

Anxiety and Perfectionism with Clarissa Ong

Clarissa Ong: [00:00:00] thinking of self kindness or self-compassion as a choice, not as a feeling, not as an earned thing, it's just something we can choose to do.

Like we can choose to walk to the store or we can choose to get water. Like we can choose to do something nice for ourselves. And there's just going to be so much pushback of like, but you, you know, but you haven't finished your assignment and you haven't replied all your emails. You can't go and like get a donut.

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

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

Yael Schonbrun: I'm Dr. Yael Schonbrun, a Boston based clinical psychologist, assistant professor at Brown University, and author of the upcoming book [00:01:00] Work, Parent, Thrive.

Jill Stoddard: And from 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.

Jill Stoddard: you for listening to Psychologists Off the Clock.

Yael Schonbrun: Psychologists off the clock is proud to be partnered with Praxis Continuing Education Praxis is the premier provider of evidence-based training for mental health professionals.

Jill Stoddard: And here at psychologists off the clock, we are huge fans of Praxis. One of the things I love most about Praxis is they offer both live. And on demand courses. So if you're really looking for that, live interaction with other people who are taking the course, you can get that.

Or if you have a busy schedule and you need something that you can just kind of click onto whenever you have time, , they offer that as well.

, and every course I have ever taken from Praxis has really been of such value to me.

Debbie Sorensen: I get questions a lot from clinicians who are looking for act training or other types of trainings, and [00:02:00] Praxis my go-to place that I send people no matter what level they are, because they have really good beginner trainings for people who have no experience.

And they also have terrific advanced trainings on different topics and just people who want to keep building their skills.

Yael Schonbrun: You can go to our website and get a coupon for the live trainings, by going to our offers page at off the clock, psych.com/sponsors. And we'll hope to see you.

Debbie Sorensen: Hi everyone. It's Debbie. And I'm bringing you today, a conversation about anxiety and perfectionism with Dr. Clarissa Ong. Um, we've had a few conversations recently on the podcast about perfectionism, which is, you know, there's a few great books out recently on it.

It's a topic that I hear about a lot. In my Personal life and my clinical practice. So I'm here today with Jill to talk a little bit about the episode ahead. Um, and so let me just pass it over to you, Jill, to tell the listeners some [00:03:00] of your thoughts about this topic in the.

Jill Stoddard: Well to start. I want to say Debbie, I really appreciated when you give an example, um, you know, a little bit into the episode, you give your own example where you, you sort of say, you know, I never thought of myself as a perfectionist. And then I realized, you know, some of these behaviors that I exhibit really are kind of related to this overlap between anxiety and perfectionism and the, and the role of uncertainty and the role of lack of control.

And, you know, that really got me thinking. About myself because I too, you know, don't consider myself much of a perfectionist. And it got me thinking about some of the ways that maybe this is, this does play out. And what really stuck out to me in this episode that I think has been different about other episodes was when Clarissa Clarissa was talking about how.

Perfectionistic behaviors make life easier for other people. And that was a little bit mind blowing for me. So there's all of this, you know, when you [00:04:00] think about some of our other kinds of avoidance behaviors, like procrastination, for example, when I put something off till tomorrow, that's dreaded and anxiety provoking today, I get relief and I feel better with perfectionism.

You know, not only does the person engaging in those behaviors feel better. But at least in a professional context, it's desirable. To the people that that perfectionistic person is working with. So there's all of this added external validation, but then those same behaviors that are desirable in a work context, I think really come at a cost in a personal context.

I mean, I don't know about you, but if I'm with somebody who I think has all of their stuff together and is really perfectionistic. That actually feels intimidating to me and sort of hard to connect with. And so it feels like there's this, I don't know, double-edged sword or trying to find this balance, you know, understanding the function, but also really seeing that in some places where there's [00:05:00] benefit or reinforcement anyway, they're like, it really does come at a cost in other ways.

Debbie Sorensen: Yes. I love this double edge sword idea here, because I do think it drives it. Right. It's part of, we talked a little bit in the episode about some of the cultural context of it that there's, you know, you may be getting some. Very strong reinforcement and there's conditioning leading into this behavior.

And, you know, people will admire you people, you do please people and make their lives easier to a degree when you're bending over backwards to do all these things and, and all of that. But I think you're right, Jill, that sometimes it also or it can also lead to some problematic interpersonal.

Issues as well, when you're always in the perfectionism cycle, maybe it doesn't leave enough room to focus on relationships or to be genuine with people. Sometimes people might have a reaction to it. You know, you might, on the one hand they might admire you. You might get a little [00:06:00] almost. envy from people that can kind of in a strange way, feel a little bit good, but there's a downside that I got to, that it might make it harder for people to feel close to you.

And you know, you don't necessarily want that to be the emotion that people are feeling around you is admiration and envy. You know what I mean?

Jill Stoddard: Yeah. And it makes me think of the first time I went to my friend Denise's house. You know, we, we got to her house and she didn't clean the house before I got there. And she just sort of like casually apologized for the mess. And I noticed that I breathed this sigh of relief and was like, oh, thank God. You know this is a, this is a woman who, you know, she she's like a bad-ass professional. Who's also a mom. You know, to see her house look exactly like mine made me feel so close to her. It made me relax. You know, that, that it didn't become this like, oh gosh, like I need to get my act [00:07:00] together and I need to, there was no competition.

