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ENG 385

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Perfecting the Art of Imperfection

Where It All Started

Feeling the need to be perfect was always something that was second nature to me, almost as if there were no other way to live. After all, how could I ever grasp someone's attention if I was average? The thought of that was impossible. Throughout my whole life, I never considered that there was an in between. Just because I wasn't perfect did not mean I was average: it meant I was human. Being able to acknowledge my mistakes, learn from them, and accept them, were the three steps I wish I had applied to my life early on; though it wasn't until this class where I realized: I needed to change my habits. This, in fact, was not something that was second nature, third nature, or maybe even fourth, because I was so fixated on perfecting the imperfect habits I had grown accustomed to out of fear of change. Little did I know that changing my ways was what would lead me into becoming not only more knowledgeable, but more self aware of the day to day routines that stunted my growth. Sticking to comfort was not the way to live, or the way to learn. This mindset is what ultimately pushed me to make this change.

Passionate or Perfectionist?

Something I can consider myself well at is my job, which is being an EMT. The process for me started in 9th grade when I had no idea what I wanted to do with my life. I didn't know what I was good at, and I wanted to find something that made me feel passionate. Following this, I attended a college and career fair where I was introduced to FDNY. I enrolled in the explorer program and at least once a month, we would attend the EMS academy or the Rock (fire training). I instantly fell in love with both, which is when I realized, this is what I was meant to do.

The process of being an EMT is lengthy if you want to join the fire department. I first had to get accepted by FDNY to take my state classes. At the time, these state classes were only offered to students who attended the FDNY high school, but because I had been in the explorers program for so long, I was accepted. Part of the explorers program was being able to attend week long boot camps that really focused on leadership, group work, and determination, which are key skills needed when working as an EMT, firefighter, or any position in the department. These boot camps were strenuous, but overall taught us all and allowed us to recognize the importance of adapting to an environment that wasn't comfortable. My participation in two of these boot camps were also helpful when I had discussed being a part of the academy with the assistant commissioner. The year before I had become an EMT, the age limit got lowered to 17, which worked in my favor as well because I have a late birthday. The process wasn't normal because like everything, it was affected by Covid-19. Thankfully though, they found ways to allow classes to start, and for the program to move smoothly .

Two weeks before we started, we got briefed on what the academy would be like, as well as measurements for our uniforms. We had also been given a textbook about a year before which covered every single piece of medical information that you needed to know in order to pass these

classes. Since I did not attend the FDNY high school like everyone else who was going to be in the academy, I was motivated to work extra hard to keep up with what they were learning, but on my own time. Every day after school, I would come home and read for hours. I would take notes on the minor things, trying to memorize as much as I could. The textbook we were given was well over 1,000 pages, so I was extremely overwhelmed. I was so scared of being behind. I am the type of person that always wants to be ahead, whether it's in class, or just in life. I put a lot of pressure on myself to do good, so jumping into something I felt beyond less than prepared for scared me. I wound up overdoing myself, and would start having panic attacks because I didn't think it was possible for me to be at the same level as everyone. I had no type of guide, so I just crammed as much information into my head as I could and hoped for the best when classes started. When I finally started the academy, I just kept pushing myself as hard as I could. Though I was always hard on myself, I started seeing my results reflect the hours of studying I was doing. I would be in the academy from 7:00am-3:00pm, and would study from 4:00pm, until I fell asleep. The course was fast paced, starting in the beginning of August, and ending at the end of September. We had quizzes everyday and it was extremely challenging, but I just had to think of the end goal and remember that this was where I was supposed to be. Once we all finished classes at the academy, we had to take our state test. After I had passed, I began applying to different private ambulance companies and started working about two weeks later. Looking back, I see that I was so focused on being ahead and moving fast that I didn't allow myself to appreciate how much work I had done over the past months, and jumped right into work. I didn't allow any time to myself, continuing the cycle of feeling like I had to be number one.

As much as they teach you while you're in the academy, you learn most of what you need to know when you're out in the field. You're not taught how to have patience, how to deal

with patients screaming at you, or how to handle the fact that some days all you want to do is quit. But at the end of the day, you learn how to deal with these different types of challenges and it all begins to feel normal. As far as medical care is concerned, sometimes I'll go over my notes and review certain things that I have never seen so that I am ready for it when the time comes. On an average week, I would work about 50 hours, but now that I am in school, I've become more focused on school until I start the academy once again to become an EMT with the fire department.

