



THE CULT OF PERFECTION:

Making Peace with Your Inner Overachiever

COOPER LAWRENCE

About the Book

The Cult of Perfection is the ultimate book for women who strive to do everything and be everything, to utmost perfection. Women who have the drive to rise higher in their chosen career; to have more letters after their name than the Yellow Pages; to have the most beautiful home on the block; to be thinner, fitter, younger looking, and better dressed; and, if they choose to start a family, to be the ideal wife and mother, with perfect children.

Cooper Lawrence details the upside of this way of life (whatever these women set their mind to, they achieve) and the downside (the stress, anxiety, and self-doubt they sometimes experience). Most importantly, this book provides women with the tools they need to make peace with their inner overachiever—that is, to bring balance to their lives so that their urge to achieve is a positive force rather than a negative one. Packed with practical exercises and real-life stories from overachieving women, *The Cult of Perfection* helps overachievers harness their incredible energy, focus, and determination so that it brings joy and success to their lives.

About the Author

COOPER LAWRENCE is a radio personality, television-show regular, and magazine columnist. Her nationally syndicated FM radio show for women, *The Cooper Lawrence Show*, is best described as “real talk for real women,” with topics ranging from dating, relationships, and family, to fashion and social issues. Cooper is also an advisory board member and monthly columnist for *CosmoGIRL!* magazine.

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What is an Overachiever?

The world wants winners.

Confident, successful, intelligent, self-assured winners who are at the top of their game.

The world will root for you to be the best you can be—but that’s not enough for the overachiever. She wants to fulfill that wish and then some. She likes to show the world that she has perfect children, a fabulous husband to father them, a successful career, a perfect lawn, and soft, manageable hair—all while still being a great friend. She judges herself on a higher level than everyone else. It’s okay for them to get an 85 on an exam, marry a sorta halfway decent man, and bowl a 54—but it’s not okay for the overachiever. She is driven by a need for approval and the parameters of how far she can go, how far she can stretch, are undefined; she makes them up for herself, which can be both freeing and anxiety-inducing at the same time.

As women, we have more opportunities now than at any other time in history, and that means that we also have more choices to make than ever before. There are so many things we can achieve, so many people we can be. This vast array of life choices can be confusing and overwhelming for the regular person, but not for an overachiever: She chooses all of them. Overachieving women have to have everything at once: a stellar career, a

contented husband, cherubic children, her own blog, a mastery of Ashtanga yoga, the ability to serve her family gourmet meals in 30 minutes or less, an MBA, a novel she's working on, spiritual enlightenment, good health, and a stock portfolio to envy. Sometimes the best option looks like leaving it all behind, trekking into the woods, and living on nuts and berries. (But even there, the overachiever would have to have the finest hut, and grow the biggest darn fig tree her fellow naturalists have ever seen.)

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One of the biggest misconceptions about overachievers is that they “have it all.” It might seem true to the outside world, but it is far from the reality. Not only does the overachiever not have it all, she is completely dissatisfied with many aspects of what she does have. Her career is good, just not good enough. Recognition from her peers? Meh! A higher salary than most of her friends, and underlings nipping at her heels to get where she is? It's okay . . . but only just. The same goes for her apartment, car, and sometimes even her friends (every once in a while she takes stock of whom she surrounds herself with and wonders if they best reflect where she is going in her life). What she has at the present time may seem great to others and, indeed, she's aware of that—she just wants *different*. Different is a test of her true overachieving abilities. Remember, this lady feels like she's just getting started.

Not only does the overachiever not have it all, she is completely dissatisfied with many aspects of what she does have.