There was no comparison while there was comparison, but you know, it wasn't this comparing up and I need to do better. And it was like, This real moment of connection, because I just felt like, okay, this is a person that we're like, we can just really be our truly flawed, imperfect selves. And I think if I had gone over and ,

you know, if her house wasn't remotely cluttered and looked like it came out of the pages of good housekeeping magazine, to me, it feels like that may have even created a little bit of distance. Do you know what I mean?

Debbie Sorensen: Oh, yes. It's funny you say this. There's some examples in the episode of. Home-life right. Like kind of the household cleanliness and that kind of thing. And I remember when a very good friend of mine came over to my house when I had a baby and a toddler. And I think I'm not a naturally clean person. So a lot of times if I'm having people over or a party or a play date at my house, I will [00:08:00] tidy up because it's a little embarrassing to me.

Um, but my friend popped over and I was so overwhelmed. I couldn't do it. And she thought it was great. Loaded the dishwasher. So I could just sit there and she was like, oh, my house is messy all the time. I'm so happy to know that your house is like this too. And it was funny. Cause what was embarrassing to me at the time was also a source of it was genuine.

It was like, yeah, we're both messy. Let's just be real about that. And it takes, it does take that pressure off and it builds a little bit of.

Jill Stoddard: Well, in a personal context, you, you sort of.

Test these things out and learn, oh, this fear I have that I'll be judged negatively. You know, that there will be some catastrophic outcome. If my house is messy, you know, you learn that, that doesn't really happen. And it's okay. But I kind of wonder if in professional contexts, you don't always get that feedback.

You know, the feedback is more on the positive side when you are doing things in a very detail [00:09:00] oriented perfectionistic way.

Debbie Sorensen: Right. Yeah, no, I think that's true. And that kind of goes back to your original point here is that that might feed it, is that it makes, you know, your boss is going to love it. If you dot all of your I's and cross your T's and stay up all night to make everything just perfect with a work project.

You're going to get very reinforced with that, but what's the cost, right? You stayed up all night long dotting I's and crossing.

Jill Stoddard: Yeah. And the two of you talk about perfectionism, like it's a rigged game and you know, it's not a game that you can ever really win, but it feels like you keep getting closer to a win and that's what kind of keeps you going. but that you can't win. And that often that game playing that game comes at a price.

Debbie Sorensen: Absolutely. Yes. Well, there were a number of things in this conversation that really got me thinking. Perfectionism about anxiety, about uncertainty control and decision, all kinds of things. And so so whether you are anxious, [00:10:00] perfectionistic, both. I hope that there's some something in this episode that will be helpful to you.

Debbie Sorensen: Dr. Clarissa Ong is completing her post-doctoral training at the center for anxiety and related disorders at Boston university and CB team. She has a PhD in clinical psychology from Utah state university.

She specializes in act process-based therapy, obsessive compulsive disorder, and perfectionism, and she is a co-author along with

Dr. Michael Twohig of the book, the anxious, perfectionist, how to manage perfectionism driven anxiety, using acceptance and commitment therapy.

Thank you so much for joining me today, Clarissa.

Clarissa Ong: Yeah, of course. Thank you for having.

Debbie Sorensen: Absolutely. Well, perfectionism is a topic that a lot of people. I think we'll be able to relate to in their lives and something that we've talked about a few times on the podcast before, but you have, you know, a unique spin

on it. I think in your book by really [00:11:00] connecting the dots between anxiety and perfectionism, especially, and some of the ways that you approach the topic of perfectionism.

I think I'm really excited to talk to you about today. Yeah. So, and I'm wondering if we could actually just start with a little bit of a personal note, because you mentioned in the introduction, and then a few times in your book that you yourself have struggled with perfectionism and that that's part of why you do this work.

Would you be willing to share a little bit about perfectionism in your life and, and what, you know, what kind of brought you into this world? Based on that, that personal experience.

Clarissa Ong: Yeah, definitely. Um, so what. Initially brought me into the work was that we happened to get a grant there, they happened to need someone to run a study on perfectionism and I happen to have the time and interest to do it. Um, but my own [00:12:00] experience.

with perfectionism started before that. I think, um, in, when I was in college, I would say that there are lots of behaviors that, I would consider perfectionist or looking back.

So like very concerned about grades. You know, anything less than an a was just terrible and I'm stupid. And, um, and I remember like studying for hours for a test that was like maybe worth 10% of my grade and. Editing papers to the point where I was like changing articles and semi-colons. And so, um, just being really concerned about doing well to the point that that was all I cared about.

Then in grad school, I joined an act lab acceptance and commitment therapy lab. And like the thrust of act is about doing things you care about. And being able to [00:13:00] let you know your anxiety and fear and thoughts and rules kind of come along for the ride. And I remember being just super distressed for like two weeks, because it just completely like shattered my perception of how things should be.

And I was really like in distress. Cause I was like, I can't like, like I just couldn't compute kind of like, what does this all mean? Um, and that's. it started sort of my journey toward practicing more acceptance based strategies in another kind of Vic turning point, I think was I attended a self-compassionate workshop by Kelly Wilson

and that literally changed my life. Like I was just came out of it and I was like, oh, I got like, I don't know. There's just so much about how he talks about. Um, self-compassion I actually think he did that on this show too. I think I

Debbie Sorensen: He did. He we've had him on before. Yeah, that's right.

Clarissa Ong: Yeah. I've listened to that episode. And I just think like [00:14:00] continually inspired by the messages that you know, he like shares.

