Review of the Past 10 Years. Part I," *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry* 35, no. 11 (1996): 1427–39, https://doi.org/10.1097/00004583-199611000-00011; see also Ronald C. Kessler, Katherine A. McGonagle, Shanyang Zhao, Christopher B. Nelson, Michael Hughes, Suzann Eshleman, and others, "Lifetime and 12-Month Prevalence of DSM-III-R Psychiatric Disorders in the United States: Results from the National Comorbidity Survey," *Archives of General Psychiatry* 51, no. 1 (1994): 8–19, https://doi:10.1001/archpsyc.1994.03950010008002.

24. Jean M. Twenge, *iGen: Why Today's Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy—and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood* (Atria Books, 2017), 108.

between 2004 to 2021, there has been a drastic uptick in major depressive episodes—especially among females. In 2004, for example, 5% of males reported a major depressive episode. By 2021, that percentage had risen to 11.5%. However, among females, 13.1% reported a major depressive episode in 2004, compared to 28% in 2022.[25]

How do depression and perfectionism interact? Is perfectionism a catalyst for depression? Or is it the other way around? In the Family Foundations study, there is a strong association (.62) between depression and perfectionism (stronger even than for perfectionism and anxiety), which is not surprising. When most people fall short of the high expectations they set for themselves, or when they compare themselves to others, depression can easily set in and take root.

Table 2. Correlations Between Perfectionism and Depression

	Discrepancy	*Social*	*Combined*
Depression	.59	.46	.62

Figure 2 helps us understand the interaction between perfectionism and depression. From the Foundations data, depression as early as twelve years of age impacts both socially prescribed and discrepancy perfectionism at age fourteen. Moreover, depression at age fourteen is linked to discrepancy perfectionism at age sixteen. Both kinds of perfectionism at age fourteen and sixteen are related to increased depression at age sixteen and eighteen, respectively. It should be noted that at age sixteen, depression is associated with socially prescribed perfectionism at age eighteen. Perfectionism and depression appear to have a strong interaction, each related to an increase in the other. Like anxiety, it appears that early in adolescence, it is the depression that feeds perfectionism. But then later in adolescence, they feed off each other.

Self-Worth

Healthy self-worth is critical to the optimal development of adolescents. A teenager with high self-worth will be able to like and accept themselves, demonstrate self-compassion, feel compassion toward others,

25. Preeti Vankar, "Percentage of U.S. Youths with a Major Depressive Episode in the Past Year from 2004 to 2022, by Gender," Statista, March 12, 2024, https://www.statista.com/statistics/252323/major-depressive-episode-among-us-youths-by-gender-since-2004/#statista.

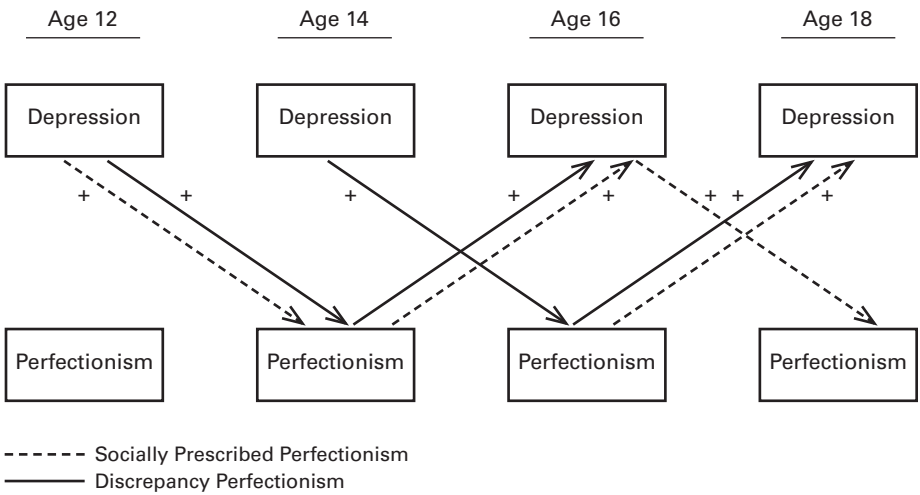

Figure 2. Relationship Between Toxic Perfectionism and Depression Across Adolescence.

show greater confidence, and be more able to both give and receive love. Self-worth "generally refers to our sense of self, our values, and our belief that we are worthy of care, support, and compassion."[26] The American Psychological Association defines self-worth as "an individual's evaluation of themself as a valuable, capable human being deserving of respect and consideration. Positive feelings of self-worth tend to be associated with a high degree of self-acceptance and self-esteem."[27]

Some researchers contend that self-worth is "the extent to which one likes oneself as a person."[28] Measures of self-worth often include statements such as "I have a positive attitude about myself" and "I feel that I am a person of worth." Brigham Young University researchers Brent Top, Bruce Chadwick, and Richard McClendon conducted a comprehensive study of Latter-day Saint adolescents and self-worth. They discovered that "Latter-day Saint high school seniors report somewhat lower self-worth than do other seniors in the United States."[29]

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26. "Why Self-Worth Matters, and How to Improve Confidence," BetterHelp, updated September 16, 2024, https://www.betterhelp.com/advice/self-esteem/why-self-worth-matters-and-how-to-improve-it/.

27. *APA Dictionary of Psychology,* "Self-Worth," updated November 15, 2023, https://dictionary.apa.org/self-worth.

28. Susan Harter, Patricia Waters, and Nancy R. Whiteshell, "Relational Self-Worth: Differences in Perceived Worth as a Person Across Interpersonal Contexts Among Adolescents," *Child Development* 69, no. 3 (1998): 757, https://doi.org/10.2307/1132202.

29. Brent L. Top, Bruce A. Chadwick, and Richard J. McClendon, "Spirituality and Self-Worth: The Role of Religion in Shaping Teen's Self-Image," *Religious Educator* 4,

In the same study, researchers learned that there was a strong correlation between religiosity and self-worth. When Latter-day Saint youth felt accepted at church and demonstrated religious beliefs, thoughts, and behaviors, they reported higher levels of self-worth. Of note is that "*acceptance at church* produced by far the strongest link with self-worth for both men and women."[30] Another interesting connection was the relationship between parent-child relationships and self-worth. When these youth reported a strong connection to their parents, they also reported higher levels of self-worth.[31]

How do self-worth and perfectionism interact? Can perfectionistic thinking patterns be detrimental to an adolescent's self-worth? Our study revealed a strong correlation between low self-worth and perfectionism—even stronger than perfectionism's correlation with anxiety or depression. This relationship makes sense given that perfectionism is partially defined by low feelings of worth when mistakes are made. If a teen falls short of expectations, hopes, dreams, and ideals, they could feel terrible about themselves; they certainly would feel inferior.

Table 3. Correlations Between Perfectionism and Depression

	Discrepancy	*Social*	*Combined*
Low Self-Worth	.65	.54	.70

Figure 3 is helpful in illustrating the relationship between low self-worth and perfectionism. Low self-worth can be identified in young Latter-day Saint adolescents as young as age twelve, contributing to both discrepancy and socially prescribed perfectionism at age fourteen. Moreover, low self-worth at age fourteen contributes to discrepancy perfectionism at age sixteen, and discrepancy perfectionism at age fourteen is associated with low self-worth at age sixteen. Finally, low self-worth at age sixteen is related to both discrepancy and socially prescribed perfectionism at age eighteen. These analyses suggest that perfectionism is driven by feelings of low self-worth rather than the other way around. Thus, for the struggling perfectionist, it may be most helpful to address the feelings of low self-worth and reduce the need to feel perfect in order to feel their infinite value. Some may feel that in order to address perfectionism, high standards need to be lowered. Depending on the situation,

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no. 2 (2003): 84, https://rsc.byu.edu/vol-4-no-2-2003/spirituality-self-worth-role-religion-shaping-teens-self-image.

30. Top, "Spirituality and Self-Worth," 86, emphasis orginal.

31. Top, "Spirituality and Self-Worth," 79–80.

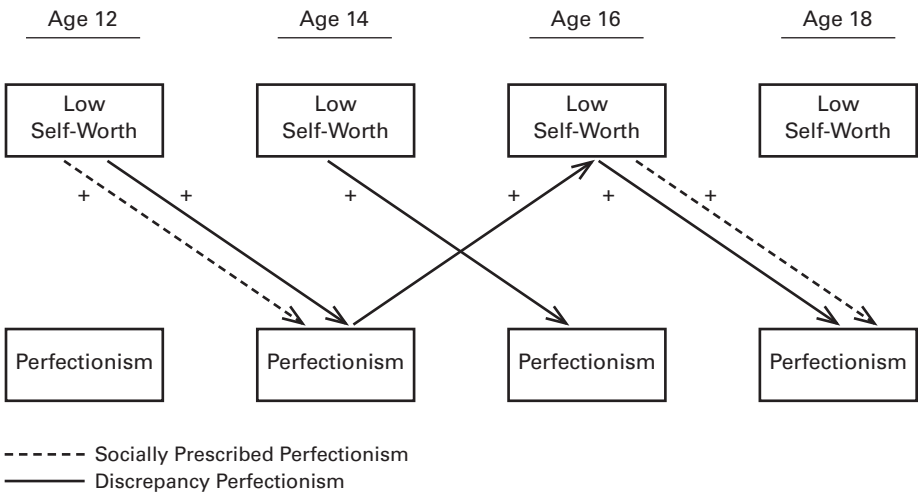

Figure 3. Relationship Between Toxic Perfectionism and Self-Worth Across Adolescence.

this may be the case. However, to reduce perfectionism, feelings of low self-worth must be addressed.

Suicidal Ideation

Suicide rates among adolescents have been on the rise for the past decade. In fact, suicide has become the second leading cause of death nationwide for adolescents and young adults since 2017.[32] In Utah, a state populated largely by Latter-day Saints,[33] there was a 136% increase in suicides among Utah youth, ages ten to seventeen, from 2011 to 2015.[34] Although Utah's increase was about average for its region of the country,[35]

32. U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) Data Summary & Trends Report: 2013–2023* (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2024), 53–67, https://www.cdc.gov/yrbs/dstr/index.html; Melonie Heron, "Deaths: Leading Causes for 2017," *National Vital Statistics Reports* 68, no. 6 (2019): 11.

33. Over 68% of the state of Utah is made up of members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. See "Mormon Population by State 2024," World Population Review, accessed October 22, 2024, https://worldpopulationreview.com/state-rankings/mormon-population-by-state.

34. Francis B. Annor, Marissa L. Zwald, Amanda Wilkinson, Mike Friedrichs, Anna Fondario, Angela Dunn, and others, "Characteristics of and Precipitating Circumstances Surrounding Suicide Among Persons Aged 10–17 Years—Utah, 2011–2015," *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* 67, no. 11 (2018): 329–32, http://dx.doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.mm6711a4.

35. W. Justin Dyer, review of *Gay Rights and the Mormon Church: Intended Actions, Unintended Consequences,* by Gregory A. Prince, *BYU Studies Quarterly* 59, no. 1 (2020): 227.

this increase is still tragic. One study reported that in 2019, among U.S. high school students ages fourteen to eighteen, 18.8% seriously considered attempting suicide, 15.7% made a suicide plan, 8.9% attempted suicide one or more times, and 2.5% made a suicide attempt that required medical treatment.[36]

The good news is that religious observance and participation are found to be a protective factor against suicide.[37] In fact, one study showed that members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints report less suicidality than those of other faiths in the state of Utah.[38] Brigham Young University researchers Justin Dyer and Mike Goodman reported in their study that Latter-day Saints were lower in ideation, primarily because of their stronger family connections and less drug and alcohol use.[39]

What can we learn about the interaction between perfectionism and suicidal thoughts? Our research demonstrates a solid association between suicidal thoughts and perfectionism.

Table 4. Correlations Between Perfectionism and Suicidal Thoughts

	Discrepancy	*Social*	*Combined*
Suicidal Thoughts	.41	.31	.44

36. Rebecca H. Bitsko, Angelika H. Claussen, Jesse Lichstein, Lindsey I. Black, Sherry Everett Jones, Melissa L. Danielson, and others, "Mental Health Surveillance Among Children—United States, 2013–2019," *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report Supplements* 71, no. 2 (2022): 17, https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/71/su/su7102a1.htm.

37. Evan M. Kleiman and Richard T. Liu, "Prospective Prediction of Suicide in a Nationally Representative Sample: Religious Service Attendance as a Protective Factor," *British Journal of Psychiatry* 204, no. 4 (2014): 262, https://doi.org/10.1192/bjp.bp.113.128900; Tyler J. VanderWeele, Shanshan Li, Alexander C. Tsai, and Ichiro Kawachi, "Association Between Religious Service Attendance and Lower Suicide Rates Among US Women," *JAMA Psychiatry* 73, no. 8 (2016): 845–51, https://doi.org/10.1001/jamapsychiatry.2016.1243.

38. W. Justin Dyer, Michael A. Goodman, and David S. Wood, "Religion and Sexual Orientation as Predictors of Utah Youth Suicidality," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 61, no. 2 (2022): 66, https://byustudies.byu.edu/article/religion-and-sexual-orientation-as-predictors-of-utah-youth-suicidality; see also Marissa L. Zwald and others, "Suicidal Ideation and Attempts Among Students in Grades 8, 10, and 12—Utah, 2015," *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* 67, no. 15 (April 20, 2018): 451–54, http://dx.doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.mm6715a4.

39. W. Justin Dyer and Michael A. Goodman, "Religious Affiliation's Association with Suicidality Across Sexual Orientations and Gender Identities," *Religions* 13, no. 10 (2022): 932, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13100932.

Analyses for suicide ideation were somewhat different from the previous analyses. Given it made less sense that suicide ideation would predict perfectionism, we did not conduct a cross-lagged model. Rather, we conducted a regression model with perfectionism predicting later suicide ideation, controlling for prior suicide ideation. Suicidal thoughts were measured by a dichotomous variable with a 1, meaning they had had suicidal thoughts, and a 0, meaning they had never had suicidal thoughts. Table 5 contains the results in odds ratios, or the measure of a predictor (perfectionism) and a likely outcome (suicide ideation). Discrepancy perfectionism consistently predicted a higher likelihood of suicidal thoughts. For each unit higher of discrepancy perfectionism, the odds of having considered suicide increased by 86% from age twelve to fourteen, increased by 26% from age fourteen to sixteen, and increased by 44% from age sixteen to eighteen. Socially prescribed perfectionism did not predict suicide early on, but it did later. From age sixteen to eighteen, for each unit higher of socially prescribed perfectionism at age sixteen, the likelihood of suicide ideation increased 48% by age eighteen.

Figure 4 shows the relationship between the various perfectionism groups (low, mid, and high; see "Perfectionism Across Adolescence" herein) and suicidal ideation. The more perfectionistic a teenager is, the more likely they will have suicidal thoughts. Indeed, while 13% of those in the low perfectionism group had seriously considered suicide in the last year, 51% (almost quadruple) of those high in perfectionism had seriously considered suicide.

Addictions

Although there are many types of addictions that adolescents can be consumed by, from drugs to alcohol and everything in between, we will focus on video games and pornography—two common addictions of our day.

Video Games

Several years ago in my counseling practice, I met with a teenage boy who struggled in many ways. He had high levels of anxiety, he wasn't sleeping well, he had isolated himself from his friends, and when he did sleep, he had catastrophic nightmares. One day, I had a hunch, so I followed my feelings. I asked this boy's mother if her son played video games. She said, "Yes, usually a couple hours a day, and then all day on Saturdays and Sundays." I made a recommendation. I told the

Table 5. Relationship Between Perfectionism and Suicidal Thoughts

	Suicidal Thoughts		
	Age 14 (odds ratio)†	**Age 16** (odds ratio)	**Age 18** (odds ratio)
Discrepancy			
Age 12	1.86**		
Age 14		1.26*	
Age 16			1.44**
Socially Prescribed			
Age 12	1.36		
Age 14		1.19	
Age 16			1.48*

* p < .05. ** p < .01. *** p < .001

† Odds ratios reflect a percentage difference between one thing and another. For example, for every one unit higher level of discrepancy perfectionism at age 12, the odds of experiencing suicidal thoughts at age 14 is 1.86 times higher.

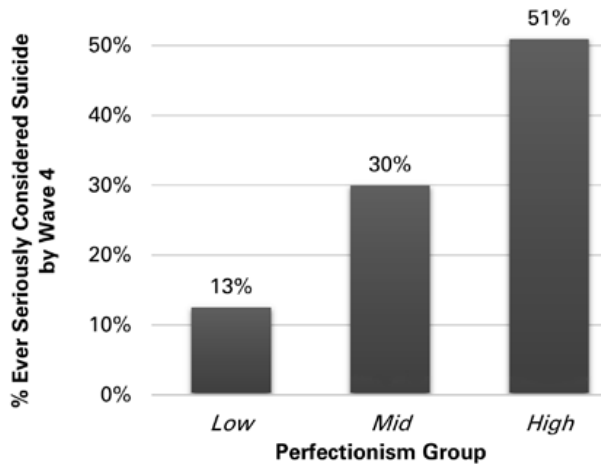

Figure 4. Percentage Who Had Ever Seriously Considered Suicide by Perfectionism Group.

mother, "Why don't we eliminate the video games from your son's life, and let's see what happens to his emotional, physical, and mental health." Two weeks later, I saw this young man in my office again. This time, he seemed much happier, well rested, and his anxiety had dissipated. He had begun sleeping again, and his nightmares disappeared. This boy did not know I had talked to his mother. I asked him how these remarkable changes had occurred in his life. His answer was simple: "I stopped playing video games."

In the United States, 53% of households report that they own at least one video-game console.[40] However, according to a Pew Research Report, 97% of adolescent boys play video games on some type of device, compared with 83% of adolescent girls.[41] Perhaps too many adolescents are not spending the majority of their discretionary time reading, engaging in homework, or participating in extracurricular activities. Instead, they are strapped to their PlayStation, Xbox, or Nintendo Switch.

One study reported that boys between the age of eight and eighteen years spent an average of two hours and seventeen minutes video gaming daily. The same study documented that teenage girls spend an average of forty-seven minutes per day on video games.[42] In another study with over twelve thousand respondents, 31% reported that they play video games for at least 3.5 hours per day.[43] The American Academy of Pediatrics reported that American teens now spend more time engaged in media-related activities than they do in school.[44]

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40. "Gaming Console Ownership and Purchase Intentions Among Households in the United States as of May 2021," Statista, updated November 2023, https://www.statista.com/statistics/1277164/purchase-video-game-consoles/.

41. Andrew Perrin, "5 Facts About Americans and Video Games," Pew Research Center, September 17, 2018, https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2018/09/17/5-facts-about-americans-and-video-games/.

42. Jessica Clement, "Average Daily Time Spent on Video Games Among Children in the United States in 2019, by Gender," Statista, August 25, 2023, https://www.statista.com/statistics/1128307/video-gaming-kids-gender/.

43. Simona Skripkauskaite, Mina Fazel, and the OxWell Study Team, "Time Spent Gaming, Device Type, Addiction Scores, and Well-Being of Adolescent English Gamers in the 2021 OxWell Survey: Latent Profile Analysis," *JMIR Pediatrics and Parenting* 5, no. 4 (2022): e41480, https://doi.org/10.2196/41480.

44. American Academy of Pediatrics, "Policy Statement: Children, Adolescents, and the Media," *Pediatrics* 132, no. 5 (2013): 958, https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2013-2656; Phillip Zimbardo and Nikita D. Coulombe, *Man (Dis)connected: How the Digital Age Is Changing Young Men Forever* (Rider Books, 2015), xxi.

Fortunately, many adolescents acknowledge that they play video games too much. Over 41% of teenage boys and 11% of teenage girls feel they spend too much time playing video games.[45] The more teens engage in video games, the greater the likelihood that they will become addicted. Some researchers in 2009 reported that about 8% of youth between the ages of eight and eighteen are addicted to video games.[46] In this study, 11–12% of boys and 2.9% of girls were youth who exhibited pathological video-game use.[47]

Video-game addictions can lead to changes in the brain, mental illness, social issues, and possible addictions in other areas.[48] Often, addictions become a form of self-medication. Teenagers can use video games to self-medicate other problems, including perfectionism.

Is there an association between video games and perfectionism? It may be that for the toxic perfectionist, video games provide a distraction from their feelings of low self-worth. It may also be that the relative ease of succeeding in a computer game draws perfectionists to these games. In our study, although still statistically significant, this relationship was much weaker than our other variables. This relationship is not as strong as we suspected. When we examined whether one affected the other, there were no statistically significant findings. Thus, although it seems video-game addictions may "bundle together" with perfectionism, we did not find any evidence they were related to each other.

Table 6. Correlations Between Toxic Perfectionism and Video-Game Addiction Symptoms

	Discrepancy	*Social*	*Combined*
Video Game Addiction	.15	.10	.17

45. Perrin, "5 Facts About Americans and Video Games."

46. Douglas Gentile, "Pathological Video-Game Use Among Youth Ages 8 to 18: A National Study," *Psychological Science* 20, no. 5 (2009): 594–602, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9280.2009.02340.x; Joe Chelales, "50 Video Game Addiction Statistics & Facts," Recovery Center of Niagara, September 12, 2023, https://www.niagararecovery.com/blog/video-game-addiction-statistics.

47. Gentile, "Pathological Video-Game Use Among Youth," 598. See also Shabina Mohammad, Raghad A. Jan, and Saba L. Alsaedi, "Symptoms, Mechanisms, and Treatments of Video Game Addiction," *Cureus* 15, no. 3 (2023): e36957, https://doi.org/10.7759/cureus.36957.

48. Mohammad, Jan, and Alsaedi, "Symptoms, Mechanisms, and Treatments of Video Game Addiction."

Pornography

Today, I spend a high percentage of my time as a licensed professional counselor helping teenagers and young adults navigate their way through a pornography addiction. The road is long and hard. Many of these individuals began the addiction around the ages of ten or eleven years of age. It seems that the earlier they engage with pornography, the more difficult it is to break through the chains of this powerful addiction.

Almost every adolescent in the United States is at risk for being exposed to pornography.[49] PornHub, one of the millions of companies that generate online pornography, reported that in 2013 they generated fifteen billion views, which translates to 1.71 million views every hour for the entire year.[50]

In 1985, 92% of adult males had viewed a pornographic magazine by the age of fifteen. With the capacity of today's internet, the average boy's first exposure to pornography is eleven years of age.[51] And the sexual content is more graphic than ever before. In days gone by, pornography consisted of a nude woman staring at a camera seductively. Today, our youth are exposed to thousands of hours of footage of sexual acts between multiple partners on video. There is nothing left to the imagination.

Looking at our Foundations data on pornography use in figure 5 (the Foundations data had frequency of use but did not measure how problematic the use was), it appears that Latter-day Saint adolescents use pornography less than those who are not Latter-day Saints. For example, 25% of male Latter-day Saint adolescents admit to using pornography more than once a week, compared to 34% of those who are not Latter-day Saints. Furthermore, 8% of female Latter-day Saint adolescent young women admit to using pornography at least once a week, compared to 13% of those who are not Latter-day Saints.

The consequences of pornography use can be extremely damaging. Those who frequently use pornography tend to objectify women, become addicted and cannot stop, engage in premarital and promiscuous sexual activity, and have skewed views about the sexual relationship.[52]

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49. Paul J. Wright, Bryant Paul, and Debby Herbenick, "Preliminary Insight from a U.S. Probability Sample on Adolecents' Pornography Exposure, Media Psychology, and Sexual Aggression," *Journal of Health Communication* 26, no. 1 (2021): 39–46, https://doi.org/10.1080/10810730.2021.1887980.

50. Cited in Zimbardo and Coulombe, *Man (Dis)connected,* 28.

51. Meeker, *Boys Should Be Boys,* 65.

52. Gustavo S. Mesch, "Social Bonds and Internet Pornographic Exposure Among Adolescents," *Journal of Adolescence* 32, no. 3 (2009): 601–18, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.adolescence.2008.06.004.

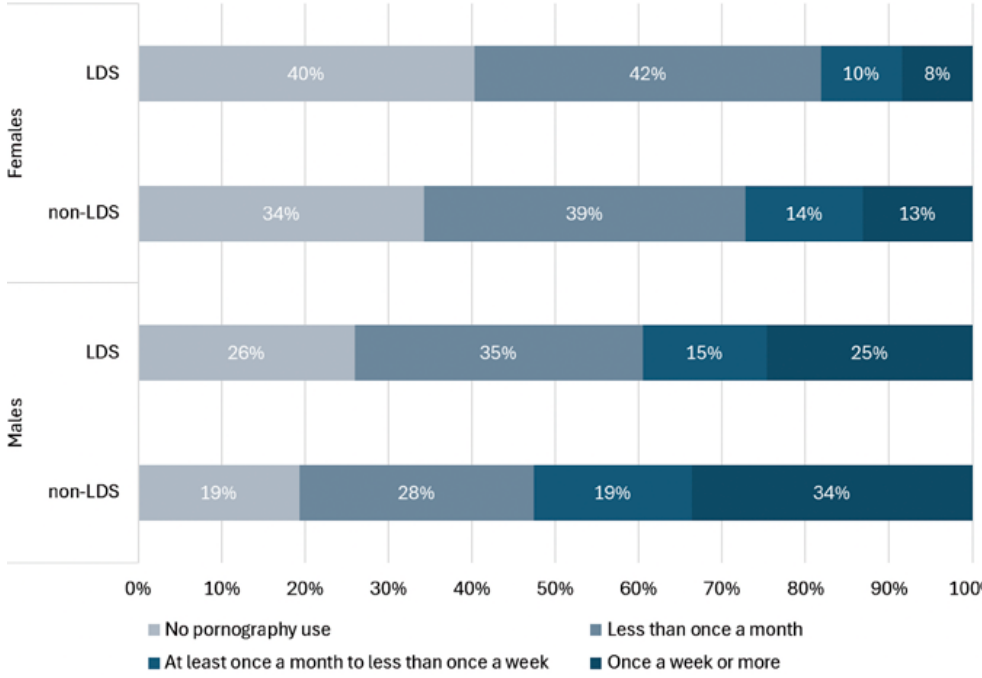

Figure 5. Pornography Use by Gender and Religion (Latter-day Saint and Non-Latter-day Saint).

