



EPISODE 29 - How To Work Through Perfectionism

Transcript

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Since I can remember, I was a perfectionist. I wanted to be perfect and it was recognized by the people in my life. People would make subtle comments in my family about how good I do in school. Comments like, Jana got straight A's again. Jana got first in the dance competition. And it felt good. I not only felt supported, I was so loved and encouraged to continue doing fantastic work. But, those words, while wonderful and supportive, reinforced the need to continue to get straight A's and continue to win competitions even though that was never the rule. Obviously. Even though the only rule in the house was to just do your best. There was never any pressure or punishment if I didn't get A's. But I do remember getting a B in history because I was way more interested in hanging out with friends and passing notes in class than I was in the history lesson. It wasn't my favorite subject. I remember someone asked me, "Why did you get a B in history. I said, cuz it's not my jam". Probably not in those words. I was in high school so I probably said something snarkier about how I wanted to pass notes in class instead or how I wasn't interested in hearing one more time about how John A. McDonald was an alcoholic - for you Canadian history nerds.

But what I've learned is that I wasn't born a perfectionist and it wasn't part of who I was at birth. That part of me was nurtured and developed over time. And for me, that part has become a dominant part of my life. And it can be exhausting.

[Music and Intro]

Well hey there. Today's episode is about perfectionism. I've been wanting to do an episode about this for a while now. If you get my weekly emails, you're familiar with me talking about perfectionism and how it doesn't exist. And, if you don't yet get my weekly emails, what ya waiting for? I love the responses I get from those of you who reply. Seriously. I've been able to connect with so many fantastic listeners which brings me so much joy. Connection is what it's all about. So if you want to hear more from me, you can join my weekly newsletter at jananicholl.com.

One of the reasons I talk about perfectionism so much and why I wanted to dedicate an episode to it is because it's so much more prevalent than you probably think. Especially in the field of dietetics. It's like there's this invisible magnet pulling all the perfectionists into one field of study or expertise. And I want you to know that if

you suffer from perfectionism, you're not alone. And I have good news for you. The good news is that you can do something about it.

It won't change right away. It takes time and effort but you can get it under control instead of letting it control you.

Before I started this podcast, I was thinking about it for months. I mean, months. I had the cover for the podcast for over 6 months before I felt I could put it out there in the world. I kept checking to see if someone had taken the name of the podcast before I released my first episode. I was relieved when I saw no one had. I mean worst case scenario, I'd have to come up with a new name. No biggie. But was so relieved every time I checked just to make sure. And yet, that wasn't enough to encourage me to just go for it and release the first episode. Nope, I had to ponder it again for the billionth time. I had to sit and think about 50 episodes before I started. I had to edit and redo the outline and the order of episodes I'd release. Then I'd put it away for another day because I wasn't sure it was perfect enough to start. So a week or two would go by and then I'd open my outline on my computer and look it over again and again. Re-organizing episodes and then I'd put it away. It sounds so silly even saying this because let me tell you, NOTHING and I mean NOTHING went as planned. It actually has been better in some ways. Let me tell you. The outline I had is out the window. I didn't stick to it. And this is why. I had one listener. Then another listener. Then another and another. And then someone reached out to me on instagram and asked me to talk about a particular topic that was challenging for them. Then someone replied to an email I sent out and shared their thoughts and feedback and asked more questions. So of course - I'm gonna answer the questions asked by the listeners because that's why I'm here. So I'd work on an episode for that listener. Then another topic would be requested and before you know it, the whole outline is just a file on my computer that I pull up from time to time to stay organized but honestly, I cover what people want to hear. Topics the listeners need help with.

So the outline I spent months on, PERFECTING, didn't even happen. But I'd argue that the content I've covered so far is so much better because it's what real listeners, real RDS2Be are needing help with and if I can help just one of you get across the finish line, my job is done. That's why I'm here.

