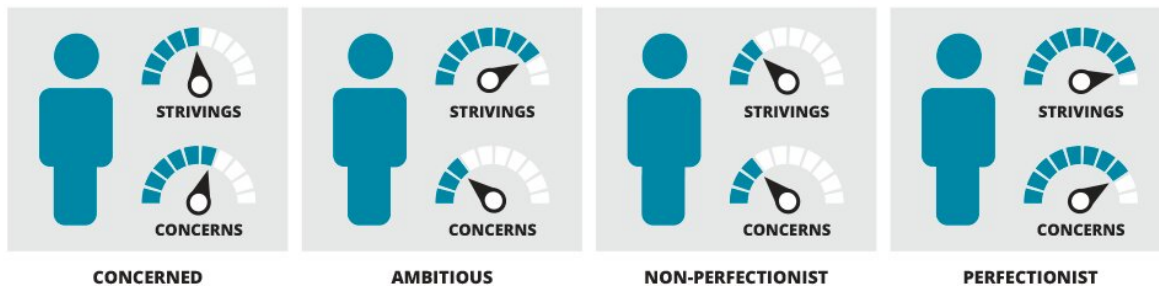


When nothing is enough: Constant dissatisfaction burns out the perfectionist student

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The four perfectionism profiles of students



Credit: University of Eastern Finland

Professor of Educational Sciences Markku Niemivirta is excited. He gives unreserved praise to his MoLeWe research collective, with which he has had the opportunity to explore important current themes from a variety of perspectives. Recently, the multidisciplinary collective has studied perfectionism among upper secondary school and university students and its connection to well-being, as well as the link between students' experiences of the pandemic and remote learning with their well-being.

"Study of perfectionism is becoming increasingly important. For example, students today are going through upper secondary school in a situation where performance pressures and coping are affected by both the entrance exam reform and a global pandemic. On their own, both have significantly transformed students' lives."

The situation is precarious particularly for students prone to perfectionism, who tire out and feel a sense of inadequacy even in normal study situations.

"In Finland, studies on perfectionism in young people are few and far between and to our knowledge, its connection with [student](#) well-being has never been studied previously in Finland. In other words, there is clear need for this kind of research."

Data obtained from the studies can be used when considering the structural factors that increase stress among students and developing student welfare services.

The four perfectionism profiles of students

Perfectionists are students who place extremely demanding personal goals on themselves while remaining very dissatisfied with their own performance at the same time.

Students who are considered ambitious also set their [personal goals](#) high, but they are not characterized by the constant dissatisfaction, concern and sense of inadequacy about their efforts typical of perfectionists.

"Ambitious students are also not exhausted by their studies in the same way as perfectionists."

In addition to these two groups, studies have also identified concerned

and non-perfectionist students.

"Concerned students have a more cynical attitude towards their studies than other students and experience as much fatigue and inadequacy as perfectionists, even as their goals are set much lower."

A surprisingly large share of upper secondary school students fall into the concerned group.

Non-perfectionist students, in turn, are characterized by both low perfectionist aspirations and few concerns.

"As many as one in six upper secondary school students may have perfectionist tendencies, while the ambitious and non-perfectionist groups each represent about one in four students and the concerned group as many as one in three," says Niemivirta.

Among university students, the distributions were more even in some ways. Compared to upper secondary school students, the proportion of students with perfectionist and ambitious tendencies was higher, while concerned students were less common.

"Based on the study, it cannot be said that perfectionism has increased during the pandemic, regardless of any increased stress caused by remote learning. About 60 percent of university students found [remote learning](#) and independent study mentally demanding, while just over one in three have not."

According to Niemivirta, the share of students affected by the situation reached its peak during the autumn of the pandemic's first year and has since returned to levels at the start of the pandemic.

External expectations also often at play

Niemivirta tells that while ambitious study goals are not in and of themselves harmful, dissatisfaction and a worry about one's own inadequacy are the factors that cause stress and exhaustion in perfectionists.

"It seems that external expectations are also often at play in the background. For example, parents' high expectations are often reflected in the student in the form of ambitious goals and a greater sense of concern. This puts pressure on the student to achieve something great."

Sensitivity to punishment can also influence how perfectionist tendencies are formed. Sensitivity to punishment means a person's susceptibility to experience and interpret various threats in their environment.

"Sensitivity to positive social feedback, such as praise or other attention, also seems to be linked to dissatisfaction with one's own achievements."

In other words, those prone to perfectionism often place great importance on "what others think of me."

An encouraging atmosphere permits mistakes

Niemivirta considers the results of the study extremely important even though they alone do not offer a ready guide on how schools and universities should deal with students with perfectionist tendencies, for example.

"It is essential that teachers understand and encounter the differences between learners. Differences in temperament, motivation and enthusiasm are also strongly linked to learning. Understanding these underlying factors already helps teachers encourage studying and the joy

of learning in the classroom."

It is also clear from previous studies that the risks of boredom, exhaustion and even depression are higher among performance-focused students.

"For this reason, perfectionists in particular are at risk of exhaustion. Our message as researchers to schools and especially upper secondary schools is that the emphasis on performance should take a back seat."

Instead of focusing on performance, it should be impressed on students that they can always take joy in their achievements and accept failures without self-blame.

"Students are better off in an encouraging learning environment where mistakes are permitted. Naturally, adequate student counseling and welfare services that support the well-being of students are also important."

Distance learning not the only reason behind student exhaustion

Recently, [public debate](#) has revolved around the excessive stress and feelings of exclusion experienced by university students. According to Niemivirta, the discussion has partly veered off on the wrong path.

"The debate is pretty heated at the moment, and [distance learning](#) is universally considered the main cause of student exhaustion. However, while our study shows that just over 40 percent of university students feel exhausted, more than one in three say they consider distance learning a positive thing."

In other words, students' experiences of distance learning are extremely divided. Only a small minority of students has no clear opinion on distance learning.

"For this reason, it is unfortunate that public debate is fairly lopsided right now. We are given the impression that as of this moment, all [university students](#) are stressed and depressed because of distance learning."

Niemivirta points out that in any case, not all exhaustion is due to distance learning, but that certain trends that cause stress were visible already before the pandemic.

"Of course, the pandemic has increased stress on top of any existing problems, and it is not my intention to downplay its impacts. Still, I hope that as we gradually return to normal, certain things won't go back to the way they were."

Distance learning has been proven to have many positive aspects, and there are students who wish to study remotely at least partly even after the pandemic.

"The better we understand the factors behind exhaustion and stress, the better we are able to distinguish between the positives and negatives of distance learning. I hope we will be able to learn from this period of time and retain its positive aspects as an alternative in the future."

Provided by University of Eastern Finland

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