Like other addictions, the user often begins due to their own curiosity. However, that curiosity eventually morphs into sexual gratification and becomes a medication for problems—just like alcohol or drugs. Those addicted to pornography often turn to their addiction to cope with problems, ranging from low self-worth to suicidality. Pornography can also become the self-prescribed medication for perfectionism.

How do perfectionism and pornography interact? Can perfectionism be a catalyst for pornography use? While the correlations between pornography use and perfectionism were statistically significant, there was no evidence of one affecting the other across time and the relationship between the two proved to be very weak. We do not feel comfortable making assumptions about this relationship at this time. So although there may be some connection, more research is needed to understand more about this relationship.

Table 7. Correlations Between Perfectionism and Pornography Use

	Discrepancy	*Social*	*Combined*
Pornography Use	.15	.12	.12

Conclusion

All aspects of mental health are significantly related to both discrepancy and socially prescribed perfectionism. At the correlation level, the strongest relationship is between perfectionism (both discrepancy and socially prescribed) and self-worth. The next strongest correlation is depression, followed by anxiety, suicidal thoughts, video-game addiction symptoms, and finally, pornography use. When we combine the discrepancy and socially prescribed perfectionism into our various groups (low, medium, and high classes), we find the correlations even stronger.

There certainly is a "chicken or egg" effect on these variables. In some cases, perfectionism seems to lead to mental health issues, and in other instances, it is the mental health issue that leads to perfectionism. For example, discrepancy perfectionism at age twelve led to increased likelihood of suicidal thoughts at age fourteen, and both discrepancy and social perfectionism at age fourteen were related to an increase in anxiety at age sixteen. This suggests that in order to get ahead of both anxiety and suicidal thoughts, discussions about toxic perfectionism should be happening with Latter-day Saint kids as soon as they get into the youth program, if not in Primary.

Parents and teachers can help teens understand that nobody is perfect, and no one ever will be. There is something healthy about not taking ourselves too seriously, recognizing that the greatest people on earth make mistakes daily, and we should engage in having fun and enjoying life each day.

Parents, teachers, coaches, and local church and school leaders could take perfectionism and mental health more seriously, especially during early adolescence. These adults can be taught what to look for regarding mental health symptoms, low self-worth, and perfectionistic tendencies. More training in our schools, churches, and community-based programs can equip both youth and adults with tools to deal with some of these challenges and provide the necessary skills and interventions to help our youth prevent these issues.

In my Provo, Utah, stake, we recently held a conference for all of our youth, focusing on mental health issues and teaching our young people how to cope with many of the challenges they face. We are also holding conferences to equip parents with the tools needed to help their children with issues such as depression, anxiety, low self-worth, and even addictions. These are some of the measures that can be taken to strengthen and fortify our adolescents.

Latter-day Saint parents and teachers would also do well to teach their children correct doctrinal principles about perfectionism. Brigham

Young taught, "Whether they can do little, or much, if they do the very best they know how, they are perfect."[53] So Latter-day Saints need to quit worrying about being perfect. Instead, we can make our best daily attempt to learn how to love the way Christ did. The Lord is the one—the only one—who saves, rescues, heals, and transforms us into new people. We are not here to earn salvation with our perfection. President Dieter F. Uchtdorf explained,

> Salvation cannot be bought with the currency of obedience; it is purchased by the blood of the Son of God. Thinking that we can trade our good works for salvation is like buying a plane ticket and then supposing we own the airline. . . . We are not saved "because" of all we can do. Have any of us done all that we can do? Does God wait until we've expended every effort before He will intervene in our lives with His saving grace? Many people feel discouraged because they constantly fall short. . . . This is why Nephi labored so diligently to persuade his children and brethren "to believe in Christ, and be reconciled to God." After all, *that is* what we can do! And *that is* our task in mortality.[54]

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53. Brigham Young, "Discourse," *Deseret News,* August 31, 1854, 1, https://contentdm.lib.byu.edu/digital/collection/desnews1/id/175512/rec/6.

54. Dieter F. Uchtdorf, "The Gift of Grace," *Ensign* 45, no. 5 (May 2015): 109–10, emphasis original.

Religion and Perfectionism

Michael A. Goodman

> "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect" (Matt. 5:48).

Perfectionism has been a frequent topic of interest to members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. In official Church material and in other sources aimed at a Latter-day Saint audience (such as podcasts and blogs), the problems of toxic perfectionism have continued to receive attention in scholarly and clinical literature. The concept has been addressed several times in general conference addresses, including by members of the Quorum of Twelve Apostles.[1] The Church has produced official videos and articles for youth,[2] young adults,[3] and adults.[4]

1. See, for example, Russell M. Nelson, "Perfection Pending," *Ensign* 25, no. 11 (November 1995): 86–88, https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/1995/11/perfection-pending; Jeffrey R. Holland, "Be Ye Therefore Perfect—Eventually," *Ensign* 47, no. 11 (November 2017): 40–42, https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/2017/11/saturday-morning-session/be-ye-therefore-perfect-eventually.

2. "A Crash Course on Overcoming Perfectionism," Gospel Living, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, May 26, 2021, https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/inspiration/a-crash-course-on-overcoming-perfectionism.

3. Nathan Read, "Perfectionism: A Toxic Game of 'Spot-the-Difference,'" *Ensign* 49, no. 9 (September 2019): 72–75, https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/2019/09/young-adults/perfectionism-a-toxic-game-of-spot-the-difference.

4. "Perfectionism: Will I Ever Be Good Enough?," Come unto Christ, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, accessed October 23, 2024, https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/comeuntochrist/video/perfectionism.

The topic has been addressed officially at Brigham Young University[5] and at BYU's Education Week.[6] It is often addressed in unofficial channels aimed at Latter-day Saints—both in faith-affirming[7] and non-faith-affirming ways.[8] Clearly, perfectionism is an issue that many believe is important for members of the Church to understand.

Even with regular and increasing emphasis that the scriptures, such as Matthew 5:48 quoted above, were never intended to infer the need for current flawlessness, some Christians, including Latter-day Saints, feel "self-loathing and misery-making"[9] when they make any mistake. Some individuals perceive the high standards of many religions as a natural source of toxic perfectionism. Although religions are not the only source of high standards and expectations, most religions do indeed encourage members to live up to high standards. An argument often heard is that religion's standards, when coupled with teachings that speak of eternal consequences for our thoughts and actions, are a powerful source of toxic perfectionism. High standards, even if intended as aspirational, can be interpreted by some as what is necessary now and that we should harshly judge ourselves and others if mistakes are made. And this is particularly problematic given few of us fully live up to our personally set standards (religious or otherwise).

Some see high standards that are attached to perceived serious consequences as a recipe for toxic perfectionism. Indeed, most of us know some religious individuals who suffer from toxic perfectionism: those of us who are religious have likely, at some point, felt burdened by some religious standards. This seems to affirm the conclusion of many that religion and toxic perfectionism go hand in hand. However, as discussed in "Understanding Perfectionism" herein, high standards are not the defining characteristic of toxic perfectionism; instead it's feeling *worthless* when we make mistakes. Conversely, healthy perfectionism includes

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5. Marianne Holman, "BYU Head Decries Perfectionism," *Deseret News,* September 7, 2011, https://www.deseret.com/2011/9/8/20214505/byu-head-decries-perfectionism/.

6. Sydney Walker and Valerie Walton, "What 3 Mental Health Experts Taught at BYU Education Week About Anxiety, Perfectionism, Religious OCD, and Depression," *Church News,* August 20, 2021, https://www.thechurchnews.com/2021/8/20/23218655/byu-education-week-mental-health-anxiety-depression-religious-ocd-perfectionism/.

7. Marilynne Todd Linford, "Is Perfectionism Really About 'Be Ye Therefore Perfect'?," *Meridian Magazine,* January 25, 2022, https://latterdaysaintmag.com/is-perfectionism-really-about-be-ye-therefore-perfect/.

8. DazzlingArmadillo6, "R/Exmormon on Reddit: 'A Culture of Toxic Perfectionism,'" Reddit, 2019, https://www.reddit.com/r/exmormon/comments/e8yk34/a_culture_of_toxic_perfectionism/.

9. Holland, "Be Ye Therefore Perfect," 40.

having high standards for oneself. The question about religion and perfectionism is, therefore, not about the standards of a religion but rather about whether not meeting those standards creates feelings of worthlessness. While there certainly are religious individuals who experience toxic perfectionism, do the majority of religious people experience toxic perfectionism? Another important question is how do religious individuals compare to nonreligious individuals?

Further, are there some religious denominations that seem to have more toxic perfectionism among their members? For some, this may feel like a logical conclusion. But is it true? And what is the direction of causation? Does increased religiosity lead to more toxic perfectionism? Or does toxic perfectionism impact a person's religiosity? This article will seek to address these questions using both past and current research with a special focus on perfectionism among Latter-day Saints.

Perfectionism Versus Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder

Before looking at past and current research into perfectionism and religion, it may be helpful to differentiate perfectionism from obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). Given that recent research has had much more to say about religion and OCD, it will be helpful to understand how OCD connects with perfectionism. In fact, it was surprising how little research has been done on perfectionism's relationship with religion. Perfectionism has received significant attention from both the scholarly and clinical world. A search of the American Psychology Association's (APA) database PsycINFO for the last twenty years produces a list of over four thousand peer-reviewed articles. The attention appears to be picking up, with over 60% of those articles being published in the last decade alone. However, far less attention has been given to the connection between perfectionism and religion. A search of that same database produced only 105 studies connecting the two constructs, and the majority of those were theological, theoretical, or primarily focused on OCD.

The APA has defined perfectionism as "the tendency to demand of others or of oneself an extremely high or even flawless level of performance, in excess of what is required by the situation."[10] However, when individuals hyper-focus on feelings of inadequacy because of their mistakes, it can also be a sign of obsessive-compulsive disorder. "Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) is a disorder in which people have recurring, unwanted

10. *APA Dictionary of Psychology,* "Perfectionism," American Psychological Association, updated April 19, 2018, https://dictionary.apa.org/perfectionism.

thoughts, ideas or sensations (obsessions)."[11] There are several subtypes of OCD, including hoarding and fear of harm. In all cases of OCD, the obsessive thoughts usually lead to a drive to do something repetitively in order to overcome them. In the case of hoarding, a person feels compelled to keep even useless items; and in the case of fear of harm, a person may obsessively check to make sure doors are locked or the stove is off. *Scrupulosity* is another type of OCD, but one that is religiously oriented. "Scrupulosity is a subtype of obsessive-compulsive disorder . . . involving religious or moral obsessions. Scrupulous individuals are overly concerned that something they thought or did might be a sin or other violation of religious or moral doctrine."[12] For example, an individual with scrupulosity may say their evening prayer and get into bed but then have an obsessive thought that they did not pray quite right. They may then compulsively get out of bed to try again, which may repeat itself over and over, going on for quite some time.

Though perfectionism and OCD/scrupulosity have commonalities, they are not the same thing. Only OCD is included in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM). In other words, OCD is considered a diagnosable mental health disorder, but scrupulosity is not. That does not mean scrupulosity does not impact mental health. Just as toxic perfectionism impacts mental health in negative ways, scrupulosity can likewise have a profound impact on mental health. So what is the relationship between them?

Like OCD, perfectionism can have religious or nonreligious overtones. While OCD is generally not related to unhealthy efforts to achieve, toxic perfection results from striving for a flawless performance and feeling worthless when mistakes are made. Though OCD/scrupulosity and perfectionism are not the same, a person may experience a combination of the two.[13] One study found that toxic perfectionism may mediate the impact of causal factors on OCD,[14] meaning that those things that cause OCD may do so because they increase perfectionism. In the study,

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11. "What Is Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder?," Psychiatry.org, reviewed September 2024, https://www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/obsessive-compulsive-disorder/what-is-obsessive-compulsive-disorder.

12. C. Alec Pollard, "What is OCD & Scrupulosity?," International OCD Foundation, revised 2022 by Jedidiah Siev, https://iocdf.org/faith-ocd/what-is-ocd-scrupulosity/.

13. G. E. Kawika Allen, Abigail Norton, Sara Pulsipher, David Johnson, and Benson Bunker, "I Worry That I Am Almost Perfect! Examining Relationships Among Perfectionism, Scrupulosity, Intrinsic Spirituality, and Psychological Well-Being Among Latter-day Saints," *Spirituality in Clinical Practice* 10, no. 4 (2021): 316–25, https://doi.org/10.1037/scp0000273.

14. Po Hu, Pengwei Liang, Xiaoyan Liu, Yuting Ouyang, and Jianping Wang, "Parenting Styles and Obsessive-Compulsive Symptoms in College Students: The Mediating Role

negative parenting styles were related to greater toxic perfectionism, which, in turn, was related to more OCD symptoms.

Though research has shown a link between religiosity and OCD/scrupulosity, few studies have looked at how they are linked. One study examined this link by looking at three specific dysfunctional thought processes: (1) an inflated sense of responsibility and over-estimation of ability, (2) intolerance of uncertainty and perfectionism, and (3) an emphasis on the importance of and the need to control thoughts. The study found that these three thought processes mediated the relationship between religion and OCD/scrupulosity.[15] Interestingly, perfectionism had the weakest association with OCD/scrupulosity, though it was still significant.

Research Findings on Religion and Perfectionism

Again, there has been far more research exploring the connection between OCD (especially scrupulosity) and religion than exploring the connection between perfectionism and religion. The rest of this article will examine the extant (currently published) research findings as well as research findings from the Foundations data to better understand the relationship between religion and perfectionism.

We will examine the two types of perfectionism spoken of in previous articles: discrepancy and social perfectionism. Discrepancy perfectionism is experiencing disappointment and dissatisfaction with even one's best efforts. Social perfectionism is perceiving that only perfection is good enough, and so not living up to high standards will cause people to not respect or love the person. Unfortunately, the Foundations data did not measure healthy perfectionism (a desire to succeed or do well that leads to positive outcomes), so we focused instead on these two aspects of toxic perfectionism. However, past studies have found that Latter-day Saints often rate highly on healthy perfectionism.[16]

Our analysis focuses on two overarching aspects of religion: religious affiliation and religious dimensions. We divide religious affiliation into the following categories: Latter-day Saints, other Christian,

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of Perfectionism," *Front Psychiatry* 14 (July 2023): article 1126689, https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyt.2023.1126689.

15. Dakota Mauzay and Carrie Cuttler, "Dysfunctional Cognitions Mediate the Relationships Between Religiosity, Paranormal Beliefs, and Symptoms of Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder," *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 21, no. 8 (2019): 838–50, https://doi.org/10.1080/13674676.2019.1583176.

16. G. E. Kawika Allen and Kenneth T. Wang, "Examining Religious Commitment, Perfectionism, Scrupulosity, and Well-Being Among LDS Individuals," *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 6, no. 3 (2014): 257–64, https://doi.org/10.1037/a0035197.

other religions, "nones" who still believe in God, atheists and agnostics, former Latter-day Saints, and former members of any other religious denomination. The religious dimensions we examined include salience, attachment to God, intrinsic versus extrinsic religious orientation, religious coping, legalism, and attendance.

For our examination of both religious affiliation and religious dimensions, we started by looking at the relationship between religion and perfectionism in prior research where such literature exists (unfortunately, many aspects of religious affiliation and religious dimensions have not yet been researched). Then, using the Foundations survey data, we examined the relationship between religion and perfectionism. Finally, we investigated "chicken and egg" questions about perfection and religiosity over time. Beyond simply knowing that there is a connection between the two, these analyses will allow us to better understand whether perfectionism may impact religious dimensions, whether religious dimensions may impact perfectionism, or whether they mutually impact each other.

Religious Identity and Perfectionism

Prior Research

Very little research has looked at whether adherents of various religious denominations differ in toxic perfectionism. Several studies look at OCD or scrupulosity across religious denominations, some of which include perfectionism, though not usually as the primary purpose of the study. Out of all the studies, only a few compare religious denominations' influence on perfectionism, and none look at perfectionism's influence on religious denominational membership. Most draw their sample from a specific denomination rather than looking at how denomination may or may not influence perfectionism. Interestingly, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints make up a good share of these studies based on specific denominational samples.

Kawika Allen from BYU and Kenneth Wang from the Fuller Theological Seminary are two prominent researchers who have looked at Latter-day Saints. In two separate studies examining scrupulosity and perfectionism, they found that the majority of Latter-day Saints have high levels of *healthy* perfectionism (the kind of perfectionism that connects with higher levels of well-being).[17] However, given they surveyed

17. G. E. Kawika Allen, Kenneth T. Wang, and Hannah Stokes, "Examining Legalism, Scrupulosity, Family Perfectionism, and Psychological Adjustment Among LDS Individuals," *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 18, no. 4 (2015): 246–58, https://doi.org/10.1080/13674676.2015.1021312.

only Latter-day Saints, it is not clear if similar levels of perfectionism may be found in other denominations. One study of college students (not necessarily Latter-day Saints) by Jeffrey Ashby and Judy Huffman found that the more religious students were, the higher their religious perfectionism—meaning they had and strove to live up to high standards, but they didn't suffer from discrepancy perfectionism.[18]

There was a minority of Latter-day Saint participants in the Allen and Wang studies that did experience toxic perfectionism, and Allen and Wang found that scrupulosity partially mediated the relationship between toxic perfectionism and its negative outcomes of depression, anxiety, and life satisfaction. In other words, it appears that toxic perfectionism may relate to poorer mental health primarily because it increases the likelihood a person will experience scrupulosity (OCD connected to religious activities and beliefs). A later study also showed that toxic perfectionism was positively associated with scrupulosity for Latter-day Saints and that both were associated with feeling anxiety about one's relationship with God.[19]

Another study by Marleen Williams compared Latter-day Saint women with Protestant women on levels of perfectionism as well as attitudes about family and depression.[20] The researchers found no difference in levels of perfectionism between the two groups. However, they did find that perfectionism correlated to higher levels of depression for both groups of women.

Finally, two other studies compared religious denominations on measures of OCD and scrupulosity.[21] Neither study had much to say about perfectionism. They both found that Catholics had higher levels of either OCD or scrupulosity than Protestants, Jews, and those with no

18. Jeffrey S. Ashby and Judy Huffman, "Religious Orientation and Multidimensional Perfectionism: Relationships and Implications," *Counseling and Values* 43, no. 3 (2011): 178–88, https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2161-007X.1999.tb00141.x.

19. Allen and others, "I Worry That I Am Almost Perfect!," 316–25.

20. Marleen Williams, "Family Attitudes and Perfectionism as Related to Depression in Latter-day Saint and Protestant Women," in *Religion, Mental Health, and the Latter-day Saints,* ed. Daniel K. Judd (Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1999): 47–66.

21. Craig J. Gonsalvez, Alex R. Hains, and Gerard Stoyles, "Relationship Between Religion and Obsessive Phenomena," *Australian Journal of Psychology* 62, no. 2 (2009): 93–102, https://doi.org/10.1080/00049530902887859; Jennifer L. Buchholz and others, "Scrupulosity, Religious Affiliation and Symptom Presentation in Obsessive Compulsive Disorder," *Behavioural and Cognitive Psychotherapy* 47, no. 4 (2019): 478–92, https://doi.org/10.1017/S1352465818000711.

religion. However, a separate study found the inverse: that Catholics had lower levels of scrupulosity.[22]

Our Findings

Unfortunately, this scant research tells us little about how individuals of various religions may differ in their perfectionism. And there is no research we are aware of that compares the perfectionism of religious and nonreligious individuals. The Foundations data therefore provides us with the most detailed look at religion and perfectionism to date (details of the analyses can be found in the appendix). Figure 1 shows a detailed comparison of how individuals from various religious (or nonreligious) affiliations compare when it comes to perfectionism.

Perfectionism as measured includes both discrepancy and social perfectionism. Discrepancy and social perfectionism were combined to show whether individuals were low on both types (low), low on one type and mid on the other (mid-low), mid on both types (mid), mid on one type and high on the other (mid-high), or high on both types (high). In this figure are (1) current Latter-day Saints, (2) those who are of other Christian religions (Catholics and Protestants, for example), (3) those of other religions (Jews, Muslims, and so forth), (4) those who believe in God but don't affiliate with a religion, (5) atheists and agnostics, and finally (6) former Latter-day Saints and (7) former members of other religions. Individuals of this last category were not affiliated with *any* religion at the time of the study. For example, a Latter-day Saint turned Catholic would be included in the "Other Christian" category but a Latter-day Saint who was not affiliated with any religion would be included as "Former Latter-day Saint."

The first four religious identities in figure 1 had very similar levels of toxic perfectionism. Regarding the last three, former Latter-day Saints and former members of other religions track closely with atheists and agnostics on perfectionism. Of everyone, Latter-day Saints were the most likely to be low on both types of toxic perfectionism. While the difference between them and members of other denominations (as well as those who believe in God but who were unaffiliated) was not *statistically* significant, Latter-day Saints and those of "Other Religions" were statistically more likely to have *low levels* of toxic perfectionism than atheists

22. E. McIngvale, K. Rufino, M. Ehlers, and J. Hart, "An In-Depth Look at the Scrupulosity Dimension of Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder," *Journal of Spirituality in Mental Health* 19 (March 2017): 295–305, https://doi.org/10.1080/19349637.2017.1288075.

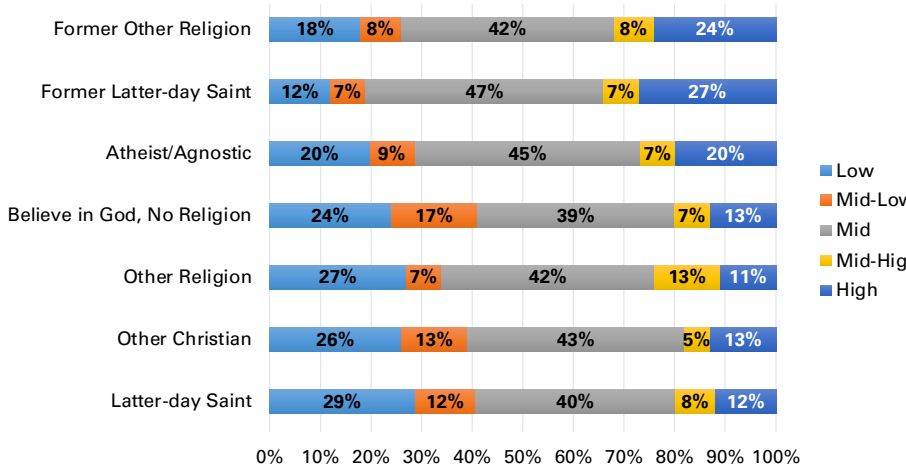

Figure 1. Perfectionism (Socially, Prescribed, and Discrepancy) by Religious Identity.

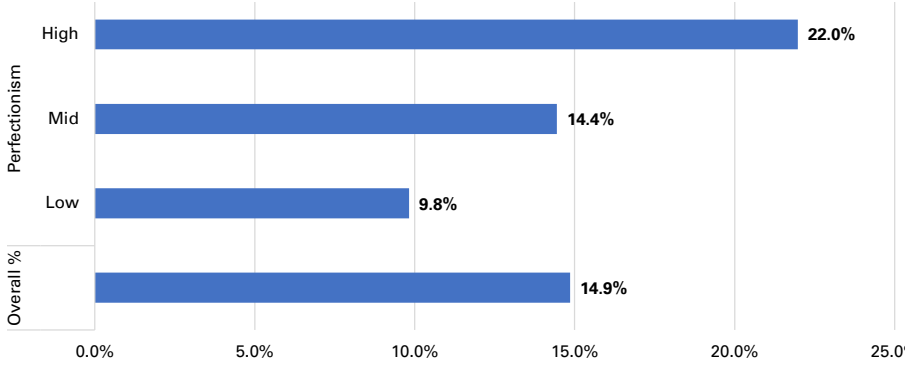

Figure 2. Percent Disaffiliation by Levels of Perfectionism Between the Average Ages of Fourteen and Eighteen Years Old.

and agnostics and former Latter-day Saints. Regarding those who were most likely to have *high levels* of toxic perfectionism, former Latter-day Saints were significantly higher than both current Latter-day Saints and other Christians.

Figure 2 shows that individuals with higher levels of toxic perfectionism were far more likely to disaffiliate from their religious denomination than those who had low levels of toxic perfectionism. In fact, those with high levels of toxic perfectionism were more than twice as likely to disaffiliate than those with low toxic perfectionism.