Reading Connection: The Upward Spiral

The author of this reading discusses that accepting that you're not perfect is what will allow you to become more positive and accepting of yourself. Habits are created by practicing, so making this part of a regular routine and staying consistent by keeping a set schedule will help you stay focused on your goal. Your brain also plays a large role in creating habits, so making sure that you develop a mindset where you focus on accomplishing each small step at a time will make it easier for you to stay motivated throughout your process.

This chapter acts as a reminder to people that although their brain is an important factor when it comes to creating and following habits, it is also crucial that you are able to accept that you are not going to be perfect when starting out with something new, or possibly ever. It is also explained that even though it may be hard to be consistent with a new goal or habit, that you need to remember not to give up because in the end, that is only training your brain that it is okay to quit. The paragraph starts off with the saying, "If you're making mistakes, it means you're out

there doing something”,¹ which can be used as a reminder when someone feels like things are too hard and they aren't doing good enough. It is better to put in the work, make mistakes, and learn from it, than not give it a chance at all.

As I try to apply not being perfect to my life, I feel like it always finds a way to slip into what I'm doing. As I always express, I am very hard on myself and always feel the need to get a 100% on everything that I do. When I don't get the best grade I can, I mentally give up on myself. I will still turn in my assignments and put in effort, but mentally I've checked out. I need to start focusing on the fact that I am always trying really hard, but instead of striving for perfection, I am going to strive for improvement which I think is more realistic because at the end of the day, there is always something that I can fix. Accepting that this isn't necessarily a bad thing is also something I need to overcome and adapt to.

Breaking the Cycle

Being able to understand that I was stuck in this infinite loop of feeling the need to perfect everything I do versus actually taking the steps to change it and feel good about myself were two totally different objectives. In every aspect of my life, I had the same plan: be ahead. If I ever allowed myself to fall behind, I was strongly convinced that it was the end of the world. I couldn't understand how I would be at a good standing if I didn't worry myself to the point of having anxiety attacks at the thought of any uncertainty. It became routine for me to worry, and maybe in some sort of way this chaos is what caused me to thrive; though nonetheless, it was not healthy. I had decided at this point in the course that I needed to develop new habits that would

¹ Alex Korb. (n.d.). Chapter 8: Develop Positive Habits . In *The Upward Spiral: Using Neuroscience to Reverse the Course of Depression, One Small Change at a Time* (pp. 128–130). essay.

allow me to have some sort of structure, and would prevent me stressing over what was to come next.

In the week where I focused on creating new habits and developing schedules that would hopefully calm my worries, I created a day for my boyfriend's birthday that consisted of all of the things he enjoyed. In hindsight, I see that even though I thought I was developing new and positive habits, I was really just seeping into my original ways. The second a part of the plan went wrong, I felt like I lost myself. I became irrationally upset given how minor the inconvenience was, and resorted to blaming myself. Over such a small change, I was ready to switch up on myself and take all the blame for something I had absolutely no control over. This was when I realized that I needed to do more than just say I would change; I would have to start applying the lessons that I wanted to live by in my everyday life. It was easy for me to say I wanted to create new habits and stick with a plan, but it's the way I acted in the heat of the moment that really demonstrated how much room I had for improvements.

Reading Connection: Atomic Habits

Recognizing the habits that we start to practice and how this is able to impact us for a long time is important to acknowledge because we become so accustomed to our own lifestyles that sometimes it is hard to change the way we live, simply because it's comfortable for us. It is important to understand in the beginning of the process of forming your new self that it is sometimes just as hard to drop a habit as it is to create a new one. The reading talks about how when you want to break a habit, you have to go beyond thinking about the immediate result; it can take something as small as changing the way you word things. If you really want to change,

you need to get into a new mindset: you are changing not only your habits, but your identity. You have to become accustomed to the fact that you are no longer participating in something that has been so regular to you for so long.²

Habits aren't something that are simple to develop or understand because if you are changing a habit that has been a part of your life for so long, you can begin to have something similar to an identity crisis. You are now contradicting your old beliefs or changing the image of yourself which can be scary. The author focuses on how important it is when you go on to changing or dropping a habit, you don't focus on seeing results right away because it can lead to lack of motivation if you aren't seeing results as fast as you thought you would. He discusses that there are three layers of behavior change: outcomes, processes, and identity. The first layer is telling the reader not to focus on the end goal but instead, take it step by step. The second layer discusses that implementing a new routine allows you to slowly develop this change that you are aiming for, and the third layer, which is accepting that you are changing your beliefs. This not only means the way the world views you, but the way that you view yourself.

