

CONNECTIONS

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Embrace Your Imperfections

By Sharon Martin, LCSW, **Psychology Today** (Used with the author's permission)

Free yourself from the need to be perfect.

Do you have impossibly high standards for yourself—and maybe for others?

Do you beat yourself up when you make even a small mistake?

Do you find it hard to relax and do things just for fun?

Do you avoid trying new things because you might embarrass yourself?

Do you believe your worth is based on how much you accomplish and what others think of you?

Your desire to be perfect may be hurting you more than it's helping.

Everyone has flaws and makes mistakes

In childhood, many of us learn that we need to be perfect—that we have to look a particular way, act a particular way, and meet other people's expectations even at the expense of our own wellbeing.

Of course, these impossibly high standards are unrealistic. No one can actually be perfect: We irritate our spouses. We overdraw our bank accounts. We disappoint our parents and our bosses. We yell at our kids. We don't have time to shop and cook, so we order pizza for a second time this week. We drink too much. We numb out in front of our televisions, video games, and phones. We don't get enough sleep. We forget things. We're late to meetings. We make bad decisions.

And while these mistakes and imperfections are all completely normal, we judge ourselves, often very harshly, for being imperfect—for being human.

Don't fall prey to "compare and despair"

The problem isn't that we're imperfect. The problem is we think that other people aren't; we think they're living perfect (or nearly perfect) lives. It's no surprise that when we compare ourselves to others we feel inadequate. We think, "What's wrong with me? Everyone else seems to have it all together. I seem to be the only one who's struggling."



Greetings City Employees,

First, some housekeeping:

The EAP office is running a bit short-staffed for the summer with Arlyn out on parental leave and with the departure of Lori Wessel from the program. Fortunately, our external EAP is available and ready to assist Tresa in supporting City staff and managers over the next few months until we are again at full capacity. If you call for an appointment, Sherri will be able to offer all of the options available to you and we are still committed to making sure that we can provide the services you need!

This month's issue of *Connections* offers a couple of articles in response to some of the challenges we are hearing about from employees using EAP services. *Embrace Your Imperfections* and *What to do When Nothing Feels Good* offer helpful advice for anyone feeling anxious about increasing their social interaction after a difficult year.

And as we celebrate **LGBTQ+ Pride Month**, we would like to draw your attention to some excellent tech sources of support for LGBTQ+ youth listed in *The Tech Dilemma for LGBTQ+ Youth and Mental Health*.

Take good care of yourself!

~ The EAP Team

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EVERYONE
IS AWESOME

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When we scroll through social media, other people's lives look perfect. They've got cute kids, expensive vacations, lots of friends, a successful career, a kind/funny/ambitious spouse, designer clothes, and a perfect body. It certainly looks good on the outside! But even if all these outward signs of a perfect life are true, they don't tell the whole story. They don't tell you that behind that seemingly happy marriage is a controlling spouse and behind that bikini body is an eating disorder and those adorable kids still don't sleep through the night. The involved in-laws are critical and demanding. And behind that big house is a woman who's embarrassed to have people over because her house is such a mess.

Logically, we all know that no one's perfect, but just knowing that isn't enough to make us let go of our desire to be perfect. We either don't see that others struggle, or we don't hold them to the same impossibly high standards.

You might think it's fine for other people to make mistakes—but it's definitely not OK for you. You have to be perfect.

Through repetition, you've trained your brain to see what everyone else is doing right—their accomplishments and strengths and how perfect they seem. But you only see your own failures and weaknesses. Your thinking is skewed due to years of self-scrutiny and comparing yourself to other people's highlight reel.

Choose to stop comparing yourself to others.

Free yourself from the need to be perfect

Movies, magazines, and social media give us unrealistic ideas about what we should look like and be able to do. And our childhood experiences often plant the seeds of perfectionism, giving us the message that we're not good enough as we are. We come to believe that we need to prove our worth. We need to work harder, accomplish more, be smarter, funnier, thinner, or more accommodating. And we should be able to do it all with ease! In other words, we need to be something other than ourselves.

It isn't fair to hold ourselves to these ridiculously high standards—standards we can never meet. It's no wonder we feel terrible about ourselves. It was a no-win proposition from the beginning. We can never be perfect—and when we expect ourselves to be, we will always fall short. We will always feel inadequate.

Choose to embrace your imperfections and accept yourself just as you are.

Perfectionism makes it hard for us to show up authentically because we're so focused on pleasing, perfecting, and proving ourselves.



Ironically, it's being imperfect that makes us real and relatable. We often connect with others over our insecurities, quirks, and struggles. People who are truly interested in you and care about you, don't expect you to be perfect; they want you to be authentic. Embracing your imperfections and letting others see the less than perfect parts of you, allows you to connect more deeply—to love others and be loved fully.