To get a sense of whether disaffiliation led to perfectionism or whether perfectionism led to disaffiliation ("chicken and egg" analyses), we examined the perfectionism of those who were disaffiliated between 2018 and 2022 (Waves 2 and 4 of the Foundations project). For *discrepancy perfectionism,* we found that those who disaffiliated were higher on discrepancy before and after they disaffiliated compared to those who remained affiliated. In other words, disaffiliation didn't seem to increase or decrease their perfectionism.

Socially prescribed perfectionism was something of a different story. Those who disaffiliated, meaning they were not currently affiliated with any religion, were significantly higher in socially prescribed perfectionism in 2018 and 2020. However, their socially prescribed perfectionism decreased from 2020 to 2022. Although it's difficult to determine whether this is causal, it may be that by leaving their religion, they no longer affiliated with individuals who they felt were judging them harshly. Whatever the case may be, higher levels of perfectionism are connected to leaving one's religion.

Intrinsic Versus Extrinsic Religiosity

Prior Research

Perhaps the aspect of religion most frequently studied in relation to perfectionism is whether a person is more intrinsically or extrinsically motivated to be religious. Interestingly, most of these studies have focused on Latter-day Saints. An intrinsic approach to religion is one where "religious practice is an end itself, rather than a means to other ends," as opposed to an extrinsic approach to religion, which is "a religious orientation in which religiosity is largely a means to other ends, such as social morality or individual well-being, rather than an end in itself."[23] Thus, an intrinsically motivated youth goes to church or reads scriptures or obeys commandments because they see such actions as fulfilling and correct in themselves. This youth would do these things without outside influences. An extrinsically motivated youth may do the same things, but they do so in hopes that such actions will bring about some other good in their life, such as peer acceptance or the bestowal of blessings (or avoidance of negative consequences, such as a parent

23. *APA Dictionary of Psychology,* "Intrinsic Religion," American Psychological Association, updated April 19, 2018, https://dictionary.apa.org/intrinsic-religion; *APA Dictionary of Psychology,* "Extrinsic Religion," American Psychological Association, updated April 19, 2018, https://dictionary.apa.org/extrinsic-religion.

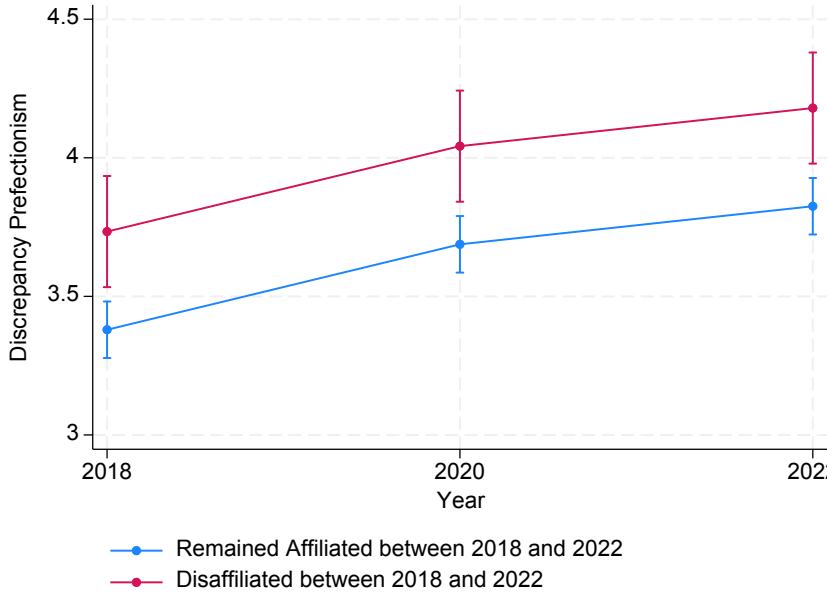

Figure 3. Discrepancy Perfectionism over Time by Disaffiliation.

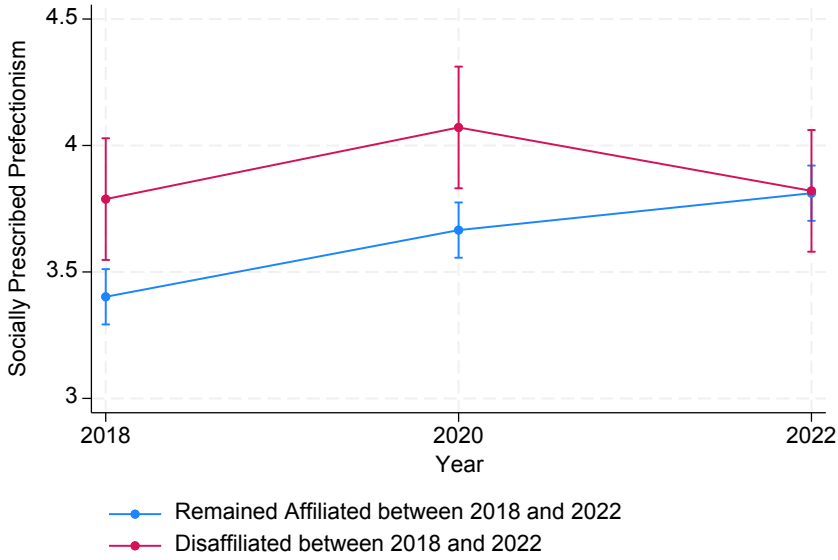

Figure 4. Socially Prescribed Perfectionism over Time by Disaffiliation.

getting mad at them). Six separate studies using nine separate samples examined the relationship between Latter-day Saint perfectionism in relation to intrinsic and extrinsic religiosity.

One of the earliest studies looking at these issues found that intrinsic religiosity was significantly associated with healthy perfectionism, while extrinsic religiosity was significantly associated with toxic religiosity.[24] Results suggested that extrinsic religiosity may lead to (or be related to) a person being inflexible in their thinking, with that inflexibility leading to toxic perfectionism (see "Healing from Toxic Perfectionism," pp. 133–41, for an extended discussion on how flexible thinking can reduce toxic perfectionism).

Similarly, a study of two separate samples of Latter-day Saint undergraduates found that the greater a student's intrinsic religiosity, the less toxic perfectionism they had, while the more extrinsically motivated they were, the greater their toxic perfectionism.[25] In a third study using three separate samples of Brigham Young University students, researchers found intrinsic religiosity, as well as spiritual maturity and self-transcendence, to be predictive of better mental health while at the same time not being predictive of shame, perfectionism, or eating disorders.[26]

A mixed-method study found that active Latter-day Saints were more likely to be intrinsically motivated than extrinsically motivated in following their religious standards and that such an orientation was associated with healthy rather than toxic perfectionism.[27]

This research suggests that religious expectations among active Latter-day Saints may be predominately internal rather than external. High levels of Latter-day Saint religiosity were related to lower levels of

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24. Jesse M. Crosby, Scott C. Bates, and Michael P. Twohig, "Examination of the Relationship Between Perfectionism and Religiosity as Mediated by Psychological Inflexibility," *Current Psychology: A Journal for Diverse Perspectives on Diverse Psychological Issues* 30, no. 2 (2011): 117–29, https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-011-9104-3.

25. Patrick R. Steffen, "Perfectionism and Life Aspirations in Intrinsically and Extrinsically Religious Individuals," *Journal of Religion and Health* 53 (February 2013) 945–58, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-013-9692-3.

26. Peter W. Sanders, G. E. Kawika Allen, Lane Fischer, P. Scott Richards, David T. Morgan, and Richard W. Potts, "Intrinsic Religiousness and Spirituality as Predictors of Mental Health and Positive Psychological Functioning in Latter-day Saint Adolescents and Young Adults," *Journal of Religion and Health* 54 (2015): 871–87, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-015-0043-4.

27. Samuel O. Peer and James S. McGraw, "Mixed-Method Study of Perfectionism and Religiosity Among Mormons: Implications for Cultural Competence and Clinical Practice," *Issues in Religion and Psychotherapy* 38, no. 1 (2017): 77–100, https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/irp/vol38/iss1/12.

self- and other-oriented perfectionism (though not socially prescribed perfectionism). Beyond replicating prior evidence that higher Latter-day Saint religiosity predicts greater adaptive perfectionism,[28] these quantitative results further evince that devout Latter-day Saints may be more intrinsically motivated, rather than externally or socially motivated, to follow religious standards. These results echo earlier findings by Allen and Wang[29] that perfectionism in active Latter-day Saints is more—but not solely—likely to be healthy rather than toxic.

Another study of Latter-day Saint undergraduates at BYU examined the impact of intrinsic religiosity on seeking help for mental health. Researchers found that higher levels of intrinsic religiosity predicted more seeking help from religious sources and was related to healthy perfectionism but not toxic perfectionism.[30] Finally, in the study of BYU students previously referenced above, researchers found that toxic perfectionism was significantly related to more scrupulosity and anxiety about God. It also found that higher levels of toxic perfectionism were associated with lower levels of intrinsic religiosity.[31] In other words, higher levels of intrinsic religiosity were related to less toxic perfectionism and less scrupulosity.

Our Data

We used the three constructs drawn from self-determination theory to measure intrinsic and extrinsic religious motivation.[32] *Identified regulation* is related to acting because we believe it is right and value it (that is, intrinsic motivation). *External regulation* is concerned with how other people will see us (that is, extrinsic motivation). *Introjected regulation* is the fear of failure or not measuring up (that is, intrinsically motivated, though in a negative way). We also found each aspect of motivation associated with perfectionism in the expected ways: Correlations found

28. Crosby and others, "Relationship Between Perfectionism and Religiosity," 117–29.

29. Allen and others, "Examining Legalism, Scrupulosity, Family Perfectionism, and Psychological Adjustment," 246–58.

30. Kyler Ray Rasmussen, Niwako Yamawaki, Jamie Moses, Lindy Powell, and Brandon Bastian, "The Relationships Between Perfectionism, Religious Motivation, and Mental Health Utilisation Among Latter-Day Saint Students," *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 16, no. 6 (2013): 612–16, https://doi.org/10.1080/13674676.2012.706273.

31. Allen and others, "I Worry That I Am Almost Perfect!," 316–25.

32. Bart Neyrinck, Maarten Vansteenkiste, Willy Lens, Bart Duriez, and Dirk Hutsebaut, "Cognitive, Affective and Behavioral Correlates of Internalization of Regulations for Religious Activities," *Motivation and Emotion* 30 (November 2006): 321–32, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11031-006-9048-3.

that those high in external and introjected regulation were likely to have high levels of toxic perfectionism. Conversely, those high in identified regulation were less likely to have high toxic perfectionism.

The following three charts, figures 5, 6, and 8, show the results of our "chicken and egg" analyses, examining whether the various religious motivations (external, introjected, and identified) affect perfectionism or whether perfectionism affects religious motivations. In this and each figure looking at religiosity constructs and perfection over time, solid arrows represent a relationship between mental health and *discrepancy* perfectionism, whereas dashed arrows represent a relationship between mental health and socially prescribed perfectionism, often called social perfectionism.

We found that the relationship between social perfectionism and externalized regulation flowed in a single direction, from perfectionism to greater external regulation (age twelve to fourteen and age sixteen to eighteen). Discrepancy perfectionism at age sixteen was related to more external regulation at age eighteen. In other words, the more social and discrepancy perfectionism youth experience, the more likely they are to develop motivations for going to church that are purely to please others.

Social perfectionism and introjected regulation had a reciprocal influence on each other at older ages. What makes this interesting is that introjected regulation has discrepancy perfectionism as part of its definition, which leads to the question of why there was no relationship between the two over time, unless they were simply so highly correlated that one could not be differentiated from the other.

Before moving on to the relationship between identified regulation, let's examine the relationship between introjected regulation and the combination of discrepancy and social perfectionism. As can be seen in figure 7, those with low levels of introjected regulation were almost twice as likely to be in the lower category of overall toxic perfectionism and more than twice as likely to be in the higher category of overall toxic perfectionism. In fact, one in five of those high in perfectionism were also motivated by shame to be religious (that is, introjected motivation). This speaks to individuals who are fearful of the judgments of others and likely experience their religion as highly stressful.

Finally, as can be seen in figure 8, the direction of influence between identified regulation and discrepancy perfectionism was such that identified regulation was related to lower levels of discrepancy perfectionism in mid-adolescence, and greater discrepancy perfectionism was related to lower levels of social perfectionism in late adolescence.

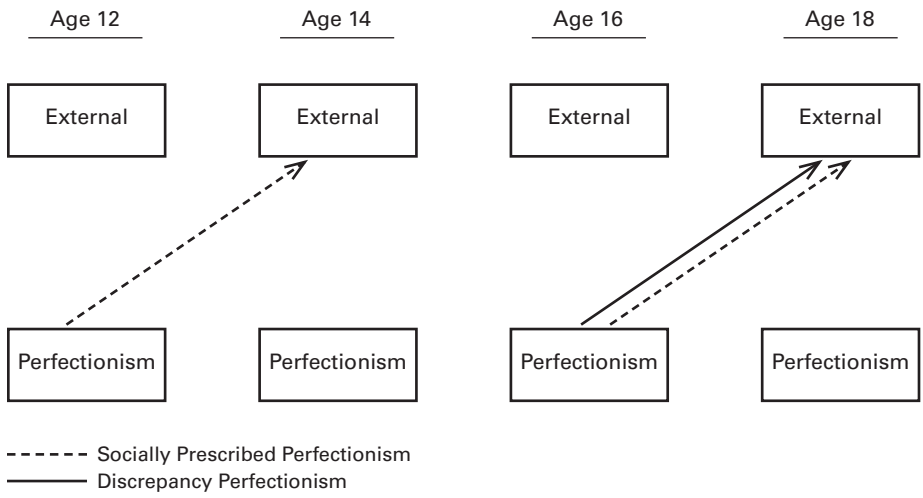

Figure 5. External Regulation and Perfectionism over Time.

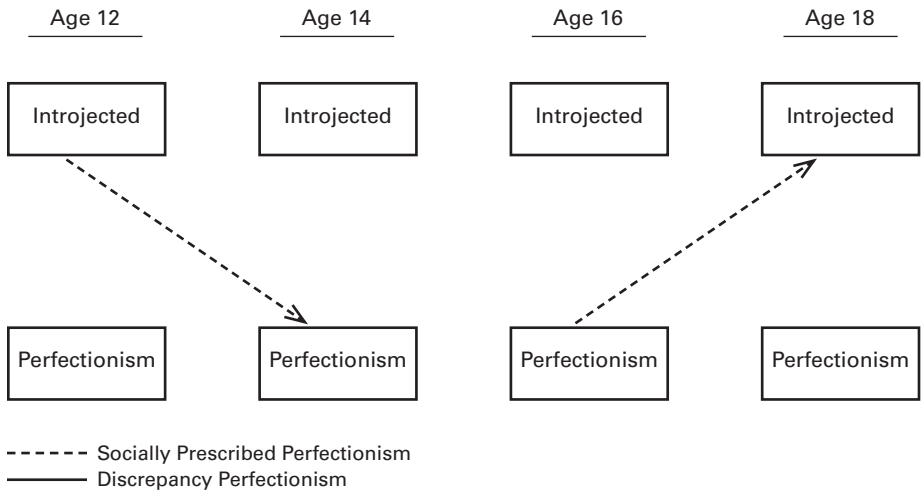

Figure 6. Introjected Regulation and Perfectionism over Time.

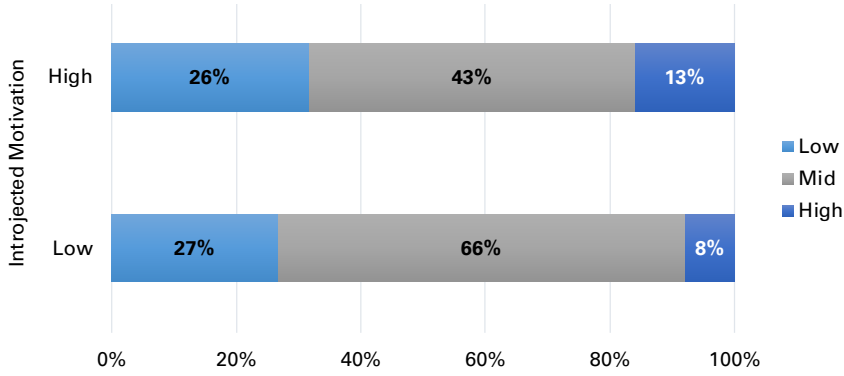

Figure 7. Youth Perfectionism by Introjected Motivation

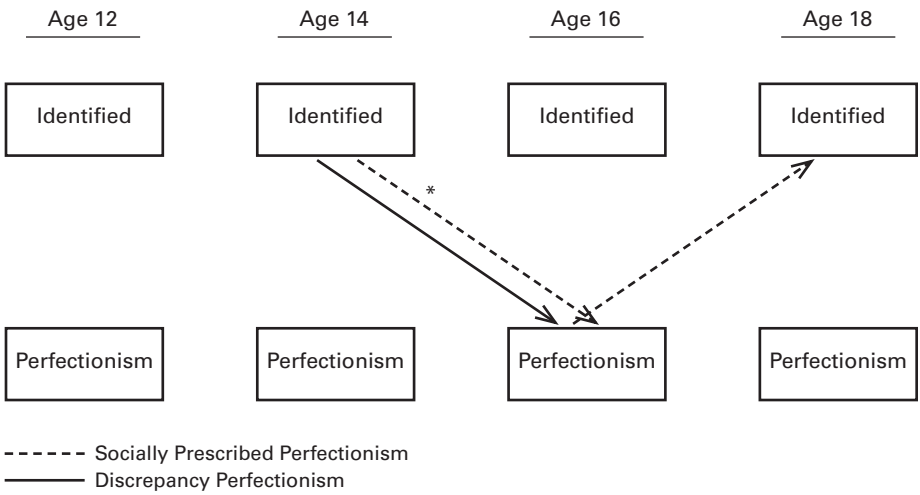

Figure 8. Identified Motivation and Perfectionism over Time.

* The line from identified motivation to socially prescribed perfectionism indicates that the more identified the motivation at age fourteen, the *greater* the socially prescribed perfectionism at age sixteen, something counter to hypotheses. However, this is an artifact of those who have high levels of identified motivation and are very low on socially prescribed perfectionism at age fourteen. Because they start so low on the scale, there is nowhere for them to go but up. Even though those high on identified motivation increase more from age fourteen to sixteen, they are still lower in socially prescribed perfectionism than those who are low on identified motivation. All other pathways are as expected: greater identified motivation related to a decrease in discrepancy perfectionism (age fourteen to sixteen) and greater discrepancy perfectionism leading to lower identified motivation (age sixteen to eighteen).

Religious Salience

Prior Research

A regularly studied aspect of religiosity is religious salience. Religious salience is the importance a person places on religion in their life. It includes how religion impacts an individual's beliefs and behaviors. In relation to perfectionism, it could be asked whether the degree of perfectionism (toxic or adaptive) is different for people who consider religion to be an important part of their lives. In other words, are people whose religion permeates their lives at greater risk for perfectionism? Little extant research has investigated the relationship of religious salience to perfectionism. In a study mentioned above, the strength of faith was measured and was related to higher symptoms of scrupulosity (a related though distinct construct from toxic perfectionism).[33] Strength of faith is a concept related to the depth and intensity of a person's religious faith, which is highly related to, though somewhat different from, religious salience. Thus, some previous research suggests there may be a connection between religious salience and toxic perfectionism.

Our Data

Figure 9 shows a large difference in toxic perfectionism between those who have high and low religious salience. Those individuals with low religious salience were approximately twice as likely to experience high levels of toxic perfectionism. They were also half as likely to have low levels of perfectionism. Because our data are longitudinal, we can look at the possible direction of influence between religion and perfectionism. Without an experimental design, it is not fully possible to claim causation. However, due to the longitudinal nature of the data, we can examine which construct (religiosity or perfectionism) precedes which. That is, does salience decrease perfectionism, or does perfectionism decrease salience? This is our "chicken and egg" analysis as we try to determine what comes first. These analyses are critical because they can tell us where we should focus our efforts. If perfectionism causes lower salience, then we would want to target perfectionism. But if salience causes lower perfectionism, then we would want to target the salience to lower perfectionism.

When we examined the relationship between perfectionism and salience, salience was related to perfectionism even after accounting

33. Gonsalvez and others, "Relationship Between Religion and Obsessive Phenomena," 93–102.

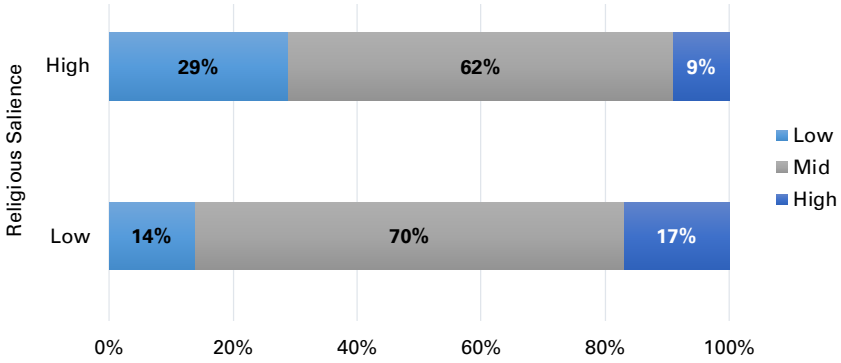

Figure 9. Youth Perfectionism by Religious Salience

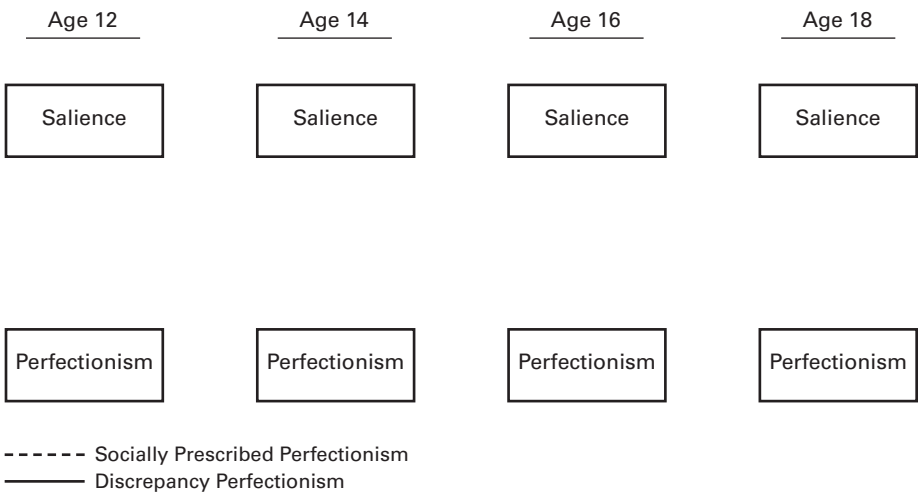

Figure 10. Salience and Perfectionism over Time.

for other religiousness variables. Higher levels of religious salience were associated with lower levels of toxic perfectionism. The strongest association was an inverse relationship between religious salience and high toxic perfectionism. The strength of this association was double the strength of the association between religious salience and low and medium levels of toxic perfectionism.

However, when we conducted a "chicken and egg" analysis (see fig. 10), there was no significant influence of religious salience on toxic perfectionism or vice versa. In other words, although there is a significant correlation between the two, they seem to simply "bundle together" rather than one causing the other.

Legalism or Grace

Prior Research

A concerning aspect of a person's religious experience is how "legalistic" they are in their thinking and beliefs. A person who has a legalistic attitude about their religion has a "strict, literal, or excessive conformity to the law or to a religious or moral code."[34] Legalistic individuals feel that God's love, his help, and his influence cannot be experienced unless they are earned. And, for the legalistic person, the price for such divine help is very high. This contrasts with recognizing the grace of God, which can be defined as a "benevolent divine influence acting upon humanity to impart spiritual enrichment or purity, to inspire virtue, or to give strength to endure trial and resist temptation."[35] Through the perspective of the restored gospel, such help is available at any point in our journey and is something that is not earned, but received.[36]

One study of Latter-day Saint students examined the connection between legalism, grace, and perfectionism.[37] Researchers found that experiencing grace related to more healthy perfectionism and less toxic perfectionism. Legalism was related to a lower likelihood of experiencing God's grace and was also related to more anxiety, depression, and shame. It was clear from the survey findings that legalistic thinking (which does not acknowledge God's grace) was related to substantial problems for Latter-day Saint students.

Our Data

In the Foundations data, those who were low in legalism were also likely to have low levels of toxic perfectionism. As can be seen in figure 11, over time legalistic toxic perfectionism was associated with more legalism in the older ages. In other words, as youth enter their mid- to late-teen years, their socially prescribed perfectionism is linked to increasing legalism.

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34. *Merriam-Webster Dictionary,* "legalism," accessed October 23, 2024, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/legalism.

35. *Oxford English Dictionary,* "grace, noun," sense I.1.b, accessed October 23, 2024, https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/7058290127.

36. See Dieter F. Uchtdorf, "The Gift of Grace," *Ensign* 45, no. 5 (May 2015): 107–10.

37. Daniel K. Judd, William Justin Dyer, and Justin B. Top, "Grace, Legalism, and Mental Health: Examining Direct and Mediating Relationships," *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 12, no. 1 (2020): 26–35, https://doi.org/10.1037/rel0000211.

