

Why Trying Harder Only Makes Things Worse



If you suspect that you, too, suffer from an undiagnosed case of Try-Harder Living, you may be wondering

- *How do I know if it's time for me to rebel?*
- *If so, exactly what do I rebel against?*
- *How do I become a rebel?*

We'll answer all of these questions and more. But first, a quick diagnostic test. Write in the blank for each statement the number that best reflects the extent to which you agree or disagree with that statement.

Strongly Disagree = 5 Disagree = 4 Neutral = 3 Agree = 2 Strongly Agree = 1

1. ___ I'm flexible about how things get done: my way, your way, either way.
2. ___ I am willing to try, fail, and learn from my mistakes.
3. ___ I allow myself to feel big emotions, from anger to sorrow to joy.
4. ___ I know how to appropriately process and express negative emotions.
5. ___ I have plenty of chances for fun, recreation, and celebration each month.
6. ___ I regularly get seven or more hours of sleep per night.
7. ___ I take responsibility for my own feelings and reactions; I expect other people to take responsibility for theirs.
8. ___ I am secure in my identity as a child of God; while I love my family, friends, work, and hobbies, none of them define me.

9. ___ I make a point to keep my home, calendar, and life uncluttered.
10. ___ I am intentional about budgeting and balancing both my time and energy.
11. ___ I ask for help as soon as I need it.
12. ___ I am comfortable declining invitations and requests; I communicate pleasantly and confidently when doing so.

___ TOTAL SCORE

The ideal range on the Try-Harder Living test is 12–24. (We’re guessing that if you’re reading this book by choice, your score is higher than ideal!)

25–36 = mild THL

37–48 = full-blown THL

49–60 = severe THL

How do you know if it’s time to rebel? If you’ve got Try-Harder Living to any degree, the sooner the better! THL worsens exponentially when left untreated. If you’re just at the mild stage, praise God and rebel while it’s still an easy choice.

The longer you wait, the harder it gets, because the four troublemakers that cause THL are parasites. They are hell-bent on dominating your life. Their goal is to destroy any sense of self you have left.

Meet the Gang

Try-Harder Living has four main instigators: Perfectionism, People-Pleasing, Performancism, and Procrastination. These bullies work together. When you’re fighting with one, the other three cheer him on and jump in as needed.

Although each bully has his own special weapon, they all share one common goal: to convince you to pour all your energy into creating and maintaining an image. This image is based on who they say you *should* be. Their criteria, of course, change from day to day. This keeps you dancing to their demands, right on the edge of burnout.

To break free from these bullies, we need to know a bit about them. Forewarned is forearmed, after all. So in the next four chapters you’ll discover how to identify each one. And you’ll learn to recognize the strategies they use against you as they aim to paralyze you with Try-Harder Living.

Perfectionism

“I’m always trying harder to look good enough.”



A quick question to ask yourself if you suspect you’re getting hammered by Perfectionism is *Am I obsessed with getting certain results?* If your answer is yes, Perfectionism is the likely culprit. If you listen closely, you can hear him yelling, “That’s not good enough! Try harder!”

Perfectionism Defined

When we asked our blog readers and Facebook friends to tell us what they thought about Perfectionism, one woman said, “If ‘perfectionism’ means striving for a higher standard than mediocrity, then I don’t think it’s a problem!” Another suggested, “I think the current generation of young women could use a good dose of ‘perfectionism.’ Too many of them are like ‘whatever’ about everything!”