So yeah, it's in the, you know, this like six, seven years later for own starting to learn about acting. I'm still learning a lot about the crevices in which perfectionism continues to show up and

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah, I was actually gonna ask you about that. Cause I was going to ask if you feel like you're, you know, in recovery from perfectionism, if you're cured or if you sometimes still notice it in your life, now I know these things don't typically just totally go away. Um, or you do like I know, I mean, yeah. I think even to write a book requires grappling a bit sometimes with perfectionism.

Clarissa Ong: Yeah, I think in some ways it's sort of like, um, I think it's, Akito where, you know, you use your opponent's force to help you, you know, or something like that. But it's, I think it's more learning [00:15:00] how to channel that perfectionistic energy toward more. Like values-based pursuits, I guess. So in being able to redirect it when it's not helpful.

So I, I guess in maybe in some ways it's like, I've learned to co-exist with perfectionism and sometimes we still argue, but for the most part, we were like learning to get along.

Debbie Sorensen: Okay. Like a roommate you're getting along with, but trying to co-exist. Well, actually that's a related, I think to a question that someone on my team wanted me to ask you, which is about, so the way that she framed it. Yeah. Hell yeah. This is, yeah. All question is about this idea of when to grit and when to quit.

And I actually think from your book, it's related to this concept of how, you know, when perfectionism. Helpful versus unhelpful because they think you're right. Like sometimes, you know, you can't really totally get rid of it maybe, or sometimes you don't want [00:16:00] to. Um, but if you're going to talk to someone, uh, either about your own experience or like maybe a client or

something, like what would you look for to know the difference between like, when perfectionism is helpful to you and when it's a real problem for someone.

Clarissa Ong: Yeah. I think on a big picture level, like a question I like to ask before when thinking about values, is just do you like your life? Like, are you excited or, you know, are you glad to get up in the morning and do the things that you're doing? And I think that's is a really quick, like litmus test for is your life going the way that you want?

Um, are you acting in ways that are consistent with the person you want to be? I feel like those are just sort of big picture questions and. I think that can be helpful for, you know, is perfectionism working or not. But then I sit there like specific contexts and domains in our lives where perfectionism could be really helpful in a certain domain, but not in others, or it could be really helpful at this time and on a different time.

So there's just big picture, like, is this helpful or not? And then [00:17:00] there's like, how do I actually apply it or how to actually use it? And I think that like when, when do I know to kind of keep going or when do I quit? I think there's a bit of that that is trial and error or requires experimentation of like, I don't know, but we, we just try it out and then contact different consequences and see which one works for you.

Basic. There's this. be commonly in perfectionism where it's like, well, then tell me where the new line is. And then I'll do that. Like tell me the correct answer. Right? Like if it's not my rules then okay. Values are my new answer. But then the function is still I'm trying to get the correct answer.

Debbie Sorensen: oh, you just, that just kind of blew my mind. It's almost like you get perfectionistic about. Stopping being a perfectionist, but in this like overly rule governed rigid way.

Clarissa Ong: Yeah.

Debbie Sorensen: the new perfectionism. That's not really freeing you up.

Clarissa Ong: Yeah, [00:18:00] exactly. Like I had, I had a recent, like self experience with that where I can't remember what it was. I was struggling with. And I felt like I wasn't being self-compassionate enough. And so I actually got very self-critical about not being self-compassionate enough. And I was like, Oh, gosh, like this is that pattern.

This is that unhelpful pattern. I was like, I need to be kinder to myself. But

Debbie Sorensen: Oh my gosh. That's funny.

Clarissa Ong: yeah. So it's kind of like that.

Debbie Sorensen: Oh, that's so interesting. Yeah. Well, what about this idea that, you know, these things sometimes. Are on a bit of a continuum and people might have maybe even have some perfectionism show up in certain domains, but not others. But I also think it's interesting that word, perfectionism that maybe sometimes it's overused, similar to OCD where it's like people are using it in a way that's kind of, you know, Colloquial language around it, but then there's also the [00:19:00] really extreme really, you know, the kind of perfectionism that can really keep people miserable and stuck.

Um, what are your thoughts? That's on that? I'm like how the, the, some of the different forms of perfectionism and how it might show up in some different ways for people.

Clarissa Ong: Yeah. So I think also one thing I like to think about too, is that the person who seems like they're super lazy and doesn't get stuff. It could also be a perfectionist, but I think the most common way we think about perfectionist or those like high achievers, like, you know, like Steve jobs, kind of people.

in the process that tends to drive people to kind of go all out and, you know, work 80 hours a week.

It might be similar to the process. That's keeping someone from turning in their assignments on time and getting reports done, and they feel like the like procrastinating. No, not producing output side of perfectionism gets kind of overlooked in a thick, [00:20:00] like there's less glory in that form of perfectionism.

And so it's, I think it's sort of interesting how we get so much external reinforcement for that. Like go, go, go for a free form of perfectionism in. I've noticed like being in the Northeast versus being in Utah, like out west, the cultural stuff feels different. Um, like I, I do feel like perfectionism in a sense of like working a lot.

It is more reinforced here is my personal experience. Um,

Debbie Sorensen: I would agree with that. I lived in Boston for 10 years and now I'm in Denver, which is where I'm from. And I think there's a cultural difference around the expectations.

Clarissa Ong: Yeah.

Yeah, yeah, totally. Like I also went to college in Massachusetts and it feels like people like it, like, like, like people are happy when you spend 10 hours and give a really good, you know, like presentation or report. I feel, [00:21:00] I don't know. So yeah, I agree. And it makes life easier for other people.