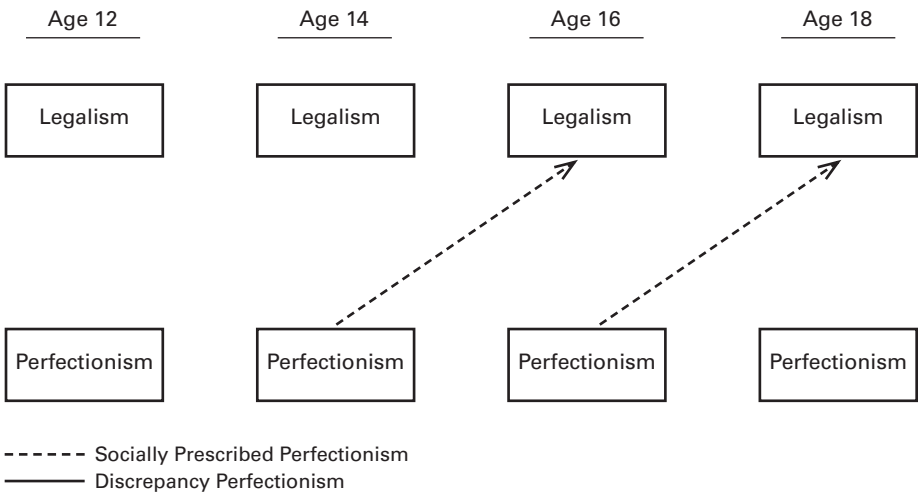

Figure 11. Legalism and Perfectionism over Time.

Religious Coping

Prior Research

There was no prior research on the relationship between religious coping, whether positive or negative, with perfectionism. Yet these constructs seem likely to be related, as our data seems to indicate. By way of definition, the *Encyclopedia of Behavioral Medicine* defines religious coping as "religiously framed cognitive, emotional, or behavioral responses to stress, encompassing multiple methods and purposes as well as positive and negative dimensions."[38] Some individuals use religion to cope with life's difficulties in positive ways, finding strength and purpose through their religious faith to help them overcome challenges. However, negative religious coping is defined as "encompass[ing] interpersonal, intrapersonal, and divine categories, including conflict with religious others, questioning, guilt, and perceived distance from or negative views of a higher power." Positive religious coping "include[s] the collaborative style, benevolent reappraisal of the stressor, and seeking spiritual support

38. Jennifer Wortmann, "Religious Coping," in *Encyclopedia of Behavioral Medicine,* ed. Marc D. Gellman and J. Rick Turner (Springer, 2013), 1647–48, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4419-1005-9_665.

from God, clergy, or members of one's religious group."[39] A person who uses religion to cope with life's difficulties in negative ways finds that their religious approach to overcoming challenges further exacerbates those challenges and leaves them feeling less able, rather than more able, to cope.

Our Data

When we examined the relationship between perfectionism and negative religious coping, negative religious coping was related to higher levels of toxic perfectionism even after accounting for other religiousness variables. In fact, it had the highest correlation of any religiosity construct. As shown in figure 12, those individuals with low levels of negative religious coping are more than ten times more likely to have low toxic perfectionism as well as ten times more likely to have high toxic perfectionism.

And as can be seen in figure 13, negative religious coping and perfectionism (both discrepancy and social) reinforced each other throughout adolescence. However, in late adolescence (age sixteen to eighteen), it seems perfectionism was more likely to drive negative coping than negative coping was to drive perfectionism. In early adolescence (age twelve to fourteen), negative coping was related to increases in both kinds of toxic perfectionism.

When we examined the relationship between perfectionism and positive religious coping, positive religious coping was related to lower

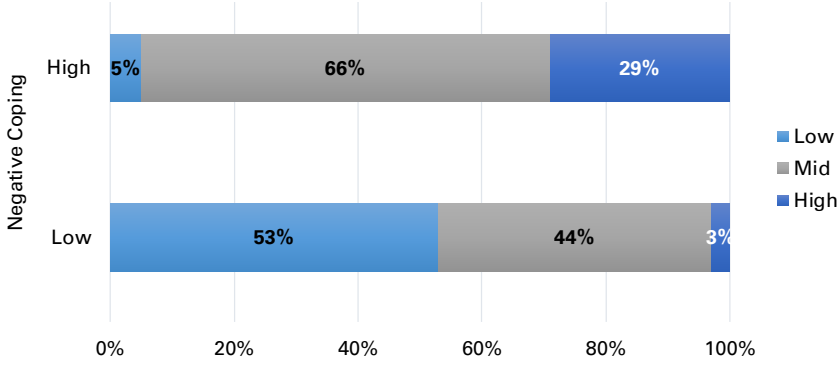

Figure 12. Youth Perfectionism by Negative Religious Coping.

39. Wortmann, "Religious Coping," 1647–48.

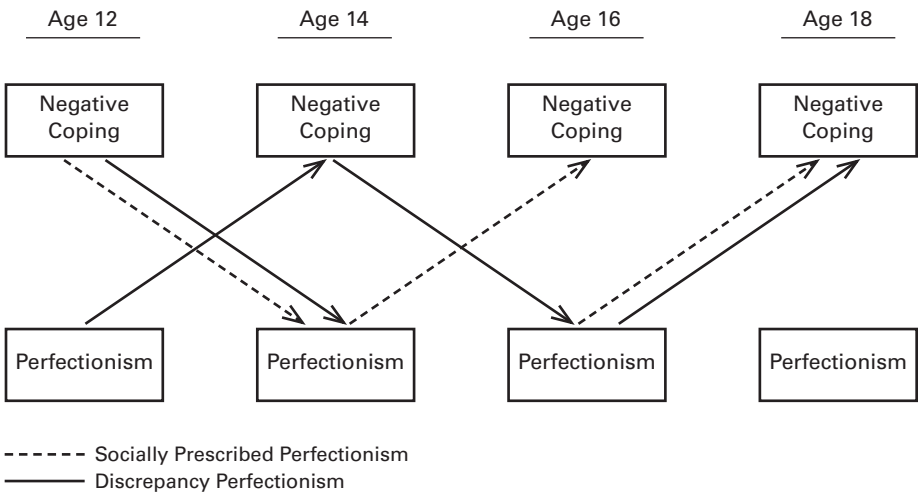

Figure 13. Negative Religious Coping and Perfectionism over Time.

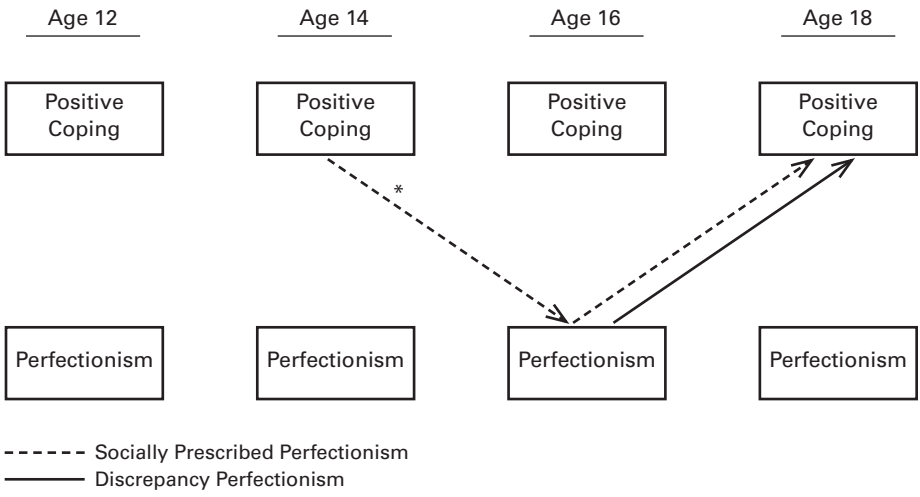

Figure 14. Positive Religious Coping and Perfectionism over Time.

* The line from positive coping at fourteen to perfectionism at sixteen indicates that the greater the positive coping, the greater the socially prescribed perfectionism. However, as with the identified analyses (fig. 8), this is an artifact of those with high positive coping having such low socially prescribed perfectionism at age fourteen that, statistically, they can only increase.

levels of toxic perfectionism. However, when entered into regression analysis (a statistical test to better understand the relationship between two or more variables) with the other religiosity constructs, positive religious coping was no longer significantly related to perfectionism. However, as can be seen from figure 14, positive religious coping had a significant inverse relationship with toxic perfectionism in the middle ages of adolescents, and then, interestingly, toxic perfectionism seemed to encourage positive religious coping at age eighteen.

Attachment to God

Prior Research

It is unsurprising that negative or positive religious coping is related to how a person relates to God. Negative religious coping, by definition, includes "conflict with religious others, questioning, guilt, and perceived distance from or negative views of a higher power."[40]

How an individual views God can have a profound impact on how they see his expectations of them. Attachment to God, like human attachment, refers to how secure (or insecure) we feel in our relationships. Secure attachments, whether to people or God, have been shown to be associated with greater psycho-social health and relationships that are close and rewarding. In the prior research, it is not always apparent which direction the influence goes, but the association is clear. In the aforementioned study of Brigham Young University students, it was found that toxic perfectionism was associated with anxiety concerning God. Though the data didn't show this definitively, the person may feel anxious about God because they feel the discrepancy between their standards and their behavior.[41] Another study involving BYU students found that those who view God as a harsh taskmaster experience more scrupulosity symptoms (different than but related to toxic perfectionism), while those who see God as a loving father experience fewer scrupulosity symptoms.[42]

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40. Wortmann, "Religious Coping," 1647–48.

41. Allen and others, "I Worry That I Am Almost Perfect!," 316–25.

42. Kenneth T. Wang, G. E. Kawika Allen, Hannah I. Stokes, and Han Na Suh, "Perceived Perfectionism from God Scale: Development and Initial Evidence," *Journal of Religion and Health* 57 (May 2017): 2207–23, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-017-0405-1.

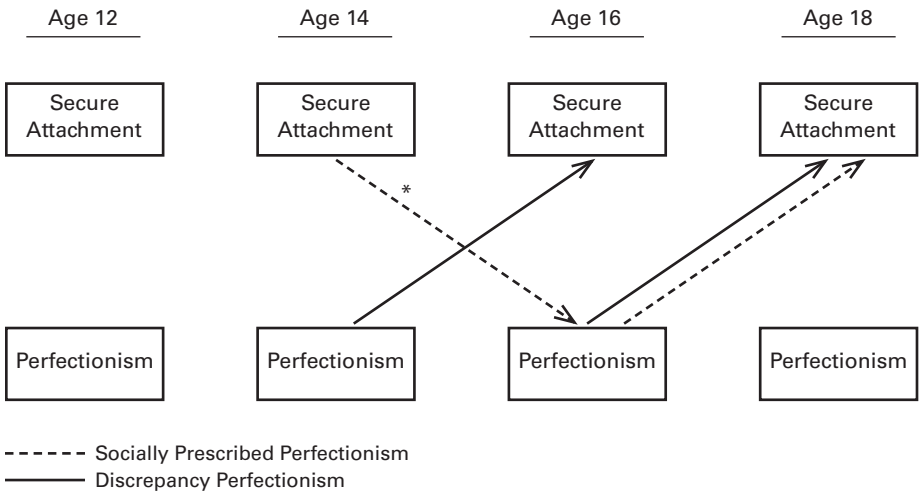

Figure 15. Secure Attachment and Perfectionism over Time.

* The line from secure attachment at fourteen to perfectionism at sixteen indicates that the greater the secure attachment, the greater the socially prescribed perfectionism. However, this is an artifact of those with high positive coping having such low socially prescribed perfectionism at age fourteen that, statistically, it can only increase (see also figs. 8 and 14).

Our Data

When we examined the relationship between perfectionism and secure attachment, secure attachment was related to lower levels of toxic perfectionism. As can be seen from figure 15, discrepancy perfectionism was related to a decreasing secure attachment from age fourteen to sixteen, and both discrepancy and social perfectionism were related to a decreasing secure attachment from age sixteen to eighteen. In other words, in mid- to late adolescence, our results suggest perfectionism may drive down a positive, warm relationship with God.

Church Attendance

Prior Research

We were unable to find any prior research on the relationship between church attendance and perfectionism. This is true not only for church attendance but also for several other religious actions, such as prayer and scripture reading.

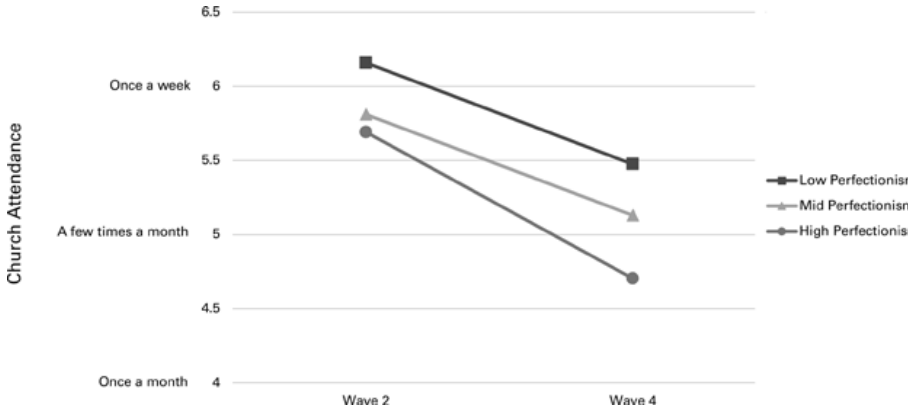

Figure 16. Church Attendance and Perfectionism over Time 1

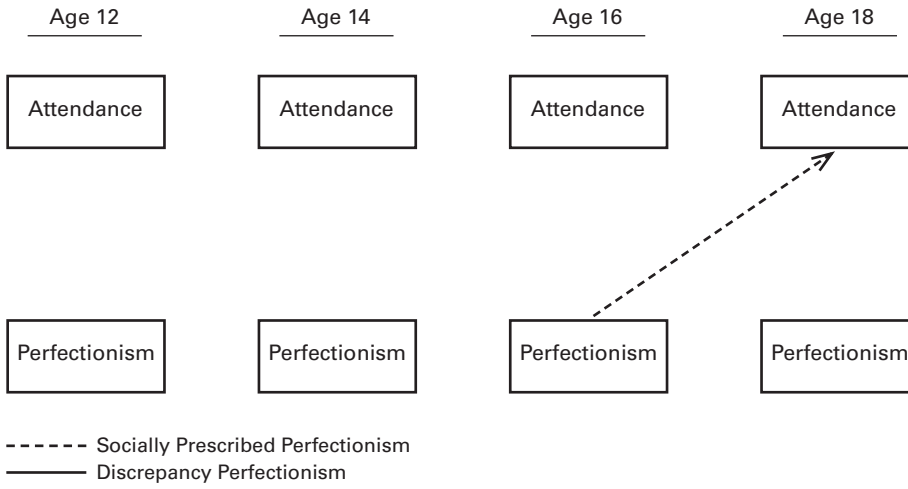

Figure 17. Church Attendance and Perfectionism over Time 2.

Our Data

When we examined the relationship between perfectionism and church attendance, church attendance was related to lower levels of toxic perfectionism. However, as can be seen from figure 16, though church attendance declined for all youth, those in the high perfectionism group started with the lowest attendance and declined at a slightly faster rate than those in the low and mid group. Also, as can be seen from figure 16, high levels of socially prescribed perfectionism led to lower attendance for older adolescents.

Conclusion

Contrary to what some may assume, religion overall is associated with lower levels of toxic perfectionism. When it comes to the association between religious denominations and toxic perfectionism, having a religious association or a belief in God (though not affiliated) tended towards lower levels of toxic perfectionism compared to those of no religion. Regarding *statistically* significant differences, Latter-day Saints and those of "Other Religions" had lower toxic perfectionism than atheists and agnostics and former Latter-day Saints. Though the difference of toxic perfectionism between those with any religious association was significantly lower than atheists or agnostics and especially lower than former members of any religious denomination. In addition to affiliation, how important religion is to a person is connected to perfectionism. For example, those who felt religion was important to them were more than twice as likely to be low in toxic perfectionism.

However, it is more complex than simply saying that religion is associated with low levels of toxic perfectionism. A person's approach to religion is also crucial. For example, those who engaged in religion because it was meaningful to them (identified) had low levels of toxic perfectionism while those whose motivation was to avoid shame (introjected) had higher levels of toxic perfectionism.

Determining the direction of influence is also important in any effort to help individuals avoid the negative consequences of toxic perfectionism. Without a controlled experimental design, we cannot speak definitively of what causes what. However, given that the Foundations data tracked people over time, we can see how earlier aspects of religion and perfectionism relate to those same aspects later on. In the analyses, it was found that at times a religious construct seemed to lead to higher levels of toxic perfectionism, toxic perfectionism was also leading to lower levels of religiosity. In other words, their influence seemed to be reciprocal—influencing each other simultaneously.

At the same time, there were few instances when religiosity led to perfectionism. Most results suggested that perfectionism led to poorer connections with one's church and one's relationship with God. For instance, socially prescribed perfectionism is related to less church attendance between the ages of sixteen and eighteen. During this late-adolescent period, youth are gaining more independence, and those who feel they have to be perfect for other people may begin to distance themselves from church.

Regarding one's relationship with God, discrepancy and socially prescribed perfectionism preceded a decreasing feeling that God is warm

and responsive (secure attachment to God). Perfectionism was also related to a person being less likely to reach out to God for help (positive coping) and more likely to feel like God is punishing them (negative coping). Perfectionists are also more likely to increase in the feeling that God's love and grace are contingent upon how well they are performing (legalism). Indeed, in nearly every way we examined, toxic perfectionism was related to a deteriorating relationship with church and God.

Another important question is which of these constructs has the strongest association with perfectionism when taken together. In other words, which aspects of religion are likely to most strongly influence toxic perfectionism in adolescents? There are statistical methods that allow us to know the answer to that question. When examining all the religiosity constructs together, we were able to see which constructs seemed to have the strongest impact. In this analysis, introjected (shame-based) religious motivation and negative religious coping both stayed statistically significant influences on high levels of toxic perfectionism even when combined with the other religious constructs being studied. Negative religious coping had far and away the strongest association with toxic perfectionism.

When considering what parents and religious leaders can do to help adolescents avoid the negative impact of toxic perfectionism, they would be wise to focus on strengthening the importance of religion to adolescents and encouraging a more intrinsic motivation for their religiosity. Helping adolescents establish a secure attachment to God is one way to accomplish this. Conversely, understanding the strong influence of a legalistic approach to religion, and especially the association between negative religious coping and toxic perfectionism, provides important red flags regarding how an adolescent's approach to religion can be harmful. It is also important to realize that toxic perfectionism, which is associated with many issues that are not related to religion, can also lead to lower levels of unhealthy approaches to religion itself. Understanding these issues provides parents and Church leaders with important information that will hopefully help them in their attempts to help the adolescents within their influence thrive both emotionally and spiritually.

Michael A. Goodman is a professor of Church History and Doctrine at Brigham Young University.

Healing from Toxic Perfectionism

Debra Theobald McClendon

Perfect is the enemy of good." This phrase is derived from a French proverb, yet it is most often attributed to the famous French writer Voltaire. It observes that those striving for perfection are their own worst enemies.[1] Indeed, perfectionism is overly demanding of those who struggle with it. With its irrational and impossible demands, perfectionism can cause anxiety, create high levels of distress that inhibit learning and performance, damage relationships, and diminish the quality of life for otherwise highly competent and dedicated individuals. Perfectionism can be the main problem that leads someone to seek therapeutic services from a mental health professional. Perfectionism can also appear in conjunction with several mental health conditions such as depression, eating disorders, anxiety disorders, or obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). In someone with OCD, perfectionism around religious or moral content is called scrupulosity.

This article begins by briefly defining healthy (adaptive) and unhealthy (maladaptive or toxic) perfectionism (see also "Understanding Perfectionism" herein) and then illustrates the ways unhealthy perfectionism influences those who struggle with it. These discussions prepare the reader for deeper explorations of gospel and clinical perspectives on healing from unhealthy perfectionism. The gospel focus on healing will highlight three Christian doctrines: we don't perfect ourselves, we

1. Allaya Cooks-Campbell, "Perfect Is the Enemy of Good: 4 Ways to Thrive in Ambiguity," BetterUp, August 4, 2022, https://www.betterup.com/blog/perfect-is-the-enemy-of-good.

become perfected in Christ, and perfection comes only after the Resurrection. The clinical focus on healing from perfectionism will highlight treatment from the cognitive perspective. The article will conclude with a brief discussion of the similarity between the two treatment approaches.

Please note that the personal stories or quotes from those struggling with perfectionism used throughout this article are shared with permission.

Healthy Perfectionism and Unhealthy Perfectionism[2]

Healthy Perfectionism

Perfectionism can be both adaptive and maladaptive.[3] Elder Neal A. Maxwell of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles taught, "There is a difference, therefore, between being 'anxiously engaged' and being over-anxious."[4]

People who are "anxiously engaged" may be what social-science researchers call adaptive perfectionists or positive perfectionists. Those with adaptive perfectionism set high standards for themselves—not out of fear of negative evaluation or failure but because they are seeking to reap the positive consequences of success.[5] As a result, they are not necessarily disturbed when they are unable to meet their standards. When a person with healthy perfectionism fails, they engage in positive, helpful behaviors such as tackling their problem directly, trying again, adjusting standards, working harder, or simply accepting the situation if there is no reasonable way to (or reason to) address the failure.[6] If they do struggle when they fail,[7] they are able to work through the situation by responding with flexibility and resiliently move forward to adapt to new circumstances. For example, a college student who did not get into their chosen major of study could reassess their interests and strengths and

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2. Debra Theobald McClendon, "A Church Educator's Guide to Identifying and Helping the Scrupulous Student," *Religious Educator* 22, no. 2 (2021): 138–40. This section is reprinted with permission from the BYU Religious Studies Center. Minor revisions have been made.

3. Joachim Stoeber and Kathleen Otto, "Positive Conceptions of Perfectionism: Approaches, Evidence, Challenges," *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 10, no. 4 (2006): 295–319.

4. Neal A. Maxwell, "Notwithstanding My Weakness," *Ensign* 6, no. 11 (November 1976): 12–13.

5. Brandy A. Fedewa, Lawrence R. Burns, and Alex A. Gomez, "Positive and Negative Perfectionism and the Shame/Guilt Distinction: Adaptive and Maladaptive Characteristics," *Personality and Individual Differences* 38, no. 7 (2005): 1609–19.

6. Fedewa, Burns, and Gomez, "Positive and Negative Perfectionism," 1611.

7. Michelle D. Craig, "Divine Discontent," *Ensign* 48, no. 11 (November 2018): 53.

then select a new major. This new major may end up setting them on a more fulfilling path than the one they had originally selected for themselves. Indeed, researchers have found that working to meet high standards has been associated with higher self-esteem and life satisfaction.[8]

In religious worship, the anxiously engaged are conscientious about living their religion in its fullness in all areas of their lives.[9] Researchers described this process: "Healthy religious observance . . . is generally typified by . . . moderate and flexible approaches to most areas of religious belief and practice, viewing perfect adherence as more of an ideal than as an imperative that is necessary to avoid subjective guilt or the threat of severe punishment."[10] You've likely had conversations with many such people and noticed their strong faith and ability to come to a healthy, balanced resolution about their difficulties, even in the face of disappointment in themselves or their own behavior.

Unhealthy Perfectionism

The "overanxious" may struggle with unhealthy perfectionism, a generalized anxiety disorder, or a more severe mental health concern, such as OCD. This unhealthy perfectionism is a frantic effort to live error-free: "the tendency to believe there is a perfect solution to every problem, that doing something perfectly (mistake free) is not only possible, but also necessary, and that even minor mistakes will have serious consequences."[11]

Those with unhealthy perfectionism that are religious are generally very loyal to God, committed to keeping his commandments, and trying to perfectly follow him, but when they fail to meet their own unattainably high standards, they are overcome by anxiety, panic, and obsessive rumination about their perceived failures. For them, failure is not just about failing a task (for example, not getting a perfect score on an assignment); failure means they are *a failure as a person*—they feel unlovable

8. G. E. Kawika Allen and Kenneth T. Wang, "Examining Religious Commitment, Perfectionism, Scrupulosity, and Well-Being Among LDS Individuals," *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 6, no. 3 (2014): 262.

9. David Greenberg and Jonathan D. Huppert, "Scrupulosity: A Unique Subtype of Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder," *Current Psychiatry Reports* 12 (2010): 286.

10. Jonathan S. Abramowitz and Ryan J. Jacoby, "Scrupulosity: A Cognitive-Behavioral Analysis and Implications for Treatment," *Journal of Obsessive-Compulsive and Related Disorders* 3 (2014): 141.

