

The vicious circle of high academic achievement

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For some teenagers, the new school year means reuniting with their friends. For others, it means an increase in anxiety and in the pressure to succeed and get good grades. According to researchers at the University

of Ottawa, this can lead to perfectionism and, in turn, to anxiety and depression.

In their study of 604 Canadian teens followed yearly from Grade 7 to Grade 12, uOttawa researchers Shari Endleman, Heather Brittain, and Tracy Vaillancourt examined the temporal ordering of academic achievement and perfectionism. According to them, perfectionism is a maladaptive personality style characterized by self-imposed [high standards](#) that are consistently linked to the development of anxiety and depression.

"High academic achievement is lauded and celebrated across the globe," said lead author Dr. Tracy Vaillancourt. "Doing well in [high school](#) is linked to future academic opportunities like attending university, which increases job prospects and earnings. There is a lot on the line and teens are feeling the pressure. What is not clear, however, is whether there is a dark side to high [academic achievement](#), and this was the focus of our research."

The results showed that teens who do well academically find themselves caught in a vicious cycle of [achievement](#) and perfectionism. Specifically, at each point assessed, higher grades led to higher perfectionism. For example, grade 7 high GPA ➡ grade 8 higher perfectionism ➡ grade 9 higher GPA, etc.

"Although achieving good [grades](#) seems fine on the surface, its link to increased perfectionism is worrisome because high [perfectionism](#) often leads to higher academic burnout, lower school engagement, and lower semester GPA in the long run, as well as increased [anxiety](#) and depression," added Dr. Vaillancourt.

The research for this study is still ongoing. However, results can be found in the article "The Longitudinal Associations between

Perfectionism and Academic Achievement across Adolescence"
published in the *International Journal of Behavioral Development*.

Dr. Vaillancourt has some advice to give.

"As much as it feels good to do well and be praised for it, youth need to accept that achieving perfection is not possible. It is important for them to understand that everyone has strengths and weaknesses, and that is what makes us human."

"With the return to [school](#), it is particularly important for parents and educators to foster environments of self-acceptance. Help youth understand that people can be accepted for who they are, even if they are still working toward certain goals."

"Avoid putting pressure on youth to be perfect and instead acknowledge their successes, even the little ones, as well as their effort. Also, work to counteract 'all-or-nothing' thinking (i.e., standards are either met or not met). Not attaining perfection does not mean one is a failure."

More information: Shari Endleman et al, The longitudinal associations between perfectionism and academic achievement across adolescence, *International Journal of Behavioral Development* (2021).
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