

ACT for Perfectionism with Jennifer Kemp

Jennifer Kemp: [00:00:00] most of us, when we make a mistake, when we, uh, stuff up in some kind of way, we speak to us.

So it was like the first I should have done that better. How could I have been so stupid? Why have I made this mistake? And we just kicking ourselves when way down, we just, and it's like an amplifier for that, for that struggle that we're in.

Debbie Sorensen: That was Jennifer Kemp on psychologists off the clock.

We are four clinical psychologists here to bring you cutting edge and science-based ideas from psychology to help you flourish in your relationships, work and health.

I'm Dr. Debbie Sorensen, practicing in mile high Denver, Colorado, and coauthor of ACT Daily Journal

Diana Hill: I'm Dr. Diana Hill coauthor with Debbie on ACT Daily Journal, and practicing in seaside Santa Barbara, California.

Yael Schonbrun: From coast to coast, I'm Dr. Yael Schonbrun, a Boston- based clinical psychologist and assistant professor at Brown University.

Jill Stoddard: And from [00:01:00] sunny San Diego, I'm Dr. Jill Stoddard author of Be Mighty and The Big Book of ACT Metaphors.

Debbie Sorensen: We hope you take what you learn here to build a rich and meaningful life.

Diana Hill: Thank you for listening to Psychologists Off the Clock!

I am here with Katy Rothfelder, who is our dissemination coordinator, and we thought we'd bring her on because we talk a lot about Praxis, how Praxis sponsors this podcast they've, offer online, continuing education for professionals, everything from DBT to act training to compassion focused

therapy and Katy's had some personal experience with practice that I think would be helpful for you to all learn.

Katy Rothfelder: Yeah Diana. And I started out with Steven Hayes act immersion program, and that was really my first chance to get, you know, really in the act. And then since then I've had these kind of on-demand course opportunities., the one that really sticks out to me is Lou Lasprugato's feedback, enhanced act course, which was this. Beautiful mix of instruction for really difficult act concepts. And then in-depth learning with practice. that grew my muscles as a brand new clinician.

Diana Hill: so if you are interested in taking a Praxis course, go ahead and go to our website off the clock, psych.com and we have a discount code for you for some of the live courses, check them out. Praxis, continuing education.

This is Diana, and if you're a healthcare worker or a mental health therapist, you may find that some of your clients are caught in a tug of war with food and weight. They battle their body image and eating and are entangled in preoccupation about weight or feeling stuck in cycles of rigid dieting, overeating, shame, or hopelessness. I'm going to be offering a live online webinar. PESI continuing education on using act for eating and body image concerns.

And then I hope you'll join me on Friday, December 3rd, 2021 from 9:00 AM to 5:00 PM central standard time. You can learn [00:03:00] more through my events page at Dr. Diana hill.com. Hope to see you there.

Debbie Sorensen: Hi, this is Debbie. I'm here with Jill today to introduce an episode with Jennifer Kemp on acceptance and commitment therapy for perfectionism. Whether you're a perfectionist yourself or whether, you know, and love a perfectionist, I think there'll be something in this episode that that will be relevant and interesting to you.

Uh, Jill, what did you think about the episode

Jill Stoddard: Well, it's funny, Debbie, because when I first started listening, I thought, oh, I'm so not a perfectionist. Like this is something I probably won't be able to personally relate to, but I had read Jennifer's book. It's wonderful. I was excited to listen and the.

more I listened to it. Huh, maybe I do have some perfectionism that I just didn't label that way.

And you know, the two of you talked about how sometimes there are assumptions about what perfectionism looks like, but there's really not a typical kind of. Perfectionist. And one of the things [00:04:00] Jennifer mentions is she says for her it's, it's about being incompetent and this is why she buys so many books and does so many trainings.

And I thought, oh my gosh, that's me. And then she talked about giving assignments where she has people write your, your, or your, the wrong way. And I literally physically cringed, you know, like as a way to practice being imperfect and Tyler and I cringed, I thought, oh my God, I, I don't know if I could do it.

And, you know, there were just a number of things that, that showed up that I thought, oh my gosh, like the, I really do have a lot of these kind of tendencies and avoidance strategies. What about you?

Debbie Sorensen: no, I feel the same way. I don't generally consider myself to be highly perfectionistic, but there are certain areas where. I can get a little bit overly perfectionist and actually, you know, this list that is in her book and Jennifer's book lists some things that are a little bit surprising that could be forms of perfectionism, such [00:05:00] as, you know, having trouble making a decision or procrastinating or worrying a lot about not offending or hurting people, almost like a people pleasing type of perfectionist.

Jill Stoddard: Um,

Debbie Sorensen: that really got me thinking about how, you know, sometimes. shows up in unhelpful ways, but what's underlying, it is really this fear of not doing things right. Fearing that maybe, you know, if you don't achieve certain things or you don't do things just so that other people will judge you.

And it reminded me a lot of the **episode identity**. It's back with Meg McKelvie. We do a lot of work together on belonging and mismanaged yearning for belonging, belonging, and how sometimes our very efforts to keep up to a high standard so that other people will approve of us. And we will feel accepted by others actually backfire because we get so rigidly, like clinging on to everything

being [00:06:00] just perfect, that it actually makes it really hard sometimes for other people to relate to them.

Jill Stoddard: , I think that's so true and it makes me realize when I think about my own tendencies, I wouldn't consider myself a perfectionist if I'm like home alone and my house is messy, but if I were having people over, I would kick into overdrive of needing to pick every single.

Thing, you know, every piece of clutter up, up the counter and get rid of the dust bunnies. And I get really stressed out and really anxious. I make everybody around me miserable. Um, and yet if I go to a friend's house, and their house, isn't totally perfect and clean. I actually feel closer to them for being imperfect and human. You know, Jennifer at the end says something about this messy and imperfect, but fulfilling life.

And I just loved that so much. And it really reminded me how, you know, we tend to bond with each other and feel a greater sense of belonging. Like you're saying. when [00:07:00] when we're flawed, you know, when other people are perfect, that doesn't actually, I mean, not the perfect is even attainable, but when they have the appearance of being perfect, I think that actually diminishes our sense of connection with others.

And at the end of the day, like, isn't that really what we all desperately crave.