11. Obsessive Compulsive Cognitions Working Group, "Cognitive Assessment of Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder," *Behaviour Research and Therapy* 35, no. 7 (1997): 678.

and of no worth. For those struggling with unhealthy perfectionism, the consequences of failure are disastrous. Thus, instead of actively engaging in their problems, they tend to avoid them to protect themselves from their negative feelings.[12]

Negative perfectionism is associated with the "tendency to view the world in black-or-white terms" and with an intolerance and distrust of others—including God.[13] A therapy client, a male in his late teens, expressed his fear this way: "If the worst happened it would mean I'm not a good person and that God doesn't care about me. It means that God would send me to hell and that he hates me. At the judgment day he'd tell me: 'you were a good person except that one thing you did.' So, then I'm going to hell."[14] One researcher explained that those struggling with unhealthy perfectionism have "unrealistic expectations with an unhealthy preoccupation with faults, weaknesses, mistakes, and sins."[15] He summarized, "Thus the problem with perfectionism is not high expectations; it is neurotic expectations that are unrealistic and oppressive."[16]

The overanxious person's faith may be strong and equal to the faith of anxiously engaged people; they are typically wonderful, dedicated disciples! Yet their unhealthy perfectionism paralyzes them spiritually with a cloud of anxiety. Elder Boyd K. Packer taught that "our physical body is the instrument of our spirit," and that it houses "delicate physical senses which have to do with spiritual communication."[17] Anxiety disrupts these "delicate physical senses" because it causes our brains to release chemicals that create physiological responses, which cloud our reception of the Spirit. It can even be difficult to tell the difference between what our body feels because of spiritual promptings and what it feels because it is releasing stress hormones.[18]

Unhealthy perfectionism does not enhance a person's quality of life or motivate them to improve; instead, it decreases their quality of life and

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12. Fedewa, Burns, and Gomez, "Positive and Negative Perfectionism," 1611–12.

13. Fedewa, Burns, and Gomez, "Positive and Negative Perfectionism," 1612.

14. Client story used with permission, also published in Debra Theobald McClendon, *Freedom from Scrupulosity: Reclaiming Your Religious Experience from Anxiety and OCD* (BYU Religious Studies Center; Deseret Book, 2023), 121.

15. Allan D. Rau, "'Be Ye Therefore Perfect': Beyond the Perfectionist Paradigm," *Religious Educator* 12, no. 3 (2011): 38.

16. Rau, "'Be Ye Therefore Perfect,'" 40.

17. Boyd K. Packer, "Revelation in a Changing World," *Ensign* 19, no. 11 (October 1989): 14.

18. Debra Theobald McClendon, "Discerning Your Feelings: Anxiety or the Spirit?," *Ensign* 49, no. 4 (April 2019).

inhibits true personal growth and development. Elder Jeffrey R. Holland counseled, "I would hope we could pursue personal improvement in a way that doesn't include getting ulcers or anorexia, feeling depressed or demolishing our self-esteem. That is *not* what the Lord wants. . . . My brothers and sisters, except for Jesus, there have been no flawless performances on this earthly journey we are pursuing, so while in mortality let's strive for steady improvement without obsessing over what behavioral scientists call 'toxic perfectionism.'"[19] The process of breaking free from unhealthy perfectionism can include both gospel and clinical approaches.

Gospel Perspectives on Healing from Unhealthy Perfectionism

The gospel of Jesus Christ offers relief and freedom from the trap of unhealthy perfectionism. This freedom is rooted in doctrine. Fully understanding the doctrine—intellectually and emotionally—can be tremendously freeing. I wish to highlight three doctrinal principles that can promote healing from unhealthy perfectionism: (1) we don't perfect ourselves, (2) we become perfected in Christ, and (3) perfection comes only in and through Jesus Christ *after* the Resurrection.

We Don't Perfect Ourselves

Those with unhealthy perfectionism "cannot forgive [themselves] for not being perfect."[20] Yet as mortals, by definition, we are incomplete and imperfect. So demanding an error-free performance with no grace for mistakes is completely futile and absolutely maddening. The restored gospel of Jesus Christ teaches that we do not—we cannot—perfect ourselves. A survey of scriptural evidence illustrates this principle:[21]

- Ephesians 2:8–9, "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast."
- 2 Nephi 2:3, 6, "I know that thou are redeemed, because of the righteousness of thy Redeemer. . . . Redemption cometh in and through the Holy Messiah; for he is full of grace and truth."

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19. Jeffrey R. Holland, "Be Ye Therefore Perfect—Eventually," *Ensign* 47, no. 11 (November 2017): 40, 42, emphasis original.

20. Don Miguel Ruiz and Janet Mills, *The Four Agreements: A Practical Guide to Personal Freedom* (Amber-Allen, 2010), 18.

21. McClendon, *Freedom from Scrupulosity,* 329–30.

- Alma 22:14, "And since man had fallen he could not merit anything of himself; but the sufferings and death of Christ atone for their sins, through faith and repentance."
- Alma 24:10, "And I also thank my God, yea, my great God, that he hath granted unto us that we might repent of these things, and also that he hath forgiven us of those our many sins and murders which we have committed, and taken away the guilt from our hearts, through the merits of his Son."
- Alma 33:11, 13, "For in thee is my joy; for thou hast turned thy judgments away from me, because of thy Son. . . . Thou hast turned away thy judgments because of thy Son."
- Helaman 14:13, "And if ye believe on his name ye will repent of all your sins, that thereby ye may have a remission of them through his merits."
- 3 Nephi 26:5, "If they be good, to the resurrection of everlasting life . . . according to the mercy, and the justice, and the holiness which is in Christ."
- Doctrine and Covenants 76:69, "These are they who are just men made perfect through Jesus the mediator of the new covenant, who wrought out this perfect atonement through the shedding of his own blood."
- Doctrine and Covenants 109:53, "Inasmuch as they will repent, thou art gracious and merciful, and wilt turn away thy wrath when thou lookest upon the face of thine Anointed."

Psychiatrist Ian Osborn has developed what he calls a Therapy of Trust.[22] In the Therapy of Trust, a person transfers responsibility for their fears onto God, recognizing that believers are not responsible for perfecting themselves. As Christians, we are familiar with the image of Jesus knocking on a door, as offered in the book of Revelation: "Behold, I stand at the door, and knock" (Rev. 3:20). In the Therapy of Trust, we open the metaphorical door and invite Jesus into our lives. We share our perfectionistic fears with him and give him responsibility for them. In essence, we are saying, "Here, Jesus, you look after this."[23]

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22. Ian Osborn, *Can Christianity Cure Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder? A Psychiatrist Explores the Role of Faith in Treatment* (Brazos Press, 2008), 160–61.

23. Osborn, *Can Christianity Cure Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder?,* 163.

We Become Perfected "in Christ"

As the above scriptures and Therapy of Trust illustrate, it is not by our merit that we become perfect; it is through Jesus Christ.[24] This doctrine is core to the belief of Christians. The Atonement works as we, imperfect mortals, join with a perfect Christ in a covenant relationship. It is then through his perfection and power (his merits) that we become perfected in him. The scriptures illustrate this companionship beautifully:[25]

- Psalm 37:17, 24, 39–40, "The Lord upholdeth the righteous. . . . Though he fall, he shall not be utterly cast down: for the Lord upholdeth him with his hand. . . . But the salvation of the righteous is of the Lord: he is their strength in the time of trouble. And the Lord shall help them, and deliver them: he shall deliver them from the wicked, and save them, because they trust in him."
- Hebrews 9:14–15, "The blood of Christ . . . purge your conscience from dead works. . . . And for this cause he is the mediator of the new testament, that by means of death, for the redemption of the transgressions that were under the first testament, they which are called might receive the promise of eternal inheritance."
- 1 John 1:7–9, "But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin. If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." (Obsessively trying to perfect oneself denies Christ's refining role.)
- Revelation 1:5, "Jesus Christ . . . washed us from our sins in his own blood."
- 2 Nephi 2:3, 9–10, "Wherefore, I know that thou art redeemed, because of the righteousness of thy Redeemer. . . . Wherefore, he is the firstfruits unto God, inasmuch as he shall make intercession for all the children of men; and they that believe in him shall be saved. And because of the intercession for all, all men come unto God; wherefore, they stand in the presence of him, to be judged of him according to the truth and holiness which is in him."

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24. See Russell N. Nelson, "Drawing the Power of Jesus Christ into Our Lives," *Ensign* 47, no. 5 (May 2017): 39–42.

25. McClendon, *Freedom from Scrupulosity,* 330–32.

- Moroni 10:32–33, "Yea, come unto Christ, and be perfected in him[;] . . . then is his grace sufficient for you, that by his grace ye may be perfect in Christ. . . . If ye by the grace of God are perfect in Christ, and deny not his power, then are ye sanctified in Christ by the grace of God, through the shedding of the blood of Christ, which is in the covenant of the Father unto the remission of your sins, that ye become holy, without spot."

Perfection Comes Only In and Through Jesus Christ After the Resurrection

As mortals, we all sin, and we all make mistakes. Bradley R. Wilcox, second counselor in the Young Men General Presidency, taught, "Some mistakenly receive the message that they are not worthy to participate fully in the gospel because they are not completely free of bad habits. God's message is that worthiness is not flawlessness. Worthiness is being honest and trying. We must be honest with God, priesthood leaders, and others who love us, and we must strive to keep God's commandments and never give up just because we slip up."[26]

Simply stated, we will not achieve perfection, in its most complete sense, until after the Resurrection. Becoming perfected in Christ is a journey of maturing, growing, and becoming like our Savior—a process only possible through his grace. This process extends well beyond this mortal probationary time into the eternities.

As a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, Elder Russell M. Nelson clarified the doctrine of perfection as it was taught in the New Testament and then explained its relationship to Jesus Christ.[27] He first quoted Matthew 5:48, wherein the Savior implored: "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect." Then Elder Nelson taught that the term *perfect* was translated from the Greek *teleios,* which means "complete," and that it was an adjective derived from the noun *telos,* which means "end." The infinitive form of the verb is *teleiono,* which means "to reach a distant end, to be fully developed, to consummate, or to finish." Then Elder Nelson explicitly noted that "the word does not imply 'freedom from error'; it implies 'achieving a distant objective.'"[28]

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26. Bradley R. Wilcox, "Worthiness Is Not Flawlessness," *Liahona* 45, no. 11 (November 2021): 62.

27. Russell M. Nelson, "Perfection Pending," *Ensign* 25, no. 11 (November 1995): 87.

28. Nelson, "Perfection Pending," 86.

After explaining the meaning of the word *perfect,* Elder Nelson taught: "Just prior to his crucifixion, [Jesus] said that on 'the third day I *shall be perfected.*' Think of that! The sinless, errorless Lord—already perfect by our mortal standards—proclaimed his own state of perfection yet to be in the future. His *eternal* perfection would follow his resurrection and receipt of 'all power' . . . in heaven and in earth."[29]

In concert with this teaching, when the resurrected Savior ministered to the Nephites, he repeated the teachings he had given to those in his mortal ministry as recorded in the New Testament. However, he altered the wording of Matthew 5:48: "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect." In 3 Nephi 12:48, Jesus Christ now included himself along with the Father, as one who was perfect: "Therefore I would that ye should be perfect even as I, or your Father who is in heaven is perfect."

Then Elder Nelson summarized:

> Brothers and sisters, let us do the best we can and try to improve each day. When our imperfections appear, we can keep trying to correct them. We can be more forgiving of flaws in ourselves and among those we love. We can be comforted and forbearing. The Lord taught, "Ye are not able to abide the presence of God now. . . ; wherefore, continue in patience until ye are perfected."
>
> We need not be dismayed if our earnest efforts toward perfection now seem so arduous and endless. Perfection is pending. It can come in full only after the Resurrection and only through the Lord.[30]

In a later message, Elder Nelson counseled: "Be patient with yourself. Perfection comes not in this life but in the next life. Don't demand things that are unreasonable but demand of yourself improvement. As you let the Lord help you through that, He will make the difference."[31] This process occurs through the grace of our Savior Jesus Christ. It is by his power, his merits, and his perfection that we are ultimately saved.

Facing doctrine *as it is taught,* rather than as it is influenced by negatively biased unhealthy perfectionism, is freeing! Christ is the answer! A person does not need to try harder, work harder, avoid mistakes, or control everything or everyone else in their lives. It is faith in Christ and

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29. Russell M. Nelson, "Perfection Pending," 88, emphasis original.

30. Russell M. Nelson, "Perfection Pending," 88.

31. Russell M. Nelson, "Men's Hearts Shall Fail Them," The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, November 18, 2011, YouTube, 2:22–49, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EMwKxmTLaCs.

a willingness to come unto him in humility that enables his power. His power, not ours, will save: "And he said to me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor. 12:9).

Clinical Perspectives on Healing from Unhealthy Perfectionism

Examining the doctrines *as they are taught* will help change one's negative focus, perspective, and view. Strategies that encourage flexibility in this way are part of a clinical treatment process that providers call cognitive restructuring.

Cognitive restructuring is a preeminent strategy in the treatment of unhealthy perfectionism. Through cognitive restructuring, a person learns to identify and dispute errors in their thinking. These errors lead to irrational thoughts and beliefs known as cognitive distortions.[32] While studying relevant gospel doctrines in an emotionally open manner can shift and restructure distorted thoughts to some degree, research-based therapeutic treatments for perfectionism should also be implemented.

Cognitive Theory of Perfectionism

Before exploring treatment strategies, it is helpful to understand the premises of the cognitive theory of perfectionism. According to the cognitive theory, perfectionism stems from biased beliefs, assumptions, and predictions.[33] These biases stem from distortions or inaccuracies in a person's beliefs.

Those with unhealthy perfectionism hold a variety of self-defeating beliefs. These beliefs are "self-esteem equations that tell you what you need to be or do in order to be a worthwhile human being."[34] This performance perfectionism includes a belief that if someone fails to reach a goal or make a mistake, they will be worthless. Additionally, they can involve three processes. (1) *Perceived perfectionism* is a belief that others won't respect you if they see that you are flawed. This is referred to as *socially prescribed perfectionism* (see pp. 15–16). (2) *Achievement addiction* means a person's self-esteem is based on their intelligence, skill,

32. *Handbook of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy: Overview and Approaches,* ed. Amy Wenzel, vol. 1 (American Psychological Association, 2021), 207–34, https://doi.org/10.1037/0000218-008.

33. Martin M. Antony and Richard P. Swinson, *When Perfect Isn't Good Enough: Strategies for Coping with Perfectionism,* 2nd ed. (New Harbinger Publications, 2009), 46.

34. David Burns, *When Panic Attacks: The New, Drug-Free Anxiety Therapy That Can Change Your Life* (Morgan Road Books, 2006), 99.

talent, successes, and productivity. (3) *Approval addiction* is a belief that everyone needs to approve of who one is or what one is doing to be worthwhile.[35]

The cognitive theory for perfectionism also examines a person's core beliefs—what therapists and researchers call *schemas.* These core beliefs are a person's deepest ideas about themselves. These ideas are central to who they perceive themselves to be and are strongly held, tending to be rigid and inflexible.[36] The most common core beliefs seen in people with unhealthy perfectionism are beliefs about their own worthlessness and incompetence as a human being.[37] These types of distorted core beliefs were illustrated in the client illustration in "Understanding Perfectionism" (see pp. 17–18) describing unhealthy perfectionism touching every aspect of their life.

Those struggling with unhealthy perfectionism also exhibit a host of distortions in their thinking process. These distortions naturally follow self-defeating core beliefs. While self-defeating beliefs are always present, these distorted thoughts tend to come up only when someone is upset.[38] Distortion causes rigidity of thought, so the thoughts get more entrenched as time goes on.

Of all the thought distortions, one of the most relevant for perfectionism is *dichotomous* (black-and-white or all-or-nothing) thinking.[39] Dichotomous thinking leads a person to view the world in extremes—the pendulum always swinging from one end to the other. When thinking is black and white, there is no room for gray area. Although black-and-white thinking has its place (certainly some things are morally and absolutely wrong), those struggling with unhealthy perfectionism are tormented by feeling they are a total failure with anything less than a perfect performance.

Other common thinking styles in unhealthy perfectionism include the following:

Selective attention in perfectionism means a person's thoughts gravitate toward the negative, and the person generally ignores anything

35. Burns, *When Panic Attacks,* 100.

36. "What Are Core Beliefs?," Centre for Clinical Interventions, accessed October 21, 2024, https://www.cci.health.wa.gov.au/-/media/CCI/Mental-Health-Professionals/Depression/Depression---Information-Sheets/Depression-Information-Sheet---12---What-are-Core-Beliefs.pdf.

37. Sarah J. Egan, Tracey D. Wade, Roz Shafran, and Martin M. Antony, *Cognitive-Behavioral Treatment of Perfectionism* (Guildford Press, 2014), 175.

38. Burns, *When Panic Attacks,* 101.

39. Egan and others, *Cognitive-Behavioral Treatment,* 171.

positive. A person will habitually focus on negative aspects of themselves or their performance.[40]

Double standards is a thinking style in which a person holds "one set of unrelenting and difficult-to-achieve standards that they apply to themselves, and a more lenient set of standards for others."[41]

Overgeneralizing means taking one mistake or flaw and extending it to other areas "as a never-ending pattern of defeat."[42] The overgeneralizing person concludes that if they are not perfect in one area, they are a failure in all areas.[43]

Should language, like "should," "must," and "ought," is a form of self-criticism and judgment that those struggling with perfectionism use "like a whip as a way to motivate themselves and guard against poor performance."[44]

The following distortions are seen in more general perfectionistic thinking styles: catastrophizing, emotional reasoning, labeling, personalization, mind reading, and predictive thinking. In *catastrophizing,* people frequently entertain the worst-case scenario with the ever-problematic question "What if?" Catastrophizing never fails to create significant anxiety. Furthermore, in OCD, this type of thinking is a significant contributor to the compulsion of rumination—replaying and analyzing thoughts over and over and over again. Catastrophizing is not concerned with what is likely or probable in a scenario, only what may be possible—even if it is a remote, almost-impossible possibility statistically equal to 0.00000001. Thus, someone who catastrophizes may avoid doing things because they imagine the worst possible scenario is bound to happen, even if it is highly unlikely.[45]

Emotional reasoning involves judging the truth of a scenario based on how the person feels about it—feelings override facts.[46] An example of emotional reasoning may be "I feel like a failure, so I am a failure," or "I feel unworthy, so I must be unworthy."

Labeling involves generalizing "from a single flaw or shortcoming to your entire identity."[47] It doesn't allow a person to be anything other than

40. Egan and others, *Cognitive-Behavioral Treatment,* 160–61.
41. Egan and others, *Cognitive-Behavioral Treatment,* 161.
42. Burns, *When Panic Attacks,* 16.
43. Egan and others, *Cognitive-Behavioral Treatment,* 162–64.
44. Egan and others, *Cognitive-Behavioral Treatment,* 164.
45. Egan and others, *Cognitive-Behavioral Treatment,* 167.
46. Burns, *When Panic Attacks,* 16.
47. Burns, *When Panic Attacks,* 16.

the label they have assigned. When not meeting some expected standard, they will assign negative self-labels such as *dumb, loser, failure, useless,* or *unworthy.*[48]

Personalization is related to self-blame. This is an overinflated sense of responsibility for every circumstance, even—and perhaps especially—when the responsibility is shared. The person does not consider all relevant factors contributing to a given outcome. "I have to fix this" or "It's all my fault" are common indicators of personalization.[49]

Mind reading is an assumption that a person can tell what others are thinking, with a heavy bias assuming others are thinking negatively about them, even with no evidence.[50]

Predictive thinking, or *fortune-telling,* is a person making negatively biased predictions about how they will perform or how a scenario will unfold.[51]

In addition to thought distortions, those with unhealthy perfectionism hold a variety of self-defeating beliefs. These beliefs are "self-esteem equations that tell you what you need to be or do in order to be a worthwhile human being."[52] This performance perfectionism includes a belief that if someone fails to reach a goal or make a mistake, they will be worthless. Additionally, this belief involves three processes: (1) *Perceived perfectionism* is a belief that others won't respect you if they see that you are flawed. This was referred to earlier as socially prescribed perfectionism. (2) *Achievement addiction* means a person's self-esteem is based on their intelligence, skill, talent, successes, and productivity. (3) *Approval addiction* is a belief that everyone needs to approve of who one is or what one is doing to be worthwhile.[53]

Treatment Strategies for Toxic Perfectionism

As shown, self-defeating beliefs and distorted thought patterns of unhealthy perfectionism are focused on the negative. With this strong negative bias, the person engages in emotional and logical fallacies that cause their mental health to deteriorate. Treatment strategies aim to break rigid thinking patterns and create flexibility in a person's thinking.

48. Egan and others, *Cognitive-Behavioral Treatment,* 168.
49. Egan and others, *Cognitive-Behavioral Treatment,* 168–70.
50. Egan and others, *Cognitive-Behavioral Treatment,* 170–71.
51. Egan and others, *Cognitive-Behavioral Treatment,* 171.
52. Burns, *When Panic Attacks,* 99.
53. Burns, *When Panic Attacks,* 100.

More flexibility allows the person to modify self-defeating beliefs, creating healthier, reality-based beliefs that will help them grow and thrive. This is often done through cognitive restructuring and behavioral experiments, as described below. These interventions can be used across age groups, with slight modifications made for children and younger adolescents to simplify concepts and exercises. Some cognitive restructuring treatment strategies include challenging distortions, examining definitions, creating responsibility pie charts, and completing thought charts.

Challenging distortions. One cognitive method is to challenge perfectionistic distortions through Socratic questioning—a disciplined dialogue between individuals using a series of guided, open-ended questions to explore values and beliefs, some of which may be out of a person's conscious awareness. In the psychotherapeutic process, therapists ask the client a series of ordered questions to guide the client to thought processes and behaviors that will help achieve therapeutic goals.[54]

To challenge the distortion of double standards, questions that could be asked include the following:

- "Is it fair to have harsher rules for yourself that are different from your rules for everyone else?"
- "What would you say to a friend who had a harder set of rules for herself than for other people?"
- "What does holding double standards do to your self-esteem and mood?"[55]

Socratic questioning for overgeneralizing can include the following:

- "How does it follow that someone's worth as a person can be judged on one instance of not meeting a goal or making a mistake?"
- "How is it that making a small mistake or error . . . can reflect on a person's worth overall?"
- "What do most people judge as important in making up a person's worth?"[56]

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54. Justin D. Braun, Daniel R. Strunk, Katherine E. Sasso, and Andrew A. Cooper, "Therapist Use of Socratic Questioning Predicts Session-to-Session Symptom Change in Cognitive Therapy for Depression," *Behaviour Research and Therapy* 70 (2015): 32–37, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.brat.2015.05.004; Egan and others, *Cognitive-Behavioral Treatment,* 113–15.

55. Egan and others, *Cognitive-Behavioral Treatment,* 163.

56. Egan and others, *Cognitive-Behavioral Treatment,* 164.

To challenge the "should" mentality, questions may include the following:

- "How does saying 'should' to yourself constantly make you feel? In what way does it impact on your sense of self?"
- "What impact do you think it might have if you apply the sort of pressure you apply on yourself to a close friend?"[57]

This exercise is modifiable for a child or adolescent by asking questions more simply, using words the child uses and understands. For example: "Would you say that to your best friend?" or "Would you be mad at your best friend if they made that mistake?"

Examining definitions. In addition to challenging the distortions through Socratic questioning, you can examine the definitions of the words you are using to think about or describe yourself. Does the word you are using *really* mean what you perceive it to mean? What does it mean to be "a failure," a "loser," "useless," or such? One researcher counseled:

> Ask yourself what those labels mean. If you try to define what you mean . . . you'll usually discover that one of four things is true:
>
> - The label applies to all human beings.
> - The label applies to no human beings.
> - The label is inherently meaningless.
> - The label doesn't apply to you.[58]

This exercise is modifiable for a child or adolescent like the Socratic questioning above by asking questions more simply, using words and concepts the child uses and understands. This exercise can help children understand that pejorative terms like "loser" could *never* accurately or appropriately describe who they are.

Responsibility pie chart. A responsibility pie chart can help examine a perfectionistic, overinflated sense of responsibility. While in unhealthy perfectionism a person generally feels everything is their fault, a responsibility pie chart can clarify that there are typically many factors contributing to any outcome. This exercise helps to challenge faulty assumptions and shame while promoting cognitive flexibility. Those struggling with unhealthy perfectionism learn the important message that one person just doesn't have *that* much power!

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57. Egan and others, *Cognitive-Behavioral Treatment,* 166.
58. Burns, *When Panic Attacks,* 182.

For example, one client, a married woman in her sixties, struggled with unhealthy perfectionism around a daughter's estrangement from the family. Although this daughter cut off relationships with other family members prior to severing her relationship with her mother, this mother could not get over the unhealthy perfectionistic belief that it was all her fault because she had made mistakes as a mother. In her view, responsibility for the estrangement was one hundred percent on her shoulders—and thus, she was responsible for fixing it (getting the daughter to reconcile), or else she would be accountable to God for failing in her role as a mother. When it became clear over many years that she could not fix it, she tormented herself by continuing to analyze and ruminate about what she could or should or ought to do to reconcile with her daughter.

If we were to complete a responsibility pie chart for this client on how her unhealthy perfectionism viewed the situation, it would look like the one in figure 1. In this figure, there is one, and only one, factor to account for the daughter's estrangement—the mother's mistakes. This view does not consider the good the mother did for her daughter throughout her life or the fact that she had other children who continued to maintain vibrant parent-child relationships with her. It also does *not* consider the daughter's role in the situation. Her unhealthy perfectionism convinced her that she was simply a failure as a mother because she hadn't always done everything perfectly.

In a responsibility pie chart, a person works to combat an unhealthy perfectionistic view by listing all the potential contributing factors to a situation and *guesstimating* the probability that each factor contributed to the outcome. *The point of this is not to know with perfect accuracy the factors and percentages,* rather, the exercise is about learning to think more broadly and realistically about the issue. Many factors can contribute to family dynamics and specific family relationships. Figure 2 shows the work this client did to get a more realistic picture of the situation with her daughter.

