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Perfectionism Major Source of Stress Among College Students

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. -- Increasing numbers of college students are experiencing significant amounts of internal pressure to perform at unrealistically high levels, according to members of the counseling staff at Illinois Wesleyan University.

"In the past several years, we have seen more and more instances of students whose high expectations of themselves cause a variety of problems," says Connie Horton, director of Counseling and Consultation Services at Illinois Wesleyan. "There is, of course, the positive side of high expectations of self and conscientiousness. That is what has led the students to be successful. But it can go too far and leave students with an inability to tolerate mistakes and to feel as if 'I'm never good enough.'"

Such feelings, says Horton, lead to high levels of stress and may even leave some students so fearful of failing that they can become paralyzed with anxiety.

"What professors see is a late assignment, and they may think that the student doesn't care," says Horton. "The truth is, in many cases, they care way too much."

In response to the trend, the University's Counseling Service has offered workshops designed to help students cope with the stresses that their perfectionist thinking causes.

The students who participated in the seminar a year ago reported experiencing perfectionist thinking in different ways, according to Robyn Walter, co-leader of the seminar with colleague Andy Novinska.

"Some felt unable to make decisions, fearing making the 'wrong' one while some wanted help in managing the immense anxiety they felt. Still others valued their high drive, but just wanted to know how to cope with their stress better," says Walter, noting that some students also reported experiencing stress from academic competition with their peers.

Walter adds that these "perfectionists" are students who have maintained high levels of activity throughout their lives quite successfully but are now overwhelmed attempting to do the same at the university level.

Some of that pressure, Walter says, has to do with the fact that some students want to achieve as much as they can in college in light of the financial commitment that their families are making for them to attend.

According to Walter, counseling interventions focus on helping students explore the source of their perfectionist thinking, encouraging them to challenge some of their self-imposed expectations and consider creating more realistic or flexible goals, and give themselves permission to be human and make mistakes.

"We also want the students to increase their ability to be self aware, to attend and respond to their bodies' messages to take care of themselves by sleeping more, eating better, and taking breaks," says Walter. "We also give them strategies to self-soothe in response to high levels of stress and anxiety."

To discuss issues of perfectionism and college students with Horton or Walter, contact either Jeff Hanna or Ann Aubry at 309/556-3181.