

## Stress monster loves perfectionists

Are you a perfectionist? If so, your parents or teachers may love you but the Stress Monster definitely loves you! Our over-achievement culture perpetuates the myth that perfectionism is a valuable trait which leads to success in life. Parents urge their children to do their best in everything they undertake, not realizing the harm they are doing to their children.

As a part of my ongoing quest to defang the Stress Monster, I'm going to discuss the problems with perfectionism and provide some advice to help you overcome the pitfalls of this myth. Too many of my clients suffer from perfectionism, finally coming to realize the negative consequences of this so-called character strength. I'll describe for you the devastating cycle of stress and defeat caused by this supposedly valuable characteristic.

If you are generally happy with yourself and your accomplishments, you're probably not a perfectionist. Perfectionists set impossible and unreachable goals, then of course fail to reach them. Even when some tasks appear to be accomplished perfectly, most, of course, are not. Chronic failure is inevitable as is the increasing pressure to try harder and better. Feelings of self-esteem created by past achievements will inevitably fade as doubt and self criticism mount. Because mistakes and even partial successes signify lack of perfection, fear of mistakes and external judgments increase. Failure to achieve goals is then seen as lack of personal value or worth. Perfectionists fear lack of acceptance if they let others see their flaws and therefore try harder to be perfect to protect themselves from criticism and rejection.

Perfectionists are often procrastinators. Worrying that they may be unable to reach their goals, they put off completing work to avoid the expected mistakes, criticism and failure cycle. In the procrastination phase they can still dream of great success in their work even while the minutes are ticking away from their planned work time. When perfectionism is seen as the secret of success, the next effort will be to try harder to reach these goals, beginning another round of the cycle. There's no time for relaxation and certainly no time for fun when the internal pressure for perfect achievement intensifies. Perfectionism ultimately results in rigid, all-or-nothing thinking and a crippling fear of mistakes and disapproval. Innovation and creativity are stifled. Too many people with high hopes for a better life actually find themselves on a path to anxiety and depression caused by perfectionism.

### Advice Line

by  
Dr. Betty Phillips



Now we know that the Stress Monster often operates under the mask of perfectionism. But you don't have to be caught up in this negative cycle! I recommend that you start by re-examining your achievement goals. They can be placed into four categories: perfect achievement; worthwhile achievement with effort; "so what" achievement; failure. Don't put any goals under perfect achievement or failure. Perfect is impossible and failure is a downer. So let's look at the meaningful achievement category. These would be goals that are important enough to you to put some time and energy into successful completion but without excessive time consumption or fear of failure. You expect your tasks to be completed well but understand that you may have missed some details. As an example, I want to write useful articles for the Chatham County Line but I don't have to be the ultimate expert on all these topics. The "so what" category is "So what if I don't achieve this goal, I'm still a worthwhile person." It's important to know that no one can achieve well in all areas of endeavor. Understanding this, a lot of people just avoid areas where they think they cannot achieve outstanding results. Unfortunately, then, they never know whether they might have achieved some success or enjoyment. If you say to yourself that participation but not achievement is important, you may categorize these areas as "so what" goals. As an example, I can't do many yoga poses but, so what, it's ok; I don't have to be a yogi to enjoy a yoga class. And I can do the savasana pose very well!

As the perfectionism topic is important, I'll continue the discussion in my next column with more tips for stressed individuals caught in the clutches of this destructive myth and for parents who want to raise capable but happy children.

#### Need advice?

Send Dr. Betty Phillips questions about individual, relationship, marriage or family issues to [BettyPhillips@BellSouth.net](mailto:BettyPhillips@BellSouth.net) or 466 Eagle Point Road, Pittsboro 27312. Questions can be anonymous. Betty looks forward to hearing from you!

## Destination Chatham: the writer's life

By Marjorie Hudson

In 1984 I moved to Chatham County to be a writer. I was already a writer, and editor, at National Parks Magazine in Washington, D.C., but as wonderful as that job was—writing and photo-editing about travel, adventure, and history—I had been hearing the call to go deeper. I knew the kind of writing I wanted to do didn't pay much. I wanted to live in the country. I needed a cheap place to live.

