

The Perils of an Achievement Culture

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Summary. Three new books tackle how to escape the grip of perfectionism: *MoneyZen*, by Manisha Thakor; *The Perfection Trap*, by Thomas Curran; and *Never Enough*, by Jennifer Breheny Wallace.

Manisha Thakor was a self-acknowledged overachiever. From an early age she sought the validation of her teachers, and later, as she entered the working world, she strove for the approval of bosses. An Ivy League-educated financial analyst, she worked more hours than anyone else in her office, competed for the

highest bonus, and often chose work over relationships. As she recounts in her book *MoneyZen*, she had moments of clarity when she tried to break free from her obsession with achieving more. But for many years she simply couldn't.



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We know that professional perfectionism—the feeling that no amount of success is ever enough—comes at a heavy cost to our well-being. That's true whether the drive to achieve is intrinsic or motivated by external factors. In either case it's a mindset that leads to workaholism, which in turn can lead to depression and anxiety. Divorce rates are 40% higher among workaholics than among couples who don't overwork. In China's intense "9-9-6" culture (in which employees work from 9 AM to 9 PM six days a week), 1,600 people work themselves to death every day, through heart attack or suicide. Yet in recent decades high-achievement cultures have only become more widespread, according to Thomas Curran, a psychology professor at the London School of Economics. In his book, *The Perfection Trap*, Curran says that perfectionism "seems to be the defining characteristic of our time."

But over the past few years pandemic soul-searching and burnout have caused many people to consider scaling back. Some young people in China are opting out of 9-9-6 in a movement called "lying flat." In Western cultures we have "quiet quitting" and "lazy girl jobs" along with the rise of the wellness movement. Of course, as Thakor writes, it's a privilege to be able to downshift at work and still earn a living. But she notes that only 28% of self-

diagnosed workaholics or overachievers toil out of financial necessity. For the rest, it's important to understand what else is fueling the never-ending quest for more success.

One might assume that ego and greed are what drive high achievers. But in her book, *Never Enough*, the journalist Jennifer Breheny Wallace instead points to “status anxiety” and says that it often takes root in childhood, as it did for Thakor, with conscious or unconscious reinforcement from parents. It then becomes toxic. She explains that our brains reward even small upticks in status—for us or our offspring—with dopamine, serotonin, oxytocin, and endorphins, while punishing us for drops in status with hits of cortisol that produce stress. That's why student achievement, professional perfectionism, and workaholism can feel like addictions.

Thakor eventually realized that her compulsive work ethic stemmed from the shame she felt as a kid on the playground, where classmates often made fun of her mixed-race heritage, non-Anglo name, and physical awkwardness. In the schoolroom, however, and then the office, she found a safe space and a way to gain status. The problem, she later discovered, was that the validation she got through achievement had to be constantly renewed—the pursuit of professional success was endless.

To break the cycle, she and Wallace recommend that obsessive overachievers find ways to reinforce the belief that they matter because of who they are, not what they do, and that they seek love and belonging, not just accolades and status. Wallace delves deep into the concept of “mattering,” which means that you are secure in meaningful connections with others and feel seen, cared for, and understood. People take an interest in you and what you have to say; they share your triumphs and support you after setbacks; they rely on you for guidance and help. High school students who feel that they truly matter to their parents—beyond doing what they're told and living up to parental expectations for

achievement—have higher self-esteem and lower rates of depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and suicide than peers who feel they matter less.

Of course, it's hard to shift your biology and psychology away from achievement addiction when the larger economy and society are working against you. In his examination of unhealthy perfectionism, Curran puts capitalist achievement culture squarely in the crosshairs. "Perfectionism is the defining psychology of an economic system that's hell-bent on overshooting human and planetary thresholds," he writes. But he reserves his harshest criticism for the way social media and advertising intersect to capitalize on our insecurities. Social platforms make money by delivering ads for products and services that promise to improve our status, whereas in fact those ads—and the posts around them—just heighten our anxieties. For that, he says, there is an easy fix: Stop scrolling. Research has found that even one hour less of social-media-based smartphone use a day significantly decreases symptoms of depression and anxiety and increases happiness and health.

Another modern-day element of our culture that Curran critiques is the glorification of the growth mindset: He argues that it forces us to turn every failure into a learning experience and a mechanism for future achievement. Espousing or buying into such thinking can put us in "a cage of unrelenting self-betterment," he writes.

In his view, the only real and long-term solution is to shift to an economic model that doesn't reward perpetual growth—for example, one that focuses on excellence rather than perfection, limits energy consumption and is thus more sustainable, reduces the wealth gap by establishing a universal basic income, and measures happiness instead of gross domestic product to inform public policy decisions (as New Zealand does).

When I began reading these books, I didn't think of myself as burdened by the achievement culture. But they helped me recognize that although I work hard partly because I like what I do, I also—whether through instinct or socialization—feel the *need* to do a good job. I get a sense of validation when I succeed, followed by pressure to find my next professional win. Thakor's and Wallace's stories—and Curran's arguments—gave me a new perspective. I don't want a lifetime of outperformance if it's going to lead to bad relationships, burnout, and ill health. So I'm going to keep reminding myself that my achievements aren't why I matter. I hope you will do the same.

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