Let’s agree right up front that when we use the term Perfectionism, we are *not* referring to

- conscientiousness
- becoming more like Christ
- a commitment to excellence

In her devotional *Prayers for a Woman’s Soul*, Julie Gilles separates excellence from Perfectionism:

Lofty standards and a desire to always get it right may seem like noble goals, but they only set us up for intense pressure, frustration, and disappointment. It’s not that we shouldn’t strive for excellence, but we need to understand

the difference between pursuing excellence and pursuing perfection. True excellence is simply doing our very best—perfectionism demands a flawless performance at all times.¹

Bill Gaultiere of *Soul Shepherding* calls Perfectionism “a manifestation of anxiety, straining to be ideal or to have an ideal experience of some kind. The perfectionists of the Bible are the Pharisees. Perfectionism goes with legalism, pride, and judgmentalism.”²

For our purposes, we’re going to borrow Brené Brown’s definition of Perfectionism: “Perfectionism is a self-destructive and addictive belief system that fuels this primary thought: ‘If I look perfect, and do everything perfectly, I can avoid or minimize the painful feelings of shame, judgment, and blame.’”³

Perfectionism is characterized by relentless criticism of self and others.

Perfectionism in Action

Two decades ago, while taking a graduate literature course, I (Cheri) signed up to give an in-class presentation and bring snacks on the same day. You might think I was simply being efficient, but the truth is I was being driven by Perfectionism. I’d given birth to my son only a couple of months earlier. Our lives had been a hodgepodge of NICU visits, car trouble, nursing issues, and sleeplessness ever since.

In addition to preparing my twenty-minute presentation for class, I decided to make snacks that matched my topic: the symbolism of the hand-shaped birthmark in one of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s short stories. I made three different types of tea sandwiches, all cut with a hand-shaped cookie cutter.

But that still wasn’t enough. The week before my presentation, I spent every spare moment sewing myself a new dress and jacket to wear to class. (The jacket had piping trim. If you sew, you know I was insane. If you don’t sew, trust me: I was insane.)

The sandwiches did look amazing. Everyone burst out with exclamations of, “No way!” and “Wow!” when I unveiled them. And my outfit was stunning. My professor kept gushing about it, especially when I casually let slip that I’d “sewn it myself last week.”

Right about now you may be wondering, “And this was bad because...?”

Yes, this was bad. Very bad. Because I did none of this out of love. I felt no joy. I sewed every stitch and cut every bread slice because I felt like I, on my own, was completely inadequate. My trying harder and even harder and still harder was motivated by my desperation for my presentation to be “good enough.”

I was on the verge of exhaustion during those months. Yet, I devoted hours to sewing a new outfit and making fancy sandwiches—hours I could have invested in catching up on sleep, enjoying my husband, being present for my children.

Instead, I robbed us all of my time, energy, and availability. For what great purpose? To complete two unnecessary projects above-and-beyond. Two projects that ultimately did not matter. In fact, they were counter-productive. I ended up alienating myself from my classmates because they found me intimidating. In my efforts to impress, I unknowingly set the bar so high, nobody felt they could come close—to my achievements or to me.

That dress and those sandwiches are long gone. But my memory of fatigue and desperation during Jonathon’s first year still lingers. As does my recall of how lonely I was; nobody would come close, and I couldn’t figure out why.

Contrast my striving with the skilled workmanship of a craftsman we met last summer. In celebration of our twenty-fifth wedding anniversary, Daniel and I spent a week in Ashland, Oregon, at a beautiful little studio called the Art-Y Cottage. It was filled with the most exquisite woodwork either of us has ever seen. Every corner was a precise 90-degree angle. The drawers and cabinet doors were in perfect alignment; they opened and closed with absolute precision.

We spent an hour in Tom Saydah’s workshop, keenly aware that we were in the presence of a skilled workman who loved his craft. His various workspaces were thoughtfully laid out. As we walked through, he picked up pieces of wood, caressing them affectionately. He handed them to us as if he were showing off his babies. Tom told us the type of wood, where he’d purchased it, and his plans for it.

Yes, he was “a perfectionist,” but he was not driven by the bully of Perfectionism.

Everything in his workshop was intentionally set up in service of his gift, his offering, his skill. We sensed no fear in the air, no frantic need for our approval. He didn’t do great work *so that* he would be a skilled craftsman—he did great work *because* he was a skilled craftsman.