I look back at when I was in college. I was that student who was super organized. I mean, I had friends who would ask to see my binder just to go through it. Every paper was in its place. The papers were all the same size. You know when teachers would hole punch the papers wrong which makes the paper hang out a little at the bottom. Such a pet peeve of mine. I know. Sounds nuts but that would drive me insane. So I'd cut the bottom. I'd get a ruler, draw a straight line and cut the paper so that it fit perfectly in my binder. I'd have dividers and tabs within

the dividers. For example the carbs section. Then the carbs would be further broken down into simple carbs and complex carbs. And on and on. My friends would ask if I could organize their binders for them. And obviously, I said yes. Hello, that was so fun to me. Taking this chaotic mess of a binder and turning it into this perfectly organized binder. Yes, please. I'm always down for a good before and after.

I was hanging out with a friend one day and her little girl threw some cards all over the room. They had letters or characters on them. Maybe some characters with letters. Anyways, doesn't really matter. The point is, as I was talking to my friend, I sat on the floor and picked up the cards. As I picked up every card, I turned them all the right way. The picture had to be facing the same way and the back of the cards had to be facing up. I carried on the conversation with zero awareness of what I was doing. My friend, who was always on a mission to help me get over my perfectionism, said, "Jana, just pick up the cards. She's just gonna throw them all over the floor again. It doesn't matter which way the cards are facing. In fact, I want you to mix them up, change the direction, just put them in a completely unorganized pile". I looked at her like she was crazy but she was dead serious. She said, "I'm not joking. Mix it up. You can't get over this perfectionism until you start actively working on it". Good friend right.

I'll never forget that day. She was right. Over the years, I've worked on it. And I've gotten better. But that doesn't mean perfectionism doesn't creep up and affect me still. It absolutely does. Let's take this podcast for example. I waited to start it because it had to be perfect. I didn't even know what perfect for a podcast is and I'd argue it doesn't even exist. But I'll tell you, as I do more episodes, things are a little better and a little easier. I've learned along the way and I continue to learn but this perception of perfection without having ever done a podcast was so silly and more than that, it held me back. I could've put the podcast out months earlier if I had just embraced it for what it is. An educational podcast to help interns get across the finish line. And I knew the podcast was important because I've worked with interns my entire career. The reason I came up with the idea for the podcast is because I've been teaching for many years and precepting dietetic interns since I became a dietitian. I've witnessed first hand, time and time again, how overwhelming interns feel going into the RD Exam. There's a lot of pressure. You don't want to be that one person not to pass in your cohort. Or maybe you didn't pass the first time so now you're worried that you won't pass it the second time. Or maybe you have a job as an RDE that requires you to pass the exam in a certain amount of time. These are all real pressures. But on top of the external pressures, there are many internal pressures that come in that can be even worse.

I had a student one time who kept putting off the exam. I kept asking her why she hadn't taken it yet and she said, "Because I'm not ready yet". Ok. Fair answer. We're all ready at our own pace and on our own time. No one can tell you when you're ready for something. You need to determine that for yourself. You feel it and you know.

I'm a true believer of that. A couple months went by of her studying a lot and when I checked in, she still hadn't taken the exam and hadn't even scheduled it yet. So again, I asked her when she was gonna take it and she said, "I don't know everything yet Jana. I need to get a 40 on the exam". I thought, "A 40 on the exam? But why a 40?" So we talked a little about it and she told me that she wanted to ace the exam. She wanted to get every answer right. She wanted to perfect the exam. She wanted to be that one person who scored a 40. I told her how would anyone know what she scored on the exam? As a hiring manager for many, many years, I've never once asked an RD what they scored on the RD Exam. For one, it truly doesn't matter to me and never crossed my mind to even ask. But more importantly, I know the score someone gets on the RD Exam is not a reflection of the type of dietitian they'll be. If you have the right attitude, you want to learn, you get along with others, you'll fit in well with the team, and you have an open mind, that's what I look for. Because no matter what score someone gets on the RD Exam, it doesn't define your abilities as a dietitian. In fact, some of the stuff on the exam, you won't use on a day to day basis. You just have to have an entry-level understanding of the material. That's it. My point is that, her need to get a perfect score on the exam stopped her from taking it. If she just didn't feel ready, that's one thing. But to not take it because she wanted to get a perfect score, that's different. She didn't in the end get a perfect score. But she passed and is a FABULOUS dietitian as I knew she'd be.