Sometimes she excels in every area of her life except the one she really wants to excel in. You know who that woman is—or you may even be that woman. You have worked extremely hard on certain things and succeeded beyond anyone's wildest dreams. Perhaps you were made the boss of a major company before you hit thirty, or became the first woman to run

Tales From the Treadmill: Alexandra



Alexandra is myopic when it comes to her job as a corporate lawyer. She admits it started early: “The top twenty-five schools have an admission rate of only about 10 percent, consequently I knew that how I spent my summers was going to be pivotal in becoming one of the lucky few.” Once she made it to law school, Alexandra obtained special permission from the dean to take more classes than were allotted to her each semester. She excelled in them, maintained an outstanding GPA as well as an editorship of the law review, and took business classes on the side. Alexandra considered going for her MBA after graduating from law school, but a job offer from a prestigious firm swayed her. Yet for all of Alexandra’s accomplishments, her Ivy League education and six-figure salary, she is unable to settle on a man. “My standards are too high, I know that. I meet men all the time and never feel that they are what I am looking for.”

This causes a great deal of anxiety for Alexandra and she finds herself questioning her choices every once in a while. She was so determined to do and be and accomplish that she never stopped to think that the kind of person she was becoming might intimidate the kind of men she was interested in. Alexandra also realized that the more she learned, the more she knew—and there is a side to her that believes the old adage “Ignorance is bliss.” She wishes, at times, for a simpler life. She wishes that she didn’t want so many things, to be so many things, to accomplish so much. Now that she is on the corporate treadmill, getting off would be career suicide. “You can’t get as far as I have, especially as a woman, and then take a few years off to peruse the Maldives or search your soul, or even have children, and then expect to return and be back on top, or at least where you left off.”

a particular division of a global organization—yet your love life is non-existent. There is that one area of your life that you have not been able to make headway in, even though you have the motivation. Being solo at the company Christmas party or at your best friend’s wedding is less a reminder about your lack of romance than the fact there is one area of your life you cannot control. One area that you have not yet achieved in, much less overachieved in. You are without what you consider to be the “perfect guy.” Even this is a sign that you are an overachiever: Your criteria for the perfect mate are much stricter than they were before you were fabulous. Now, your other half needs to not only be worthy of you, but better than you. After all, you will pass an equal pretty quickly on your journey upwards; you’ll need someone to keep you on those well-pedicured toes.

Maybe you became the ultimate wife and mother, and spend your days making sure everything looks perfect on the outside—happy husband, happy kids who are regularly shuttled, play-dated and bathed, working on their own little résumés—but inside you wonder whatever happened to your dreams. Could you still become a rock star or be on the Forbes 200 Best Small Companies list as well? Could you fit it all in? You think so. While being the perfect wife and mother, you are also on every board known to man, have started a campaign at your kids’ school for healthier lunches, are taking tennis lessons, and are in three book clubs. Your life is almost as overscheduled as your kids’. You can’t just be a mom; you must be Supermom. Heaven forbid if someone accuses you of not being a great mother. Some Supermoms are so focused on doing and being and achieving for their family that they don’t even realize they’re driving their family nuts in the process.

Just to be clear, when we say “overachiever” we’re not talking about a successful woman whose life is in balance, because ironically, overachievers are usually the least balanced people. We’re talking about someone for whom success in one area of her life is not enough. She has to be better at her job than everyone else; she has to be the ideal worker or boss; she has

Tales From the Treadmill: Mary Beth



Mary Beth set out to be a better mother than her mother was, and to set a great example for her children. Not only was it important for her to be active in her community, she also strived for her kids to be involved. Her cause? Drug-free school zones. She read that law enforcement efforts were much higher in drug-free school zones—in March 2006, 80 percent of offenses being investigated by the DEA took place in these zones. This sent Mary Beth over the edge and she began researching programs and aligning herself with law enforcement officers. She started gathering the troops: other mothers whose time she could usurp for her cause. This added to her list of daily to do's, which included at least forty minutes on her cross trainer and a half hour of weight training, at least an hour with her novel—the one she has sworn to finish by Labor Day, after she re-landscapes the front yard. She has found a combination of birch and Japanese maple trees that will look just perfect! Are you exhausted reading everything on Mary Beth's list? Yeah, so am I, but now you get the picture.

to be thinner, fitter, younger looking, better dressed. She has to be the best at everything, all at the same time. She may not be there yet, but make no mistake, that is her goal.

