



Overcoming Perfectionism: Finding the Key to Balance and Self-Acceptance

By Ann Smith MS LMFT

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Anything worth doing is worth doing well. Practice makes perfect. Winning isn't everything, it's the only thing. Failure is not an option. In today's perfection-obsessed culture, these are the maxims we live by. Yet, the damage that they cause is stifling. Renowned author and pioneer of codependency treatment Ann W. Smith knows this first hand. Smith has dealt with her fair share of perfectionism and has bared witness to this all too common phenomenon in her professional life, having spent the last thirty years studying the impact compulsive disorders have on individuals and family. While perfectionism lacks much of the stigma attached to today's most common compulsions?smoking, gambling, sex addiction, alcoholism, and drug abuse?many of the negative connotations on self and the family system are the same.

In this revised and updated edition of the original, groundbreaking book *Overcoming Perfectionism: The Key to a Balanced Recovery*, Smith describes the key differences between *overt* and *covert* perfectionism; the role early attachment, temperament, sibling relationships, and life circumstances play in developing this pattern; and how to shift toward a center of balance for a more fulfilling life.

Readers will learn how to identify and confront the root cause of their problem, how to reveal and accept their essence, and finally, they will learn the importance of forgiveness and letting go. Additionally, readers discover the key characteristics of a healthy family system, along with the single most important lesson of all?*perfection does not exist.*

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Editorial Review

Review

"As I discuss in my new book *Recover to Live: Kick Any Habit, Manage Any Addiction*, you can't lead a productive and fulfilling life if unhealthy behavior is holding you back. Perfectionism can be just as damaging as many other compulsive behaviors. Ann Smith is among the best in the world at helping people to break lifelong patterns and find balance in their lives. I would highly recommend this book."

Christopher Kennedy Lawford

(Endorsement)

"As a former Miss USA, I've dedicated a lot of time to trying to be the perfect woman. In fact, I spent so much time trying to be the Tara that everyone else needed me to be that I wasn't in touch with my own needs. Ann Smith has helped me to develop and live in sync with my own values and authentic self. She has empowered me to love the woman I am today. I would recommend this book to anyone seeking self-acceptance."

Tara Conner, Miss USA 2006, Public Advocacy Consultant, Caron Treatment Centers *(Endorsement)*

"The drive for perfection is a painful dynamic that destroys relationships and leads to a life of despair, emptiness, and exhaustion. Ann Smith has taken her seminal work on perfectionism and created an inspirational and practical guide! I'd recommend this book for anyone who is plagued by patterns of perfectionistic thinking or behavior!"

Rokelle Lerner, Author of *The Object of my Affection Is in My Reflection: Coping with Narcissists*, Clinical Director Cottonwood Inner Path Workshops

(Endorsement)

"I highly recommend Ann Smith's second edition of her highly successful book, *Overcoming Perfectionism*. She has taken her work to another level, one that will benefit all who are making the journey beyond their painful childhoods. Her work is very personal, but her willingness to share her knowledge and emotions will touch many readers. Her style of writing makes you feel that this book is just for you and so it is."

Robert J. Ackerman, PhD, Author, *Perfect Daughters: Adult Daughters of Alcoholics*, Professor and Program Director of the Human Services Degree Program at the University of South Carolina at Beaufort

(Endorsement)

"Smith celebrates the art of living with imperfection, delivers a set of affirmations to lift up your spirit, and puts out the welcome mat for spiritual practices."

Frederic Brussat, Spirituality & Practice

About the Author

Ann W. Smith MS, LMFT, is a nationally recognized leader and expert in the field of codependency, frequently presenting at major conferences throughout the U.S., Canada, and Finland. As a licensed marriage and family therapist, she has spent nearly thirty years researching the impact compulsive disorders have on

individuals and family systems. Ann is also the director of Breakthrough at Caron? a program she designed for Caron Treatment Centers aimed at helping adults shift destructive life patterns, improve relationships, and foster personal growth.

Ann's professional experience has landed her interviews with National Public Radio, *Newsweek*, *Us Magazine*, *Redbook*, *U.S. News and World Report*, *Philadelphia* magazine, *Washington Post*, *Forbes Women*, *Wall Street Journal*, and numerous other newspapers, magazines, and radio and TV programs across the U.S.

Currently, she is a regular contributor to *Psychology Today's* website through her popular blog, *Healthy Connections*, with over 200,000 views to date. Ann has also authored *Grandchildren of Alcoholics: Another Generation of Co-dependency*. To learn more about Ann visit annsmith.com or breakthroughatcaron.org.

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Introduction

Writing a second edition of *Overcoming Perfectionism* has been an enjoyable and validating exercise for me. I do love to write, but I find it difficult to create the space and time to do it as much as I would like. This project has allowed me to go back to my own beginnings? as a therapist, a mom, an aunt, a wife, a sister, a daughter, a teacher, a director, and a friend? and reflect on what I have learned and how I have grown. At the same time, I can see that my essence has not really changed all that much.

When I wrote the original *Overcoming Perfectionism*, I was a single mom with two children, ages seven and seventeen. I had just left my full-time job, moved sixty miles away, and built an irrationally large, six-bedroom house for my seven-year-old daughter, Lindsay, and myself. My son, Jeff, was going off to college, and I started my own business. I met the man who became my husband and married him soon after, expanding my little family with three more boys. We were a very nontraditional family with what seemed like a revolving door on our house. 'Build it and they will come' was a frequent comment made by friends and extended family that proved to be very true.