I've never thought of dropping a habit as something that is really tied into my identity, but instead as something that I just naturally do. Though, when I take away this idea of being perfectionist, it changes a lot of my life and the way I perceive myself and situations that surround me. I feel like being a perfectionist has become a part of who I am, whether others are able to tell or not. Even though it may be more of a personal/mental thing, slowly getting rid of this mindset will change the way that I act around others. Another thing that I found interesting was not focusing so much on the end goal. A lot of the time, we are taught that focusing on this is what will push us to keep going or to stay motivated, but it can actually be detrimental

² Clear, J. (2018). *Atomic habits: An Easy & Proven Way to Build Good Habits & Break Bad Ones*.

because we start to expect certain results in a limited amount of time and when that doesn't happen, we are discouraged. Taking things one day and one step at a time is something that I want to try, but is something I know I will also struggle with since I like to plan ahead and focus on the future. As hard as it may be, it will allow me to see things from a different perspective, and may actually help me in the end.

Ditching the Schedule

After taking into consideration that the majority of the time I get overwhelmed is because I lose control over a situation, I realized that maybe it would be good for me to stray away from the idea of having a specific routine. For others, having a routine allows for balance. Though I think for me, having a routine only meant that if something were to go wrong, I wouldn't know what to do; sort of like becoming codependent. I would rely heavily on a schedule and figured that if I had things planned to a T, it should run smoothly. Though, more times than not, I have been proved wrong by the uncertainties that life has to offer. Given this knowledge and my past experiences, I realized that maybe what I needed to do was ditch the schedule. The thought of doing this sounded absurd to me at the time because if scheduling was what kept things neat and organized, why would I stray away from it?

The answer to this question was actually quite simple if I looked past societal norms: to make myself uncomfortable. Being on a consistent schedule allowed me to only look at things in black and white. As long as the schedule was there, I didn't have to think further. This didn't work for me because now if something were to go wrong, what would I do? Panic. If I had given myself more lenience with what I would do each day, I wouldn't have to stress out over a part of

my schedule not working out. I needed to give myself room to branch out and do something out of the ordinary once in a while, so that's what I did.

Because I was so used to planning everything that I do, I decided to try something spontaneous. I was uncomfortable with the idea, and overthought the basics: What if I don't enjoy myself? What if I want to go home? What if something goes wrong? As discomfoting as this was, I knew it was what I needed if I wanted to improve my habits. I had to be exposed to a new environment with new people. And if I didn't like it? Well at least I strayed away from what I was used to, and know what to avoid next time. You can't grow if you refuse to change. I ended up going to a club with one of my friends, and had one of the best nights that I've experienced in a while. As much as I have anxiety, I'm also extremely extroverted; these two don't typically pair well, but because I decided that I wanted to change, I think I made a seemingly large step in the right direction.

Reading Connection: Becoming a Self Regulated Learner

The author discusses the idea of self regulation, and how it is something that should not only be taught to students in school, but important for everybody to learn. He explains that learning is something that used to be seen as discipline, and that if you were unable to follow along with the standards, you were looked at as "less intelligent". In the 80s-90s, researchers began to understand "metacognition" and "social cognitive", which focused on students' personal limitations and how a child's environment had an impact on how they comprehended certain things.³ Later, it was found that students who wrote down their goals for the week, for example, had a higher likelihood of not only completing and excelling in those tasks, but completing other

³ Zimmerman , B. (2002). In *Becoming a Self-Regulated Learner: An Overview* (pp. 64–70).

ones as well. He describes self regulation as, “not a mental ability or an academic performance skill; rather it is the self-directive process by which learners transform their mental abilities into academic skill”.⁴ Self-regulation is something he talks about as going past education and schooling, but something that is required in order to complete life tasks such as learning a new skill, or adapting to a new position at a job.