In general, overachievers strive to accomplish each and every goal they have set, yet along the way they are chronically plagued by self-doubt. Like those moments when you ask yourself if you are doing the right thing or are good enough to achieve the goals you have set for yourself. That self-doubt can be pervasive, but it also helps keep overachievers motivated. While the overachiever may often be nagged by the voice of self-doubt, she

keeps going. We'll explore this in Chapter Nine, but suffice it to say: Self-doubt can influence the decision-making of a regular person, taking them down another road entirely—not us overachievers, though. We're warriors in this way.

Types of Overachievers

Most overachieving women have an overachieving little girl trapped inside. And like ice cream, they come in a variety of flavors. The gifted girl who grew up with unrealistic expectations, the mediocre girl who strived to be seen as extraordinary, the girl who did everything to try to impress her disapproving mother—these are the main breeds of overachievers from which all the rest (we'll get into those in later chapters) are sprung. Here they are now, all grown up, and still desperate for approval.

The “Gifted” Overachiever

As a gifted child, at a very young age you had unrealistic expectations put upon you, so you grew up to be the put-upon adult who feels pressured by others to be better, faster, stronger, smarter . . . You are Superwoman! Perhaps back in your school days you were taken out of your regular classroom and placed in one considered more nourishing. But a simple change of environment has an impact on the way a girl perceives herself. You can view yourself a number of ways, especially in those early years when you are figuring out who you are and who you want to be: the smart girl, the popular girl, the life of the party, the rebel, and so on. The way you see yourself, and whether you feel positively or negatively about yourself, is formed to some degree by your environment and the people around you. As a child, what impact did you have on the kids in your classroom, your teacher, and your family? And how did they perceive you? This all makes a difference when you reach the age when it's time to decide who you are and what you want out of life.

For example, lah-de-dah, one day you are in algebra with everyone

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else, wondering what that smell is and is it coming from the boy in the front row, and then suddenly you are with all the smarty-pants kids in an honors class, away from your friends. You may perceive your academic self in a brand new, positive light (*Hey, I'm smart!*), but your social self in a negative light (*My friends hate smart*). Thus begins an imbalance you may carry for years to come.

Your newfound identity as a gifted child could work against you in other ways. In the regular class with the regular kids you were at the top of the class; now that you're in with the smarty-pants kiddies, you are at the bottom. To regain that top-of-the-class position, you need to work harder than ever before; you have to come up with a strategy to become better than the other kids. Thus begins your overachieving life.

Being gifted may also place expectations upon you that are greater than everyone else's your age, like higher career expectations. You say to yourself: *Well, I was all geared up to be a towel girl for the Seattle Superonics, but now I have to go cure cancer.* You may be confused about who you ought to be versus who you thought you were.

Gifted girls are expected to be over-achievers—it's built in—but being gifted doesn't mean that you are equipped to make complex decisions about your life and your future. And there are many different ways a person can be gifted—perhaps as a girl you were a math genius, a virtuoso on the violin, a

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champion debater. In other words, there is no one way to be “gifted,” so for many gifted people, there are no role models; they have to make up their own rules as they go along. This, plus being assigned the label of “gifted” at a young age, has an impact. Heck, it's difficult to grow up to begin with; it's even harder when you are placed in special programs and pulled away from your peers. Adult things are now expected of you. Consequently, you begin to feel pressure, which you internalize. While you would like to con-

form and be like all of your friends, you aren't like them anymore; you are special in a good way and there are those demands to excel weighing you down. So guess what happens next. C'mon, guess...you got it: You are always afraid you are making the wrong choice, so you either stop choosing to do things, or you do all of them. It's a sick, sad way to live, and I can totally relate.

The Mediocre Girl

Then there is the mediocre girl who early on had to overcompensate for her mediocrity—most likely academic—by piling on her plate more than humanly possible, quantity over quality. She might have been an average student, but her list of extracurricular activities was longer than the ole mighty Mississippi'.

