

Why Your Best Is Good Enough

Dr. Kevin Leman



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Introduction

After writing *The Birth Order Book* in 1985, I got an avalanche of responses to one specific part of that bestselling book. I talked about a syndrome that I observed in people over and over again: *perfectionism*.

Perhaps you know these people. They start a lot of projects and don't finish them. Their motto is, "If I can put it off for a day (or a year) or two, all the better." If you look on their desks at their places of work, you'll see signs of the defeated perfectionist—they live in piles. If you ask these people to find something on their cluttered desks, they'll find it with ease. If you want to send them into a tizzy, move their piles. There is order within the disorder.

But these personality types have a unique way of defeating themselves. Let's look at a student who fits the profile. This young person needs to study for a final exam. He tells himself throughout the day that he is going to study all night. Evening arrives, and he sits down to bury himself in his books, only to find himself studying for just a few minutes before seeing that shirt or that jacket that needs to be hung up across the room.

Introduction

What's the probability of him returning to his studies? Zero? Nada? Zilch? Bingo! You should have been a psychologist. This syndrome is produced in people who are brought up with at least one critical-eyed parent. That parent can spot a flaw at forty paces. And these personalities protect themselves from criticism by simply not completing tasks and not performing up to their abilities.

So, because of the overwhelming response, I wrote the book *Why Your Best Is Good Enough*. It's intended to help those afflicted with this syndrome to remove the high-jump bar of life that seems to stymie them at every turn.

My hope is that it will help you.

PART **1**

Starting Out on the Wrong Foot

1



Why Can't I Measure Up?

You're bound to know the feeling.

Maybe it only comes around at family reunions, when you see your younger brother, Fred, again. There he is—tan, handsome, athletic—and a tremendous success in the world of business.

Most of the time you're pretty self-confident. You're doing okay in the world, and your friends seem to like and respect you.

But then, there *he* is—and all of a sudden you feel like you're six years old again, with torn pants and a dirty face. You suddenly realize that whatever you've done with your life, it hasn't been enough. No matter how much you know, it isn't as much as he knows.

No, sir. You couldn't measure up to this magnificent brother when you were a kid—and you're still standing in his shadow. You feel so . . . so . . . inadequate. At any minute he's bound to come up and tell you that you have spinach stuck between your teeth, or that your fly's open. Maybe you'd better stay over here, in the corner.

If it isn't your brother who brings out these feelings in you, perhaps it's somebody like *her* . . . Mary Johnson, who still looks terrific after all these years.

You had to practically starve yourself for six weeks to get down to a size 12 for your high school reunion. And then she shows up wearing a stunning size 5! And just look at that figure!

If situations such as these are the only times you feel like something of a failure, then you can consider yourself very lucky. You've developed a pretty healthy self-image.

Many people—no matter what they may say or how they may conduct themselves—really don't feel very good about themselves. They feel inadequate, like failures and rejects much of the time. And they're not. They're ordinary, productive citizens, who have just never been able to feel they measure up. They try so hard, but always seem to come up short. Even when they succeed, they feel as if they just got lucky, or that they've failed.

They don't measure up to their parents' expectations, their teachers' expectations, or even their own expectations. They always feel as if they've let somebody down, and in many instances they have become so defeated and weary that they live out their lives in a way that reinforces their opinion of themselves. These people are defeated perfectionists. Defeated because they can never clear what I call "the high-jump bar of life."

If they ever do manage to get over it, they quickly raise it up a notch or two so they can never get over it a second time.

In my more than thirty years of private psychological practice I've talked to thousands of these people, and I've come to see consistent patterns of thought and actions—patterns that reinforce the “I just can't measure up” syndrome.

I don't care who you are, or what has happened in your life up to this point. You are not a failure, and you do not have to live your life as one.

This book is being written to help everyone who has ever struggled with feelings of self-doubt and inadequacy, no matter how strong and consistent or weak and sporadic those feelings may be. I want to help you break the cycle of failure and rejection. I want to teach parents how to instill a positive self-image in their children. And I want to help you understand how you got caught in this vicious cycle in the first place. The defeated perfectionist can be set free from discouragement and failure, and I'll show you how.

Now, I've already told you that I'm a psychologist, and that I've counseled thousands of people over the past thirty years. But don't think for a moment that I'm going to approach the subject with the cold and detached eye of a clinician. I'm not going to be writing from some lofty ivory tower and use only words you might find in *Reader's Digest* under “It Pays to Enrich Your Word Power.”

I haven't always been a psychologist, and I wasn't born with a doctorate degree. When I write about the feeling of not being able to measure up, believe me, I know what I'm talking about.

For instance, when you hear the word *undistinguished* you might as well think of my high school career. I graduated a “gimme putt” from the bottom of my class. I was in a reading group in elementary school where one kid ate paste and two others continually smiled for no apparent reasons. I was a college dropout who worked for a while as a janitor in a hospital.

The head nurse there took my future wife, Sande, aside and told her not to go out with me because it was clear I was never going to amount to anything, and that she was wasting her time with the likes of me. (I'll tell you more about this later.)

And I'll have to admit, at the time that looked like some pretty good advice. (But I'm awfully glad Sande didn't take it!)

Take It from One Who Knows

What's my point? Only that I know what I'm talking about not only on the professional level, but on the personal level as well. When you're starting out on a vacation trip, it's one thing to look at all the colorful brochures and believe what they say. It's another thing to take the advice of someone who knows where you should stay because he's been there himself. Well . . . I've been there!

I'll talk more about that later on, but before we go further I want to assure you of something else: People who see themselves as not being able to measure up are often some of the most intelligent, attractive, and productive people around. If you're one of those who are troubled with thoughts of inadequacy you're in some pretty good company.