Right. Cause then they don't have to spend as much time like editing your work. So I just, I guess, like, just noticing that there's a lot of, and why people stay in perfectionistic patterns, even if it's really like stressful for them. Like you get so much external reinforcement for it too. Um, Yeah.

Debbie Sorensen: I want to I'll test tell a little personal example from myself about, you know, you're talking about different ways perfectionism shows up, and sometimes it's not what you think, because I have even said on this podcast before that I'm not much of a perfectionist because I'm not, I'm kind of, you know, a little, not that organized.

I'm a little, I can be a little slobbish sometimes, but this weekend, so we're recording this on a Friday. And they have the weekend ahead and I have some family life things I need to do, but I also have a couple of deadlines coming up and I thought I should actually not do I shouldn't work on anything this weekend.

I should do [00:22:00] all the family stuff and get some things done around the house. And I was plagued by this panic over it. So that's one example. But then with the house, the work I need to do around the house, I was really fretting. There's a couple things like we need a new stove and have literally needed a new stove for like a year.

And I haven't bought one. And I just think to myself, like, I'm such a slacker, why don't I just buy a stove? But it's because I can't decide, like, I don't wanna say so not much money, but I also want it to be nice. And I can't decide if it should be gas or electric, because gas might be bad for you, but I I'm just in a place of indecisive, but on the surface, it looks like a person who just doesn't have their act together to buy a new oven.

But it's actually like, I can't choose the right one. I'm like, there's more perfectionism to that than I realized.

Clarissa Ong: Yes. So the, there's, I think a lot of perfectionism is driven by the rigidity around the rules, like rules by themselves, or, you know, [00:23:00] neither here nor there. Like I can say, like, you know, you should go to the store every day. If you don't listen, like my saying that doesn't do anything.

Right. Like, so I think it's that rigidity. Like with your stove example, it's like, I need to find the right stove. If I don't find the right stove, I'm not getting it. Or at least, you know, or like, for me, it's like, I need to be self compassionate. And if I'm not self compassionate, I'm just failing at life.

Right. It's that rigidity of like this needs to happen or like, I shouldn't check my emails after 10:00 PM, like, right. Like, so I think that's the part that can, uh, can bog people down. It's less that I want to be great. It's that I need to be great at all costs. And if I'm not great,

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah. And there's no flexibility in that. Absolutely. Yeah. Well, let's talk about this link between anxiety and perfectionism. You know, it's in the title of your book, the anxious perfectionism. And to me, I mean, I see that a lot of times, you know, if you love. Anxiety there might be perfectionism there. If you [00:24:00] look at perfectionism there's anxiety there.

Um, can you just talk a little bit about the relationship between the two and how they're, how they intersect, I guess how they intersect.

Clarissa Ong: Yeah, I think, and I think it's different for everyone. I think the motivation behind like doing perfectionistic things. So I think two common ones are a fear of failure and intolerance of uncertainty are common kind of drivers. Right. So I do everything I can because I don't want to fail or I don't try at all because I don't want to fail.

Right. If I try, then there's a chance I could fail. So just don't do anything. Um, and then there's the, um, I need to be sure of everything before I can act, right. Like if there's any uncertainty, then I'm not acting like I need to spend lots of time problem solving and planning for all the different contingencies, because I need that assurance that everything is like working and those are pretty like anxious feelings.

Right? Like I don't want to fail. I can't, if [00:25:00] not, and I need to be sure. And if I'm not sure, like that's bad. Flavor of like catastrophizing and worrying

and like lots of planning. And they think what perfectionism does is it sort of provides a sort of like comforting or protective function of like, it's okay.

Like I can give you control in this uncertain world. And so there's. Like, so there is negative reinforcement in that you do the thing and you feel less anxious, right? You plan for 10 different, um, outcomes. And you're like, Okay.

now I can go on vacation because I'm prepared no matter what happens. Like, so there's that piece of it relieves some of the anxiety by sick.

It also, I don't know. I feel like at some point it's sort of like a safety blanket in a way maybe. Thorny safety blanket, but it has, I think a bit of that function for some people. And so that's why it's really difficult to let go of, because it's like, what if I'm out of control if I let go, because [00:26:00] perfectionism is so much about control and when we're anxious, what we want to do is have control, right?

Like, I don't know. I'm really scared of roller coasters. And my instinct is to grab like more onto like the bars to feel in control, but that actually makes the experience. The point is to, it's sort of flat things happen, but I think that's our instinct like to fix.

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah, I think that control element, it's a sort of a driver. I mean, all of these things go together, anxiety, perfectionism, some control, and kind of, you know, we have a little bit of a, which comes first, the chicken or the egg scenario here, because they're all kind of intertwined and you could see how that drive for control is really, um, it can feed that, right?

Like just that sense of having to plan for everything.

Clarissa Ong: Yeah,

Debbie Sorensen: that discomfort when you're not in control, which we often aren't in the world.

Clarissa Ong: yeah. Yeah. And [00:27:00] almost. By definition, we can't be in control of everything or like, that's just the way the world works. Like we can't even be in control of our emotions. So just something that's so fundamental to our being. And so I think it's in some ways that like it's so like, it makes a lot of sense and it's so valid for people to rely on perfectionism as that sense of like control or safety. And then the unfortunate part is that that sense of safety and usually a short term sense comes at a pretty high price.