In order to enable yourself to complete new tasks, it is important to understand how to create a system that allows you to stay motivated. Making a goal for yourself is what will allow you to see the areas that you need to work on, along with the areas you strive in. Staying motivated may be hard when you first set your goals, so it is important to have some type of drive that pushes you to stick to your plans that will eventually lead to greater growth. This reading strongly emphasizes the importance of documenting your own progress, as it allows you to recognize what system works best for you. He mentions how self control and self observation is critical in this process as it allows the reader to comprehend that going about a new task isn't as simple as saying you're going to do it and sticking with it. Being aware of your surroundings and acknowledging how certain scenarios play out with the use of different techniques also allows for advancement and provides a broader understanding of how the self regulation process works

This reading applied a lot to what was being covered in class at the time because it discussed how writing down your goals and progress helps you stick to or get into a routine to benefit you in areas where you are struggling. I've personally noticed that writing what I am

⁴ Zimmerman , B. (2002). In *Becoming a Self-Regulated Learner: An Overview* (pp. 64–70).

doing day by day shows me what works for me, and what doesn't. If I notice my mood is happier when I complete a certain task, I will try to incorporate that more into my daily schedule. If I see that an action I am doing isn't benefiting me, I'll try and break that habit even though it is hard to change your routine when you feel comfortable. Aside from the part of the text where it talks about writing down your goals or progress, I related to the short example that the text began with. It talked about a girl who got frustrated when it came to something she didn't understand and instead of asking for help, she shut down in fear of looking "stupid". This is something that I found myself doing a lot in highschool, and I wanted to change it once I got to college. For example, in my first semester I had to take a math class. Was I happy about it? Absolutely not, because math has always been my worst subject. But now that I look at it, was it my worst subject because I genuinely wasn't good at it, or was I just mad that this skill didn't come to me naturally? So when I started my first semester, I promised myself that I would go into it with a different attitude. I asked questions when I needed to, and stayed on top of that class a little extra than my others because if I slacked off once, I was worried I would slip back into my old habits. Changing my mindset and goals allowed me to finish that class with an A. I was extremely proud of myself and I think that moment allowed me to see that even if there is something that I struggle with, it doesn't mean that I'm "dumb"; it just means I have to put in a little extra effort to see the results that I wanted.

Digging Deeper

This drive that I have to constantly perfect everything I do didn't start recently; it is something I have dealt with since I was young. For 15 years, I lived with my mom, dad, and brother. My brother was diagnosed with autism when he was two, and on top of this, I had an emotionally absent father. Because of the lack of one parent, and the need for my mom to

excessively tend to my brother's needs, I felt like I was often left in the dark. I knew that I was loved, but being that young, I couldn't understand why he received all of this extra attention. As a result, I felt the need to go above and beyond in everything I did; in school, sports, and any other extra curriculars. It was when I didn't receive an abundance of attention in these areas that I would become extremely anxious. I wanted to know what I was doing wrong. I wanted to know how I could be the best. It didn't make sense to me. What did everyone else have that I not so clearly (at least to myself), lacked?

Reading connection: How Autism Shapes Sibling Relationships

This article discusses how having a sibling with a disability impacts not only the relationships that their other siblings may have with them, but the way in which the relationship differs with the parent and the child who does not have the disability. The reading starts off by discussing how having an autistic sibling can be hard, as their brother or sister often feels the need to be overprotective when it comes to their emotions or success.⁵ This starts at a very young age, and typically carries on throughout their life because that is what they grew up knowing. Research has shown that having a close relationship with a sibling leads to better mental health in the future, but when a sibling has autism or another disability, it is often hard for them to express their emotions and makes this bond harder to form. Studies also show that “typical children with autistic siblings are more prone to anxiety and depression, on average, than their

⁵ Laber-Warren, E. (2020, July 24). *How autism shapes sibling relationships*. Spectrum. Retrieved February 28, 2022, from <https://www.spectrumnews.org/features/deep-dive/how-autism-shapes-sibling-relationships/>

peers". This can take the form of low self esteem, poor view of disability, or general lack of optimism".⁶ The author also includes how because children with autism need extra attention the majority of the time, their sibling tends to get "overlooked" or appears to always "come in second".

