

A green banner for Staples featuring the text "STAPLES that was easy.\*" on the left, "Save 20-40% on all ink" in large white and red font in the center, and "Learn More" in a red button on the right. Images of ink cartridges and a printer are on the right side.

STAPLES  
that was easy.\*

Save 20-40% on all ink

Learn More

[Back to Article](#)[Click to Print](#)

Monday, Apr. 21, 2008

# Why Do Women Need To Be Perfect?

By Andrea Sachs

Five years ago, Dr. Alice Domar, a successful psychologist in Boston, had what she describes as an "ah-ha experience." A new patient, whom she refers to as "Kim," came in for an evaluation. Kim seemed to have everything — a happy marriage, four well-adjusted kids, a well-to-do lifestyle, good health and a trim figure. Admits Domar, "As she was telling me her story, I was listening to her thinking, what the hell is she doing seeing me?" It turns out that Kim was distressed by the messiness in her house. She told Domar, "Every time I open a drawer or closet and see the clutter, I feel like a miserable failure."

For Domar, that was a wake-up call about perfectionism. "Women are unhappy because, even if 11 out of 12 things are going well, they zero in on the one that isn't, and they get miserable about it." Now, bestselling author Domar (*Self-Nurture*), drawing on 20 years of clinical experience, has written *Be Happy Without Being Perfect* (Crown) to help readers cope with their own unrealistic needs to be perfect. TIME reporter Andrea Sachs spoke with Domar:

## **TIME: What is perfectionism?**

**Dr. Alice Domar:** It's certainly a diagnosis that falls within the range of obsessive-compulsive disorder. But the way I'm looking at it is not for women who meet the criteria as a true OCD perfectionist. I'm talking about your average, everyday woman who feels uncomfortable going to bed if there are dishes in the sink. Or who feels guilty if she goes out to dinner and leaves her kids with a sitter more than once a month. Or who has a hard time finishing a project at work because she feels it isn't quite good enough. So I'm talking more about you and me, not people who have met the criteria for the diagnosis per se.

## **Is perfectionism more common in women?**

I believe it is, yes.

**Why would that be?**

I think women, because we multitask, tend to have more things we try to be good at. There is a study done about 10 years ago tracked married couples over three months. They found that men on average worry about three things every day, but women on average worry about 12 things every day. In which way are you going to be more neurotic? If you worry about three things or if you worry about 12 things?

**If my mother or my father is the same way, is this genetic?**

I think it's partially genetic. We [Domar and her co-author, Alice Lesch Kelly] talked about 200 women. Most women who have issues in this realm either had a parent who was a perfectionist or had a parent who was a slob. If it is genetic, then I guess they follow in their parent's footsteps or they rebel and go the opposite way.

**If I fall into the category of perfectionism, does that mean I need therapy?**

No. It depends on how intense it is. The goal of the book is for the average person who doesn't need therapy, who really just needs to let up a little and enjoy life a little more. There are certainly people out there who have OCD. When we talked to women, if they made chicken, they would spend an hour sterilizing their kitchen. So those are the people who do need more than read a book.

**Why isn't trying to be perfect a good thing?**

I think trying to do things well is a good thing. I think trying to do everything perfectly is a bad thing. Obviously, if you're a surgeon, you'd better damn well do things perfectly. You better operate perfectly. But it's a little less important that you balance your checkbook every day. So I think there are some things in our lives that we need to have our very, very best effort. But you can't be perfect in everything you do.

**How does it affect our view of our own appearance?**

Oh, profoundly. I have never in my career seen a woman — and I've seen patients who are models and celebrities and such — who would look in the mirror and like everything they saw. What we do, no matter what we look like, is look in the mirror and zero in on the flaws.

**What if your husband expects you go have a perfectly clean home?**

Then I tell him to get to work. I've had a lot of women say to me, "I don't really care that much, but my husband insists that I vacuum every day." I'm like, buddy, pick up the vacuum. Obviously you don't want to live in a dirty house. There are certain minimal standards. But you don't need to wash the walls. You don't need to vacuum every

day.

### **What's the link with eating disorders?**

If you look at the spectrum, that is more on the pathological side. I've treated a lot of young women in my practice with anorexia and bulimia. That's a pathological need to control one's body. I think that there are a lot of women in this country who fall into a gray zone where they are so obsessed with staying a certain body size that they forfeit their health.

### **Can perfectionism affect someone on their job?**

Oh, enormously. Either as a boss or as an employee, it can be very harmful. For example, if your boss on a Monday asks you to do five tasks by Friday, and you spend until Friday morning getting the first task perfect and can't get to the other four tasks, how happy do you think your boss is going to be? And if you are a perfectionistic boss, you're going to have very high turnover rates. I think a lot of people at work have to learn how to distinguish between a perfect job and a good enough job.

### **How would perfectionism affect your marriage?**

The chapter on relationships opens with a story about a woman who talks about how she's always been on the perfectionistic side and it wasn't an issue. She started dating her husband and things were okay and they got married, and she'd sort of nudge him about leaving the bathroom mat on the floor after a shower. But it wasn't until they had kids that it really got bad and she would project all her issues on him. Twice a year she travels for business and before she leaves she types out these long instructions for him. She calls every day to check up on him. When she comes home, she looks right past the fact that the kids are fine and she focuses on his unshaven face and the pizza boxes in the garage and the laundry. She knows she's wrong but she can't help herself. She worries her husband is going to leave her for somebody who loves him for who he is and the fact that he doesn't drink and he doesn't beat them and he brings home a good paycheck. So I think it can be toxic in a relationship.

### **What if you want to exercise every day?**

For most people, exercising on a regular basis is indeed a very good thing. However, there are people who are so obsessed with exercise that they exercise when they are injured or when they're sick, and that's not a very good thing. You have to have some common sense here. If you're hurting, it means your body is saying, don't do this.

### **Let's talk about some of the techniques that you give to help yourself if you're overly perfectionistic.**

#### **Mini-relaxation.**

It's basically focused breathing techniques, based on diaphragmatic breathing. This immediately works to bring down your level of anxiety.

### **What about visualization?**

You can either buy a CD that has you visualize walking along a beach, or what I like to do with my patients is have them imagine a place where they feel very safe and happy. This can be their grandparents' backyard from when they were a kid, or it can be their favorite hike, or whatever. Our brain's capacity to transport us to places through our imagination is wonderful.

### **You write about humor being valuable.**

Yes. I've got to tell you, some perfectionists are pretty funny. If they can step back and look at what they're doing, even they can see the humor in it.

### **And active gratitude. How does that work?**

There has been a lot of research now on the benefits of acknowledging what is good in our lives. Getting yourself a notebook or a journal and in the evening before you go to bed, jotting down what that day you are grateful for, can have very significant positive impact on your mental and physical health. My mother died a few years ago and it was clearly the worst thing that ever happened to me. I decided to keep a gratitude journal and every night I wrote down what I was grateful for. It's really hard to do when you've just lost your mother, but there was stuff every day. There was a really good bagel or there was a hug from one of my kids. There was something every day. It really shifts your thinking in a healthier way.

 Click to Print

### **Find this article at:**

<http://www.time.com/time/arts/article/0,8599,1733856,00.html>