The definition of what is mediocre is subjective, but to the overachiever it reads like “inadequate.”

If you are an overachiever, mediocrity is something you will not tolerate. While your life may be ordinary at the moment, you are ever so aware that this state can change—and *will* change if you have anything to do with it. The definition of what is mediocre is subjective, but to the overachiever it reads like “inadequate.” It means that you are just not trying hard enough and have the potential to achieve so much more.

For many of us this started in school, where we heard continually that we were “not working to our full potential” or “She's one of the brightest in the class, but she just doesn't apply herself.” Okay, you want to see application? How about this, Mrs. Guidance Counselor: cheerleader, varsity softball team as a freshman, the debate team, theater club, yearbook committee, and volunteering on the weekends for Big Brothers, Big Sisters, all while starring in the local production of *Peter Pan* and dating the shop teacher. Is that enough “application” for ya?

Overachieving women have the “See, I told you so” gene that makes us need to be right even at the expense of our own sleep. We will not be seen

as average, because inside we know that we are not. We can feel it: We are bound for greatness, and it's just a matter of time. At some point we read a book about greatness, or were inspired by a woman who made something out of nothing. We swear to the gods above that we will be great too,

We can feel it:
We are bound
for greatness, and
it's just a matter
of time.

we will succeed. Mantras start streaming through our heads, and we begin to put them in our mental needlepoint—words of inspiration like “The world is full of rejection, but only success counts” and other such untruths.

The Girl With the Disapproving Mother

Third, there is the girl with the disapproving mother who thought to herself: *Maybe if I do this she'll approve; What about this; How about that; What about now?* The overall message she received as a girl was: Whatever you do, it will never be good enough.

The daughters of parents with a disapproving parenting style tend to have a poorer sense of self, and so as women we retaliate by doing our own little dog and pony show. You can just picture the barker at the tent. “Ladies and gentlemen, step right up to see how, defying all odds, this woman will balance on her nose: a new business; winning yet another award; a private jet; and being elected to local office—all before lunch! Oooh, sorry. . . parents are not impressed. Please see your bartender immediately.”

Kidnapping is on the rise, but not in the traditional sense—the new kidnapers are much more devious. In this kind of kidnapping a mother holds her love ransom in place of her daughter marrying the perfect husband, having a safe career, and one day giving her grandchildren . . . but not too soon, she doesn't want to feel old or be referred to as “Grandma” yet . . . Don't worry, she'll tell you when. It all begins when you are little, and your mom starts to tell you how you should feel, act, think; what you should want, do, be, and wear. Lots of “shoulds,” not a lot of guidance. Parenting



Tales From the Treadmill: Jennifer

It is interesting that many classic overachieving women I interviewed didn't think that they fit into the category. You can judge this one for yourself:

Jennifer, who just turned thirty-two, has a PhD in Environmental Toxicology from a prominent university that she—of course—graduated from with honors. She has a plum job—a fellowship in Washington DC for the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)—and is planning her wedding to her fiancé, who holds a PhD in Biology. She is planning on having two children whose first seven years will be spent between Puerto Rico and New York. Jennifer explains it is so her children can grow up bilingual, since those first years of brain growth are the most critical for language development.

Oh, and did I mention that at the start of our interview Jennifer asked why I would want to talk with her since she is in no way an overachiever? Jennifer recalls, "In high school I had such a different experience than your typical high school student. I was in honors classes, but I was also a cheerleader." I asked Jennifer if those were her only two extracurricular activities in high school, to which she replied, "Oh no, I was in the science honors society, Amnesty, the swim team, and outside of school I took a photography class—oh, I was also on the gymnastics team, but nobody ever called me an overachiever." During her summers Jennifer went to performing arts camp for photography and also for dance, which she admits she was not as good at. "I chose dance because you had to have a minor."