Debbie Sorensen: Right. And if we could just be more authentic, you know, imperfections and all, I think that that really would help us all feel that sense of common humanity. Right. That nobody's perfect. And that's okay. Right. That's not just, okay. That's what makes us lovable, right. Is all of our imperfections.

Jill Stoddard: Exactly.

Debbie Sorensen: well, we hope you enjoy this episode with Jennifer Kemp. We've also just wanted to share that we've done another episode in the past on perfectionism episode 88. If you want more resources, you can check that out. And there's also a book that's coming out.

In a couple of months called the anxious perfectionist, which is [00:08:00] also an act oriented book about perfectionism. When it's tied to anxiety, it's quite different from Jennifer's book, but that's another resource that you might want to be on the lookout as well.

If you want to learn more about perfectionism.

My guest today, Jennifer Kemp, is a clinical psychologist in Australia. She works with clients who are struggling with perfectionism, as well as

problems that are associated with perfectionism, like anxiety, depression, eating, and body image problems and obsessive compulsive disorder.

Jennifer integrates act behavior analysis, exposure and compassion focused therapy approaches in her therapeutic and consultation work. She also presents internationally on the topic of perfectionism.

She provides professional consultation to therapists, seeking to deepen their therapeutic skills and fluency in act. And she's also the author of a new book, the act workbook for perfectionism. It's terrific. You should check [00:09:00] it out. If you want to do a little self-help work on perfectionism, and we're going to be talking about the book today.

A welcome to the podcast, Jennifer, and congratulations on your book.

Jennifer Kemp: Thank you so much for having me I'm really, really thrilled to on psychologists off the clock. I just love these, these podcasts.

Debbie Sorensen: Oh, thank you so much. I think perfectionism, I'm really excited to have you here today, partly to honor the work that you're doing. I've attended one of your workshops before. Um, and you know, I see a lot of perfectionism in my work and around me. I think it's a really good topic because I think a lot of people can relate to that experience of perfectionism

Jennifer Kemp: Yeah. absolutely. I think the workshop you would have attended would have been the perfectionistic therapist a couple of years ago. And I, every time I present on that, people just like, yes, that's me like, oh my God, that's me. Like they, yeah. They seem to really, really like, it really [00:10:00] resonates with psychologists and other therapists working out there.

Um, we just had such high standards for ourselves and, um, just yeah. And then get really caught up in it, I think. And I still do it myself.

Debbie Sorensen: Right. Therapists and clients alike. I mean, it's they, right? I mean, there's a lot of it going around and actually I, along those lines, I think that often, not always, of course, but often as therapists, as psychologists, as you

know, mental health professionals, sometimes we get drawn to working with particular issues that we have experienced ourselves, or that that has personal relevance to us.

And I was just wondering if you could talk about your own personal story that led you into doing this particular kind of work

Jennifer Kemp: Yeah, sure. I, um, I've struggled with perfectionism my whole life, but it took me a long time to work out that that's what was going on. So I, um, I had an eating disorder when I was in my teens when I started [00:11:00] by dieting. Like you do so started by sort of hard dieting and wanting a thigh gap and wanting a flat stomach and all the things that my current clients, uh, you know, chasing and, um, such common goals for, for us to have.

And, um, and then out of the back of that, I didn't know how to eat properly. So it became very chaotic and I developed this kind of eating disorder that kind of lasted. I mean, I'd still say some degree meeting isn't completely normal. Um, but I kind of lasted a lot of years and I had a lot of anxiety across that time as well.

So in my mid twenties, I was still like, I've finished a university degree. I, um, in psychology as it, well, I was working in various roles here in Australia and also working overseas. So on the outside I was successful. But, um, if I got feedback from a manager or someone pulled me up on something in my work, I would just fall to pieces.

Like they wouldn't [00:12:00] necessarily see it, but I'd spend days just sort of, um, just telling myself off basically and working out what I should have done better. And, um, and I ended up kind of off the back of one of those jobs where I resigned because. Really stressful job, um, had a major depressive episode and it was only, um, like I went through all of that and I saw a therapist at the time.

Like I saw a therapist to help me with my eating disorder, um, and sort of get back on track with that. And it was really helpful. And I saw someone about anxiety in my twenties and, um, I wasn't working as a psychologist at the time was working as a business analyst that came back to psychology later in life.

But, um, and, and when I did, I went to a one day workshop with professor Tracey Wade. Who's actually, she's a world leader in eating disorders and has a book on perfectionism as well. And she's based here in Adelaide. And, um, I

went to a one day [00:13:00] workshop called perfectionism as a transactional stick process.

And it was, um, I walked in and she was playing this song, um, by Rachel Ferguson, never good enough. I've actually emailed her and got the link from that later on. Cause I needed to know what it was and I just heard this song never good enough. And my eyes just completely filled with tears. And this is I'm now it's around 30 by this point.

Um, I've been struggling away for years and years and, and being successful at the same time. And, um, I sat there that day and it just kind of all fell into place. For me like, oh my goodness, all of these problems that I've been struggling with all these years, there's one sort of common thread to all of that.

And that's this perfectionism that ties it all together. And I took sort of copious notes, not just of the content, but also sort of my own observations and how connected it for myself. And I took it back to my [00:14:00] therapist at the time. Um, and literally handed it over and said, this, this here, this is what I need to work on.

And no one, despite, you know, therapy being really helpful over these, no one had picked it up. No one had sort of said this way. You're behaving around setting really high standards for yourself and then kind of beating yourself up when you don't achieve them. Um, and, and, you know, being very scared of failing that this is what could have glues it all together.

So that, that was about, oh gosh. So what he is now going to age myself, um, It was, oh, it was, must've been over 30. It was 2011 when I went to this workshop, I think. So I was just starting a master's in clinical psychology at the time. And, um, I ended up doing my thesis on perfectionism as part of that and starting to work with perfectionistic clients since then obviously start working on my own stuff too.

So I've been working on that now for [00:15:00] over a decade and I still keep stuffing it up, but like in terms of falling into perfectionistic traps, but I've come a long way. And my clients, it taught me a whole load as well. So, uh, yeah, so it it's, it's amazing to me. And why, one of the reasons I feel so passionate about talking about this and sharing it with people is that it took me going to the therapist to say, Hey, this is something I need to work on.