Working to identify these dynamics, this client identified two outside influences on the daughter's choice to leave the family and abandon her as a mother: (1) the enabling by the daughter's spouse and (2) a psychologist who recommended a book that advised cutting people out of her life if they caused angst. The mother estimated that these two factors together equaled about 15% of the contribution to the estrangement outcome. She then identified a variety of choices this daughter made that contributed to the estrangement. If the daughter had made different choices in any of these areas, she recognized that the outcome could have been different. These additional choices, she surmised, added up to

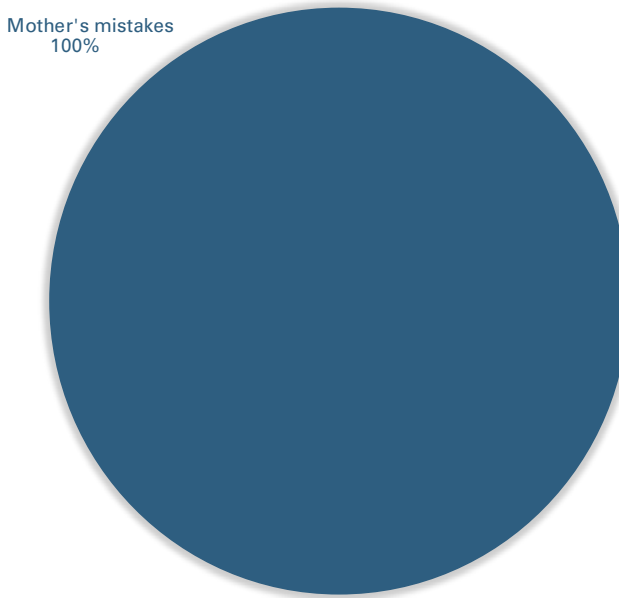

Figure 1. Responsibility pie chart: Client example (a) from perfectionistic viewpoint.

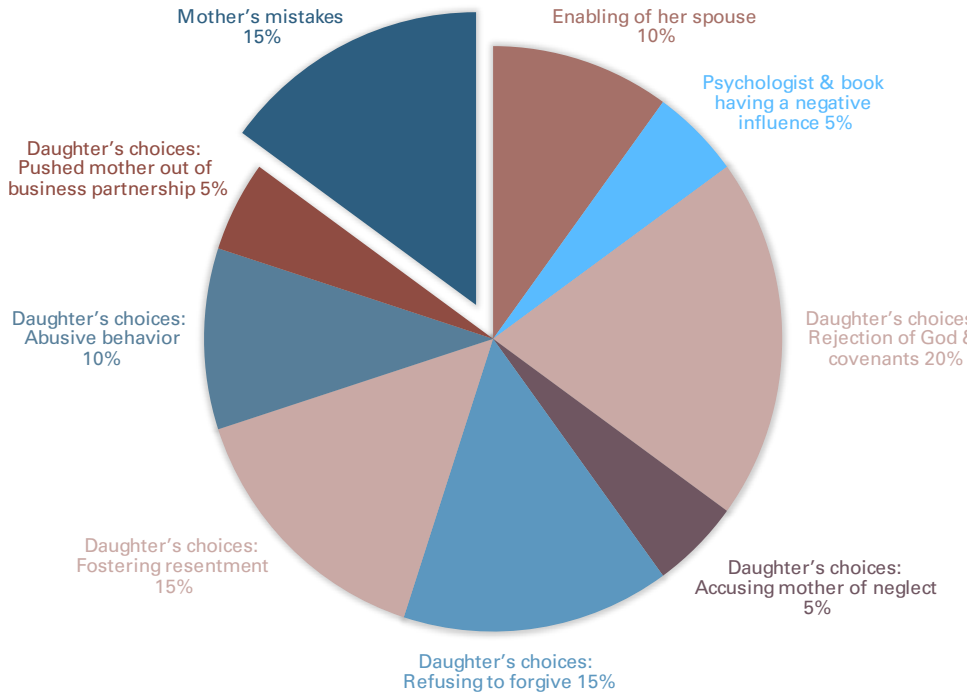

Figure 2. Responsibility pie chart: Client example (b) from a realistic perspective.

a huge 70% of the contribution! These choices included a rejection of her religious beliefs, accusing the mother of neglect, refusing to forgive, fostering resentment, acting abusively toward the mother, and pushing the mother out of their business partnership. Once this mother identified these factors (both the outside influences and her daughter's choices) and estimated the contribution of each factor, 85% of the estrangement-outcome pie was already accounted for, leaving only about a 15% possible contribution to the outcome left for the mother's mistakes.

Oh, how self-defeating beliefs begin to vanish when a person goes from believing one hundred percent of everything is their fault to believing they are responsible for only a portion of it! Responsibility pie charts can help a person shed an excessive sense of responsibility and accompanying shame and facilitate recognition of any cognitive distortions at play. With this more reality-based perspective, the person is more likely to be able to move forward in a healthy and productive way. After completing this exercise, upon reflection, this client commented: "What did I learn from that pie chart? I learned that it wasn't all me." This was a powerful commentary for someone who had suffered with unhealthy perfectionism for so many years. It opened her up to be able to explore the role of agency and face the hard truth that her daughter will always retain it—she cannot force her daughter to reconcile.

This exercise is also modifiable for a child or adolescent. When they are upset, feeling that everything is their fault, you can challenge them to think of two to four other things that may be involved in creating the situation or outcome. Drawing these factors out can be helpful and fun.

Thought charts. Distortion can also be challenged through the use of a thought chart, commonly called a thought record. An online search can provide many different examples of thought charts. A thought chart is a common psychotherapeutic tool that provides a person with a structured, organized approach to identify the presence of any distortion in their thinking and then encourage them to dispute the distortion with contrary evidence. This process leads the person to more reality-based thoughts and feelings that can be acted on more appropriately. For example, in unhealthy perfectionism, you can tease out the distorted belief that an error-free performance is necessary to be successful in life.

Working through an example with a thought chart will illustrate how this process can be helpful to perfectionistic individuals. Figure 3 shows how a client who struggled with academic perfectionism (see "Understanding Perfectionism" in this issue) completed one of his thought charts.

A	Activating Event	• I got a 17/20 on a technical accounting memo.
B	Belief	• "I'm going to fail the class." • "I'm never going to succeed in law school." • "I'm a fraud." • "I'm dumb."
C	Consequences	• Sadness • Shame • Embarrassment • Feeling worthless • Rumination
D	Dispute	• 17/20 = 85%. That's a B on one assignment. • This technical accounting research class is substantially different from law school. • My identity is not solely defined by academic performance in a single class. • Missing 3 points does not constitute a failing grade. • I have a 4.0. I'm not dumb. • Even if I didn't get an A in this class or keep my 4.0, I can still reach my goal of going to law school.
E	Eliminate	• I'm performing well in the class even if I'm not performing perfectly. • This experience will help me perform better in law school. • I have so much to offer beyond just academics. • I'm human and I will make mistakes. That's okay.
F	New Feeling	• Flexible • Grounded • Honest • Authentic • Confident
G	Go and Do!	• I'll keep trying my best without obsessing over my shortcomings. • I will invest in all areas of my life. • I will view imperfections as a gift.

Figure 3. Client thought chart, shared with permission.

Row A is the activating event. This is simply a place for the person to objectively record the event that triggered feelings of unhealthy perfectionism (shame, self-hatred, and so forth). For this client, the perfectionistic trigger was losing three points on an accounting assignment.

Row B is the personal belief that popped up about that event, or a person can identify automatic thoughts about the event. This client had four different automatic thoughts or beliefs about this activating event: "I'm going to fail the class; I'm never going to succeed in law school; I'm a fraud; I'm dumb." These thoughts suggest that he is overgeneralizing, mentally filtering, fortune telling, and magnifying the problem. This client reported believing these thoughts about 90% at the height of this emotional trigger.

Row C represents the consequences caused by those beliefs or automatic thoughts. The consequences can be both emotional consequences (for example, I cried; I felt guilty; I was angry), or they can be behavioral consequences (for example, I left the room; I hit the wall; I cried; I isolated myself). This client listed the emotional consequences of sadness, shame, embarrassment, and feeling worthless. He listed one behavioral consequence of rumination. These three rows (A, B, and C) are simply a description of the person's lived experience: (A) Something happened, (B) they had thoughts and beliefs about that something, and (C) consequences unfolded from their reaction to that something.

Row D is where the therapeutic exercise in flexibility begins. The person struggling with unhealthy perfectionism has spent much of their life looking for evidence to support the assumption(s) stated in row B (confirmation bias). Here they will learn to do the opposite and find evidence to disprove their beliefs and automatic thoughts. They will dispute the assumption in row B and give evidence for why the thought(s) is not one hundred percent true. Although this goes contrary to their regular thought patterns and may feel difficult, cognitive flexibility improves with practice, and the process becomes easier. Looking back to row D, we can see that he worked through evidence from a variety of angles to begin unseating the distorted thoughts in row B. His disputes were as follows: "17/20 = 85%. That's a B on one assignment." "This technical accounting research class is substantially different from law school." "My identity is not solely defined by academic performance in a single class." "Missing 3 points does not constitute a failing grade." "I have a 4.0. I'm not dumb." "Even if I didn't get an A in this class or keep my 4.0, I can still reach my goal of going to law school."

In row E, the client works to eliminate the distortion present in their previous row B thoughts by creating new, more reality-based thoughts.

These summarize the essence of what they learned from their disputing beliefs in row D. As seen in this client's example in row E, he created several summary statements about what he learned from the disputes he had written in row D: "I'm performing well in the class even If I'm not performing perfectly." "This experience will help me perform better in law school." "I have so much to offer beyond just academics." "I'm human and will make mistakes. That's okay."

After processing through rows D and E, this client reported believing the thoughts in row B now only 10%, in contrast to believing them 90% when he was first triggered. As things shifted, the client recorded any new feelings he was having in row F, in contrast to the emotional and behavioral consequences he previously listed in row C. In row F, he recorded his improved mental state: "flexible, grounded, honest, authentic, and confident." These are striking improvements over his earlier feelings of sadness, shame, embarrassment, and feeling worthless.

Once the therapeutic work in rows D, E, and F has been done, row G asks the person to consider what they will do going forward on this issue. It invites them to consider the question "What is my responsibility to honor the new feelings I created in row F?" This is a way to say, "Okay, now that I'm looking at it in a healthier way, and I feel differently, what am I going to do about it?" The person can put anything in this row that they feel is appropriate for their situation. You can see that in our example, the client decided, "I'll keep trying my best without obsessing over my shortcomings," "I will invest in all areas of my life," and "I will view imperfection as a gift." Deciding on new actions to take is a way of honoring the reality-based thoughts and feelings that the client just created. When behaviors align with these new feelings and values, the client experiences reduced stress and feelings of confidence and competence. At another time in his treatment journey, this client commented about the thought chart process: "I love [the] thought charts. These charts help ingrain healthy cognitive processes that breathe flexibility and contentment into my life."[59]

This exercise is easily modifiable for a child or adolescent—help them identify their automatic thought (B), and then help them to think of evidence or disputes about why that thought is not one hundred percent accurate (D). You can make this a discussion, or they can write down the automatic thought (B) at the top of a paper, underline it, and then put all the disputes underneath it, making a bulleted list.

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59. Client story shared with permission. Also quoted in McClendon, *Freedom from Scrupulosity,* 205.

Behavioral Experiments

Behavioral experiments test core beliefs and help shift faulty cognitions as the person brings new information. Researchers explain, "Beliefs rarely change as a result of intellectual challenging, but only through engaging emotions and behaving in new ways that produce evidence that confirms new beliefs."[60] One treatment manual for mood disorders suggests, "The best way to increase the believability of your alternative or balanced thoughts is to try them out in your day-to-day life."[61]

Contrast Experiments

For the treatment of unhealthy perfectionism, *contrast experiments* are recommended.[62] In contrast experiments, clients can compare (or, really, contrast) how they already behave with a new way of behaving. For example, in academic perfectionism, the client may be exhibiting extreme and unhealthy study habits. Perhaps they procrastinate studying out of fear of not doing well, and then, in a frenzy, they stay up very late, studying into the early morning hours for a week prior to an exam. In a contrast experiment for their next exam, they can plan out their study time, study for a specified amount of time during each day, and then stop studying when they have completed their scheduled study time. They can evaluate how these two approaches to studying for exams affected their subjective quality of life (stress levels, sleep quality and fatigue, overall sense of enjoyment or misery), as well as the objective outcome of the exam (points or grade earned). They can then review this data and decide which way of studying for tests works best for them.

Shame-Attacking Exercises

My favorite behavioral experiments are *shame-attacking exercises*. In shame-attacking exercises, a person chooses to publicly and purposefully behave in a manner that triggers anxiety, shame, and embarrassment. Generally, they act in a manner that is not culturally expected (as long as it is not illegal, doesn't hurt anyone, and doesn't violate their values or long-term goals). The choice of shame-attacking exercises

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60. Paul Chadwick, Max Birchwood, and Peter Trower, *Cognitive Therapy for Delusions, Voices and Paranoia* (John Wiley and Sons, 1996), 37.

61. Dennis Greenberger and Christine A. Padesky, *Mind Over Mood: Change How You Feel by Changing the Way You Think* (Guilford Press, 1995), 113.

62. Egan and others, *Cognitive-Behavioral Treatment,* 191.

should line up to counter the person's self-defeating beliefs or cognitive distortions.

One author explained the goals of shame-attacking exercises as follows: "The exercise has three goals. First and most important, is to provide experiences that prove you can act against your emotions, survive the discomfort, and behave as you planned despite unhealthy negative emotions. Second, it convinces you that even if people dislike or disapprove of you for your behavior, it is not awful, and you can stand their disapproval. Third and least important, it teaches us that most people do not even notice what we do, and we exaggerate the disapproval and reject we expect."[63]

Three categories of shame-attacking exercises include (1) targeting specific perfectionistic issues, (2) publicly violating cultural expectations, and (3) boundary setting and assertiveness training.

First, some shame-attacking exercises can target the person's specific perfectionistic tendencies. They can send texts with multiple purposely misspelled words. They can show up late for an appointment. They can attend a class, a therapy session, or another appointment without preparing or doing their assignments. They can tell a personal story to someone and leave out important details. They can fill out a questionnaire quickly rather than agonizing over every answer. They can admit to not knowing something. They can apologize when they make a mistake. And so on and so forth.

Second, some shame-attacking exercises involve violating some cultural expectations, which also trigger a host of emotions for someone struggling with unhealthy perfectionism. For example, a person can get in a crowded elevator and stay facing the back of the elevator instead of turning around to face the doors, as is generally expected. They can similarly ride an escalator facing backward toward the people behind them. They can turn up the music in their car when they stop at a red light next to another car, dance in their seat, and sing at the top of their lungs. They can approach people in a crowded store to survey them on a topic. They can button their shirt or blouse with the buttons mismatched so it hangs crooked. They can wear mismatched earrings. They can go to an important meeting with a big stain on the front of their shirt.

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63. Ray DiGiuseppe, "A Forty Year Follow-Up of the Efficacy of Shame Attacking Exercises: A Single Case Study," Albert Ellis Institute, accessed September 22, 2024, https://albertellis.org/2018/09/a-forty-year-follow-up-of-the-efficacy-of-shame-attacking-exercises-a-single-case-study/.

Last, shame-attacking exercises can also be serious practice with boundary setting or assertiveness training. The person can politely offer a differing opinion with a person of authority. They can politely ask for something they need without apologizing, being honest with people about what they need. They can bargain for a better price on a product they are purchasing. They can say "no" to a request from someone if they don't want to do it. They can ask someone for help, even though they don't know them well.

For children or adolescents, any behavioral experiments, such as the shame-attacking exercises just described, can be easily adapted by designing exercises that are interesting, creative, and even fun or silly. This approach motivates the child to remember to do them and be more willing to try them out. For example, most would find it risky but also a bit exciting to be challenged to talk to strangers at a store. The tension between the risk and excitement of doing something new and unexpected would be enticing to them. Curiosity would make them feel like they just *have* to do it so they can see what happens!

A Client's Cognitive Treatment for Religious Perfectionism

A married man in his mid-forties with a large family struggled with extreme religious perfectionism and anxiety. His distress paralyzed him. He would stay in bed, hiding under his covers, unable to function. Although he was temple worthy, he avoided the temple for years because of plaguing thoughts about his imperfections. In treatment, he completed many thought charts and also did behavioral experiments. His thinking grew more flexible over time, and in that healthier state, his distress lessened, and he found more joy in life.

To assess the extremity of his religious perfectionism we used the Perceived Perfectionism from God Scale.[64] Figures 4 through 6 show three administrations of this measure over the course of his treatment process, which focused almost entirely on the types of cognitive interventions outlined in this article. Just a visual scan of the images shows how this client shifted from an extreme all-or-nothing mentality about God (all of his answers hugging the right side of the scale) to a more flexible approach (his answers varying across the measure).

64. Kenneth T. Wang, G. E. Kawika Allen, Hannah I. Stokes, Han Na Suh, "Perceived Perfectionism from God Scale: Development and Initial Evidence," *Journal of Religion and Health* 57 (2018): 2207–23, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-017-0405-1.

PPGS

Instructions

The following items are designed to measure your perceptions of God. Use your first impression and indicate how much you agree with each item.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Neutral	Slightly Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree

Items	Ratings						
1. God has high standards for my performance at work or at school.	1	2	3	4	X	6	7
2. My best just never seems to be good enough for God.	1	2	3	4	5	X	7
3. God has high expectations for me.	1	2	3	4	5	6	X
4. I rarely live up to God's high standards.	1	2	3	4	5	6	X
5. God sets very high standards for me.	1	2	3	4	5	6	X
6. God expects the best from me.	1	2	3	4	5	6	X
7. I am seldom able to meet God's high standards of performance.	1	2	3	4	5	6	X
8. God expects me to have a strong need to strive for excellence.	1	2	3	4	5	6	X
9. God is hardly ever satisfied with my performance.	1	2	3	4	5	6	X
10. God is often disappointed because He knows I could have done better.	1	2	3	4	5	6	X

FIGURE 4. Perceived Perfectionism from God Scale, first client administration: January 30, 2020. Score = 67.

PPGS

Instructions

The following items are designed to measure your perceptions of God. Use your first impression and indicate how much you agree with each item.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Neutral	Slightly Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree

Items	Ratings						
1. God has high standards for my performance at work or at school	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
2. My best just never seems to be good enough for God.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
3. God has high expectations for me.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
4. I rarely live up to God's high standards.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
5. God sets very high standards for me.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
6. God expects the best from me.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
7. I am seldom able to meet God's high standards of performance.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8. God expects me to have a strong need to strive for excellence.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
9. God is hardly ever satisfied with my performance.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
10. God is often disappointed because He knows I could have done better.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

FIGURE 5. Perceived Perfectionism from God Scale, second client administration: October 15, 2020. Score = 52.

PPGS

Instructions

The following items are designed to measure your perceptions of God. Use your first impression and indicate how much you agree with each item.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Neutral	Slightly Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree

Items	Ratings
1. God has high standards for my performance at work or at school.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
2. My best just never seems to be good enough for God.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
3. God has high expectations for me.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
4. I rarely live up to God's high standards.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
5. God sets very high standards for me.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
6. God expects the best from me.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
7. I am seldom able to meet God's high standards of performance.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
8. God expects me to have a strong need to strive for excellence.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
9. God is hardly ever satisfied with my performance.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
10. God is often disappointed because He knows I could have done better.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Figure 6. Perceived Perfectionism from God Scale, third client administration: April 29, 2021. Score = 52.

Even though his total scores on the measure were identical for administrations two and three, the range of answers varied more in the third administration, even hitting a three on the scale, which is a "slightly disagree" endorsement, representing a significant—even miraculous—milestone for him in his therapeutic journey. These images show the power of the cognitive work he did in treatment—over time, the rigidity of his unhealthy perfectionism broke down and became more flexible.

As his thinking became more flexible over the year and a half he spent in therapy, the intensity of his overall distress came down significantly. We used the Outcome Questionnaire 45.2[65] (OQ–45) to track his distress levels at each therapy session. The clinical cutoff score is 63, indicating that scores of 63 and above represent distress that is high enough to warrant targeted treatment. The average score for a nonclinical community population is 45,

65. Michael J. Lambert, Ann T. Gregersen, and Gary M. Burlingame, "The Outcome Questionnaire–45," in *The Use of Psychological Testing for Treatment Planning and Outcomes Assessment,* vol. 3, *Instruments for Adults,* ed. Mark E. Maruish, 3rd ed. (Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2004), 191–234.

with scores below 62 falling in the average range. In figure 7, you can see several charts that show some of his OQ–45 scores. The first two charts show his first twenty data points from an assessment and then nineteen therapy sessions. His increasingly high distress scores over the first nine sessions illustrate how his distress increased as he got closer to a major deadline at work but did not yet have adequate therapeutic tools to deal with the stress in a healthy manner. You can see the sporadic nature of his distress during the next ten therapy sessions in the second chart as he began to gain some therapeutic skills and practice them. The third chart jumps ahead to show his functioning from sessions 54 to 63. At this time, he settled into a stable pattern of functioning, hovering around the clinical cutoff score, with most scores below the cutoff score in the normal range. From there, we continued to meet every three months (beyond what is shown in these charts) to allow him time to practice emotional self-reliance and maintain gains while still having some therapeutic accountability; his distress scores continued to remain low. After stabilizing for some time, he was emotionally self-reliant and resilient, and he was able to successfully discontinue treatment.

At the end of his treatment process, this client reflected:

> While there are therapeutic measures that show my progress, maybe my favorite measure is how my family sees me and responds to me. Just last week I reminded my seven-year-old how important it is to be flexible in her thinking, and she said, "That's my dad!" I love that she sees me as a person who promotes flexible thinking in how we respond to life's situations. After more than four years of avoiding temple worship (including while closed during the pandemic), I've recently returned, and I felt at peace. I'm able to think my way through most of my panic-inducing situations. I've even taken up some hobbies that include public performance, something inconceivable just a few years ago.
>
> It's been quite a journey. As I look back with compassion at my younger self, I wish I could let him know that help was on its way and that things would improve. I now understand that he was doing the best he could in the circumstances he was in. I did the best I could. I wasn't perfect. But there is something beautiful to me in the dialectal beliefs that I wasn't perfect, but I was doing the best I could, and it's okay, and I was and am worthy of God's love, and I can still grow and become better.
>
> There is great power in trusting in the process. I'm so glad that I did. Two years ago, I was hiding in my bed, so depressed I couldn't function. Today I'm happy, engaged in my life, and continuing to improve.[66]

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66. Client story shared with permission. Also quoted in McClendon, *Freedom from Scrupulosity,* 212.

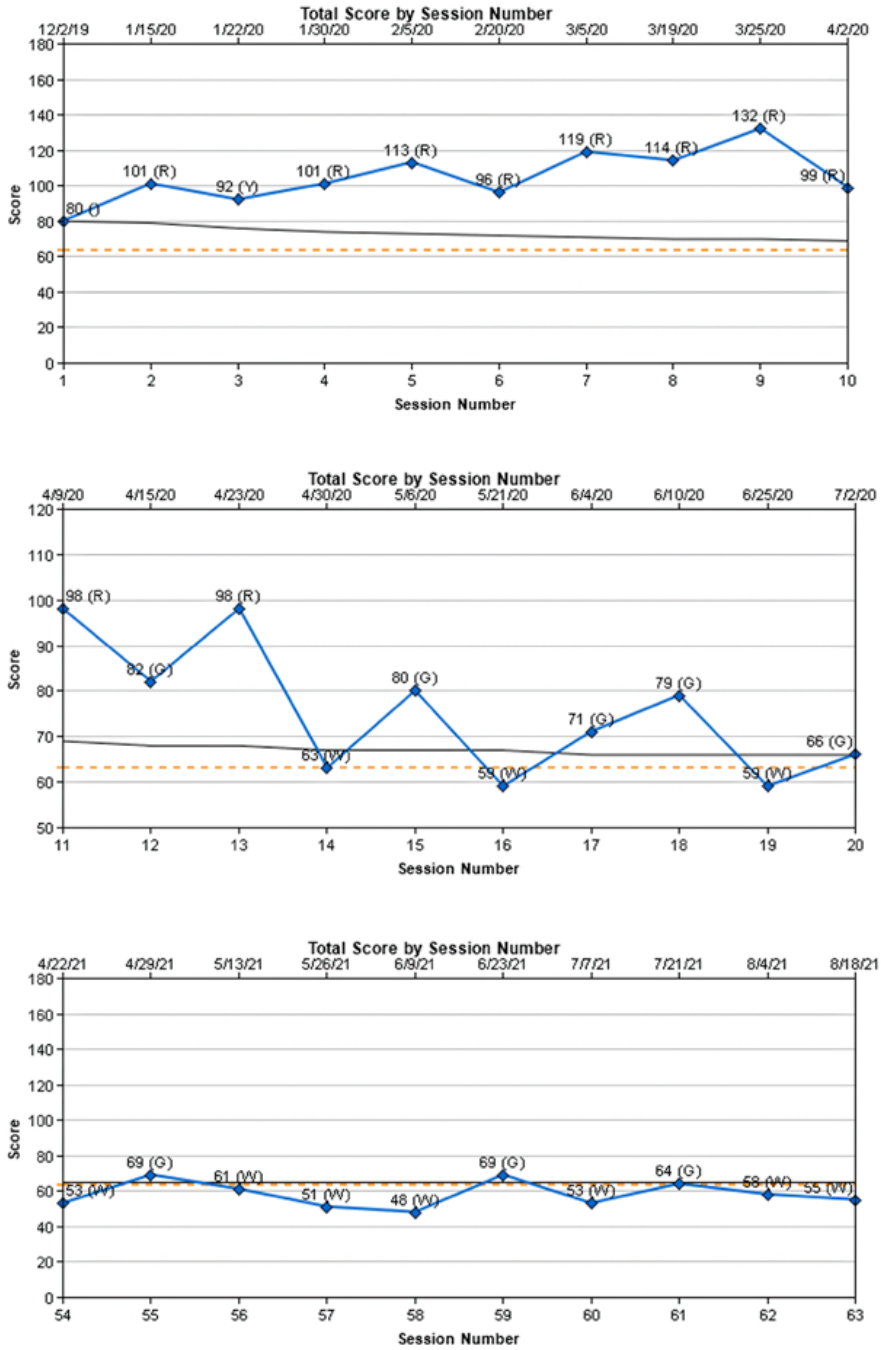

FIGURE 7. Outcome Questionnaire–45.2 charts for client.

