Mental Health Series Week 3: Control and Perfectionism (James & John)

Story/Quote

Perfectionism is broadly defined as a combination of excessively high personal standards and overly critical self-evaluations. The need for control is all about all about avoiding negative outcomes so it’s not a surprise that control and perfectionism go hand in hand.

Statistics

Every week I’ve given a few statistics just so we can all wrap our heads around the gravity of the mental health crisis specific to the topic of the week. But sometimes when we see numbers we can forget that every number has a name. Every one of them was created in the image of God and loved by Him (and most likely many others). Here are some of the names you may have heard in the last two months.

* Laura Bernett was a softball player at James Madison University. She had just been named conference player of the week.
* Sarah Shulze was a runner at University of Wisconsin – Madison
* Katie Meyer was a soccer player for Stanford University
* Naomi Judd was a country music artist with 5 Grammy awards to show for it
* Sydney Breyer was an honor student at University of Mount Union
  + She would have been 25 on May 4th, but remains forever 18 in my mind’s eye

For those who don’t know me well, none of this series has been an academic exercise of rattling statistics or helpful tips that I have never had to live out. These things matter. My daughter Sydney, your kids, your spouse, your friends and co-workers all matter.

The hardest thing about our topic on perfectionism and control today is that perfectionistic people want to seem perfect, so they tend not to seek help when it is required and they hide their true pain. However, one study that I found reported that more than 70% of those who attempt suicide were in the habit of creating “exceedingly high” expectations of themselves.

Types of Perfectionism There are 3 basic types of perfectionism

* Self-oriented perfectionism (unrealistic high expectations for oneself)
  + Many high achievers land in this category, and it is not all bad
  + If they don’t have other types, mistakes can be motivating, rather than views as catastrophic failure.
* Other-oriented perfectionism (unrealistic high expectations for others). Perfectionistic parents are often place their other-oriented tendencies onto their children, which feeds into this last one.
* Socially prescribed perfectionism (the belief that others have high expectations related to oneself to be perfect)
  + The most debilitating of the three types
  + Generally see significant maladaptive behaviors

Sources of Perfectionism (maladaptive)

* Concern over making mistakes
  + reacting negatively in case of mistakes, interpret mistakes as failure
* Doubts about actions
  + doubting related to the ability of one's performance
* Parental criticism
  + also works for a spouse, close relative, or trusted coach/mentor
* Parental expectations
  + Perceiving that one's parents set high goals and expectations on one's performance
* Personal Standards
  + Striving for high standards and goals
* Organization
  + A high need for order and neatness

Remember the first week I said that 2 contributing factors of suicide are a sense of “thwarted belongingness” (I don’t belong, not connected, nobody cares) and a sense of “perceived burdensomeness” (I can’t do anything right, I’ll not good enough, I have nothing to bring to the table). When the two factors in yellow occur together, we see that “perceived burdensomeness” becomes significantly magnified, and it is a big red flag.

Indicators/Consequences of Perfectionism

* Body-focused repetitive behaviors (nail biting, skin picking, hair pulling etc)
* Obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) & Anorexia
* Anxiety/Depression
* Non-suicidal self-injury (cutting, burning, etc)
  + More prevalent in girls
  + Big risk factor for suicide
* Increased risk of suicide
* Anger
  + Outbursts are more prevalent in boys, but anger itself is not unique to the male gender
* Procrastination (due to fear of failure)
* Withdrawal from social circles

What to do if it’s you

* Become more balanced
  + Avoid all or nothing mentality
  + Emphasize progress over perfection
  + Celebrate small wins
* Incorporate laughter and silliness into your day/week
* Practice gratitude
  + This helps connect things you have as provision or gifts from God and not something you had to strive to earn.
* Meditate on Scripture: The identity statements I read last week are helpful, and these scriptural truths help to counter criticism whether it is external or internal.
  + There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:1) He didn’t condemn the woman caught in adultery and he does not condemn you for your mistakes
  + You are fearfully and wonderfully made (Psalm 139:14) God created you perfectly, flaws and all.
  + While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. (Romans 5:8) He didn’t wait to see how great you would be.
  + If you are in Christ, you are a new creation (1 Corinthians 5:17) He made you new, not better, and he is not waiting for you to make yourself better either.

What to do if it’s someone else

* Seen
  + Take the time to look, listen, and really understand what’s going on. Discard preconceived ideas and avoid snap judgments.
  + Be curious about their inner world and point of view.
* Safe
  + Make a commitment that you won’t be the source of fear or judgement in your home or relationship.
  + Repair, repair, repair! If there’s a breach in your relationship with your child, reconnect
  + Be a safe person for someone to confide in.
* Soothed
  + Offer your P-E-A-C-E: Give them your presence, engagement, affection, calm, and empathy.

How to start a conversation:

You seem to be putting a lot of pressure on yourself. Can you tell me what’s going on?.

My understanding is that people use cutting to cope with emotional or mental distress. What are you struggling to cope with?

I see you working really hard on this project. Can we schedule in an ice cream break?

If you have any questions or want to talk through anything you can reach out to me at tambra@southwestchurch.org.