The author writes this article to discuss the challenges that a child may face when having a sibling with a disability, more specifically, autism. There are different types of situations that each child may face, depending on the sibling. For example, the reading talked about a girl who received almost 100 notifications from her brother with autism while she was at work. As inconvenient as it was for her, she was appreciative instead because she included that there was a time where he couldn't talk at all. On the other hand, there is an example of a girl who has a sibling with autism and because of all the attention that she never received, her parents had no idea that she was dyslexic until the age of 12. These scenarios just go to show the different types of struggles that are faced when having a sibling with a disability.

I decided to use this article because the only way that I will be able to change mindset is if I am able to understand what led to it. When I was younger, my brother with autism was always the one who got the attention. He was always extremely loud, had constant outbursts, and had an extremely hard time interacting with others. He was always on medication, and would have different therapists coming to our house to try and find ways to keep him calm or teach him how to appropriately express his emotions. I remember one of the days that the therapist came, I asked my mom, "Why does he always have nice friends coming over and I'm not allowed to talk to them?". I was very young at the time, and obviously didn't understand what

⁶ Laber-Warren, E. (2020, July 24). *How autism shapes sibling relationships*. Spectrum. Retrieved February 28, 2022, from <https://www.spectrumnews.org/features/deep-dive/how-autism-shapes-sibling-relationships/>

was going on other than the fact that he received all the attention and I was kind of just there lingering in the background. Since I was little, I was always trying to grab the attention of other people and always looking for reassurance. I had an art teacher in kindergarten and at the end of every class, I would go up and ask her, “How did I do today? Did I do a good job?”. Now fast forward to the future, of course I was able to understand what autism was and why my brother needed the extra help, but I was still left hurt on the inside. Just because I understood it, didn’t mean the way I felt suddenly left. I still always had to go above and beyond to prove myself to anybody that would pay attention because I didn’t receive nearly as much as my brother when I was home. To this day, it is clearly something that I am still working on fixing within myself, even though it’s something I’ve been dealing with for the past 19 years. So, reading an article like this was comforting in a way, seeing that other people had similar stories as well, and that it’s not something I have to blame myself for feeling.

What Felt Like A Pause In My Progress

I had a rough week, which led to me feeling down. I was anxious, and started doubting myself and the progress that I was making. I knew how happy I was while doing something spontaneous, but I just couldn’t find the motivation to do so. It was hard for me because I had to accept that I may need days to take a break, and there is nothing wrong with that.

This is one of the things that I had to learn to accept during this process: things aren’t always going to move as smoothly as planned. I always had the feeling that if I wasn’t doing something productive, that I was being lazy or useless. Though I had to learn that everyone is different, and I can’t compare my lowest day to someone’s most productive one. I put a lot of stress on myself most days, so if my body was telling me that I needed a break, I needed to

listen. One of my biggest focuses in our last class was emotional burnout; though instead of just writing about it, I had to learn how I could apply this lesson to my life in order to avoid any unnecessary turbulence in my journey.

Reading connection: Developing a Growth Mindset

Dweck starts off her talk by discussing the concept of “not yet”, instead of completely shutting someone down for not understanding what they were learning right away. She discusses a fixed mindset, and growth mindset. When a person has a growth mindset, it allows them to understand the things that are difficult, and find a solution. When a person has a fixed mindset, they are unable to look past challenges in their way, and their brain activity slows down because they aren't pushing themselves to their fullest potential. Studies have shown that when students were asked to stick with something that they found really hard, they would become “rewarded”, as their neurons started to form stronger connections and allow the person to “become smarter”.⁷ This too, allows an increase in students' grades, for example. She quotes, “difficulty simply just means, not yet”.

When a person faces certain setbacks in their life, whether as a student or at a new job, it is often difficult to believe that things can get better and you often begin to doubt your own abilities both big and small. Because of this mindset that people tend to fall into, Dweck decided to run her own experiments and write a book that discusses how motivating people to do things that challenge them has a positive impact on their brain and overall lifestyle. She pushes the mindset that just because one struggles to do something, doesn't simply indicate that they are

⁷ *Developing a Growth Mindset with Carol Dweck* . (2014). *Youtube* . Retrieved March 13, 2022, from <https://youtu.be/hiiEeMN7vbQ>.

dumb; some people just need to take more time to work on a solution in a way that challenges their brain.