Debbie Sorensen: well, and one thing that's, that is interesting to think about is where this comes from, right? Like some of the roots of perfectionism, you actually. Wrote in your book that you have a purse. I love this quote. You said you have a personal history that has generously nurtured a need to be perfect. I love that idea because it's like something feeds it along the way. Are there some sort of, you know, maybe historic or [00:28:00] cultural context in which perfectionism emerges? So what are some of the things that might contribute to perfectionism in a person's history?

Clarissa Ong: Um, I think some things could be receiving messages from people that we respect and admire. Like for example, parents are like, you know, caregivers that doing well. And, um, and that could be implicit or explicit, like explicitly you could be like, oh, like, awesome that you're getting A's in your classes implicitly.

It could be maybe only giving you positive attention when you come back with a good grade or when you, you know, win some contest. Right. That's more implicit. But I think because humans are very smart and we can derive all sorts of relations. Right. If I learned that doing well equals good. I can derive.

Not doing well equals bad, right. Or equals I don't get love or equals I don't get approval. [00:29:00] So you almost don't even need that direct experience of someone scolding you for doing poorly. Like, we can deduce that because that's how our brains work. So I think enough of those messages and I think, especially coming from people, right.

Because as kids, we don't know what's going on. Like, we don't know how the world works and we look to people that we respect and like, For tunes for how the world works, right? Like maybe it's our teachers and you know, maybe it's like people on TV. I don't, I'm not totally sure if the kids, you know, look up to these days, but like, so then that's kind of how, like our first, um, the first story that we hear about how things work and that, I don't know, I think that can stick, but it's not just that it's that external society reinforces those messages.

So there's a lot to. There's a lot of, I think, credibility in the story that success is good. And I it'd be very [00:30:00] hard to find people who disagree with that they think are they're out there usually therapists, I think, you know, by far like that's what we learn and so yeah.

Debbie Sorensen: I mean, that's who we see making all this money and being, you know, getting all the accolades and fame or people who are, have done

something remarkable like that or who are high achieving. And so it's like there is that vibe in the world about that?

Clarissa Ong: Yeah.

Debbie Sorensen: So for parents who might be listening and seeing some of the early signs of perfectionist.

So like, say that your child gets really upset if they miss something on a math test, or if your child is terrified of making a mistake or puts a lot of pressure on themselves. And you're seeing that flare of, Ooh, this looks like early perfectionism and not to pin it all on parents, because like you said, it's also cultural just in the world around us.

But what advice would you give to a parent who is trying not [00:31:00] to, you know, to water the seeds of perfectionism?

Clarissa Ong: Yeah. Um, I guess before I answer the question, I want to add a caveat that I'm not a parent in that I can't fully appreciate the complexities of parenting every time I see parents, I'm just like, I don't know how. Doing this, this just seems like the wildest most difficult thing as a

Debbie Sorensen: the record, I am a parent and I still feel that way. So.

Clarissa Ong: So I'll probably give some sort of like, non-parent answer. It's like, like, oh, you don't fully appreciate the complexities of parenting. And it's true that I don't. Um, so I think like as a, from a behavioral perspective, the thing I think of. Providing reinforcement, regardless of outcome and sort of emphasizing process over outcome where it's like, well, like you start, you studied really hard.

And as opposed to like, wow, you got an A and I think, um, and I think maybe even like explicitly undermining those messages and catching [00:32:00] ourselves when, like I still fall into that trap of like, oh yes, like, you know, I got. This publication or something, and as opposed to like, oh my gosh, I'm so glad that I like created, you know, work to develop this knowledge that can be used to help people in some way.

So I think, and then so habitual. So I think being able to catch ourselves and maybe modeling it in our own behavior. Right. So like, Hey, like I landed this great deal. It's like, oh, I worked really hard. And like I made these connections. So I think it's just a lot of undermining these messages that we get.

It gets the same thing with emotions that we, we also are often told, you know, you need to be able to control your emotions. Um, not in those words, but like, oh, you know, just stop crying, like, oh, like it's okay. Cheer up. Or these are all implicit messages that we can control our emotions. I think maybe being [00:33:00] mindful of how powerful languages would be one thing.

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah. I all add one thing to that in terms of the role modeling piece, that another parent, um, that I know from my kid's school asked me about this one time, when she found out I was a psychologist. Yeah. My advice because she herself as a perfectionist and she said, I'm noticing my daughter, what should I do?

And I think actually role modeling, making mistakes. This can be helpful too. Like, oh, I totally messed that up. I'm so embarrassed. Oh, well, you know, kind of just that we all do it, I think, but I love that. What you're saying about, Role modeling and not emphasizing the outcome. And I think it's hard to do because you know, sometimes you're genuinely proud of your kid.

They do, you know, one of my kids came home with a score on a test and I was like, oh wow. You know, it's kind of like, surprisingly, she did really well on it. And I felt like, oh, that's so cool. But it's like, you don't want to make too [00:34:00] big of a deal about that because that implies that the other times when.

She doesn't, you know, is like bad. And that is definitely not the message that is gonna, that you want to give them. Right.

Clarissa Ong: Yeah. Yeah. I think, um, yeah, kids pick up on these patterns really well, even if we don't have. For them too. And I really like what you said about being willing to make mistakes. I think It's that like showing that, you know, weak side of ourselves that we all want to hide, we always want to show people when we're doing really well.

Like, I mean, just thinking about social media, that's the best example. Like we all want to show when we're just like, you know, achieving and all that. And they think, yeah. With our, even with kids, with kids, just sharing that. Like I had a really rough day and, you know, that's just part of, part of life, right?