When the opportunity came, in the form of an old friend with a farmhouse in Chatham County who needed a roommate, I was interested. One day I visited that farmhouse. The rain cleared. A rainbow formed. I took it as a sign. I jumped without a parachute. I had no job, an ugly car that wasn't paid for, and a dog with city fleas. My dog needed some country fleas, and so did I.

The rent was \$50 a month, and I commenced to write poetry and essays about nature and life in the country. Then I got a job editing Southern fiction writers. Pretty soon I was turning my hand to fiction.

It took a while, but I began to see that there was a writer under every bush in North Carolina, and some of them lived in Chatham County. Correction—lots of them lived in Chatham County. Perhaps, like me, they needed a cheap place to live. Perhaps, also like me, they had been struck dumb, then inspired to write, by the gentle rolling pastures, the secret lives of deer and country people, the visitations of birds and frogs and foxes. The blessing of miles of sky.

The farmhouse sat on a rise at the end of a long dirt road, in a clearing surrounded by fruit trees and 90 acres of pines. It was painted white, and peeling, and some former hippie tenant had scribed a mandala on the wall just inside the front door in fine-point Magic Marker. I painted over it, but it bled through again and again. I finally left it there, a pale and pastel version of itself, hanging ghostlike in the hall.

I learned the house I was living in had been a gathering place for writers. Wallace Kaufman used to live here. I would glimpse Doris Betts at the Pittsboro Street Fair. I read the stories of Laurence Naumoff and glimpsed snatches of Chatham life in his pages.

The blessings that have fallen on my head as a writer in Chatham County have been better than any treasure-house of gold. Writing is the lonely art—we dance without partners in an empty room. I began to gather writers at my home to read to each other, get support and feedback. My writing groups

included Ralph Earle and Barbara Lorie, Carol Klevay, Nancy Peacock and Tony Peacock, Hal Kome and Lora Sparrow and Virginia Holman. A writing group with extraordinary writers in it can bring out the best in you, make you strive for more. I started a coffeehouse. We read aloud to friends, family, and complete strangers. I began to coach writers, who sometimes left their manuscripts in my mailbox, flag up, a distinctly rural ritual.

I began to notice that more and more writers had connections to Chatham County or were moving here. I learned about George Moses Horton, the first black man to publish a book in the South, and he became a guiding spirit in my own work. If a man living in slavery could sell poems and make good money from the back of a horse cart at a farmers' market, perhaps there was hope for me too.

In 2003 I published my first book and started teaching Kitchen Table Workshops—writers gathered in my kitchen, and the first few sessions I bribed them to come by offering a free lunch.

The workshops turned into collaborations with a local business, Rosemary House Bed & Breakfast, (owned by a talented writer, Karen Pullen), where writers could stay overnight if they were coming from out of town for classes. Karen's B&B parlor with fireplace and dining room table with chocolate chip cookies became the site of connection and new creative work for many writers.

In 2010, in the worst economy we've had for a while, I decided to expand my business by collaborating with some of my favorite community institutions. Now there are workshops at the General Store Café in Pittsboro, McIntyre's Fine Books in Fearington, and the North Carolina Arts Incubator in Siler City. Now, in this tough economy for writers and farmers and everyone else, writers are gathering, in small groups, in what I call "The Writing Insurgency"—creating the extraordinary community that comes from creating and sharing stories.

There are writers groups in Bynum and Moncure and all over, Al Manning's Writers' Morning Out in Pittsboro, Open Mikes at McIntyre's and CCCC and The Joyful Jewel, a new Creative Writing Program at CCCC, started by writers such as Judy Hogan, Chris Bouton, and Karen Pullen, and, as my old friend Lora Sparrow would say, Lord knows what else. When I feel like my writerly dance is a little too lonely, or the world is a little too cruel, I like to think of writers gathering, putting pen to paper, making a reality I can be inspired by and sharing their deepest hearts.

What I found at the end of my rainbow? A writer's life in Chatham County.

Marjorie Hudson's new book is "Accidental Birds of the Carolinas," stories of natives and newcomers, love and loss, in the South, from Press 53.

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