Um, this is not just sort of part of who I am like a part of my personality. This seems like something that I could change. And that's when I started working.

Debbie Sorensen: You know, I appreciate you sharing your story. Thank you I think your work has helped me see that often. It really does underlie multiple things that are going on on the surface. So eating and body image, anxiety, of course, Depression some of these other kinds of Struggles that people get into.

And so interesting to me that you went to that workshop and [00:16:00] tears showed up because I've actually seen that a few times in clients where if perfectionism comes up and how hard people are on themselves, that there's a emotional reaction to that, which often just really indicates that's what's going on.

Jennifer Kemp: Yeah, absolutely. Well, isn't that how it works in therapy. So where the tears show up, that's where the important stuff is. So yeah, if you starting to touch on those sort of themes of like just never being good enough, for example, you'll say people just do the same that I did just kind of, their eyes flooded with tears.

They tighten up in their bodies. They instead of sit in, choking up, you know, you're in the right places with therapists when that's happening. Right.

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah, you've hit something. You've had a nerve. Yeah. So in your book, one of the things that you you write about is that there are, there's helpful perfectionism, there's unhelpful perfection, and then [00:17:00] there's also clinical perfectionism where it's really interfering with people's lives to a significant degree.

I'm curious your thoughts about how would you, what would you be on the lookout for it, you know, for one of our listeners, maybe to have a sense of, is this perfectionism okay. No big deal or is it actually a problem for me? What would be some of the indicators

Jennifer Kemp: Yeah. So it's ultimately whether it's causing problems in your life, I'll often say to people, we don't need to change everything about what you're doing. You don't need to be perfect at this. Um, always, always,

Debbie Sorensen: Right.

Jennifer Kemp: always a paradox of working with perfectionistic people as they try to do that perfectly, of course.

That's part of the work that you're doing. Um, trying to, I guess there's often talk about it kind of tipping over an edge, like sort of, if we could just scale this back 10% so we could kind of bring it back to the helpful aspects. So [00:18:00] those helpful aspects kind of striving towards things that are really important to you.

Being able to change your approach to that so that you could adjust it. If it's not working and try something new, feel a sense of achievement and accomplishment with that. Like there they're all the great things about perfectionism, like wanting to do a great job. There's nothing wrong with that. And I always really pointed out.

I'm not trying to make, like, make you kind of average here. I'm not trying to just kind of make you aim for mediocrity. We need to just like, keep on striving to do a great, great job. There's nothing wrong with that. And you probably wouldn't change it even if I asked you to, so let's not waste our time here.

I think that's a great thing, but where it becomes a problem is that like it tips over the edge and that's where behavior is being driven by the things that we're scared of. So, um, and the, the major thing is fear of failure. So that's where your kind of behavior becomes kind of [00:19:00] rigid and around rules.

And you starting to notice that like, instead of like wanting to do well at uni, you must always get A's or here in Australia, McComb high distinctions, and then you must have a perfect GPA. And then it's like, I must have a perfect score in every assault. matter how much it's worth all the time. That's when it starting to become really rigid.

And rule-bound, and I would say that at that end, where on a sort of slippery slope towards more OCD. So when I'm working clinically with people, I'm also assessing for that. If I'm seeing that really rigid behavior, because I do think that sort of a continuum here and that OCD is kind of at one end of that.

So we do need to, to be checking for that, um, that even when it's become kind of stuck on those standards as a therapist, it's like, I must help every client in every session all the time. Like how easy it is to kind of get hooked into that [00:20:00] expectation of ourselves. And the other thing you'd be seeing in people is, I guess if you're always setting that really high standard, and you're

really scared of not achieving it, so failing in some way, um, then really beating yourself.

If you don't get there. So that's constant perfectionistic, self criticism, like nitpicking and watching everything that you do. Um, a lot of us struggle with self criticism. I think it's a, it's a just, I think it's part of the human condition, honestly. Uh, but I think it can become very perfectionistic around like fault-finding and trying to usually doing it to avoid making mistakes in the future because I've got to pick up every single thing I've done wrong and make sure that I noticed so that I don't do it again.

Um, I think that, that those are the kinds of behaviors that you're seeing. So lots of checking and rewriting or avoiding things altogether. So don't make a mistake and picking on myself, criticizing myself if I don't. And then [00:21:00] ultimately at the end of that, that's going to have some pretty negative impacts on your life.

Isn't that? And so I think that's the ultimate measure in the end.

Debbie Sorensen: we'll pick up on a few of those threads a little bit later to unpack those a little bit more, if that's okay with you. And I want to just highlight the cost. I think you, you talk in your book. I think about a few different areas where the cost can be high. And there's actually two, I wanted to ask you about the first is I do a lot of work in the area of burnout.

And you mentioned that a couple of times throughout your book, just stress and burnout. Um, what, what do you think is the link between perfectionism and burnout or stress for people

Jennifer Kemp: yeah, it's great question. It could be a number of things. So burnout could come from, I guess, and you're the expert in this, so please correct me if I'm [00:22:00] wrong. But I would say from overworking, striving too hard and kind of getting stuck, spending too long, doing certain things. So I know, I do know some therapist, she spent a long time writing up their notes because they don't want to get in trouble down the track of their notes.

Aren't great if they get, you know, subpoenaed by court or something, or they want to make sure they've perfectly captured all of the content in the sessions. So they spend a lot of time say writing up their notes. And, um, this has, uh, it's adds onto their day, an extra hour, hour or more of work. So it sort of

contributes to burnout like that extra work, that extra time and that needing for it to be perfect can really grind you down.

Debbie Sorensen: um,

Jennifer Kemp: And I think probably, I think it's a bit of a stereotype to think that all. Um, perfectionist the kind of high achievers, because actually I often see the opposite as well. Often see people who are struggling to do anything because they can't do it to their own [00:23:00] standards. So I think burnout can come from pulling away from the things that are really important to you because you don't want to stuff them up.

You don't want to do badly. And then you kind of get disconnected

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah. Disconnection. Totally.

Jennifer Kemp: Yeah. Which leads to depression. Right. That's one of the major causes of depression is soon being disconnected from the things that are important to us, whether they be relationships or, or meaningful work. Um, yeah. The kinds of things that really make a difference to us.

So that's how I would say. Yeah.