Like we, don't only talk about good things. There's space for difficult times and enjoyable time. So I, yeah, I think that's a great point.[00:35:00]

Debbie Sorensen: Thank you. Yeah. Okay. So I like the metaphor in the book about trying to do things perfectly and avoiding mistakes as a game. Like it's a game that we're trying, playing kind of trying to win the game.

Uh, could you kind of walk through that concept of how perfectionism can be like a game and, and you know what, well, I'll just stop there. That idea of what, um, of thinking about perfectionism as, as it's like playing a game.

Clarissa Ong: Yeah. Yeah. I think, I think part of that metaphor is like the transactional nature of perfectionism. Right. It's like, I, I like hit my forehand and then I like when a point, right? Like I. Stay up till midnight to finish the report. And then I get praise. It's like a part of it is sort of, um, describing the transactional nature but I think, the heart of the metaphors taking a step back and examining, is [00:36:00] this a game?

Well, first is it a game that I can win? And second, is it a game that I want to win? I think like being able to. Step back and explore those bigger questions because they like a common, I don't know if it's coming, I guess a metaphor, I've heard use an act as like that we're playing a rigged game, right?

Like in perfectionism, we're almost always outscored by perfectionism, right? Like we don't. The prompt, like the promised reward, right? Like, so it says like, okay, like once you get 20 publications, you'll feel like you're good enough. And that never happens. Right? Like once you get like this grant, then you'll think you're a good researcher.

And that promise like, you know, so we work really hard cause it's like, now I'm going to feel like I'm competent. Like it doesn't actually happen. And so it's a game that is kind of unfair. It's like those rigs, carnival games. Where it's like, oh no, if you try, like one more time, the ball will go into the hoop.

And it's like was, is that [00:37:00] really how the game works? And everything in our rational logical mind is like, it should work because that would make sense. And they think part of it is listening to your experience playing the game, but it's like, okay, there's logic. But also you've played this game for 20 years.

Like that's a lot of valuable data. And what is your experience tell you about if this is a winnable game. And I think another thing with perfectionism is like, the rules are always changing too, right? It's like, oh, like, okay, you think you're good at this, but are you good at this other thing? Um, and so it just creates new criteria for us to fulfill.

Um, but then I think even beyond that, it's what are you going to get if you win this game? Like what, what is that, what is that thing that you're holding out for that is making all these hours you're spending, playing the game worth it, because those hours and the energy, so attention could have gone to something [00:38:00] else. Right. But we're kind of betting on. Like the prize I get is going to be worth it. It's going to be worth those missed dinners with my family. It's going to be worth like, um, not like watching any movies while I was in college. And so I think, um, so I think, yeah, that's sort of how I see the metaphor is more like to, um, help us reflect on these bigger questions has be, you know, if we're in a game.

we just assume of course. that may not be like a fair.

Debbie Sorensen: Right because a, it keeps on going. You never really, truly win that game. And then. That idea of what's the price of playing the game? Like, what are you not doing if you're in that mode? And like you said, for 20 years, you can be so fixated on winning the game that you'll never, you'll never win, but you're also [00:39:00] consumed by the game to the point where you're not doing other things you might rather be doing.

It's like that video game, you can't stop playing even though, you know, you probably should.

Clarissa Ong: Yeah. Yeah, exactly. Yeah. And it just feels like every time you play, you're getting closer and closer and that's kind of what keeps you going.

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah, there's a quote in your book. I actually wrote it down cause I, it was so powerful, which says, as long as you're playing the game of perfectionism, you're losing,

Clarissa Ong: Um,

Debbie Sorensen: what are you losing? I mean, what are you, what do you think? Like what do people lose when they're trapped by perfectionist?

Clarissa Ong: Yeah. Um, I think, I feel like That's a question that I would hope people like allow themselves to be open and vulnerable enough to like grapple with, because, so I can say personally, like, you know, maybe. Well, I guess his thought personally, but [00:40:00] like, I could see, like, you know, I'm losing like deeper relationships.

I'm losing moments of being present, right? Like I think about, um, like I had the client where they struggle with perfectionism. And they don't even remember like their kid's wedding, because the entire time they're worrying about like the plate setting and the flowers and are things going on schedule.

And that was like a huge regret for them because it's like, I only remember it because of the videos and the photos, but I like don't remember being there. And so that's the stuff I think we miss and like really we miss living it. Like we missed. All of these precious moments where, you know, maybe it's like the weather is really nice and we just want to be outside or we want to go skiing.

Um, [00:41:00] so yeah, I think it, I think it's a hard question to

Debbie Sorensen: That's a beautiful answer because that's such, those are such painful examples. And I think you're right. That everybody has to answer that question for themselves. A little. 'cause it, it depends. And if you're not losing anything, then fine. Keep playing the game. You know, there's no problem there, but I think for a lot of people who get in that cycle, there is a, a loss to it.

That's yeah. That's where it's. Yeah. The painful part, the pain of missing out can be, or the pain of getting trapped in the struggle can be. Yeah. Well, we talked a little bit earlier about rules and how we can, some times get rigid about those kinds of internal rules. You know, like I have to have zero unread emails.

I have to be caught up on laundry. I have to beat this deadline or that deadline. And sometimes when we have rules, I think. [00:42:00] It can be hard to let go of those. And also it can limit us in terms of feeling like we have a choice. And I recently, uh, I guess a couple of months ago, I had Aprilia West on the podcast and she kind of challenged me a little bit about that.

