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DA COMPREENSÃO DO PERFECCIONISMO À PROMOÇÃO DA SAÚDE MENTAL: SERÁ A LITERACIA SOBRE O PERFECCIONISMO A PRÓXIMA FRONTEIRA?

FROM UNDERSTANDING PERFECTIONISM TO PROMOTING MENTAL HEALTH: IS PERFECTIONISM LITERACY THE NEXT FRONTIER?

DE LA COMPRENSIÓN DEL PERFECCIONISMO A LA PROMOCIÓN DE LA SALUD MENTAL: ¿SERÁ LA ALFABETIZACIÓN SOBRE EL PERFECCIONISMO LA PRÓXIMA FRONTERA?

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EDITORIAL

FROM UNDERSTANDING PERFECTIONISM TO PROMOTING MENTAL HEALTH: IS PERFECTIONISM LITERACY THE NEXT FRONTIER?

We are living through a particularly challenging historical moment: Western culture has systematically valued excellence, productivity, performance, and achievement, while simultaneously bombarding us with messages about the importance of caring for our physical and mental health. In contexts where effort is required and being merely good is not enough, perfectionism is widely regarded as a positive quality, reinforced across various spheres of our lives. However, the scientific literature accumulated over the past decades presents a substantially different scenario. Multidimensional perfectionism can be defined as the tendency to establish and pursue extremely high and rigid personal standards, accompanied by frequent and excessive self-criticism, constant concerns about failure and mistakes, negative self-evaluation, and tying self-worth to achieving these standards (Flett & Hewitt, 2020; Frost et al., 1990). Taken together, research conducted in different contexts and involving diverse outcomes and age groups largely points—unlike what we tend to hear in a job interview or in a casual conversation at a bar—to the deleterious effects of high levels of perfectionism. Perfectionism has been consistently associated with anxiety- and depression-related conditions and symptoms, eating disorders, suicidal ideation, obsessive-compulsive disorders, marital dissatisfaction, social isolation, burnout, chronic pain, and poorer quality-of-life indicators (Flett & Hewitt, 2020; Limburg et al., 2017; Pinto et al., 2017; Smith et al., 2018; Stackpole et al., 2023). These findings underscore the importance of placing perfectionism at the center of mental health care. The marked increase in perfectionism further reinforces the need for strategies to identify and prevent it, as well as to develop effective interventions. Curran and Hill (2019) state that levels of perfectionism have increased dramatically over the past three decades and estimate a 32% increase among adults between 1989 and 2017.

In recent decades, considerable scientific effort has been devoted to understanding perfectionism. As Smith et al. (2022) point out, the number of articles indexed in PsycINFO increased from approximately 100 between 1990 and 1999 to nearly 2,500 publications between 2010 and 2019. Scientific output is not only extensive but also diverse in its subject matter. There are studies examining risk and vulnerability factors for the development of perfectionism; research focused on identifying types of perfectionists and differences among them; studies linking perfectionism to various mental health and psychological ill-health outcomes, as well as to educational and career outcomes; and studies conducted in the contexts of sport, dance, and exercise. However, how much of this knowledge has actually reached people? This article argues that mental health literacy can be viewed as a powerful and scalable strategy for prevention and health promotion by directly addressing the public's understanding of what perfectionism is and its effects.

Traditionally, mental health literacy is understood as “the knowledge and beliefs about mental disorders that aid their recognition, management, and prevention” (Jorm et al., 1997, p. 182). As Jorm (2012) points out, it is not merely a matter of possessing knowledge, but of being able to act for the benefit of one's own mental health and that of others. Mental health literacy has been shown to reduce stigma, increase knowledge about mental health conditions, and improve attitudes toward and intentions to seek help among both adults and children (Amaro-Rodriguez et al., 2022; Chen et al., 2024; Yeo et al., 2024). Even the WHO, although it does not use the term “mental health literacy,” has emphasized in its documents the need to expand knowledge about mental health in order to reduce stigma, empower people, and promote mental health.

In this regard, and understanding perfectionism as a transdiagnostic process with important negative impacts on mental health, perfectionism literacy could be understood as a set of knowledge, beliefs, and competencies that would enable people to recognize manifestations of perfectionism in themselves and others; differentiate perfectionism from a healthy pursuit of excellence; understand its risk factors and maintenance mechanisms; identify when perfectionism is causing distress or functional impairment; know evidence-based strategies for its management; and know when and how to seek help (Etherson et al., 2025). Perfectionism literacy could therefore be regarded as a relevant strategy for the prevention and promotion of mental health, to be integrated into school health, suicide prevention, university health, and occupational health programs.

If perfectionism is a transdiagnostic, modifiable process associated with the development and maintenance of multiple mental disorders, why do we still not treat it as a specific target of health literacy? Transforming scientific knowledge into literacy may be one of the most promising next steps toward reducing the impact of perfectionism on mental health.

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