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah. I think, I just know I was reading something about parental burnout and how parents who have this belief that they must be the greatest parent ever all the time are at higher risk for burnout because it's right. It's just too stressful. Nobody can really do that. And so that chronic stress of trying to be so good all the time.

Jennifer Kemp: Oh my goodness. You have absolutely fallen into that. Particularly when the kids were younger, like trying to do be the [00:24:00] perfect mum and it just was so stressful. And I think it made me more grumpy, you know, and I'm trying to be perfect. So then I'm just getting frustrated and I'm getting grumpy and that's taken even further away from being what I wanted and what vicious cycle.

Debbie Sorensen: Well, that's a good segue into the other cost of perfectionism. I wanted to highlight that. I think it's maybe the most important one, which is the toll on relationships. Could you talk a little bit about what you've seen. With that, with how perfectionism can, you know, get in the way of relationships.

Jennifer Kemp: Yeah, well, I guess it can, that could happen two ways. I think there's a whole book in that and I, um, unpacking that. I, um, first of all, if we're expecting ourselves to be perfect in a relationship that can really put a lot of, um, a lot of pressure on how you behave in a relationship. I see it a lot. When I work with young [00:25:00] adults who are dating at the moment, dating just seems to be on the whole quite toxic and the online dating scene.

So trying to like present perfectly and have the, like the witty response and. Really it's really performative. Isn't that, that kind of, and look, you know, look perfect. So needing to go out on a date or whatever, looking amazing, and it's just not real. So you're not actually getting to know people and it gets in the way of making connections.

And then I think it gets in the way of making connections in general with people. And particularly if you also hold perfectionistic standards for other people that can, like, if you're in an established relationship and you're expecting your partner to be perfect. And my husband has given me permission to say that he is also perfectionistic.

So it has definitely caused tension at times, um, of like having expectations that just because [00:26:00] you know, that you should be doing something that you automatically will be doing something that you won't forget it or overlook it and having those expectations can cause a lot of conflict as well. So many ways, there'd be a couple of ways anyway, it could undermine relationships.

Yeah.

Debbie Sorensen: Absolutely. Yeah.

Jennifer Kemp: to start by working on yourself, but having an, and, and that, that those work relationships to having hun realistic expectations of like the people in your team or your peers can be very, very stressful and make you very, um, unsatisfied at work frustrated too.

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah. No one can ever quite meet your standards.

Jennifer Kemp: No.

Debbie Sorensen: You know, you mentioned that there are some assumptions about what perfectionism looks like, right. That high-achieving person or

someone who's very meticulous about things or something like that. But actually you say in the book, there's no typical [00:27:00] perfectionist, right?

There's all kinds of variations of this. And you have a list of perfectionistic behaviors, which was really striking to me to look at it because some of it was very surprising to me. Um, I don't know why it was just like different domains that you might not even associate with perfectionism. So I was just wondering, could you give, maybe just for listeners who have that same assumption about what perfectionism looks like. Could you give some examples of some of the different forms that you might see in your practice?

Jennifer Kemp: Yeah. So I work a lot with chronic health problems and have done for a long time. I used to work in the cystic fibrosis unit at the big teaching hospital here. Um, and cystic fibrosis is, uh, a life limiting chronic like genetic disorder that affects your lungs and your digestion, multiple organs. Um, and, uh, I found it a lot amongst clients there who were [00:28:00] really struggling to actually progress in their lives.

So they've been sort of raised with. I had 60 year old clients who would told that they wouldn't make their teens. It was still, you know, had made it to their sixties. Um, but I had a lot of sort of young 20-something clients, often guys, not always who had really struggled to make the transition from adolescence where I'm picking them up at 18 because I was in the adult service.

So they'd really struggled to, to make the transition from adolescent where mum and dad controlled all their treatments. They have to do various inhalers and puffers and take certain medications every time they eat as well as every day. And, um, th they'd struggled to sort of take control of that for themselves.

So they would. Really, um, taking any ownership over their treatments and they were spending their days kind of hiding out. And I think, uh, like gaming and, [00:29:00] um, not that hadn't built no friends, perhaps it hadn't finished schools, they sort of just dropped off the planet. So my job was to sort of help them get back into their lives and, uh, and find purpose and meaning.

But where, what I often found was I had these sort of perfect expectations of themselves. So I must be doing the, doing my Pulmozyme inhaler. So I had to do it twice a day and then not doing it at all. Uh, and so this sort of idea of perfectionistic goal setting and chronic health problems is really, I find like super useful to sort of think of it that.

Because, um, what I end up working on is trying to increase the frequency of that behavior over time, rather than set what I would call like a perfect forever goal, where I'm supposed to start doing my, um, my Pulmozyme every day and continue every day for the rest of my life, doing it twice a day, [00:30:00] perfectly.

And of course, by the second day I've forgotten and I've failed. And so I've had many of those experiences. So now I'm not going to do it at all. I was, I give out, I don't want to go back through that cycle of like expecting myself to do a perfectly and then not, not being able to live up to that standard.

So breaking that down as being really important, you'll see. Um, you'll see it a lot in, um, weight related issues. So I also work now was weight with a corner as a chronic health concern. So what a lot of people who, uh, have larger bodies, uh, binge eating, um, Mixed between binging and restricting and, uh, that also set these perfectionistic goals.

Whereas I'm going to say, so what would be one small thing that you think, you know, that you could start, we could work on. I'm going to go for a walk every day.

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah.

Jennifer Kemp: Well, you're not, you're not doing like, you feel like dying, laughing, like, [00:31:00] you know what, no one can do that goal. There's going to be rain. There's going to be work.

There's going to be low motivation. So we stopped by saying, okay, I'm going to see you in two weeks. Let's see how many walks you can get done. And if you can get done two or three, great, you know, if you can go once, well, that's one more than you were doing and we'll start there and we'll build on that.

We'll start to build up that behavior at a time. So I think you see it a lot in those kinds of goals. And, um, and they're the ones that don't kind of stand out. I also see a lot of clients who have very, like, I must have a perfect GPA, that kind of thing as well. I seem to have a lot of university student type age clients.

Um, but I do. Yeah. I certainly see it as well in, in just people not doing anything at all.

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah. So I think that's so counterintuitive because it can sometimes turn into this all or nothing thing where it's like, well, I can't do it perfectly, so I'm going to do [00:32:00] not, or I'm going to just completely give up on it.