During our first ten years in the big house, we were frustrated with the chronic problem of two leaking chimneys that made a mess of our two attic bedrooms. The builder brought in experts and tried everything the team could think of to fix the chimneys. They would be okay for a while, but then the leaking would start again. At the ten-year point, we thought we had it permanently repaired.

My husband helped me to expand my business during those years, and we were a good team. Through his career as a training director, he just happened to have the skills I lacked. This helped a great deal with my start-up private practice and five-and-a-half-day workshops.

As we approached an empty nest, breathing a sigh of relief that our five children were almost adults, we considered selling the big house and downsizing. After months of preparing for the move and having many showings, we were forced to take the house off the market because the leaks in the chimneys returned, and the house was just too big for most people.

We were also exhausted from the challenges of a blended -family and raising so many teenagers, so we decided to enjoy our space while we figured out what was next for us. After three years of relative quiet, we decided to prepare the house for sale once again. Within what seemed like just a few days after that decision, the water heater gave out and a torrential rain caused the chimneys to leak once more, damaging the ceilings

and leaving us no choice but to postpone the sale. With this setback, we were again in pause mode, when the unthinkable happened.

My husband's sister and her husband, who lived in a nearby town, were tragically killed, leaving three young children and two adult sons without parents. It was traumatic for everyone concerned and had a ripple effect throughout all of our lives. Our 'pause' was then transformed, and all of our lives were sent in an entirely new -direction.

In a few months, my husband and I were active parents once again, to three children ages twelve, fifteen, and sixteen. All available space in our big house was full once again. Then, much to our amazement, one week before the children arrived at our doorstep, a contractor we had not heard from in many months contacted us, saying that he had found a permanent solution to our leaking chimneys after fourteen years of trial and error. We were so grateful to have what we later called our 'house that God built.' And although it was a tough adjustment for all of us, the children got exactly what they needed. They were secure in their own dry bedrooms, and more important, they were safe and loved by a family that shared and understood the trauma they had experienced. We are thankful that we have not had a single leak in seven years.

Today, the youngest of my sister-in-law's three children is in his first year of college, and her oldest daughter was married last month. My husband and I are alone again, preparing the house for sale, we hope for next year. Our six grandchildren are very fond of this house, and I know that they would want us to keep it forever. I have no solid plan, one way or the other. I have learned that if I just keep walking in the direction that feels best, things have a way of working out.

I would love to say that I handled everything with grace and patience, but that would not be true. It was very hard. Overall, I feel good about myself and believe that my marriage is the cornerstone of this story. There were many other difficult challenges that I don't dwell on or worry about today. I have learned how to love unconditionally, how to accept what is, and how to show up when called upon. Yet there is no end to the story?so much for being perfect.

When I wrote the first edition, I was doing the best I could with my life. I still am, but I no longer have an agenda of being great or proving that I am strong. That is the moral of this book: It is enough to just be you and put one foot in front of the other while doing the next best thing.

The Second Edition

There are a few significant changes in this edition, based on the evolution of the addiction and mental health fields. You will notice that the word *codependency* is no longer prominent in this book. We have reached a new level of understanding that I believe is more useful and applies to a much larger group of people who are stuck in dysfunctional relationship patterns and emotional pain. I have limited the use of other labels in this edition as well. For instance, family roles are not labeled as hero, scapegoat, and so forth, and the more inclusive term *painful family* is used in place of *alcoholic family*.

Based on experience with a wide range of clients, clinical professionals no longer consider the alcoholic family to be unique in its effect on individuals. In studying and working with families affected by addiction, we have learned a great deal, and as a result we have been able to help thousands of people open up about the challenges they experienced in childhood.

The second chapter explains the human experience in a broader sense than we had understood when the first book was written. It focuses on patterns developed in childhood as a result of insecure attachment when families are in pain or chronic stress. It is important to understand that this pattern is a normal human response, not a dysfunctional choice.

When an awareness of the negative effects of growing up in an alcoholic or chemically dependent family first gained attention during the late 1980s and the 1990s, droves of adult children of alcoholics came to conferences, read self-help books, and sought help at places like Breakthrough at Caron, then called Caron's Adult Children of Alcoholics program. Throughout my first eight years with the program, more than 14,000 people attended the five-and-a-half-day residential program. Since then, the total has been estimated at well over 35,000 and is growing. Many of these people's stories are in this book.

There is an increased emphasis in this edition on the covert perfectionist. The first chapter examines the similarities and differences between covert and overt perfectionism. It opens the door to a large group of people whose perfectionism exists more as a pattern of thinking than as obvious visible traits, but for the covert perfectionist this reality is equally troublesome. The approach in this book is designed to benefit both overt and covert perfectionists by increasing self-awareness and self-esteem through a process of letting go and learning self-acceptance.

My overall goal in writing this book is to improve your quality of life by showing you how to bring in more of what really matters to you and let go of what gets in the way of your peace of mind. I urge you to use it as a workbook. Take notes, write in the margins, and make it your own. The exercises were designed to show perfectionists how to live in the middle, to find their balance. I encourage you to find yours.

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From reader reviews:

Fernando Rowe:

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Overcoming Perfectionism: Finding the Key to Balance and Self-Acceptance can be one of your basic books that are good idea. All of us recommend that straight away because this book has good vocabulary that may increase your knowledge in words, easy to understand, bit entertaining but nevertheless delivering the information. The copy writer giving his/her effort that will put every word into joy arrangement in writing *Overcoming Perfectionism: Finding the Key to Balance and Self-Acceptance* nevertheless doesn't forget the main position, giving the reader the hottest along with based confirm resource facts that maybe you can be one of it. This great information can draw you into fresh stage of crucial pondering.

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