

Emotional Perfectionism – A hidden trigger of anxiety

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When we feel anxious, panicky, or constantly worried, we are responding to a sense of fear that something awful is about to happen. Once you begin to feel anxious, your negative thoughts and feelings snowball and lead to a vicious circle. Negative thoughts fuel anxiety, and the anxiety makes us feel worse, triggering more negative thoughts. We end up feeling tense, tired, and even a bit hopeless that we may never get off this frightening treadmill.

If you are faced with a direct threat, such as a fear that MS will cause you to lose your job your social life, your independence or your dignity, it is not too difficult to identify the source of your fear. If you believe that your illness will have terrible consequences, then that belief will trigger genuine and understandable fears of financial hardship.

How we develop Emotional Perfectionism?

However, a more subtle source of anxiety is what we call Emotional Perfectionism. We usually think of a perfectionist as someone who aims to achieve impossible standards at work, home, or perhaps their appearance. But emotional perfectionism involves applying impossible standards to how we actually feel (*'I should be able to control my emotions'*), and when a person has MS, such standards are not only extremely unfair, but also unhelpful.

When Jacqui was growing up, her mother encouraged her to keep her feelings to herself, and to put on a bright front, regardless of how she really felt. There were relationship problems between Jacqui's parents, but their way of handling it was to play down these difficulties and put on a positive show. As an adult, when Jacqui was diagnosed with MS, she did not acknowledge her distress following her diagnosis, and believed that stoicism was the best way forward. Over time, however, this led her to be very self-critical if she did feel low or tearful, and she told herself 'I've got to be strong, not pathetic'. This created a degree of tension in Jacqui, as the effort

of holding back her feelings was tiring and gave her headaches. It also led to a sense of distance between her and her family, as she refused to talk about her MS.

Emotional Perfectionism and Thinking Styles

Emotional perfectionism tends to be linked to thoughts which are associated with self-criticism, and a lack of self-compassion. Examples of this include:

‘I should never feel sad/scared/inadequate/vulnerable’

‘I must not let them see how I really feel - they will think I’m losing my grip’

‘I need to stay positive because I don’t want to upset my family. They need to believe that I am coping’

These thoughts reflect an *unrealistic aim of controlling and suppressing our deeper feelings*, and a denial of our natural, human, emotions. Over time, they can lead to emotional distancing, out of fear that if we ‘let go’ then we will be overwhelmed by sadness.

Dealing with Emotional Perfectionism

In fact, acknowledging and expressing your feelings is an essential part of coming to terms with a longterm condition, and enables you to adjust to the ups and downs that MS present. In addition, it opens doors to support from others who may be struggling to know how to help.

Feeling emotions is a healthy and normal part of our humanity. While suppressing our emotions may be helpful in certain specific situations, it will not help you move forward with your longterm MS symptoms, but may actually contribute to low mood. Perfectionism sets an impossible bar for us to aim for, and as we fail to meet such unrealistic standards, we are left feeling a sense of failure and worthlessness.

Talking to your relatives and friends, or your MS nurse or therapist, can be a valuable and productive means of helping yourself accept and manage how you deal with your MS symptoms.