The Commonality Between Gospel and Clinical Perspectives

Gospel teaching that can heal unhealthy perfectionism emphasizes setting aside self-defeating beliefs and distorted thinking, such as striving to earn worth and love from God or others with perfect behavior. Rather than a focus on negatively biased perfectionistic beliefs, the gospel focus remains on the Atonement of Jesus Christ. The gospel of Jesus Christ offers perfection *in him* and *through him,* even while we are imperfect or incomplete. We have faith in our Savior and accept that it is his perfection and healing that will ultimately perfect us in the eternities.

Clinical perspectives on healing from unhealthy perfectionism also emphasize becoming aware of and modifying negatively biased self-defeating beliefs and cognitive distortions. Clients shift distorted beliefs by identifying reality-based evidence they had previously ignored.

These two perspectives are not entirely distinct. It is not simply a choice between a gospel-centered approach or a clinical approach for treating unhealthy perfectionism. Do not both approaches expand a person's perspective beyond their present interpretations and require cognitive flexibility to resist applying unhealthy perfectionistic assumptions? The approaches, when used together, can inform each other. For example, careful gospel study can provide data that helps promote cognitive restructuring. Clinical cognitive restructuring techniques also provide flexibility training to fully embrace and accept Christ's teachings as he taught them—not as unhealthy perfectionism claims them to be. Enhancing cognitive flexibility allows those struggling to break perfectionistic perspectives and accept the errors and "grace" associated with mortal imperfection. This is illustrated by the following example.

One client struggled to listen to general conference talks by President Dallin H. Oaks. President Oaks's professional history as a lawyer, a professor of law, and a justice of the Utah Supreme Court contributes to a professional delivery style that, coupled with her insecurities caused by unhealthy perfectionism, led her to believe that he was often condemning in his talks—because *she felt* condemned. I asked her to read a BYU devotional he gave in 1982 entitled "Our Strengths Can Become Our Downfall."[67] In this talk, President Oaks highlighted twenty strengths that, if not considered and navigated carefully, could be exploited by Satan and end up causing difficulty. As she talked about reading this

67. Dallin H. Oaks, "Our Strengths Can Become Our Downfall," BYU Speeches, June 7, 1992, https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/dallin-h-oaks/strengths-can-become-downfall/.

discourse, she repeatedly used the phrase "President Oaks condemned . . ." I was struck by the strong negativity of the word she was using over and over again: "condemned." I questioned her and even gently challenged her that I didn't see anywhere in the discourse where President Oaks was condemning anybody. Instead, I saw that he was offering cautionary guidance to hopefully help prevent people from causing themselves serious problems. I sought to help her more accurately hear the message as it was being taught rather than hearing through the lens of her negative bias. She was genuinely surprised by my perspective and was struck by how negatively she interpreted something that didn't come across negatively to me at all.

Then, to strengthen this more realistically based perspective that I presented, I introduced the cognitive technique of examining definitions. We talked about the difference between condemning someone and offering cautionary guidance to someone. We then went a step further with the cognitive emphasis. President Oaks has shared previously that his talks go through ten to fifteen drafts in the development phase,[68] so the client and I discussed the idea that *every* word in his talks is there specifically for a chosen purpose. We examined the specific BYU devotional that had initially felt so condemning to her and his most recent general conference address. Words that would have made his messages demanding, harsh, or condemning were noticeably absent. He was not trying to scare anybody into behaving well. Instead, we found words that showed a purposeful *softening* of his message. Clearly, President Oaks wanted to make sure those listening felt encouraged and supported.

This cognitive intervention was eye-opening for her. She grew to see for herself how the meaning of President Oaks's messages had become distorted by her unhealthy perfectionism. She continued to focus on the softening of his message for several weeks as she listened to more of his general conference talks and noticed the specific words he chose to use. As distortion in her thinking decreased, she began to feel the Spirit confirm the truthfulness of his words. The Spirit also helped her feel the love with which President Oaks gave his talks. This changed how she saw him. In a tremendous therapeutic reversal, this client no longer felt condemned by President Oaks's talks and even grew to *love* listening to

68. Tad Walch, "New Biography of President Dallin H. Oaks Uses His Journals, Letters to Show Man Behind the Talks," *Deseret News,* March 2, 2021, https://www.deseret.com/faith/2021/3/2/22310108/biography-of-president-dallin-oaks-provides-insight-into-latter-day-saints-leader-salt-lake-city/.

his talks in a very short amount of time. The loving feelings continued to expand as she kept listening to his talks with this new awareness, and in a few more weeks, she reported that she grew to "loving *him* so much."[69] The key was to engage *more* with the talks, not less, and strive to see things as they really were (Jacob 4:13).

Conclusion

Simply put, living the gospel of Jesus Christ in this mortal, fallen world as an imperfect human being requires us to rely on the atoning grace and mercy of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. While we strive to follow the gospel with good and honest hearts, perfect behavior is *not possible and is not required* for his atonement to have power in our lives. Our ability to accept this gift from him requires an intentional, flexible cognitive approach to daily living. By embracing flexibility through both gospel and clinical means, those struggling with unhealthy perfectionism can find emotional peace and freedom from the rigidity and condemnation of unhealthy perfectionistic beliefs and distortions.

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69. Client story shared with permission.

Love Is a Law, Not a Reward

Adam S. Miller

1.

Love is the substance of God's law.

As Paul puts it: "If there be any other commandment, it is briefly comprehended in this saying, namely, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself" (Rom. 13:9). Or, as Jesus summarizes the law: "On these two commandments"—love of God and love of neighbor—"hang all the law and the prophets" (Matt. 22:40). What's more, this love can't be treated as a special reward. "Ye have heard that it hath been said," Jesus acknowledges, "thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy. But I say unto you, Love your enemies" (Matt. 5:43–44).

This is the law: love even your enemies.

What would happen if I actually believed this? What would happen if I stopped treating love as a reward and finally started obeying love as a law?

To help sketch an answer to this question, I want to revisit two familiar stories. The first is by Arnold Lobel. The second is by Jesus. But both stories, really, are about love.

2.

The first story is called "The Garden." It's from Arnold Lobel's classic collection of children's stories *Frog and Toad Together.*[1]

1. Arnold Lobel, "The Garden," in *Frog and Toad Together* (Harper Collins, 1971), 18–29.

In this story, Toad finds Frog working in his garden. Toad thinks it is a beautiful garden. Frog agrees. "It is very nice," Frog says. "But it was hard work."[2]

Now Toad wants a garden like Frog's. Frog offers Toad some seeds, instructs Toad to plant them in the ground, and promises that Toad, too, can soon have a beautiful garden filled with flowers.

Toad can hardly wait. He runs home and plants the seeds.

Toad tells the seeds to start growing. He walks up and down the rows, but nothing happens.

Toad leans in and says more sternly, "Now seeds, start growing!"[3] Still, nothing happens.

Finally, Toad gets down on his hands and knees, fills his lungs, and bellows the same command. But still, nothing happens.

Provoked by all the commotion, Frog comes running to help. "What is all this noise?" he asks. Frowning, Toad confesses his seeds won't grow.

The problem is obvious to Frog. "You are shouting too much," he says. "These poor seeds are afraid to grow."[4] He advises Toad to give his seeds a few quiet days in the sun and rain; then they will start to grow.

Toad backs off, hoping not to frighten his seeds anymore. But that night, Toad looks out his window to find that, even with all the quiet, his seeds still haven't started to grow. "My seeds have not started to grow," he says. "They must be afraid of the dark."[5]

So, Toad lights some candles and takes them out to the garden. All through the night, he reads his seeds a long story to help them not be afraid. He spends the whole next day singing songs to his seeds. Then he spends the whole next day playing music for his seeds.

But the seeds still won't grow.

> "What shall I do?" cried Toad. "These must be the most frightened seeds in the whole world!"
>
> Then Toad felt very tired, and he fell asleep.
>
> "Toad, Toad, wake up," said Frog. "Look at your garden!"
>
> Toad looked at his garden.
>
> Little green plants were coming up out of the ground.
>
> "At last," shouted Toad, "my seeds have stopped being afraid to grow!"

2. Lobel, "Garden," 18.
3. Lobel, "Garden," 21.
4. Lobel, "Garden," 22.
5. Lobel, "Garden," 24.

"And now you will have a nice garden too," said Frog.
"Yes," said Toad, "but you were right, Frog. It was very hard work."[6]

3.

I'm like Toad.

I want good things, but I don't actually know how gardens grow. Ignorant about the true nature of things, I tell myself stories instead. I make up ridiculous stories about why nothing will grow. And these stories, of course, aren't actually about the garden. They're really about me.

And so, buying my own ridiculous stories, I've dedicated my life to doing impossible and useless things. I've dedicated my life to doing very hard work that is, on its own terms, utterly beside the point. And truth be told, I suspect I'm especially like Toad—that is, adorably earnest and decidedly dim-witted—when it comes to religion.

Recently, I've come to what feels like a long-gestating but now obvious and unavoidable conclusion. After nearly fifty years of shouting at my seeds to grow, I've concluded that shouting may not work. After nearly fifty years of trying to earn God's love—of trying to prove I deserve that reward—I've reached the blunt and sobering conclusion that God never asked me to do this.

To understand how I'm like Toad, you must see just this: I've spent the better part of my life trying—and failing—to obey a commandment God never gave. Like Toad, I've had the whole thing backward. I've had life upside down.

There is no commandment in all of scripture—delivered from any pulpit by any prophet in any age—to make myself into someone God could finally love. There is no commandment to make myself into someone perfectly lovable. It is impossible to keep this commandment—this imaginary commandment to be perfectly lovable—because God never gave it. And, for this same reason, it is impossible to break this commandment. It is impossible to break a commandment God never gave.

There is, instead, always and only the single, eternal, unconditional commandment to do love's work: to love God with all my heart, and then to join God in the hard work of loving others.

My problem is that I have, all along, been telling myself a ridiculous story about how love is a reward when, in truth, love is a law. Love cannot be deserved. Love is always a commandment to be obeyed—full

6. Lobel, "Garden," 27–29.

stop—and never a prize to be earned. Love is a verb, not a noun. Love is a work I must join, not a reward I can get. Love requires my participation, not my perfection.

This is the secret hidden from the foundation of the world. This is the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

4.

Jesus has tried, again and again, to tell us this. "I will open my mouth in parables," he said. "I will utter things which have been kept secret from the foundation of the world" (Matt. 13:35). So, consider this parable—maybe the most famous parable of all—with its own stubborn secret hidden in plain sight.

"A certain man had two sons," Jesus tells us, "and the younger," acting as if his father were already dead, asks for his share of the inheritance (Luke 15:11–12). The son receives it. He wastes it. He starves. Woken by his hunger, this son then "came to himself" (Luke 15:17). "I will arise and go to my father," the son thinks, "and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven" and so "am no more worthy to be called thy son" (Luke 15:18–19).

I am this younger son. This is me. This is how Toad and I think.

Rather than treating love as a law, the younger son treats love as a reward he has failed to earn. He treats love as something he could—with very hard work—deserve. He treats God's law as a measure for whether he deserves to be loved.

This son thinks love is about being loved and earning love, not about loving others.

He thinks his seeds didn't grow because he didn't shout at the ground long enough or hard enough. So now he thinks he doesn't deserve to be loved.

No outcome could be more predictable and inevitable than this. Treating love as a reward, I will always find that I've failed to deserve it. And having failed to deserve it, I will feel guilty.

But why have I failed? Because I'm not good enough or strong enough or "perfect" enough to be loved? Or because I've been wrong about what love even is?

To understand the truth about love, I must also come to understand the truth about guilt. I must see that guilt is the inescapable shadow cast by every backward and disobedient attempt to deserve love and be loved.

In this way, guilt is a telling symptom. It's a powerful sign that something is wrong, that something in me is painfully out of joint. The trouble

is that, ignorant as I am, I constantly misread this sign in light of my own ridiculous stories. I constantly misinterpret this symptom as a sign that God does not love me because I do not deserve to be loved.

This, though, is not what guilt means. What this powerful sign actually means is that I've been doing the wrong thing. I've misunderstood what love even is.

If we compare God's law of love to a spyglass or telescope, we might describe my mistake like this: As a sinner, I've got the right instrument, but I've spent my whole life looking through the wrong end. I've got God's law, but I'm using it backward. This law was meant to magnify love, to call me to love, to show me how the world is already filled with God's love. But by misusing God's law, by looking through the wrong end of the telescope, I've produced the exact opposite effect. I've made God's love seem incredibly small and impossibly far away.

As a prize, love will always look impossibly small and far away.

But as a law I must obey—as a work I must join—love is always magnified and always at hand.

5.

In Jesus's parable, however, the disobedient son isn't the only one trapped inside this sad story about love being a reward. In fact, the whole point of Jesus's parable may be that the obedient son doesn't see the truth either. Both sons think love is a conditional reward. Both sons think love can be deserved. They've just reached different conclusions about whether they deserve it.

The father greets the younger son's return with an outpouring of love. But when the elder son sees this, he doesn't join his father in obeying love. Rather—tellingly—he gets angry.

When the father comes out and asks him to join the celebration, the elder son bitterly replies: "Lo, these many years do I serve thee, neither transgressed I at any time thy commandment: and yet thou never gavest me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends" (Luke 15:29).

The elder son, just like his younger brother, has God's law backward.

The elder son thinks love is a reward—and he thinks he's earned it.

If, like the younger son, you try to earn love and then feel like you've failed, you will be filled with guilt and hopelessness. But if, like the elder son, you try to earn love and imagine you've succeeded, you still won't find love. Instead, you will—predictably, inescapably—be filled with anger, bitterness, and judgment. And this anger will estrange you from love and strand you on an island of vanity and indignation.

The younger son finds himself unworthy of love and, so, hates himself.

The elder son finds himself worthy of love and, so, hates his brother.

Hate rushes to fill every vacuum created when God's law is used to decide that some people—perhaps others, perhaps me—haven't earned the reward of love.

So often, I am this elder son. This is me. This is how Toad and I think.

It's impossible to misuse God's law as a weapon for excluding others from love without also harming myself. Whenever I treat love as a conditional reward, I inevitably turn Jesus's commandment to "be ye therefore perfect" on its head (Matt. 5:48). This commandment to be perfect does not describe what I must become to finally earn God's love. Rather, "perfect" describes the kind of divine love God already has for me—and, then, the kind of love I must also obey.

This is the difference between perfection and perfectionism. Perfectionism is love upside down and backward. Perfectionism is the desire to be perfectly lovable, not the desire to love perfectly. And unlike God's perfect love, perfectionisms of all kinds are predictably harsh, angry, and unloving.

Perfectionism is a bitter and frustrating project. Perfectionism withholds love and disobeys the command to love. In this way, perfectionism is a crippling form of disobedience and an arrogant dismissal of God's law. Perfectionism is a sour form of moral relativism that undercuts God's law by rendering love relative to some imagined scale of merits.

God is perfect. God is not a perfectionist.

6.

In this parable, the father is the only one who thinks like God. The father is the only one who knows how gardens actually grow. He's the only one who knows what love even is.

Obedient to God's law, the father isn't guilty or angry. He loves both his sons.

When his younger son returns, full of guilt and shame, the father doesn't hesitate to love him. "When he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him" (Luke 15:20).

Humbled, the younger son protests, "Father, I . . . am no more worthy to be called thy son" (Luke 15:21). The father, though, ignores this ridiculous story and says "to his servants, Bring forth the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet . . . and let us

eat, and be merry: For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found" (Luke 15:22–24).

The father knows both what God's law says and what God's law is for. He knows how to love. The father, in other words, knows how to render righteous judgment.

In Matthew 7:1, Jesus famously commands: "Judge not, that ye be not judged."

But the Joseph Smith Translation amends the verse as follows: "Judge not unrighteously, that ye be not judged; but judge righteous judgment" (JST Matt. 7:2). There are, then, two forms of judgment: unrighteous judgment and righteous judgment. What divides one from the other? These forms of judgment are, I think, cleanly divided by whether we're treating love as a law or as a reward.

If we think love is a special reward reserved only for those who have "earned" it, then we'll use God's law to judge what people deserve. We'll use God's law to divide up the world into those who deserve to be loved and those who don't. We'll use judgment as a weapon. This is unrighteous judgment.

Righteous judgment, though, does just the opposite. Rather than judging others in a way that prevents me from loving them, righteous judgment treats love as a law that commands me to love them, even if—especially if—they are my enemies and do not deserve it.

Unrighteous judgments ask: *Who* deserves to be loved?

But righteous judgments ask: *How* must I love?

Unrighteous judgments treat love as a rare reward, while righteous judgments treat love as a moral law. When I practice unrighteous judgment, I not only condemn others, I condemn myself to expect and receive this kind of judgment. "For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged," Jesus says (Matt. 7:2). Having misunderstood what love even is, I condemn myself to live as someone cut off from love.

But when I obey love's law, I stop judging who deserves to be loved and exclusively use God's law to judge how to love.

In other words, obedient to love, I live like the father in the parable. I judge like the father. I obey God's law like the father.

When the elder son angrily demands to know why his obedience hasn't earned him more love than this younger brother, the father doesn't get angry—but he also does not endorse the elder son's treatment of love as a reward he's earned. Rather, the father simply promises all his love and repeats the same thing he said when he welcomed the prodigal

home. "It was meet that we should make merry . . . for this thy brother was dead, and is alive again; and was lost, and is found" (Luke 15:32).

This love, this compassion, the father says, was "meet"—that is, it was required, it was necessary, it was commanded by God's own law.

And this divine law never asks if you deserve to be loved.

This divine law asks only if you are dead or alive, if you are lost or found.

It only asks how best to love you.

This is the truth about how gardens grow.

And this—while it is still very hard work—is work of an entirely different kind.

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This article was adapted from Adam S. Miller's presentation at the Faith Matters Restore conference on October 14, 2023, in Sandy, Utah.

Conclusion

Latter-day Saints and Perfectionism

W. Justin Dyer

This special issue on members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and toxic perfectionism seems long overdue. Although there has been some research in the past, many misleading narratives about Latter-day Saints and perfectionism—narratives promoted by professionals and nonprofessionals alike—were pulled into that research vacuum. Prior to the research presented in this issue, there were no studies that revealed how Latter-day Saints compare in perfectionism to those of other religions and those of no religion, and there was no longitudinal research that provided evidence for the sources and consequences of perfectionism over time for Latter-day Saints. Without this comparison and longitudinal data, our ability to reasonably tackle this important problem for Latter-day Saints has been hampered. The authors of the articles in this issue provide much-needed data and perspectives that help us understand, prevent, and heal from toxic perfectionism in our culture.

Several of these perspectives are found in the first article, "Understanding Perfectionism," by Kawika Allen, Jace Clayton, Emma Moore, and Debra Theobald McClendon. Today, it seems there are conflicting views about setting high goals, with some people unsure whether these goals may reflect an unhealthy perfectionism. Many wonder whether the high expectations of the restored gospel are a good thing. However, as Allen and colleagues remind us, setting high goals and expectations is wonderful. Phrases like "Dream big," "Reach for the stars," and "The sky's the limit" are stereotypical precisely because they can be motivating and help us accomplish ambitious goals.

However, to avoid toxic perfectionism, we must separate our individual worth from our successes and failures. As quoted in their article, a nonperfectionist "may well be disappointed and hurt by failure [but] perfectionistic people are potentially devastated by it. . . . Striving for excellence is vitalizing and energizing, and it opens the possibility of continued growth. Perfectionism, by contrast, is deadening, bringing with it feelings of hopelessness and personal failure."[1] As we fall short, we can learn to embrace an invigorating pursuit of excellence without succumbing to the self-loathing and judgment that failure often brings.

Toxic perfectionism can manifest itself in a person who obsessively strives for flawlessness and then crashes into despair with the inevitable imperfections. It may also manifest in a person who is so afraid of failure that they rarely try, or if they do try, they give very little effort. Not trying gives the person a reason for their failure other than that they were not good enough. As one perfectionist admitted in that article, "It's better to say I didn't try than to say I failed" (see p. 17). These feelings of shame and low self-worth undermine our relationships with ourselves, family, friends, and God and can negatively influence the expectations we have of other people.

Mark Ogletree's article "Perfectionism's Influence on Adolescent Mental Health" finds that toxic perfectionism is not something to be taken lightly. Results from his article suggest that toxic perfectionism has a snowball effect with anxiety, depression, and low self-worth. Evidence suggests that each of these reinforce and are reinforced by toxic perfectionism across adolescence. What's more, 51% of youth who were high in toxic perfectionism had seriously considered suicide at some point (see fig. 4, p. 85).

But where does this toxic perfectionism come from? As summarized in my article, "Perfectionism Across Adolescence," it likely emerges from a society where (1) there are an anxiety-provoking number of choices to make, (2) polarized and cancel culture gives choices incredibly high stakes, and (3) the sense of community has been lost to radical individualism, turning us obsessively inward rather than encouraging us to be outwardly aware. Further, evidence in the article "Parental Influence on Adolescent Perfectionism" by Jenet Erickson, Olivia Forsberg, and McKenna Schmidt suggests parents likely have a large influence on

1. Thomas S. Greenspon, "Is There an Antidote to Perfectionism?," *Psychology in the Schools* 51, no. 9 (2014): 988, https://doi.org/10.1002/pits.21797.

perfectionism in their family. An astounding 46% of girls whose parents use love withdrawal and shame (also called psychological control) are highly perfectionistic, compared to just 10% of girls whose parents do not use these tactics (see fig. 1, p. 64). Toxic perfectionism also appears to flourish in families that are either highly rigid or highly chaotic. A loving, flexible family structure that supports rather than suffocates seems most effective in preventing perfectionism.

What about religion? Does its structure suffocate its adherents? Are Latter-day Saints a "notoriously perfectionistic population" as some have claimed?[2] Michael Goodman's "Religion and Perfectionism" article provides the first-ever study known to examine these questions. Although the answers may surprise the social media world, the research community should be unsurprised. Decades of research have found that religion is related to better mental health. Thus, it is no surprise that Latter-day Saints, known for their strong religiosity,[3] and those of other religions exhibited lower levels of perfectionism compared to atheists and agnostics who had never been part of a religion (see pp. 100–101, 118). It is not unlikely that the decline of religion in society is another reason for the rise in perfectionism.

At the same time, it is also likely that the increase in toxic perfectionism over the past few years may be partially the reason for the decrease in religion. As found in the article "Religion and Perfectionism," of those who were highly perfectionistic, more than one in five (22%) left their religion within a four-year time period (this includes those of all religions in the sample, not just Latter-day Saints; see fig. 2, p. 101). Because they feel that failure within an organization is tied to their self-worth, it may be difficult for the toxic perfectionist to stay connected to *any* institution. And indeed, we see a steep decline in people who participate in religion and also many other civic organizations.[4] Although it is speculative to say the rise in toxic perfectionism may be part of what's driving disengagement from organizations, it could be easily said that

2. Donna Bevan-Lee, "Mormonism and the Pursuit of Perfection," *Medium,* November 16, 2019, https://medium.com/@donna.bevanlee/mormonism-and-the-pursuit-of-perfection-54646372c949.

3. Christian Smith with Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford University Press, 2005), 35.

4. See Robert D. Putnam with Shaylyn Romney Garrett, *The Upswing: How America Came Together a Century Ago and How We Can Do It Again* (Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2021).

institutions that value people for their inherent worth rather than an "earned" worth are much more likely to retain their members—this is true even as an institution may encourage its members to greater heights.

In working on this issue, one of the most important takeaways for me was the reality that perfectionism does not belong to a single group but is widespread across religious and nonreligious populations. The tendency to tie our value to the ever-shifting quality of our performance seems to be part of the human condition, and few people are immune to this. But Christ's gospel teaches that our value is tied to the unchangeable love of God.

On the one hand, the fact that fewer Latter-day Saint youth struggle with high perfectionism is a good thing. This means Christ's message is likely having its intended effect on many families. On the other hand, the reality that more than one in ten of the Latter-day Saint youth surveyed (15%) are high perfectionists and 7% are mid-high to high perfectionists (see fig. 3, p. 38) means nearly every ward will have several youth struggling with toxic perfectionism. What can be done? The more we learn and apply the lessons from the articles in this issue, the better we will help our youth (and adults) flourish.