This video was just another reminder that even though some things may take longer to learn, it shouldn't be a reason to look down on yourself. Constantly building better habits will start to feel normal once you are able to look past the challenge and find a solution that works best for you. Being able to apply the, “not yet” mindset into my life can benefit me because oftentimes when I see I am not as far as I thought I should be or as I planned, I get frustrated and begin to not only doubt myself, but compare my abilities and progress to others. Instead, I need to use the abilities that I know I am strong in, and find a way to push myself to where I want to be. Challenges are going to be a part of every aspect in life, and although it is uncomfortable, it is crucial to understand that facing these will be the only way to grow. A specific area I can apply this to in my life is pushing to get myself in a better mental state. Sometimes when I see others happy and living their lives, I'll sit and wonder where I went wrong, and why I don't feel like that. On top of the fact that everyone has their own issues, I need to understand that it is okay to slowly progress, because slow progress is better than no progress at all.

Tuning Into My Old Self

Given how much I was struggling the previous week, I wanted to do something that was spontaneous but also something that I knew I enjoyed because I didn't want to be put off if I tried something new that I didn't like when I had just come back from a bad anxiety episode. I thought back to when life seemed the most simple: high school (in some ways). When I was in high school, at least at the beginning, I did not have a care in the world when it came to grades. I feel like this is a time in a teenagers life where they really feel like they're the sh*t; or at least I did. I

didn't care if I got bad scores, as long as I passed the class. I just wanted to have fun, and I did. Although looking back I see I was going sort of rouge at the time, I was enjoying every minute of it. I wanted to look back now and see, what exactly made me happy at this time? How did I go from having such a carefree attitude, to a whirlwind of anxious thoughts?

Though I still haven't found my answer to that last question, I did come up with a few of the activities I would take part in that would allow me to feel tranquil. The biggest thing on that list was watching the sunset. As I've discussed in past writings, this was my therapy. Bad day? Walk to the end of the block and watch the sunset. Fight with parent? Take a run to the end of the block and watch the sunset. Had a great day and wanted to end it off with a nice view? Sunset! You get the point, but I didn't; at least for a while. What stopped me from doing the thing that once made me the happiest? Life. I got busy and felt the need to prioritize school, work, and all of the other treasures life brings instead of my mental health. So given the rough week I had previous to this one, I felt watching the sunset was the best thing I could do for myself.

The Impact Writing Had On My Growth

I feel like for the past few years, I've really struggled with being able to find the difference between my own identity, versus the work that I do. I've let the job that I do and the student that I am define me as a person, instead of letting my creativity and passions do the talking. Given how much I struggle with this, I've never actually taken the time to work on these habits that I have, and I really feel like writing allowed me to visibly see the impact my actions were having on my life now that they were transcribed right in front of me. I now understand more than ever how feeling the need to be perfect only drives me in the opposite direction of my goals and that in order to get to where I want to be, I have to work on myself and acknowledge

that things are never going to be perfect. Writing has been an outlet in many ways, and sort of like a one on one therapy session with myself. I also enjoy the fact that I can go back to my old writing pieces and see how much I've grown in such a short period of time.

Conclusion

I walked into this class with the intention of being perfect; no exceptions. Little did I know, the whole purpose of this course would be focusing on the exact opposite. Acknowledging that I had to change myself was something that didn't seem possible because going into this, I couldn't understand why I would work towards being anything but the best. I learned how much of an impact stressing myself out was having on my mental health and the stunt it had on my progress because I refused to look anywhere but forward. Looking into the past, acknowledging the present, and foreseeing the future, allowed me to recognize what steps would be best for me moving forward. I had to accept that what once worked for me might not work now, and vice versa. There will always be room for change, even at this moment in time. Throughout this process, as much as I've changed my habits and adapted to new ideas, there will always be something else for me to try. This is a concept I've learned to accept in order to move in a direction of growth, and understanding how to create habits that will fulfill my needs in each phase of my life.