Jennifer Kemp: I didn't play any sport as a teen. Like I was like, don't I, I'm not good at this. I'm not naturally coordinated. So I just please don't make me do sport team sport. High-touch just opted out and he's on my good.

Debbie Sorensen: Well, in that, in that list that you have in your book where you talk about different behaviors, perfectionistic behaviors, it wasn't a lot of different domains, you know, you're keeping your home a certain way, but it could also look like hoarding behavior. It could, you know, could show up in your hobbies.

It's like, well, I'm not going to learn to play the guitar because I won't be, you know, Jimmy Hendrix or something like that. So why bother? You know, it's, it's just interesting to me, it's, it's shows up in ways that you might not expect, but underneath it, it's the same type of, you know, high standards and perfectionistic thinking, driving the behavior.

Jennifer Kemp: yeah, yeah, absolutely. You [00:33:00] can really fall out in any different, all sorts of different.

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah. Um, I think one of the things that's really, I just want to highlight it again and maybe unpack it a little bit is what's really driving it deep down, like taking a deeper look at, and this is why I appreciate the acceptance and commitment therapy approach that you take in your workbook, what's really at the heart of perfectionism, is that underlying emotional discomfort, right.

Whether it's fear of failure, shame, shame around failure. Could you talk about how you approach, I guess what's really going on underneath

Jennifer Kemp: Yeah. Sure. So. Well, I think all of us want to avoid feeling uncomfortable. Don't we, um, even say this to my clients and my trainees, even unicellular organisms will move away from something that is uncomfortable. That is an aversive thing for them and humans and are different. [00:34:00] So if you framed up failing as something that's unwanted, which honestly, by, I think by definition, it is right.

Like no one goes out, no one goes out there and says, Hey today, I'm going to file. Like, let's have a great day like that. Despite what they might say in motivational, you know, like the motivational YouTube channels, no one would do that. Really. I think, um, So by definition, we want to avoid that. And when I say failing, I kind of mean in the broadest sense.

So failing, being, making a mistake, being rejected by other people, feeling incompetent in some way. Uh, and, and any of those can trigger a sense of shame and humans will go a long way in particular to avoid feeling shame. So they will, um, it w it shapes a huge amount of our, our behavior. So, we [00:35:00] can sort of think about this, this.

One thing, like for me, it's being incompetent, which is one reason why I buy so many books and it tends to many trainings is because, um, I don't want to be in confident and it causes really unhelpful behaviors in, in therapy. I think for me, because I do a lot of like needing to be like do it. Right. Kind of behaviors.

And, um, a lot of like mulling over what I could be doing better, which isn't always really helpful. I've got better at not doing that, but it drives a lot of, kind of probably reassurance seeking behavior on my part that I'm doing, doing okay. So that underneath the kind of like the engine room for perfectionism is the sort of fear of mistakes, failure being rejected and feeling shame.

And so we want to get away from those uncomfortable feelings. Um, it really helped me in what we talk about in the book is sort of identifying kind of when that show. [00:36:00] So I, I noticed that when I ever make, when I make a mistake and I feel incompetent, I get like a clenching sick feeling in my stomach. If it's really bad mistake, I'll feel nauseas, I'll feel really like, just like sick to my stomach and a lot of sort of anxiety and tension out of that.

So a lot of sort of tightness in my chest, those physical sensations are really uncomfortable and unwanted. And that's what we talk about in the acceptance and commitment therapy. Isn't it? It's like, how do we still do the things that are important to us, even in the presence of these kinds of uncomfortable feelings?

So I think the first place to start is identifying when they show up and noticing that, and then pausing it long enough to sort of make a choice. How am I going to behave? Even though I feel uncomfort.

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah. I think it's so important to acknowledge that because if people are working, if people are looking to change that pattern and get

[00:37:00] off the perfectionism train, you know, that is going to all show up, right. That holds that stuff that you're talking about, the discomfort inside, the, the feeling in the pit of your stomach.

Jennifer Kemp: Yeah. Yeah. And if we wait until that goes away to make a change, what makes a change? Because ultimately we have to kind of do things, even though we feel uncomfortable doing them. And that, that essentially is, I guess, one of the themes of the book is helpful. Helping people find ways to make those changes.

And again, we don't need to change everything. It might be just very small things, very small habits that are kind of heading us down a direction that. Proving to be very unhelpful for us. Um, how to get clients, to sit with me and send a text with a spelling mistake in it, like, and watch score, like just the thought of that.

Like, I want you to write your and you're like, do the wrong [00:38:00] one what's um, and making a mistake like that is just, uh, just to test out like, okay, now what shows up? What is going to be the kind of, um, what are those sensations that are showing up right now? Because those are the same ones that are going to show up when you try these other things that you need to, when you send that email to your boss without checking it 10 times, or, um, yeah.

Submit your report early without having done those 15 extra reviews or those kinds of things. So,

Debbie Sorensen: Do you encourage your clients to do these things on purpose as a little form of exposure therapy?

Jennifer Kemp: Yeah. I do use a bit of exposure therapy. So, I mean, I think honestly, the skills that you learn in to treat OCD, you can almost use any way. I think I heard, I heard Lisa Coyne say that recently, um, that it's like a framework for therapy [00:39:00] and I, and I'm doing acts when I'm integrating that idea of like, let's see if we can like, get clear on how we're going to feel.

So let's bring it right now into the room, like, and let's create an experience where you feeling it right now. Cause otherwise it's just all theoretical and you go home and it's just too hard or you're too busy. And of course it is because it's really hard to make yourself feel uncomfortable. So let's practice that here a little

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah.

Jennifer Kemp: Yeah.

Debbie Sorensen: I think that people can take a look at your book for some really helpful strategies around how to do some of this. On their own, or if you're a therapist listening, what you can do some of this with your clients. And I think for instance, you have some strategies for increasing flexibility, you know, for, for having a bit more willingness to feel some of that discomfort for being a little bit more flexible around self stories and that kind of thing.

So I think that [00:40:00] it's really helpful to me to think about some ways to loosen up on some of this and to get out of that whole cycle, um, so that you can be flexible, especially if something's not working in your

Jennifer Kemp: Yeah. Yeah. That's not easy to do. Right. I like to sit at the same seat at the dining table because it's the one closest to the kitchen and I'm running in and out. But, so that was my justification for choosing that one. But now it's like, oh, I feel weird sitting somewhere else. But just little things like that.

