Perfection paralysis

Rebecca Silver[1] asks: 'Have we become so paranoid about being "perfect" in this social media age that we aren't willing to learn, grow and maybe be embarrassed, whilst doing our jobs?'

When you hear the words social media, what do you automatically think of? Instagram? LinkedIn? TikTok? Facebook? Or showing your age, Myspace? Now, holding that thought in your head, is it a professional page or a personal page that you think of? Do you have separate professional and personal accounts or are you happy to keep everything under your name?

Now that you've thought of those questions, ask yourself this: do you curate your posts? By this I mean is everything that is posted filtered? Do you only post the success stories? Are you glamorous in every post and actively ignore posts where your friends have uploaded photos that you're not happy with? I do. On my personal Facebook page, which is also where I will post about dentistry, you can look through my notifications and see that there are a few posts that I have been tagged in, but refuse to add to my timeline. This is because I don't like the way I look. I can also appreciate that how I look has no bearing on the work I produce within the profession, and whether I am wearing my glasses, have whitened my teeth or straightened my hair, my work doesn't change.

Author information

[1]Rebecca Silver FdSc MSc RDN FBADN is a multi-award-winning dental nurse. She has worked within the NHS and private dentistry and has worked with numerous dental specialists. She has obtained post-qualification certificates in Oral Health Education and Conscious Sedation and an MSc in Advanced and Specialist Healthcare (Applied Dental Professional Practice). She is also a *BDJ Team* reader panellist.

©Viktor Cvetkovic/E+/Getty Images Plus

that there are two types of perfectionism: healthy and neurotic. Healthy perfectionism suggests that the individual is able to create boundaries and realistic objectives, and gain their achievement after meeting these objectives. Neurotic perfectionism is where the individual sets excessively high standards of achievement, but they are never obtainable. Therefore, an uncomfortable feeling is created as they never feel that they meet these objectives; they are incomplete or imperfect.

If there are different types of perfectionism and by chasing unobtainable goals, then we can end up with the 'paradox of perfection'. This revolves around the idea that striving for perfection is inherently flawed. This leads to a cycle of dissatisfaction as these standards become more and more unattainable. This paradox arises from the tension between the desire for flawlessness and the recognition of human limitations. Perfection becomes a paradox when its pursuit hinders personal growth and fulfilment rather than enhancing it.

Were you scared to have questions asked at you? Or were you scared about not meeting standards? But what are these standards, and who set them? Is the reason that you care that you want to fit in? Fitting in is a human trait and most people have a desire to be accepted by others to some degree. This pause of possible imperfect posting is hindering us as a profession. There is less room for questions and growth and also a sense of belonging, maybe for those people who are at the beginning of their journey but are still learning.

Another reason that professionals may limit what they post to social media is due to the governance of the General Dental Council (GDC). We know that our registration is at risk for bringing the profession into disrepute, and we also know that 'blue on blue' reporting occurs. Therefore, it may be possible that this perfect façade has actually been created by the very people who want us to continue to study. Our CPD shows this.

> **'If people are feeling constrained by the pressure of maintaining a flawless online image, then this means that growth isn't occurring and stagnation can set in.'**

But what about the new generations coming into dentistry? Perhaps by only posting perfect cases, pretty pictures and ensuring that you rack up those all-important likes and clicks, we are doing newcomers a disservice. Perhaps it is our responsibility to think about how others take our professional posts, with professional cameras.

I'm sure we can remember how old we were when social media came into our lives. Younger members of the population, and the workforce, have grown up only ever knowing social media. The trend of influencers pushing weight loss pills, the next craze, tooth whitening, crowns and veneers have certainly had an effect on our patients. Dental tourism is still booming, illegal tooth whitening is still occurring. But we also need to examine how this has had an effect on our friends and colleagues in the industry, and if we are adding to the problem of 'social media and perfectionism'.

Todorov and Bazinet[1] perceive perfectionism as a personality trait and

'You could say that perfectionism is a crime against humanity. Adaptability is the characteristic that enables the species to survive – and if there's one thing perfectionism does, it rigidifies behaviour. It constricts people just when the fast-moving world requires more flexibility and comfort with ambiguity than ever. It turns people into success slaves.'[2]

So, if perfectionism can cause individuals more problems, why are we still striving for it? Think about a case you have completed on a patient that you were proud of and examine what in particular made you proud. Did you post to your social media? If you did, did you explain all the trials and hardships that may have occurred during the treatment, or did you post the final result and then basked in the likes and congratulations? If you didn't post, why not? Did you feel that the case would not stand up against those of other colleagues who post on social media?

If people are feeling constrained by the pressure of maintaining a flawless online image, then this means that growth isn't occurring and stagnation can set in. People are known to stick to a formula that works and continue with it. But this lack of growth can have a negative effect.