Choose connection over perfection.

You don't have to prove your worth. You don't have to please everyone all the time. You don't have to compare yourself to others. You don't have to measure up to anyone else's idea of beauty, success, or worthiness. Some people will like you—and some won't. And that's OK.

What you'll gain is freedom. Freedom to be yourself, to do what feels right for you, to pursue your interests, to follow your values, to wear whatever you want, to explore who you are.

Nobody's perfect, but we all have value—and we don't have to keep trying to prove it.

Choose to let others see your real self rather than hiding behind a facade of perfection.

Tips for Raising Resilient Kids

Tip #4 – Teach them to reframe



Our ability to reframe our current situation and find something that we learned from it is a valuable resiliency skill. Build this skill with children by first acknowledging their disappointment, anger, or loss. Then help them reframe the situation and find a positive spin to it.

How Trauma Can Lead to Positive Growth

For those who are experiencing a traumatic loss or crisis, it can sometimes seem impossible to keep moving forward.

However, research shows that adverse experiences often help us develop new strengths and perspectives, which not only help us get through traumatic events, but also emerge from them, stronger than before.

This concept—that negative experiences can spur positive change—has appeared in literature throughout history. About 25 years ago, psychologists created a name for it: post-traumatic growth, or PTG.

All of us are capable of post-traumatic growth—children, parents, coworkers and friends. Psychologists say this growth can appear in various ways. Watch for new skills, new opportunities, deeper relationships, or a greater appreciation for life and spiritual growth in yourself and those closest to you.

Post-traumatic growth can't be rushed or forced. However, at some point, you may be able to look back at the challenges you've endured and notice you've grown stronger because of them.



NEED HELP?

Your EAP can provide additional guidance and resources.

2021 WEBINAR SERIES

JUNE 16, 11am CT

How Challenging Times Can Lead To Growth

REGISTER

During this past year, many of us have experienced disruption, trauma, loss and change. But according to science, we have great potential for growth following times of challenge—if we take the time to look for it. From a trauma-informed perspective, we'll explore what it takes to move forward after a crisis.

Presented by Randy Kratz
Senior Account Manager
FEI Behavioral Health

The Tech Dilemma for LGBTQ+ Youth and Mental Health

By Danielle Ramo, Ph.D., **Psychology Today** (Used with the author's permission)

How the internet can be used to support community and identity for LGBTQ+ youth.

I can't stop thinking about how much has changed in a single generation. My kids are growing up with two moms who are legally married. They can hold a smooth rectangle in their hand and connect with virtually anybody, anywhere, any time. They have just witnessed the election of the queerest congress in history, including two openly-gay Black men. Every day my kids are exposed to images and messages that celebrate diversity and those that foster deep hatred and polarization. Technology is contributing to and facilitating this quagmire. I can't stop thinking about it.

In many ways, it's a great time to be young and queer in America. Discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity is less tolerated, both legally and socially. Happy, proud, thriving, visible LGBTQ+ people can be seen in virtually every profession, every lifestyle, in every stitch of the social fabric.

And yet, queer teens still face disproportionately high rates of bullying and violence, abuse and rejection, discrimination and isolation at school, at home, and in their communities. They are more likely to battle depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation—a likelihood that increases along multiple axes for trans, gender non-binary, and queer people of color. It's a complicated picture, made more complicated in the COVID era.

As we begin 2021, many American teens haven't regularly attended school or in-person activities in almost a year. With COVID has come a breadth and intensity of isolation that creates a variety of new problems for young people, and exacerbates existing problems beyond what I think we have the capacity to imagine right now.

We don't know what comes of this, but we do know a few things. We know that LGBTQ+ youth are at heightened risk of experiencing intimate partner violence and substance abuse. We know that racism and intersecting stigmas compound dangers for queer youth, and that they shoulder a disproportionate burden of mental health challenges, especially if they are youth of color. We know that protective factors for these young people include access to affirming services and belonging to a community.

We also know that isolation—whether it be from friends, community, teachers, or the outside world generally—is bad for mental health and safety under the best of circumstances, and especially dangerous for young people already in trouble.

Research has shown, over and over, that even today, online continues to be safer for many queer youth than offline. Virtual spaces provide a place for identity-building and social support, exploration and individuation—vital developmental components that are not always available for queer youth to engage with safely offline.

Right now, in this moment, queer teens are spending more time online than ever before, seeking affirmation and information, creating content, developing a self in relation to others—going ahead with the business of becoming a young adult. Because plans can be rescheduled, but growing up can't.