I'm just loosening it up a little can be really good because it just puts us into that little zone of being uncomfortable. It's not a mistake, but it. Instead of nudging into being more flexible, which I think is great. Um, talk about like that curiosity and, um, willingness. So willingness to feel uncomfortable is one of the key things it's really hard.

Um, it's you got to somehow make a choice to feel uncomfortable and [00:41:00] trying something new,

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah. And I think it is it's what is keeping perfectionism going is often that people don't want to feel that. And so it just maintains it, it keeps it going over time. It reinforces it. And

Jennifer Kemp: Yup. And the more you do it, the more it's reinforced exactly. Because the behavior that you're doing takes away that uncomfortable feeling. So that's like negative reinforcement, basically. That's what that's called. It just means that you're more likely to do that behavior again, uh, because you, because it was.

Everything we doing makes sense. You know, it works. It's just that in the, in the short term, it's just in the long term, it's starting to cause problems. And so, yeah, just, I'll just read it through one more time and I'll just check that email one more time. It works. Like, I feel a little reassured that it's, the quality is better or that I haven't made any [00:42:00] mistakes, but then I'm staying back at work for an extra couple of hours a day because it's taking me so long to get my work done because I'm doing all of this checking.

Now that's a problem. And, uh, so we have to start with the small behavior in order to fix that bigger problem.

Debbie Sorensen: Right. You're losing sleep because five hours later you're tweaking your paper or your PowerPoint slides. And

Jennifer Kemp: Oh, my PowerPoint slides. Oh my goodness. To that one caught me recently. I can tell you that story. Um, I just did a, I did a workshop for Praxis. It's the first one that I've done. I know that you have a relationship with Praxis. Um, so you're familiar with them and for me, I'd built it up to this like massive thing in my head.

Uh, I had to come up with, at least half of the content was completely new and every time I present, I rework my content [00:43:00] anyway. So it's, it's never the same. Like I'm always refining my thinking. So everything has a new wash over it, but some of it is, you know, what is perfectionism that the core of that doesn't change.

But I spent, oh gosh, I had six months notice that I was going to run this course because we picked it to run in the fall and the U S and. We organized it back in January or something. I went down this whole rabbit hole of like, trying to think about curriculum design and refreshing my memory on how to do that total waste of time.

And then I came up with, you have to do these sort of big forms for like getting CES. Uh, so I had to come up with a curriculum and learning goals and I did all of that. That was a lot of work. And then I had to create it. And somehow, whilst I created the framework, I spent so long just messing about with the format of it, that there was still big pieces.

Like I was behind despite having six [00:44:00] months to write this thing, I was behind, oh, it was a week out. I'm going, I haven't even finished it, which is

like, there was no reason for that to have happened, but yet I hadn't even been. And then, um, and then I got, I built it up to be this, this huge thing in my head.

Um, and the night before, like across the week before, because it was Friday mornings for me, Thursday evenings for the U S and across the week leading up, I just got more and more anxious. And the night before I was like, I'm not even going to sleep. Like, I'm so nervous, even though it, the first session was pretty much all familiar content.

Like I know this stuff standing on my head was so anxious and I think it went fine in the end, but the next week I had to give myself a really big talking to in the kindest way, because I practiced so compassion, maybe, um, I realized that my perfectionism had just kicked in this [00:45:00] massive amount of anxiety and it wasn't sustainable.

And I needed to just to calm them down and really like, you've got. Okay. You know, this stuff, um, you've learned some things about what works and doesn't work in this particular context. Use that for the next one. Um, finish off the presentation and just do it, just do it and see how it goes. And each one got easier, but how am God?

I couldn't believe it. 10 years, 12 years I've been working on this and I just completely fell back into that, that trap. And this is how it goes. It was like, this was really important for me, this workshop, like it really I'd built it up to be this thing and I had to do it exceptionally and it meant so much to do it that well.

and that's where I it'll like it fell apart for me. I think it went fine. Like the feedback is it went fine. Um, but you know, for me personally, it was just my goodness.[00:46:00]

Debbie Sorensen: I think what I love about this story so much is just how it's so human, how easily we slip back into old patterns. And it sometimes just takes us a while, even if we literally wrote the book about it. And we are, you know, you're doing the irony of doing the training on perfectionism and not realizing I'm just picturing you tweaking every little, you know, font size and changing around your, up in there. yeah.

Jennifer Kemp: totally totally spent. I spend a lot of time. That's why I want one area with perfectionism still does catch me. I do in general, spend a lot of time preparing for particularly conference presentations and work. And I don't

mind it because sometimes that, that tweaking that I'm doing is me. I'm sort of doing it while I'm thinking, like it's a process of thinking through I'd spent.

I think it, I think it comes across. I spend a lot of time thinking about how much I can fit into that [00:47:00] time. What are the key things that the audience really wants? Okay. I spend a lot of time thinking about that. And sometimes I'm doing that while I'm fiddling with the font size. Sometimes I'm just fiddling with the font size as well.

And, um, yeah. And so I do spend longer. I don't mind that to a point, but this was ridiculous.

Debbie Sorensen: yeah. Cross the line from helpful perfectionism to unhelpful. Didn't it?

Jennifer Kemp: And, and here's the funny part. I didn't even kind of realize until I came out the other side of that first of, so it was full weekly workshops and, um, I came out the other side of that weekly worship. I was actually reading someone else's book on perfectionism. That's coming out next year. And then I went, oh, that's me.

I took reading someone else's book to actually go, oh my goodness, this is what I'm doing.

Debbie Sorensen: How funny.

Jennifer Kemp: Yeah. I know. You know?

Debbie Sorensen: You [00:48:00] have to get that perspective shift.

Jennifer Kemp: Yeah. So

Debbie Sorensen: Let's talk a little bit more about self-criticism if that's okay, because that's come up, that's been peppered throughout the conversation so far, but I think it's so key to talking about perfectionism, and I'm just curious both with your clients. And also it sounds like you've been prone to it yourself as well. And as you do things like put books out into the world and write talks and that kind of thing. Could you maybe just talk a little bit about what that might look like and any thoughts around the most effective way to work with self critical thinking?

