

Perfectly Healthy

Miles of self-help books rail against the tyranny of perfectionism. But is this trait getting an overly bad rap? Just ask Martha Stewart, whose insistence on the highest standards, no matter the chore—from running an empire to planting a bulb—may really be a healthy way for her to work through tough times, including the recent loss of her mother.

Some mental health experts still cling to the notion that perfectionism is a form of neurosis, but many now understand it can have positive aspects, says University of Michigan psychologist Edward C. Chang, PhD. While “maladaptive” or negative perfectionists turn that stress inward and use it as an excuse to give up, “adaptive” or positive perfectionists such as Stewart “use that stress as kind of a motivating or energizing factor to move toward their goals,” he says.

Other experts see a potential upside as well. Psychologists Joachim Stoeber, PhD, from the University of Kent in the United Kingdom and Kathleen Otto, PhD, from the University of Leipzig in Germany reviewed 35 studies of perfectionists and found a healthy benefit to perfectionism. Compared with less exacting people, perfectionists tend to be:

- ▶ More conscientious
- ▶ More satisfied with their lives
- ▶ More able to cope with changes and setbacks
- ▶ Less prone to depression or suicidal thoughts
- ▶ Extroverted rather than introverted
- ▶ Higher achievers



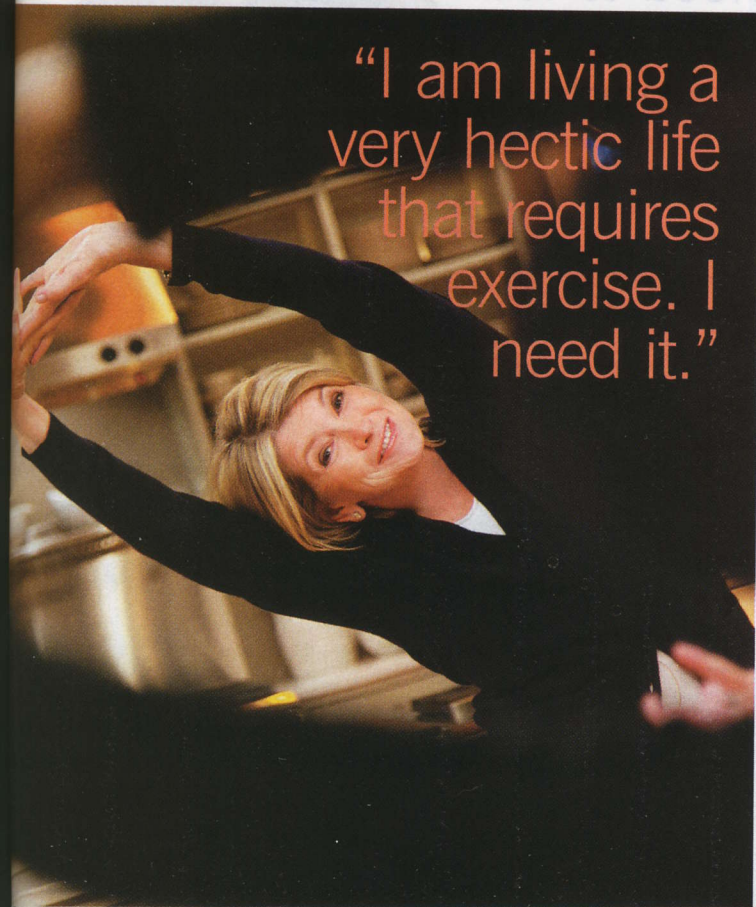
STEPHEN SWINTEK/GETTY IMAGES

But “perfect” can also be the enemy of “good,” caution psychologists. The need to be flawless in our own eyes or those of others can lead to stress, anxiety, depression, and even eating disorders such as anorexia nervosa and bulimia.

Taken to an extreme, it can even hurt your heart. “Maintaining high standards of perfectionism to that maladaptive form, where you have a lot of doubts about your actions, lots of concerns about your mistakes, can set you up for high levels of stress, and high levels of stress can lead to cardiac problems,” says Simon A. Rego, PsyD, associate director of psychology training at Montefiore Medical Center in New York City.

The goal is to find a perfect balance, say experts. But if you feel your exacting standards are doing you more harm than good, talk to your doctor.—Neil Osterweil

“I am living a very hectic life that requires exercise. I need it.”



“We wanted to create a place that feels good, that treats you nicely, that makes you think somebody cares about your experience there,” says Stewart.

Senior Care in America

Stewart’s right about the need for coordinated senior care, says Knight Steel, MD, a pioneer in geriatric medicine who now heads the division of geriatrics at Hackensack University Medical Center in New Jersey. We all could benefit from having our doctors under one roof—but the elderly have the most to gain from coordinated care. “There are issues related to aging per se, and then there are issues related to diseases and organ systems, so you need a cardiologist, a neurologist, a pulmonologist, and so on. It’s clearly best to have a place where you can be managed comprehensively, rather than having care fragmented at different locations and practices,” he says.

Stewart learned about this issue firsthand while helping care for her mother. “My mom went to four, five, six different doctors, and she wasn’t always totally open about what medications she was taking, or not taking,” she says.

The more medications a senior takes, and the more doctors prescribing them, the greater the opportunity for error—for example, prescribing medications that have dangerous interactions. More than half of fatal hospital medication errors involved seniors,