All over America, young LGBTQ+ people are developing into the people they are going to be, and a lot of them are doing a large part of that work online.

Technology is rampant, but it's also risky.

Technology may be a lifeline, but as a researcher and a parent, I can confirm the inverse truth as well: the internet can be a dangerous place, and LGBTQ+ teens can get especially hurt. For some, digital platforms are the only places where they express their authentic selves, and abuse or rejection in these spaces can be uniquely harmful. Gender- and sexuality-based cyberbullying and harassment is common, and LGBTQ+ youth are less likely to tell somebody or ask for help when they experience it. This is doubly true for LGBTQ+ youth of color.

None of this is new, but the scope and intensity of it is. COVID-19 has brought an additional layer of structural and psychosocial danger that, for those of us in the field of youth mental health, is worrying. The needs are deep, and the stakes are high.

How can we navigate the double-edged sword of technology for LGBTQ+ teens?

If the tech dilemma hinges on the promise versus the peril, young people are better served the more promise is in the mix. **The Trevor Project**, **Born This Way Foundation**, **Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network (GLSEN)**, the **It Gets Better Project**, and media outlets such as **Them**, provide foundational support to build affirming ideas of the LGBTQ+ experience, strategies to deal with stress, and immediate help in times of crisis. The National Queer and Trans Therapists of Color Network (**NQTTCN**) has a directory of therapists who identify as queer people of color, and **Violet** is a source for queer-competent therapists in the northeast United States. CenterLink's **Q Chat Space** and Trevor Project's **TrevorSpace** are two digital tools that provide an affirming community for LGBTQ+ youth.

We need more.

In response to the sharp increase in demand brought on by pandemic conditions, many mental health and well-being services have cropped up in the digital sphere or have expanded from in-person services to virtual, but the focus of these services hasn't diversified much. Resources specifically tailored to the emotional and cultural experiences of LGBTQ+ teens remain rare, and those for LGBTQ+ youth of color even more so. LGBTQ+ individuals and people of color consistently report a preference for mental health interventions that are tailored for them, and evidence suggests that such tailored online health programs may be more likely to work—especially transgender, gender non-binary, and youth of color. That's critical in this moment, as their needs are heightened, the dangers are complex, and the potential for harm is profound. Tech and behavioral health have a unique and pressing opportunity to step into a critical role for these young people, and they can't wait.

View references for this article.

What to Do When Nothing Feels Good

By Ellen Hendriksen, Ph.D., *Psychology Today* (Used with the author's permission)

Feeling down in the dumps can be a symptom called anhedonia. Here's what to do.

Imagine feeling blah, but on steroids. Or unmotivated, but bigly. Feeling like nothing is enjoyable (and that nothing matters anyway) is a serious symptom called anhedonia. Here's a quick primer on what it is, plus two science-backed ways to beat the capital-B blahs.

Ugh.

I don't feel like it.

Everything is terrible.

What's the point?

Sound like your inner monologue right now?

If you haven't been enjoying (insert activity that used to bring you joy), you have no motivation to see friends or get going, or you're feeling generally ground down by the world, know that what you're experiencing has a name: anhedonia.

Unlike hedonism (the concept, not the clothing-optional resort in Jamaica), which is the pursuit of pleasure and gratification, anhedonia is its opposite. With anhedonia, the brain's ability to feel joy, satisfaction, or enjoyment gets put on mute. It feels like nothing really matters anymore. In other words, anhedonia feels like the moment in *The Wizard of Oz* when Dorothy steps from her black-and-white world into Technicolor, except in reverse.

What's at the root of anhedonia? It can be a part of burnout, PTSD, substance abuse, schizophrenia, or even Parkinson's disease, but the granddaddy of anhedonia is depression. A study in *The American Journal of Psychiatry* found that 95 percent of people with major depression reported a loss of interest or pleasure—a virtual vaporization of joy from their lives.

Notice that the study used two particular words: interest or pleasure. Those two concepts are actually quite different and illustrate how anhedonia packs a one-two punch.

How? It turns out there are two types of enjoyment: anticipatory, also known as “wanting,” and consummatory, also known as “liking.” Think of the difference between looking forward to a vacation and actually being on vacation. There's the excitement of planning and imagining in your mind's eye what you'll do and how you'll feel. But then there's also the pleasure of the moment—how you feel when you're finally on the beach with your mojito, riding up the ski lift, or hiking down the trail in search of a blissful lack of cellphone coverage.

But in anhedonia, both wanting and liking are muted. Without “wanting,” you may not look forward to things or you may feel unmotivated. You can't see the reward or pleasure at the end of the road, so why bother slogging down it in the first place?