Jennifer Kemp: Yeah. I think it's great that you've picked that up, um, as a key point, because if you don't have a lot of time and you're working with someone or you're working on this yourself and you want to pick the things, that'll make the biggest difference, then tackling the self-criticism. It's one of those two things.

The other one is those unhelpful habits that unpacking that. [00:49:00] And then the self criticism and trying and learning how to be more compassionate towards yourself is the other thing, if you don't have a lot of times do that, that has made the biggest difference for me is learning how to speak to myself with a warmer, kinder kind of tone.

Like I could have spent that week between the first and the second workshop, really telling myself off, getting anxious, what would be the point? Honestly, it's just going to make me feel worse. So picking that up and going okay. And a that's gone and be like, it's okay. this, we get into this habit of essentially kicking ourselves from it.

even like, I shouldn't be so anxious about this, you know, I can't believe that I, I just got so worked up and spent too long on this. Like what is the point? Um, the metaphor that I use in the book and I actually, I used this with a [00:50:00] client yesterday is the two teachers metaphor. Um, I don't know if it would be useful to sort of go through and just describe perhaps yet.

So I'll just tell it to you, Debbie. Like I would tell anyone else, so. If you imagined that you had an, I think you do have school-aged kids. So imagine that you had like, um, a young child who who's just starting school. So they had like a normally developing child, some strengths and some things they're not so great at, um, to help sell, were struggling to learn how to read or struggling to sit down.

Well, you know, these still in class or struggling with numeracy, something like that. So just a normally developing child and they have, um, they're just starting out at school and they have two teachers, um, severely lacking a job share situation. And, uh, so one teacher comes up to your child and says, why can't you do this already?

I've already shown you. You should be doing this better by now. [00:51:00] Need to get your act together, sit down and get your work done. Look like, I

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah. I'm just

Jennifer Kemp: like.

Debbie Sorensen: like, I felt a reaction to that,

Jennifer Kemp: Yeah, right. I need to, every time I say it, I have to say like, oh my stomach feels a little bit sick. Um, yeah, horrible. Right. Um, that's one of the way one teacher talks to your child and, um, then they, your child has another teacher as well, and this teacher's completely different. Um, she comes and she sits down next to your child, says, Hey, I can see you're really struggling here.

Um, show me where you are at and what you need help with. Let's go through a couple of questions together. Um, and let's just see if we can do a few more before we even go out to play. Um, which teacher would you prefer for your child?

Debbie Sorensen: Oh the second without, uh, even a hesitation. Yeah,

Jennifer Kemp: Um, which takes you, do you think is going to help them? Long-term learn and grow was a little human.

Debbie Sorensen: the [00:52:00] second.

Jennifer Kemp: Right. And which teacher is more like the way that you would talk to yourself?

Debbie Sorensen: Well, yes, it depends, but when you're in that self-critical place and when you're being so hard on yourself, which we all get there sometimes I definitely hear a little bit of that voice of the first.

Jennifer Kemp: The first and most of my clients would say, oh, like, you can just say that the first, um, I've know that you've been worked, probably working on that yourself for, for a while, given the work that you do. But, um, most of us, when we make a mistake, when we, uh, stuff up in some kind of way, we speak to us.

So it was like the first I should have done that better. How could I have been so stupid? Why have I made this mistake? And we just kicking ourselves when

way down, we just, and it's like an amplifier for that, for that struggle that we're in. So we, we need to learn how to speak to us. So it was like the second time.

That's [00:53:00] those Mo those elements of self-compassion, which are, um, the skills of self-compassion, um, motivation to help, you know, that what do you need right now? Um, and nonjudgmental voice. Like I can see that you're struggling here, um, and still holding ourselves accountable with that, that teachers still want to still said, let's do a few more before we go out to play.

I think we can think that we need to be hard on ourselves to be motivated, but actually we can still motivate ourselves through encouragement, through warm, through kindness, through being nonjudgmental. I think in the long term, um, tackling that as made the biggest difference. Doing things like these podcasts, writing a book, um, public speaking.

I didn't think I could have ever done that before. I kind of found a way of, of dying. Okay. So that didn't work so well, like let's, you know, what do you [00:54:00] need or what do we need to work on here and finding a kind of way of talking to myself? I think honestly, I really would, if, if I was still beating myself up the way I was doing it in my mid twenties, I'd never be able to do this kind of

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah, you would probably, it would be too painful to do if you were talking to yourself in that way.

Jennifer Kemp: I,

be scared, stopped.

Debbie Sorensen: I had a client literally today who said she's so much harder on herself than she ever would be to anyone else. So anyone who can resonate with that should check out the book because you have a whole chapter.

How to be more compassionate toward yourself, how to be kinder to yourself, into work on that voice, the voice of the second teacher, who's a little bit more encouraging and it's really the, the antidote to that. Self-critical

Jennifer Kemp: Yeah.

Debbie Sorensen: tone. The self-criticism that shows up.

Jennifer Kemp: I know you shouldn't play favorites, but chapters six and seven sniffle can probably gender. [00:55:00]

Debbie Sorensen: It's what, uh, it's what the world needs. Right? We all need just a little more compassion.

Jennifer Kemp: yeah. Um, we used the passengers on the bus metaphor to, to, to work on like how we can be that, like how that self-critical voice considered drive the, try to drive the bus, like down the road, if you're, if you're the driver of this bus and how does that, that passenger, that so critical passenger influence, um, and learning to speak to yourself in a way.

And, um, that is more warmer and less judgemental and learning not to respond. I see all the pieces that, so even though I sitting right in that book, I would be saying stuff like that. So I apologize despairing, but this is what was going on in my head. It's like, this is shit. This is shit. No one's going to like this.

Like, oh, literally some days just constantly this issue, that's just going on and on and on in my head. Um, and I didn't let it stop me writing the book. And so I decided that I was going to hit down the road to where I wanted to go.

[00:56:00] Uh, it's painful. Those days were exhausting. Um, hearing that over and over again, but in the end, it quietened down because I wasn't doing what it wanted me to do.

I wasn't letting that determine the road that I wanted to take.

So

Debbie Sorensen: yeah. You kept writing.

Jennifer Kemp: yeah. I kept writing. I've got another book in my head still I've already started planning it, so yeah. And I'm not going to let this voice derail that one either.