And this idea of the language of choice, because I think sometimes we almost feel like it's not a choice when we're really rigid about our rules. Like I must do this or that. So do you have any words of wisdom about how we can move more from rigidity into looking at choice and just being a little bit more flexible around loosening up on perfectionist?

Clarissa Ong: Yeah. I think for me, the first thing I think of is identifying the rules in a first place. And it's kind of like, if we don't know we're following a, I have to, or I should then. I don't know, it's kind of like swimming in water or, you know, like we just don't know that it's there. So I think before anything it's recognizing, I have to, um, and [00:43:00] once we realize, Oh, okay, there's a rule saying, you know, I should brush my teeth every night.

Then from there, then I can take a step back and say like, okay, like I, I could brush my teeth every night or I can not really. Why would I choose to brush my teeth every night? Like, what are the consequences? And I think this is just like a, really an oversimplification, but I think what comes down to a half too, is I'm unwilling to bear the consequences, right?

Like when I say like, I have to graduate for grad school, because I spent like five years, you know, and in grad school already, it's like, I'm unwilling to bear the consequences of losing all these years of work. And so I have to, but really it's, there's nothing. There's nothing I have to do. Like I, if I'm willing to bear the consequence, then I can easily drop out or at least, you know, I can willingly drop out.

So I think, and I think that's okay. Like, like certain things we choose to do because the [00:44:00] consequences of not doing it is so huge. Like I have to go visit like my relative who's in the hospital. It's because I'm unwilling to bear the consequences of missing out that moment, that, you know, potential last moments with them.

I think just being really explicit about like, it's not, I have to it's I choose to in, I think, I feel like, but just the awareness of the rules in the first place for me tends to be the most helpful.

Debbie Sorensen: Oh, yeah, I like that. Like I have to get organized or I have to plan everything out, or, I mean, back to my example of this coming weekend, it's like that consequence. So if I do all my, you know, things in my personal life and spend time with my family and get stuff done around my house, the consequences I'll feel a little behind on work Monday morning.

Okay. But to think that that is a choice, you know, and one way or the other, you know, I get to make that choice.

Clarissa Ong: Yeah. Yeah. Like all choices have consequences And [00:45:00] AP just recognizing there's certain consequences. We don't want to bear and that's perfectly okay.

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah. And it's also awareness. I think you're within that you're making room for different feelings, right then, which is part of your book is about acceptance and making room for different feelings and also being aware of your thoughts and those kinds of self stories that kind of. Limit you. And so I think people who want to learn more about that, you have some terrific chapters

about some ways to do that, to notice those self stories and to, to unhook a little bit from self-criticism and be a little bit kinder toward yourself.

Clarissa Ong: Yeah. Yeah. It's a, it's a difficult skill being kinder to yourself. Yeah.

Debbie Sorensen: You have some wonderful ideas for some of the ways to, to work with perfectionism using this act approach. And I think one of the things that's really foundational in any act approach, but that's also really relevant or to perfectionist.

Perfectionism [00:46:00] is just. This idea of getting caught in a struggle. Right. And how we get. So when we're in that place of really struggling with our emotions or with something like perfectionism, it can be really hard to move out of that. So could you give our listeners some thoughts if they really identify with that idea of being caught in an anxiety and perfectionism struggle?

How would you look at that and what might be helpful for them if they're in that place?

Clarissa Ong: Yeah, I think, um, as you said, that the metaphor that came to mind was like being in quicksand. The like feeling like for a struggling in the thing that feels most helpful to do is struggle. Like just the logical thing feels like I need to swim out of this and that the way anxiety and perfectionism work is that the more you struggle, the more entangled you get and the harder it is to get out of whatever situation that you're in.

[00:47:00] So the thing I think about is like looking at what's around you. Honestly, assessing for yourself, like, is this where I want to be? Is the direction that I'm going, going to take me to where I want to end up in, you know, 30, 40 years. Right? So for example, I might say at the end of my life, I want to be surrounded by people who I love and care about, but if I look at my behavior, I think I'm going to be surrounded by. I don't really care about being surrounded by pieces of paper.

Debbie Sorensen: Publications. Don't love you back, right.

Clarissa Ong: Exactly. Exactly. So like that kind of helps me to just reflect on okay. Like just an honest assessment of where I am right now. And where do I want to go from here? And like, you know, going back, to the quicksand idea, it's that before anything like, let's just stop struggling.[00:48:00]

Or like, even before we devise the, like, how do I like, you know, find a plank or whatever. It's like, the first thing is just stop struggling. And I think that's really scary because like I mentioned, there's a protective function of perfectionism. It feels good, or it feel safer that I'm do, at least I'm doing something, right.

Like at least I'm not just doing nothing. Cause that would be the worst thing. And I think it's reflecting on is you're doing something. Like actually helpful. Like, it is possible that doing something is actively on helpful. So I think almost starting there and empowering ourselves with choice of like, I can choose my next step, even if it's really uncomfortable.

Even if my mind is like yelling at me, like, don't, you dare, like, you don't even know what's going to happen. Yeah.

I don't know. I just feel like being able to recognize that the choice is yours to [00:49:00] make, even though it's hard to believe, I think.

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah, I love that. And then, then that frees you up so much. All kinds of things show up when you're, when you're first letting go of the struggle and then you can kind of move in these directions and, you know, toward values and toward that life you want to live.