Growth occurs through many ways, but a big way is through trial and error. This starts in childhood and continues into our adulthood. How do we learn not to throw ourselves down the stairs? Possibly by doing it and then realising it wasn't a very good idea. Growth that has occurred through mistakes and embracing them is personal to us. This may seem like common knowledge, but with the growth of online videos and tutorials, where we see others talking about their mistakes and time, we never actually get to experience it ourselves. I am not recommending that as professionals we start making 'easy' mistakes to just have our

growth; it is more about how we take what we learn and apply it to our work. If we are told by someone how to use an instrument and continue to use it in that way, then we may be limiting our potential and the potential of the instrument. Clinicians, how many times have you had to adapt and overcome lack of instruments, or things going wrong and having to work on the spot to overcome this? Dental nurses, how many times have you watched fellow DNs and just been told 'that's the way we do it'. There isn't a possibility for growth to occur. Different learning styles are well known in education, but have we thought to look at how social media is potentially stopping this type of growth and education?

my embarrassment (colleagues may have their own stories):

1. Only you know if you've made a mistake – I try and keep this mantra in my mind when I am public speaking or presenting. The audience does not know if I have made a mistake in my slides, or if I've stumbled over a word – especially if it is a subject that I have a deep knowledge of.

2. What's the worse that could happen? Again, this is used mainly for my public speaking, and if the worst that could happen is that I say something wrong, which I can correct at the time or at the end, or I need to stand on a step so people can see me above the podium (which has

yourself is noticeable to everyone. Sometimes we need to step back and assess ourselves to find out what we actually like and dislike and what our boundaries are. What are we willing to accept from people and what are we willing to accept of ourselves? This all shows online, and we don't know who is watching us. We don't know how many little cheerleaders we have silently watching, learning and hoping to grow from our posts. We don't know all the unasked questions, the doubts that people have of possibly doing the same as you. By being genuine and talking about all the pitfalls as well as the achievements, you don't know whose life you are impacting.

There is a balance that needs to be had when it comes to our online persona and professionalism, and this is for patients and colleagues. As I mentioned previously, we create boundaries for ourselves but we all need to understand and appreciate the boundaries other people have placed on themselves. We need to be aware that there may be posts that can be construed in a different way to your reasons and be aware that there may be pushback and questions.

Social media can impact our growth as professional due to the constraints it puts on education and learning as GDC registrants. If we continue to only ever post engaging posts, positive posts, posts that generate the likes, then why would we feel the need to change our ways, or come out of our comfort zone? Or even open our minds and expand our horizons?

In conclusion, it could be argued that the pervasive fear of judgement in the social media age might impede our professional development by discouraging learning, growth and the acceptance of vulnerability. It prompts reflection on the balance between perfection and the authentic journey of improvement in the modern workplace of dentistry.

> **'There is a balance that needs to be had when it comes to our online persona and professionalism, and this is for patients and colleagues.'**

If you search online and throughout the profession you will find many stories of people's mistakes, possible tribunals in front of the GDC or law courts, and complaints from patients. How many of these stories have been shared from the person themselves, or are grapevine and hearsay stories? There are people who will openly discuss their mistakes, for example a dental hygienist speaking freely about their journey with addiction. Sharing their story can help others and provide others with support. This is an example of someone using their mistakes and life journeys and using them positively for the sake of the profession. But it takes an inner strength and a willingness to be vulnerable with strangers, possibly having to work with being judged.

The fear of embarrassment can hold us back in many different ways in life and professionally. How many times have you had the chance to take part in a basic life support (BLS) or medical emergencies demonstration, and felt embarrassed whilst using the resuscitation mannequin? And this is usually just in front of our colleagues and possibly our friends. So how would it feel knowing that you may embarrass yourself in a bigger stadium? I use two tricks to cope with

actually occurred), then can it really be so bad?

Opportunities come from saying yes – most of my dental career because other people have either advised me of courses or roles and thought I would be a good fit, or that I would benefit from it. And this has been true for most of my career. It has also helped with networking and growing my personal and professional groups. By saying yes I have met people I may not have ever interacted with and been exposed to different parts of dentistry that may have previously been closed to me.

These tips aren't for everyone, but they work for me in real life. Sometimes we need to take these real life scenarios and talk about them when it comes to social media.

Being fake is quite easy to do on social media. We can curate a persona and nobody has to know if that is actually how we are. However, fakeness can also shine through, especially for patients and other professionals.

Being able to be authentic is important in this world as so many people resonate with authenticity. It transcends gender, class, age and many other parts of our life. Being true to

References

1. Todorov C, Bazinet A. [Perfectionism: conceptual and clinical aspects.] *Can J Psychiatry* 1996; **41:** 291–298.
2. Marano H E. Pitfalls of perfectionism. *Psychology Today*, 1 March 2008. Available at: https://www.psychologytoday.com/gb/articles/200803/pitfalls-perfectionism (accessed January 2024).