Without “liking,” you may take no joy in things you usually love. It's when a superfan doesn't care if his team wins, the social butterfly withdraws from her friends, or the avid gardener lets his roses go to seed. Things we usually love—even food or sex—become one big “meh.”

So even if you try and you try, but you can't get no satisfaction, what should you do? Anhedonia is tough to beat, but it can be done. Here are two research-backed ways to lift the fog.

Practice #1: Do what you usually enjoy and value, even if you're not in the mood.

The way out of anhedonia is, counterintuitively, through the back door. Don't wait until you feel better to do the things you love. Instead, do what you used to love, even if you don't feel like it.

This is hard. It's easy to get pulled down the swirling drain of inactivity and apathy because your brain and body get understimulated. Breaking the cycle takes a lot of effort, especially if you've felt depressed for a long time.

Luckily, doing what you used to love can be accomplished on many scales. Start with a small thing that takes two minutes, like blasting your favorite song, rubbing your dog's tummy, or making homemade hot chocolate with marshmallows and whipped cream. And sprinkles. Mmm... sprinkles. I digress: Whatever it is doesn't have to be big. It may feel like just a drop, but drop by drop, you can fill an ocean.

Next, if you can't bring yourself to be around people just yet, that's fine. Stay in and do the things you love: make brownies, do some online yoga, work on your guitar riffs, or watch a comedy special (but don't over-rely on the screen time). The point is to deliberately do things you enjoy and are in line with your values.



Eventually, schedule things that get you out of the house, even if you don't see the point. Accept your friends' invitation to meet at the grilled cheese food truck, go for a hike, or, as in one of my favorite client stories, sign up for the Mr. Leather contest at the corner gay bar, and to your surprise, win.

Psychologists call this behavioral activation, and if it sounds like fake it 'til you make it, you're right. It may feel fake, fleeting, or hopeless at first, but the reason it works is that it sets up a positive feedback loop. Your brain affects your behavior, but behavior also affects your brain. So do the things you love, even if you don't feel the effects right away. Like the Velveteen Rabbit, it's fake until it becomes real.

A big asterisk: Don't use this technique to be productive, get stuff done, or motivate yourself to do stuff you hate. The only goals in behavioral activation are meaning and happiness. So don't use it to do your laundry or finally get to the post office.

Now, here's a challenge: what if you've been depressed for so long you can't remember what you like to do? Think back to childhood. What did you love then? Do it again. If you loved riding your bike, plonk a helmet on your head and go for a spin around the neighborhood (or for the grownup version, sign up for a spin class). Bonus points if you get ice cream afterward. Did you love to draw? Take an online art class or sit on your stoop with your sketchbook.

Do these things even if it feels like you're just going through the motions. It won't feel the same as when you're healthy, but it will likely feel better than doing nothing at all. If nothing else, getting out of the house will keep you from sliding further into the depths.

The takeaway? Don't leave these actions to chance. Intentionally set aside time to do the activities you love and value, even if the forces of gravity get really strong right around your couch when it's time to put on your shoes. There will be a million reasons not to go, but do your best not to listen to them.

Practice #2: Savor the good stuff.

Another practice to push back against anhedonia is called savoring. To savor, hold a metaphorical magnifying glass up to your hot chocolate, your hike, or your guitar riffs. Savor these small pleasures, instead of getting distracted by your phone, the news, or your thoughts.

Anhedonia tells you to discount these small moments of joy, to write them off as "just little things," or to say, "Well, I didn't feel better, so that was a waste of time." Instead, notice with as many of your five senses as possible what you just did, even if you have to peer really closely to find any enjoyment. Lean into the smell of the freshly-brewed coffee, the beat of your favorite song, or the warm and fuzzy energy of your dog.

In addition to paying attention with your senses, zoom in on any sense of pride, joy, or accomplishment you may feel. It will likely be small or fleeting, but pay close attention and revel in it to make it last.

And don't stop with savoring the moment. In addition, you can bring to mind recent pleasures. Each evening, take the time to note three things you enjoyed that day. Actually write them down, in a journal or the notes section of your phone. That way, you'll create a growing list of things—those drops that make up the ocean—that emphasize and reinforce pleasure, mastery, and joy.

In summary, do what you used to love, on a daily basis (at minimum!), before you feel like it. Tune into the experience using your five senses, and bask in it, even if it doesn't seem like much. Eventually, you'll find yourself stepping out the door and back into a world of Technicolor.

Ellen Hendriksen, Ph.D. is the author of [How to be Yourself](#), a book about conquering social anxiety. Learn more at [ellenhendriksen.com](#).

*Thanks for reading,
we hope you found the information useful!*

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