Clarissa Ong: Yeah. Yeah. And even just asking, like, what is that life I want to live.

Because I think sometimes we don't know. We think we should know, but sometimes we don't know.

Debbie Sorensen: If there are any, any, um, you know, self-described anxious, perfectionist listening who are out of contact with that, who are like, I don't actually, I've heard that from some clients, if they could drop the expectations, if they could drop the sherds and the perfectionism, what would they do instead? And if someone's really, really in that place of struggle, sometimes they're like, I don't know.

[00:50:00] What would you do to help a client maybe, or a friend who's who's in that place to, to begin to think about the life they want to live.

Clarissa Ong: Yeah. Um, so I think, especially for clients, I try to think about going to experience rather than like, like intellectualizing values. So it could be like, just reflect on a past year, past two years. What are moments where you

felt like really connected and present and engaged and like, and I think I got a little bit, like hippie-ish when I talk about values, but like, it's this sense of like, just this feels nice, this feels right.

This just feels like where I want to be in like that conserve you where you start and then going forward again, like listening to your experience, like try out different things. I think perfectionism again, this is going to say. Like, well, then figure out your values, then we'll do that. Like easy, like [00:51:00] step one, figure out your values.

And the thing is like, sometimes we need to, you know, like just try out different things and things might show up that we don't expect because, uh, values aren't logical. Like, so for example, I recently like, could admit to myself that one of my values is aestheticism. And I, and I never thought that was a real thing.

And I was like, no, like, like in the values card sort, there's like beauty. And I was like, Oh,

this is just like a trick of value. It's like, not actually real. And I dunno, it was just like, through some, like self-reflection I was like, Hey, this actually like, Yeah. I like having this in my life. I like my life more when I like follow this value, like having art or you know, or something.

And I didn't realize that until I just sort of experimented around and like, Able to connect with just my own like experience and the feedback that I was getting from how I was reacting to different things. But I would [00:52:00] never have logically figured that out. In fact, logically it doesn't even make sense.

I don't know to me or to my mind. So

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah. I mean, I have seen that so many times when people. Determined some type of value and then just almost get perfectionistic or rule, or develop a rule about that value. Like now that I know this value, I must do this value every single day, no matter what. And it's like, whoa, whoa, whoa. You know that, that loses the vitality to it, then it's like, yeah,

Clarissa Ong: yeah. Yeah. Vitality is such a good word for it. Yeah.

Debbie Sorensen: yeah. Um, Well, on a final note before we wrap up, let's just make a little, let's just make a little room for the topic of self-kindness, um, which is sort of where your book ends too. And I think it's just absolutely really

important with perfectionism because you know, you, I think when people are in that place of perfectionism, like we [00:53:00] can be so mean to ourselves.

How can people just move a little gentle nudge toward self kindness?

Clarissa Ong: Um, yeah, I think It's really, um, it's such a, like, you have a big question for like

Debbie Sorensen: It's a big question. Sorry to lob a huge question. It's you here?

Clarissa Ong: no, no, no more, just like it's such an important one and a good one. Um, I think the things that have helped me, Isaac or one. Kind of thinking of self kindness or self-compassion as a choice, not as a feeling, not as an earned thing, it's just something we can choose to do.

Like we can choose to walk to the store or we can choose to get water. Like we can choose to do something nice for ourselves. And there's just going to be so much pushback of like, but you, you know, but you haven't finished your assignment and you haven't replied all your emails. You can't go and like get a donut.[00:54:00]

Think kind of holding, like holding on to the idea that I can choose to do this. Even if I feel like I don't deserve it, I can still choose to do it. Um, I think sometimes perspective taking is helpful around like, what would I say to a friend, um, and kind of treating ourselves like we would treat our friend.

Um, I think the other thing that helps me is thinking of self kindness as a skill. So what I like about that is. Um, I can get better at it and it makes sense why I suck at it. Right. Cause I haven't done it before and it's new. So of course I'm going to suck at it and the more practice, the better I'm going to get.

So I feel like thinking of it as a skill kind of helps me a lot.

Debbie Sorensen: I love that it's a skill and it's something that can be practiced and learned.

Clarissa Ong: Yeah. Like flossing, we don't have to like doing it, but we can still choose to do it.

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah, I'd love that. Well, Clarissa, thank you so much again for [00:55:00] joining us. And again, your book is called the anxious,

perfectionist, how to manage perfectionism driven anxiety, using acceptance and commitment therapy.

It's a terrific book for those who want to learn more, check it out and, um,

Clarissa, thank you so much for joining us. Really enjoyed the conversation.

Clarissa Ong: Thank you. I'm glad we got to talk

Debbie Sorensen: Thank you for listening to psychologists off the clock. If you enjoy our podcast, you can help us out by leaving a review or contributing on Patreon.

Yael Schonbrun: You can get more psychology tips by subscribing to our newsletter, and you can find us wherever you get your podcasts. Connect with us on social media and purchase swag from our merch store. By going to our website

at off the clock, psych.com/march

Jill Stoddard: We'd like to thank our strategic consultant, Michael Harold, our dissemination coordinator, Katy Rothfelder, and our editorial coordinator, Melissa Miller.

Debbie Sorensen: This podcast is for informational and entertainment purposes only, and is not meant to be a substitute for mental health treatment. If you're having a [00:56:00] mental health emergency dial 9 1 1. . If you're looking for mental health treatment, please visit the resources page of our website off the clock.

psych.com.