These new statistics on perfectionism provide the foundation upon which other remedies can be built. In her article "Healing from Toxic Perfectionism," Debra Theobald McClendon expertly outlines cognitive distortions we often don't realize we have. These include selective attention, double standards, overgeneralizing, and catastrophizing. Toxic perfectionists may believe they are thinking rationally yet may fall into unrealistic thought patterns. The perfectionist may believe that if something goes wrong, it must be entirely their fault, even if that is not the case. Helping individuals recognize faulty thinking and gain a more balanced perspective can assist them in seeing the world as it really is. McClendon's excellent exercise (see fig. 3, page 139) can help an individual slow their thinking enough to recognize distorted beliefs and reflect realistically on their situation. For some perfectionists, a trained therapist may be an important guide in helping them recognize how some of their thought processes can be adjusted to see situations more clearly.

McClendon's article also points us to a gospel perspective on perfectionism. She quotes President Russell M. Nelson: "Be patient with yourself. Perfection comes not in this life but in the next life. Don't demand things that are unreasonable but demand of yourself improvement. As

you let the Lord help you through that, He will make the difference."[5] This teaching encapsulates the wonderful journey to strive for improvement every day and provides the perspective that we can trust in a God who, no matter our mistakes, loves us infinitely and is there to help and enable us.

Further, one of the greatest antidotes to perfectionism is to know that our infinite worth does not depend on our good behavior, intelligence, talents, or appearance. Adam Miller's essay "Love Is a Law, Not a Reward" reminds us to look through the right end of the telescope—to avoid thinking of God's love as a reward for perfection or a love that can be earned (see p. 157). Instead, God's love is ever present, even in our imperfections. God loved us first (1 Jn. 4:19) and will love us through eternity.

Sometimes we may think that tying our worth to our success will help us succeed. We may think that feelings of self-hate and loathing will keep us from making the same mistakes again. At one time or another, most of us have called ourselves all the meanest names ever invented after we've made a mistake. Yet, even as a short-term strategy, this is ineffective (not to mention unproductive and wrong). In the long run, when we devalue ourselves for any reason, we strip away our motivation and a foundation upon which to progress.

And progression *is* essential. Recognizing our mistakes is key to mental health. We become lost when we cannot identify our right and wrong choices. It is the Lord's covenants that provide the essential map to our heavenly home. Yet trying to achieve progress by beating ourselves down only makes us feel stuck. By sensing the Savior's constant and unearned love calling us from ahead and supporting us from behind, we can believe in our progress and feel lifted when we fall.

In the end, we hope readers of this special issue have found insights that can help them more joyfully walk the covenant path. Often, we most clearly see the *Lord's* perfections as he loves us in our weakness. When we see the way the Lord loves us, we can more easily forgive the imperfections in ourselves and others. Our imperfections may be thought of as "a thorn in the flesh" (2 Cor. 12:7). Paul, struggling with his imperfection, asked for his thorn to be removed. But the Lord told him that (1) "my grace is sufficient" and (2) "my strength is made perfect in weakness."

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5. Russell M. Nelson, "Men's Hearts Shall Fail Them," The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, posted November 18, 2011, YouTube, 2:22–49, youtube.com/watch?v=EMwKxmTLaCs.

Recognizing the way the Lord loved him, Paul didn't just put up with his weakness. Rather, he wrote, "Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me" (2 Cor. 12:9). For Paul, whatever limitations he had were a source of glory because they gave him a chance to connect with the power and love of Christ.

Although our thorns in the flesh may cause us to walk the covenant path in a halting and stumbling way, as we continue toward our eternal home, we can say with Paul, "I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing" (2 Tim. 4:7–8).

Appendix

All unique analyses in the articles "Perfectionism Across Adolescence," "Parental Influence on Adolescent Perfectionism," "Perfectionism's Influence on Adolescent Mental Health," and "Religion and Perfectionism" were conducted by Justin Dyer. Details of the data collection and analysis are contained in this appendix. All code and detailed outputs are available from Justin Dyer upon request.

Sample

The unique analyses in this issue (in the four articles mentioned above) were conducted with the "Family Foundations of Youth Development" data ("Foundations"). The information on the sample is primarily drawn from the Foundations website (foundations.byu.edu). There are currently four waves of data collection in the Foundations project. At each wave of data collection, those who participated previously were invited to participate again, and new participants were recruited. Surveys at each wave took between thirty-five and fifty-five minutes to complete. Given Latter-day Saints are underrepresented in the research literature, they were oversampled.

The first wave of data was collected in the summer of 2016 and consisted of youth in Utah and one of the child's parents. To obtain a random sample, the national research company InfoUSA (now called "Data Axel") was utilized. This company collects information from publicly available sources to identify U.S. households and their characteristics. Their database contains over eighty million households, and the information is regularly

updated. This company is not associated with Brigham Young University or The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

In Wave 1, the contact information for ten thousand households with children between the ages of twelve and fourteen in Utah were randomly selected from InfoUSA's database. Recruitment letters were sent to these ten thousand potential participants, and they were also contacted by phone. Each letter contained a unique code that participants used on the Foundations website to complete the survey. Although InfoUSA's information regarding families was mostly reliable, we found it inaccurate regarding household composition (that is, no child between the ages of twelve and fourteen) in at least 10% of the cases. However, of those households that were found to be eligible, just over 60% participated. Youth were given twenty dollars in Amazon.com credit to complete the survey, and parents were given thirty dollars in Amazon.com credit.

Throughout the four waves of data collection, we had several participants ask if their other family or friends could participate. In each instance, the answer was "no." Although this would have simplified recruiting, to obtain a random sample, households could participate only if they had been randomly selected through the InfoUSA database. Thus, "snowball" sampling was not allowed. However, it is useful to be able to conduct within-household analyses—that is, examine how children in the same household may be affected differently by parenting. Thus, if a household was randomly selected, any youth who met the age criteria could participate. In analyses, appropriate statistical methods for handling households with multiple participants were employed.

In total, 638 families participated in Wave 1. Youth ages ranged from eleven to fifteen (some youth just under twelve or just over fifteen took the survey). Regarding religion, 86.2% of the youth identified as Latter-day Saint, 4.3% as Catholic, 3.3% as atheist/agnostic, and 6.2% identified as another religion. Regarding income, 27% of households made $75,000 or less, another 22.8% made between $75,000 and $100,000, and 50.2% of households made more than $100,000. Racially, 88.1% of youth identified as White, 5.8% identified as Hispanic, 3.7% identified as a combination of races, and the rest identified as other races (for example, Black, Asian, and so forth).

The second wave of data collection occurred in 2018. Those who had been surveyed at the first wave were recruited to participate again in the second wave. Additional participants were recruited from Utah to increase the diversity within the Utah sample. A sample was also recruited from Arizona because it is similar to Utah in several respects,

though with a substantially lower proportion of Latter-day Saints. The new families recruited from Utah and Arizona in this second wave were recruited using the InfoUSA national database. The selection criterion for households was those having a child between the ages of twelve and sixteen. The age at this wave was increased from the first wave to be comparable to Wave 1 participants from Utah. The youth were compensated thirty dollars in Amazon.com credit, and the parents were compensated forty dollars in Amazon.com credit. Over 80% of those who participated in Wave 1 participated again in Wave 2. In Utah, an additional 187 families were recruited. In Arizona, 689 families participated. The total sample at Wave 2 was 1,396 families (a parent and a child).

The sample at Wave 2 became more religiously diverse: 62.9% Latter-day Saint, 8.6% Catholic, 9.3% Protestant, 8.4% believing in God but not affiliated with a religion, 7.4% atheist/agnostic, and 3.4% of other religions. The Wave 2 sample remained mostly the same in terms of race and income. In terms of income, 28.4% made less than $75,000, 22.4% made between $75,000 and $100,000, and the rest (49.2%) made over $100,000. Regarding race, 81.3% were White, 7.12% Hispanic, 7% identifying as a combination of races, 1.8% Black, 1.7% Asian American, and 1.2% identifying as other races.

Wave 3 was conducted in the summer of 2020, as COVID-19 lockdowns were underway. This afforded an important opportunity to examine how the pandemic influenced individuals. Those who had been in either of the previous two waves were recruited to participate again.[1] In Wave 3, both parent and child received a thirty-dollar Amazon.com gift code for participating. In total, 1,226 families from Utah and Arizona participated in Wave 3. Of youth who participated in Wave 2, 87.9% participated in Wave 3.

In Wave 3, 62.3% identified at Latter-day Saint, 7.4% as Protestant, 7.1% as Catholic, 11.6% as atheist/agnostic, 8.8% as believing in God but not part of a religion, and 2.9% of other religions. For income, 23.1% made less than $75,000, 20.8% made between $75,000 and $100,000, and 56.2% made over $100,000. Regarding race, 83.4% were White, 5.2% Hispanic, 1.5% Black, .98% Asian American, 7.4% a combination of races, and 1.2% of other races.

1. At this wave, a sample from California was also recruited. However, given we have only two waves of data on these youth, we limit the current analyses to Wave 2 through 4, using only the Arizona and Utah samples.

Wave 4 was conducted in the summer of 2022. All those who were interviewed in prior waves were recruited to participate in Wave 4. In Wave 4, both parent and child received a twenty-dollar Amazon.com gift code for participating. In total, 1,015 families participated in Wave 4 (again, this is just using the Arizona and Utah samples). For children, the retention rate over these four years was 72.9%, and for parents it was 72.1%.

In Wave 4, 52.2% of the youth identified at Latter-day Saint, 8.7% as Protestant, 6.2% as Catholic, 17.2% as atheist/agnostic, 11.9% as believing in God but not part of a religion, and 3.8% of other religions. For income, 18.2% made less than $75,000, 17.7% made between $75,000 and $100,000, and 64.2% made over $100,000. Regarding race, 79.2% were White, 6.8% Hispanic, 1.9% Black, 2.3% Asian American, 8.8% a combination of races, and 1.0% of other races.

Dyer, "Perfectionism Across Adolescence"

Figure 1

Figure 1 (p. 36) is derived from a latent variable growth curve of 1,609 adolescents from the Family Foundations of Youth Development data when they were ages twelve, fourteen, sixteen, and eighteen. The model was fit in the statistical modeling computer program Mplus 8.10. Data were rearranged based on the age at which they took the survey, reconfiguring to an accelerated longitudinal design.[2] Each individual is missing at least one time point, though those missing data are missing completely at random and should not bias results since Full Information Maximum Likelihood was used to handle the missing data.[3] This model contains growth curves for both discrepancy and socially prescribed perfectionism. The data fit the model acceptably with a CFI of .964, though the RMSEA was somewhat poor at .099.

The intercept for discrepancy perfectionism was 3.36 with a slope of .21 ($p < .001$), and the intercept for socially prescribed perfectionism was 3.33 with a slope of .20 ($p < .001$). In other words, both discrepancy and socially prescribed perfectionism significantly increased over time.

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2. For more on statistical methods and models used to analyze relationships between variables over time, see Todd D. Little, *Longitudinal Structural Equation Modeling,* 2nd ed. (Guilford Press, 2024).

3. For more on the FIML estimation technique, see Craig K. Enders, *Applied Missing Data Analysis,* 2nd ed. (Guilford Press, 2022).

The variances of the slopes and intercepts were also significant (all at $p < .001$).

Figure 2

Results from growth mixture modeling were used to create figure 2 (p. 37). Two growth mixture models were estimated in Mplus 8.10, one for socially prescribed perfectionism and another for discrepancy perfectionism. For socially prescribed perfectionism, model fit continued to improve from one to five classes. However, after a large improvement in fit from the one to two class and the two to three class, there was relatively little improvement in model fit, suggesting the three-class solution may fit the data best. Entropy was acceptable for the three-class solution (.68) with interpretable classes: high perfectionism (20% of the sample), mid-perfectionism (53% of the sample), low perfectionism (28% of the sample).

For the discrepancy model, model fit improved from one to three classes. However, the four-class solution did not converge with unresolvable issues. The three-class solution had acceptable entropy (.73) with interpretable classes: high perfectionism (18% of the sample), mid-perfectionism (48% of the sample), low perfectionism (34% of the sample). This three-class solution showed convergent validity with the socially prescribed three-class solution (the correlation was .81 between the two). The three-class solution was chosen as the final discrepancy model.

Figure 3

Figure 3 (p. 38) shows the classifications we used for levels of discrepancy and socially prescribed perfectionism.

Erickson, Forsberg, and Schmidt, "Parental Influence on Adolescent Perfectionism"

Table 1 contains results from a multinomial logistic regression with the low child perfectionisms as the baseline. This regression was used to calculate the predicted probabilities reported in the article.

Table 1. Results from Multinomial Logistic Regression

	Low v. Mid Perfectionism	Low v. High Perfectionism
Constant		
Female	–5.72	–16.72**
Male	–4.06	–8.50
Parent Discrepancy Perfectionism		
Female	–0.09	–0.08
Male	0.09	0.62*
Parent Socially Prescribed Perfectionism		
Female	0.32	0.40
Male	–0.02	0.07
Mother Psychological Control		
Female	1.71	2.25*
Male	1.56*	1.59
Father Psychological Control		
Female	0.29	2.20*
Male	–0.09	0.89
Mother Warmth		
Female	–0.43	–0.75
Male	0.11	–0.33
Father Warmth		
Female	–0.32	–0.13
Male	–0.12	0.49
Mother Verbal Hostility		
Female	0.20	0.11
Male	–0.29	0.05
Father Verbal Hostility		
Female	0	0.19
Male	0.27	0.85

	Low v. Mid Perfectionism	Low v. High Perfectionism
Parent Anxiety		
Female	0.73	0.23
Male	0.14	–0.65
Parental Conflict		
Female	1.10	–0.07
Male	2.65	1.94
Family Rigidity		
Female	0.47	1.58*
Male	0.86	0.02
Family Chaos		
Female	0.83*	1.08*
Male	0.67	1.31*
Family Flexibility		
Female	–0.47	–0.74
Male	–0.02	–1.02
Family Disengagement		
Female	0.60	1.23*
Male	1.44**	1.55*
Child Age		
Female	0.03	0.36
Male	–0.60**	–0.45
Primarily Parent Mother		
Female	0.90	0.43
Male	–0.36	–0.70
Parent Income		
Female	–0.02	–0.01
Male	–0.06	0.09
Utah		
Female	–0.68*	–0.40
Male	0.35	1.14*

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Ogletree, "Perfectionism's Influence on Adolescent Mental Health"

Table 2 on the following page contains detailed results (standardized) of cross-lagged models that appear in figures 1–3 of Ogletree's article. These analyses were conducted in Mplus 8.10 and controlled for adolescent gender, parent income, and whether the adolescent lived in Utah or Arizona (controls not displayed but details available from Justin Dyer).

Figure 4 was created from a regression predicting whether the participant had ever seriously considered suicide by Wave 4 (1 = had considered suicide, 0 = had not considered suicide; n = 693). This logistic regression was conducted in Stata (statistical software for data science) and controlled for adolescent gender, parent income, and whether the adolescent lived in Utah or Arizona. Multiple imputation with twenty imputations was used to handle missing data.

Figure 5 was generated from a multinomial logistic regression predicting four categories of pornography use: 0 = *never,* 1 = *less than once a month,* 2 = *once a month to less than once a week,* 3 = *once a week or more.* State, gender, and income were examined. The number of observations was 1,058. Imputed data was not used for this analysis as data for pornography use was highly skewed and imputations varied widely. This, therefore, represents the raw unimputed data.

Table 2. Detailed Standardized Results for Figures 1–3 of "Perfectionism's Influence on Adolescent Mental Health"

	Discrepancy				Socially Prescribed			
	12	14	16	18	12	14	16	18
	B(se)	B(se)	B(se)	B(se)	B(se)	B(se)	B(se)	B(se)
Anxiety								
12		.01(.05)				.11(.05)*		
14	.05(.05)		.06(.03)*		−0.03(.05)		.03(.03)	
16		.06(.03)*		.08(.04)*		.11(.03)***		.09(.04)*
18			.08(.03)*				.07(.03)*	
χ^2(df)/CFI/RMSEA	31.13(6)***/.989/.073				40.95(4)*/.984/.087			
Depression								
12		.14(.06)*				.16(.05)**		
14	.06(.05)		.08(.03)*		−.03(.04)		.05(.03)	
16		.12(.03)**		.03(.04)		.10(.03)**		.08(.04)*
18			.09(.04)*				.09(.04)**	
χ^2(df)/CFI/RMSEA	18.74(6)**/.994/.052				25.48(6)***/.989/.065			
Low Self-Worth								
12		.22(.05)***				.19(.06)***		
14	.03(.05)		.07(.04)*		−.04(.05)		−.01(.04)	
16		.11(.04)**		.15(.04)***		.05(.03)		.13(.04)**
18			.02(.04)				.06(.03)	
χ^2(df)/CFI/RMSEA	8.32(6)/.999/.022				15.17(6)*/.995/.044			

* p < .05. ** p < .01. *** p < .001.

Goodman, "Religion and Perfectionism"

Figure 1 of Goodman's article is the predicted probabilities from a multinomial logistic regression after controlling for state, gender, and family income. Significant differences across religion are the result of pairwise comparisons of those predicted probabilities. Figure 2 is predicted probabilities from a logistic regression predicting whether a teen would disaffiliate between an average age of fourteen (Wave 2) and eighteen (Wave 4). This analysis includes only those who had data at these two waves and who were Latter-day Saints at Wave 2 (n = 522) and controls for gender, state, and income. Given it was highly predictive of both perfectionism and disaffiliation, whether the teen was a sexual and gender minority at Wave 4 was also controlled. Logistic regression results are in table 3.

Table 3. Predictors of Disaffiliation Between Wave 2 and Wave 4 (n = 522)

Independent Variables	Odds-Ratio
Perfectionism (base low risk)	
Mid Risk	1.96[t]
High Risk	4.14**
Gender (base female)	2.01*
State (Arizona baseline)	0.75
Sexual and Gender Minority	10.74*
Income	0.92[t]
Constant	0.08***

[t] p < .10. * p < .05. ** p < .01. *** p < .001

Figures 3 and 4 are marginal means from a multilevel regression predicting discrepancy and socially prescribed perfectionism, respectively. Independent variables were year (2018, 2020, 2022), disaffiliation between Wave 2 (2018) and Wave 4 (2022), gender, income, state, and whether the teen was a sexual or gender minority at Wave 4. To allow for nonlinear change over time, the year was also specified as a nominal variable. This is essentially a multilevel growth curve with a nominal slope. This "slope" does not represent change over time; rather, it represents the difference of each time point to a base time point—in this case, Wave 2 is the baseline time point. Similar to predicting a linear slope in a growth curve model, an interaction between year and disaffiliation

was specified to examine whether the shape of change across the three waves differed by whether the individual had disaffiliated. If the interaction was significant, it was kept. If it was not significant, it was dropped. Table 4 displays multilevel regression results for discrepancy and socially prescribed perfectionism.

Table 4. Predictors of Perfectionisms Across Time

	Discrepancy	**Socially Prescribed**
Independent Variables	*Coefficient*	*Coefficient*
Year (2018 baseline)		
2020	0.31***	0.31***
2022	0.45***	0.48***
Disaffiliated	0.35**	0.43**
Year X Disaffiliate Interaction		
2020 X Disaffiliated		0.01
2022 X Disaffiliated		–0.42**
Gender (female baseline)	–0.28**	–0.31***
Parent Income	–0.01	0.00
State (Arizona baseline)	0.01	0.09
Sexual and Gender Minority	0.46***	0.31*
Constant	3.51***	3.45***

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

For discrepancy perfectionism, the interaction between year and disaffiliation was not significant, indicating that individuals followed the same trajectory over time whether or not they disaffiliated. However, those who did disaffiliate had higher levels of discrepancy perfectionism throughout; that is, there was a significant effect on discrepancy perfectionism, but this effect did not vary by wave—similar to an effect on the intercept of a growth curve but not on the slope. The interaction was significant for socially prescribed perfectionisms with those who disaffiliated higher on socially prescribed perfectionism in 2018 and 2020 but not in 2022.

Cross-lagged models are reported in tables 5, 6, and 7. Cross-lagged models for salience are not reported, given there were not significant cross-lagged effects.

Table 5. Detailed Results for Figures 5, 6, and 8 of "Religion and Perfectionism"

	Discrepancy				Socially Prescribed			
	12	14	16	18	12	14	16	18
	B(se)	B(se)	B(se)	B(se)	B(se)	B(se)	B(se)	B(se)
External Regulation								
12		.00(.06)				−.03(.05)		
14	.07(.05)		−.00(.03)		.17(.05)**		.00(.03)	
16		.01(.04)		.01(.04)		−.01(.03)		.03(.03)
18			.11(.04)**				.18(.04)***	
χ^2(df)/CFI/RMSEA	17.81(10)/ .993/.032				26.31(10)**/.985/.046			
Introjected Regulation								
12		.16(.11)				.11(.05)*		
14	−.01(.03)		−.00(.06)		.02(.05)		.00(.03)	
16		.03(.02)		.08(.05)		−.01(.03)		.06(.03)
18			.04(.02)				.13(.04)**	
χ^2(df)/CFI/RMSEA	21.63(11)*/.991/.035				24.88(12)*/.989/.037			
Identified Motivation								
12		.05(.05)				.08(.05)		
14	−.04(.06)		.01(.03)		−.08(.06)		.07(.03)*	
16		−.07(.03)*		.02(.04)		−.02(.03)		−.01(.03)
18			−.06(.03)				−.08(.04)*	
χ^2(df)/CFI/RMSEA	24.86(10)**/.988/.044							

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Table 6. Detailed Results for Figures 11, 13, and 14 of "Religion and Perfectionism"

	Discrepancy				Socially Prescribed			
	12	14	16	18	12	14	16	18
	B(se)	B(se)	B(se)	B(se)	B(se)	B(se)	B(se)	B(se)
Legalism								
12		.06(.13)				.02(.06)		
14	.03(.03)		.03(.07)		.12(.06)		−.03(.03)	
16		.02(.02)		.01(.07)		.07(.03)*		.05(.03)
18			.02(.02)				.08(.04)*	
χ^2(df)/CFI/RMSEA	33.16(10)***/.981/.055				37.60(10)***/.977/.060			
Negative Religious Coping								
12		.13(.05)*				.11(.05)*		
14	.09(.04)*		.07(.03)*		.10(.05)		.06(.04)	
16		.06(.03)		−.06(.04)		.08(.03)*		.01(.03)
18			.08(.03)*				.09(.03)*	
χ^2(df)/CFI/RMSEA	33.42(10)***/.983/.055				49.07(11)/.971/.067			
Positive Religious Coping								
12		.01(.05)				.038(.05)		
14	.00(.05)		.04(.03)		−.04(.05)		.07(.03)*	
16		−.02(.03)		−.01(.04)		−.01(.03)		−.02(.04)
18			−.07(.03)**				−.08(.03)**	
χ^2(df)/CFI/RMSEA					39.25(11)***/.983/.057			

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Table 7. Detailed Results for Figures 15 and 17 of "Religion and Perfectionism"

	Discrepancy				Socially Prescribed			
	12	14	16	18	12	14	16	18
	B(se)	B(se)	B(se)	B(se)	B(se)	B(se)	B(se)	B(se)
Secure Attachment								
12		−.24(.35)				.19(.33)		
14	−.01(.01)		.15(.17)		−.01(.01)		.42(.17)*	
16		−.02(.01)**		.24(.17)		−.01(.01)		.06(.19)
18			−.02(.01)*				−.03(.01)***	
χ^2(df)/CFI/RMSEA	45.20(10)***/.977/.067				48.15(11)***/.975/.066			
Church Attendance								
12		.03(.05)				.02(.05)		
14	−.05(.05)		.02(.03)		−.03(.06)		.06(.03)	
16		−.05(.04)		−.01(.04)		−.03(.04)		.01(.04)
18			−.09(.04)*				−.05(.04)	
χ^2(df)/CFI/RMSEA	32.14(12)**/.975/.046				25.87(11)**/.982/.042			

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

The conclusion of Goodman's article discusses a logistic regression with the dependent variable being whether or not the individual was categorized as high in perfectionism (high in both discrepancy and socially prescribed perfectionism). All religious constructs used in previous cross-lagged models were included as predictors. This logistic regression was conducted in Mplus 8.10 and included the following as predictors: dummy variables for all denominations (Latter-day Saint as the omitted category), religious motivations (externalized, introjected, identified), religious salience, legalism, negative coping, positive coping, church attendance, secure attachment to God, gender (male or female), parent income, and state (Utah or Arizona). These variables are all from Wave 2 except religious affiliation, which is from Wave 4 so as to capture whether a participant left their religion. Sample size for this analysis was 1,609. Table 8 contains odds-ratio results for this model.

Table 8. Logistic Regression Predicting Being Classified as High in Perfectionism

	High Perfectionism
Independent Variables	*Odds-Ratio*
Religious Affiliation (Latter-day Saint baseline)	
Other Christian	1.12
No Religion, Believe in God	0.92
Atheist/Agnostic	1.38
Other Religion	0.60
Former Latter-day Saint	2.85*
Former Other Religion	1.93
Religious Motivations	
External	1.07
Introjected	2.03*
Identified	1.02
Religious Salience	0.95
Legalism	1.12
Negative Coping	6.37*
Positive Coping	1.05
Church Attendance	0.97
Secure Attachment	0.51
Gender (female baseline)	0.41*
Parent Income	1.01
State (Arizona Baseline)	1.35

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.