And my need to put out a perfect podcast held me back from releasing it sooner. And I wonder who I could've reached and helped if I'd just released it in all its imperfections. It's to a perfect podcast because perfect doesn't exist. And nothing has gone exactly as planned because that's how life is. You think it's gonna go one way and that's when the universe says, "Um nope. But I have something so much better for you!"

So, you my friend, aren't perfect and that's ok. You're not meant to be. Your imperfections are what make you YOU. And if you're struggling with perfectionism, you can help yourself get through it. And I KNOW you will. And to help, I wanted to give you some tips you can start doing today to help you work through this. These are things I've personally done to help me overcome my moments of what feels like paralyzing perfectionism.

- 1) The first thing is to be reasonable with the goals you set. Let's take the goal of passing the RD Exam. The goal is to simply pass the exam. No one needs to know what score you get. And you don't need a perfect score to prove to anyone you're worthy of being a dietitian. You made it this far. You are more than worthy. You seriously just need to pass. You just need to get across the finish line. That's it. So if you keep postponing the exam but you've been studying for it, go ahead and schedule it. And if you're listening and you passed the exam already but perfectionism is stopping you from applying to that job you're dreaming of or maybe you're feeling doubtful of your abilities now that you're a dietitian, I want you to tell yourself, "I got this". Because you do. You've got this. The goal is to pass the exam. The goal is to get a job as a dietitian and get

experience. Don't ever underestimate any experience. Every single thing I've done as a dietitian has helped me get to where I'm at today. Don't put such intense goals in place or set expectations that can't reasonably be met. Just do your best and learn from your mistakes. Because we all make mistakes.

- 2) When you catch yourself spiraling into the land of perfectionism, stop what you're doing and breathe. And be mindful of what you're doing. Catch yourself in the act. Like my friend caught me picking up a stack of cards making sure every card faced the same way even though I knew a toddler will just throw them on the ground again in 0.2 seconds. Be aware of what you're doing and reflect on it. What's the worst that can happen if you're not perfect? Chances are, no one will notice the flaws or imperfections you notice. And if they do, it won't be enough for them to judge you. And if they do, well, then they're not your people. And the reality is, some people are just not your people. It's a hard lesson to learn but it's reality. And when you surround yourself with the right people, like my friend who caught me in the act of trying to be perfect, you'll feel so much better.
- 3) While I'm talking about mindfulness, be aware of the things that make you question yourself. Those things that are triggering that need to be perfect. Like social media. It's not reality. More and more people are trying to show the imperfections of life but it's still flooded with people showing this perfect, flawless life. And remember, social media, regardless of what someone posts, is still posted intentionally. It's been edited. I double check the images I post. The captions I write. Even reality TV isn't real. I don't know how truly real you can be when someone has a camera in front of your face. And of course, the content can and will always be edited. And let's just face it, life can't be edited. You can't go back and undo things or redo things. You can only move forward and make different choices. That's it. So be aware of what you're consuming and the impact it has on you.
- 4) And lastly, be kind to yourself. Be aware of the words you say to yourself. I've been known to not say the nicest things to myself. That was so stupid Jana. What were you thinking? Instead, I've learned over the years to reframe things. "You made the best decision in the moment Jana. Now you know better. You can make a different choice." I'd be lying if I said this was super easy and that I don't slip up. Of course I do. And I go through periods of time where it just feels harder than others. I'd say that makes me human. Who you surround yourself with has a huge impact too. If you have people around you tearing you down and not lifting you up, set boundaries to protect yourself from the negative energy. Because you deserve all the beautiful energy and kindness this world has to offer. So protect yourself from the things and people that make you feel like you need to be perfect. Who you are is enough.

You got this my friend. Whatever it is you're working towards. You can do it. You will do it. You're perfectly imperfect.

So when you start the criticism and you start to hold yourself back because you're worried it's not perfect, just know that no one is perfect. You can't be. It's impossible. But you're great and you're unique and you're exactly who you're supposed to be. The flaws are what make you human. So don't let your need for perfectionism hold you back from achieving all the amazing things you deserve in this life.

Stay on top of your study game. There's no limits to achieving the success you so deeply desire. Until next time.

[Music and Outro]