How Others Perceive Perfectionism

Of the three hundred women who responded to our “Women Trying to Measure Up” survey, 70 percent considered themselves perfectionistic toward others, themselves, or both. As I read through their comments, I kept thinking, *How did she get inside my brain?*

Which of these sound familiar to you?

Perfectionism in Marriage

“It’s hard for me to go with the flow. And I know that drives my husband crazy.”

“I feel perpetual disappointment and discontent with the things my husband does for the family because I feel they aren’t done right. I try very hard not to nag or demean his actions, but even when I succeed in keeping quiet, those thoughts are still there, bubbling under the surface.”

Perfectionism in Parenting

“I carried my perfectionistic upbringing over to my own children and would spend hours yelling at my four- and five-year-olds, ‘HOW HARD IS IT TO PUT YOUR HOT WHEEL CARS IN THE BUCKET LABELED HOT WHEELS, LEGOS IN THE LEGO BUCKET, ARMY MEN IN THE ARMY BUCKET!’ I am so embarrassed about that now. I missed so much of my kids being little because I was trying to live up to the perfectionistic standards that were ingrained in me.”

Perfectionism in Relationships

“I have to be the person to do everything right, without help from others. I can’t show that I’m weak in aspects of my life

that others might see. For example, when my father passed away, I had to organize the funeral and help my mother and sister cope, as well as be strong for my children. I felt that if they saw me cry, they would perceive me as being weak and a failure. As a result of living my life this way, I think people see me as detached and unfriendly.”

Perfectionism at Home

“I insist on a perfect house with a perfect yard. I end up being not just disappointed but angry because, after all, I’m doing it for them!”

Perfectionism at Work

“I see Perfectionism a lot at work. One person takes over and orders everyone else around because she feels that she is the only one who can do it right. We are supposed to be a team, but these people don’t work well as part of a team. As a result, there are a lot of hurt feelings, a lot of bitterness, and people become more reluctant to work together to accomplish things.”

Perfectionism with Self

“I expect that every project I begin, every conversation, every opportunity, must be just right and achieve all possible potential. It’s exhausting, and the demands I put on myself cause me to be disappointed most of the time.”

“I find myself wanting to do things right and overachieving at least partly for the wrong motives: wanting people to notice and think well of me. I’m looking for validation and feelings of worth.”

“It was how I made sense of being sexually assaulted as a child—if I behaved better, then I wouldn’t get hurt. So I worked hard at getting straight *As*, a great job that eventually led to a very senior position in a global public company. But

it was exhausting. And I still got hurt. However, the world does reward perfectionism. Even if you don't get to perfect, you are an overachiever and companies like overachievers.”

It's so easy to wear our Perfectionist badges with pride, forgetting the dangers of getting all buddy-buddy with this bully. But Perfectionism is patient and sly. He'll wait until you're giving your best effort and then shove you over the line to obsessing about results.

Comedian Ken Davis offers this caution: “A perfectionist is not someone who is perfect; it is someone who is miserable, because they can't get it right.”⁴ Know all too well what that kind of misery feels like? We do too. And we want you to know how good it feels to send this bully packing.

People-Pleasing

“I’m always trying harder to seem nice enough.”



Am I obsessed with getting specific reactions? is the question that will help you catch People-Pleasing meddling in your affairs. This bully assures you that he has your best interests at heart and is just trying to help. “They don’t look happy yet. Try harder!” is his motivational mantra.

People-Pleasing Defined

People-Pleasing is not the same thing as love; in fact, in many cases it is a major cause of the erosion of love. Nor is People-Pleasing the same thing as care, compassion, sympathy, or empathy. People-Pleasing involves

- putting the wants of others above one’s own needs
- avoiding conflict
- basing self-worth on others’ reactions
- feeling trapped, often to the point of martyrdom, by others’ needs
- and keeping silent about one’s own needs, wants, and opinions

In *What Happens When Women Say Yes to God*, Lysa TerKeurst spells out three reasons we people-please:

Fearful motives: “They might not like me if I say no.”

Skewed intentions: “If I do this for them, will they be more likely to do that for me?”