I remember Joanne, for instance, who was warm, intelligent, and absolutely beautiful, with soft golden hair, Carolina blue eyes, and a perfect smile. It was hard to find the slightest flaw on that face, and the rest of her was not bad either!

She was the sort of woman who couldn't walk into a crowded room without causing several male heads to turn in her direction. Her looks, coupled with her sparkling personality, made her a most-eligible and sought-after young woman.

But she never saw any of that, and her charming personality was only a front. Beneath the surface she was miserable, sad, and lonely; she considered herself to be a terrible failure.

She wanted desperately to find a man to love her—or at least she thought she did. But even though she had many “relationships,” they always ended in disaster.

The truth was that Joanne, like many others I have counseled, was caught up in the self-perpetuating cycle of not being able to measure up.

She unconsciously sabotaged every one of those relationships because she had grown so used to living in a world of broken dreams.

It could be that this is what has happened in your life. You have come, for whatever reason, to see yourself as someone whose best efforts are bound to fail. You just can't seem to get your life into sync.

You're the type of person who puts his life savings into the stock market, two days before Black Friday. You go to buy a house and the interest rates quickly jump two percentage points. You go to sell a house and a subdivision with three thousand units opens its doors just across the street.

Sometimes you don't know whether to laugh or cry, and you often feel like doing both at the same time. It doesn't matter how strong you are. Sometimes all it takes to get things rolling in the wrong direction is one or two setbacks. We begin to see ourselves as “losers”—or at the least we begin to think that some mystical forces are aligned against us, so we might as well be resigned to lives of defeat and futility.

That, in essence, is what had happened to Joanne. And she had to come to see that there were no real obstacles standing in the way of her lasting happiness—only her own decisions and choices based on the way she subconsciously perceived herself.

I remember Jim, a good-looking athletic man in his mid-thirties. He was intelligent and successful in the world of business.

Jim had been married, once, but it had lasted less than five years, and since then he'd had a succession of unsuccessful relationships. He was no playboy, either. He wanted desperately to find a woman with whom he could share his life. He loved children and wanted to have a family, and it scared him to find that he was still alone with “no prospects” at thirty-seven.

He was just like Joanne. Everyone around him saw him as successful and self-assured, but he had come to believe, at a very early age, that he simply did not measure up. So he punished himself by rejecting anyone who really began to care about him. Commitment wasn't a word in Jim's vocabulary. He had hurt several women deeply, but what they didn't understand was that he broke off relationships not because he was rejecting them, but because he was rejecting himself. He could never measure up to their expectations.

Again, that wasn't a conscious decision he made. He would always find some reason to terminate the relationship—most of them quite petty. He would suddenly discover that he didn't like the way Judi laughed, or the way Donna slurped her soup, and that would be the end of the relationship.

The truth was, though, that he was never the one to “officially” terminate things. He would just begin finding fault, nagging, and criticizing until his women friends got the picture and decided to break things off. In this way, he was always the one being rejected instead of the one doing the rejecting.

Jim's problem was not only that he felt he could not measure up, but that he had come to believe, as a young child, that the only way he could really get the attention he craved was to be rejected. It was not an easy task to get him to see that he was a worthwhile human being, that he had much to bring to any relationship, and that he, himself, was bringing about his own rejection.

Joanne and Jim acted similarly for different reasons, and I'll be talking more about those reasons later on. But they stand out in my mind as two dramatic examples of people who were failing in the most important area of life—the search for love and companionship—not because they were unattractive or unworthy, but because they had both come to believe that they did not, could not, and would never measure up to that impossible standard by which they evaluated their own self-worth.

You may not be a stunning beauty like Joanne, nor a six-two “hunk” like Jim. And I certainly don't bring them up so you'll compare yourself to them. My purpose, rather, is to show that feelings of unworthiness and rejection seldom have any basis in reality.

You're Wrong about Yourself

Do you consider yourself to be a failure?

Well, you're wrong, and I hope that by the time you finish reading this book you will come to see how you fell into the “I-just-can't-measure-up” trap, and, more important, what you can do to find your way out of it. Because you can be set free from the cycle of rejection and failure.

And it's about time you had the joy of discovering the truth about yourself—that you have everything you need to come out a winner in this game called life!

Are You a Defeated Perfectionist?

Here's a brief quiz to help you find out.

1. If your boss asks you to do a special report for him, would you be most likely to:

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- A. Immediately be afraid you'd never get it finished by his deadline?
 - B. Worry about whether he'd like your finished project?
 - C. Be proud of the fact that the boss had chosen you?
2. If you called your best friend on the phone and he asked you to please call back later because he was late for an appointment, would you:
- A. Think you had offended him somehow and he simply didn't want to talk to you?
 - B. Felt that this was typical, because everything else was more important to him than you are?
 - C. Gladly agree to call him back, and think nothing further about it?
3. If you overslept and were fifteen minutes late for work, would you:
- A. Figure that your reputation was ruined because everyone had seen you coming in late?
 - B. Report yourself to the boss and promise to work thirty minutes of your lunch hour to make up for it?
 - C. Realize that everyone oversleeps once in a while, and promise yourself that you'll try not to do it again?

In all of the questions, the A and B answers are normal routine for the defeated perfectionists. Only the C answers show a healthy sense of self-esteem.

Question No. 1: Defeated perfectionists are excellent when it comes to contemplating disaster and failure.

Question No. 2: They're also great at seeing rejection and criticism everywhere.

Question No. 3: Another favorite pastime of the defeated perfectionist is magnifying his mistakes and flaws.¹