Debbie Sorensen: It's funny. I gave a presentation recently and I caught myself, you know, these online presentations where you're staring at this screen and you can't even see anybody. And I just kept thinking, this is so boring. I'm boring everyone. This is, and then I did a, a thought, a cognitive diffusion exercise as part of the workshop.

And I noticed I was having that thought that I was able to, to recognize, okay, I'm just being so critical here. I don't know if I'm boring people or not, but [00:57:00] I'm going to keep going.

Jennifer Kemp: Yeah, yeah,

Debbie Sorensen: I can maybe stop beating myself up over how boring I am.

Jennifer Kemp: Yep. Or maybe just keep presenting anyway, even though that is still going on in your head. There it is

Debbie Sorensen: That's right. Keep going. I'm not going to bail now.

Jennifer Kemp: Yeah, it is really hard to present to a blank screen. Like there's no doubt you have no feedback. That is, that is really, I take my hat off to sort of TV presenters, because that's what they do all the time.

Isn't it? I'm talking to the camera so hard.

Debbie Sorensen: you don't have that nice person in the front row, smiling and nodding at you to keep you going

Jennifer Kemp: Yeah, exactly. Exactly.

Debbie Sorensen: interview focused on acceptance and commitment therapy would be complete without talking a little bit about values. And maybe as our final question here, as we're wrapping up, you have a chapter on values as well and moving towards.

You know, having kind of a messy and imperfect but fulfilling life. Um, and [00:58:00] I thought it might offer listeners who are getting trapped by perfectionism a little bit of hope. Maybe if you could give some examples of ways that you've seen people transform perfectionism into something a little bit closer to their values, or maybe it could be your own life.

I mean, I think you've already shared some things that you've done. Um, but how does that, how does that transform?

Jennifer Kemp: Yeah. Well, I think for a start, we need to get an idea of what is like down the road, where do we want to hit? What is important to us? We can get so stuck in doing things right, doing things well, or exceptionally that we're

kind of stuck on a really short-term loop, kind of like a hamster in a wheel, really chasing a kind of perfection, but really not thinking about where it wants to take us and where we want to go down the road.

Um, It's always amazing to me to watch clients when [00:59:00] they finished therapy, uh, kind of learn that it's okay to be different and unique as a person. I had one finished up yesterday and she, we used the two teachers metaphor and she had body image issues. And she was like, yeah, you know, some days it's a little bit harder and that voice, like, don't let anyone see how you look is really, really loud, but I'm having more and more days where I can just go and be at school and learning and doing the things that I want to do.

And she's decided that it, the problems she's been having in school, she's changing schools. She's going to have a fresh start. She's looking to uni, she's making those choices and she's okay. That sh her body is coming with her through all of that adventure. So finding ways of just sort of going, yeah, I'm having that and it's not gonna let me like stop me from really getting the most out of these new experiences.

Um, it's really [01:00:00] lovely to see when people finish up like that. Um, and I, for me personally, that, that the, the big shifts came from when I started to be kind of not just to myself, but also to that self critical part of me, um, when that that's so critical passenger was, is, is always there. And I know that it's trying to help me actually achieve a fulfilling life.

It's wanting me to do that flawlessly, which isn't helpful in itself, but it's wanting me to do. And, um, so if I can harness that, then I've been able to achieve a bunch of stuff. And, um, I just, I was just loved talking about this topic. I just never seem to get tired of talking about it, you know, real pleasure talking to you over this sort of last hour about it, because I always learned something you always get to, [01:01:00] um, honestly, make a, hopefully make a difference for someone that's listening.

Uh, maybe someone sort of says, oh my goodness, that's me and stops down the journey like I did when I attended that workshop. Um, perhaps someone realizes, Hey, maybe I am stuck on, I need to change some of my behaviors or maybe I need to be a little kinder to myself when I'm struggling. Um, that's what feeds me.

So, uh, and learning to be kind to myself is probably the last piece in the puzzle that helped them look that for me. So, um, yeah, I hope that people feel. Kind of

useful like that. Whenever I'm speaking, I love talking to other professionals. I work both in consultations with psychologists who struggle with this and doing workshops and stuff like that.

Um, yeah, it just really, I think they're the parts of a fulfilling life. Isn't it?

Like having those connections, um, making a difference in your own way that you can, [01:02:00] um,

Debbie Sorensen: yeah. That's a great example. Your values shine through. I'm glad you found your passion for this, and then it sustains you because I think, you know, your own perfectionism has been along for the ride and you've done something that really matters. And I really encourage people to check out more of your work.

Of course, there's your book, which goes into a lot more depth about the things we talked about today. We can link to that in some of your other resources. Um, where can people find out more about your work, Jennifer?

Jennifer Kemp: Yeah. So I've got a website, <https://jenniferkemp.com.au/> so they can pop on there. You can sign up to a mailing list. I'm really erratic and sporadic at sending out emails.

Debbie Sorensen: You're not perfect about it. That's good.

Jennifer Kemp: You know how they say you should be sending out an email every week with something I'm like, yeah, nah, it doesn't happen. Um, you might need from me for a while and then you will. But what I will do is anytime, like I post up on my [01:03:00] website, um, anything I'm working on at the moment. So you'll find the two teachers metaphors up on there.

Like, um, as a worksheet you can work through yourself and, uh, sort of an extract from the book. Um, there's like an ebook on there that just goes through those. I think we talked about it. So that's sort of the processes of perfectionism. So if you want to sort of get your head around that there's a up as much as I can, that can be useful.

Um, and my intention is to put something up on the. But I'm getting a bit stuck on how to ride it. Um, funny that I'm on the perfectionistic therapist. So there will be something up on that for those listeners who are therapists or

psychologists working with other people, or even, um, any kind of professional it will be, be useful for.

So that's a good way of finding me probably the key spot.

Debbie Sorensen: Well, great. We will link to those and Jennifer, thank you so much. I really appreciate you coming on today and especially sharing some of your personal stories about that. I think.

it's, [01:04:00] it's really helps. Make it more relatable to know that. So I appreciate that. And thank you and congratulations again on your book.

Jennifer Kemp: Great. Thank you so much for having me. It's been a pleasure.

Debbie Sorensen: Thank you.

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