Some overachievers like Jennifer were conditioned to get straight A's in school. I asked her why she had to get A's, and would she have settled for B's, to which she countered, "That's the wrong question. You should be asking me what were the best grades for me, because if a C student can only get C's then that's okay for them, but I'm an A student so my best were A's, and I was just

doing my best. My parents are the driving force. I wasn't going to be half-assed about study. Why not do the best that I could do?" Did Jennifer ever get a C? I had to know.

"I did get a C once, and then never again, but it was because I did something stupid. When I first got to college I didn't know exactly what I wanted to do and in high school I loved physics class, so in college I signed up for calculus. I had taken pre-calc in high school, but all the other kids in the class were way ahead of me and this was their major. So I met with the professor for help three to four times a week. I think he gave me a C for trying. I don't beat myself up over it because I realized it's just not my strength, so I learned to play to my strengths and that never happened again. If I ever do something that is my strength and it doesn't go how I would like it to, I'm just frustrated, but I keep at it until I have succeeded. I don't know if I'm an overachiever, maybe just tenacious."

like this springs from several sources: jealousy, a mother's desire to control her daughter's life, or a mother's own fears projected on to her daughter.

She may feel that the world has been unkind to her and out of love for you she doesn't want to see you face the same pain. As a result, she would prefer you take the safe road: a nine-to-five job with 401K, health insurance, dental, a short commute, and two weeks' vacation a year, which you will spend at an all-inclusive resort with the rest of the non-risk-takers. You will marry someone who loves you, even though you are not truly interested; your mother will remind you that you "could do worse." Then you will have 2.5 children, a dog, a cat, and two fish that you name "Gin" and "Tonic" as a harbinger of your impending alcohol problems. Or you will become an overachieving daughter who takes immeasurable risks, because let's face it: no risk, no reward.

When you have a disapproving mother, what you get is a daughter who

Is This You?

1. When I have an idea I:

- a) Talk about it endlessly and start strategizing how to make it happen.
- b) Think about it a lot but don't act on it as fast as I should.

2. My to-do list:

- a) Contains all of my life goals and as I check items off, I revise and add the next set of goals.
- b) Contains my day-to-day chores like "Get milk" and "Stop at post office."

3. When it comes to deadlines:

- a) I get the work done ahead of time.
- b) I try and make my deadlines, but sometimes I have to extend them.

4. I feel overwhelmed:

- a) Most of the time.
- b) Almost never.

5. When a problem arises I:

- a) Tackle it immediately; it's one less thing on my plate.
- b) Only deal with it when I absolutely have to.

6. When my boss criticizes my work:

- b) I assume she knows best and is looking at the big picture, as I am, so I work even harder.
- b) It makes me feel terrible and it does not motivate me to want to keep trying.

7. My achievements are:

- a) Pretty spectacular on one level, but I know there is so much more I can do.
- b) For my benefit and I don't care if nobody else is impressed by them.

8. When I'm on vacation:

- a) It drives me nuts to sit around and do nothing; I'm terribly restless.
- b) I can let the world slip away and I can just zone out for weeks at a time.

9. When it comes to my family and friends:

- a) They need to understand that everything I'm doing is important to me; if they love me, they'll get that.
- b) They always come first, and if it means letting a project go, I will.

What Your Answers Say About You?

Mostly A's:

You, my friend, are most certainly an overachiever—as if you didn't already know that. You strive for excellence in every part of your life, and give everything to the career or role you have chosen for yourself. And that is justified because, let's face it, it is hard enough being a woman no matter what path you choose. If you are a mother, you are inherently overburdened. If you are a career gal, many industries are still such boys clubs. So what's a girl to do but work hard at it, right?

Your dogged determination can be applied to any challenge that comes up in your life; you are ready to take on the world. But at times you feel besieged by it all and want to run screaming. The paradox is: Taking time out to come up for air causes you just as much anxiety. You feel that if you take your eye off the race for a second, you will lose your place at the head of the pack. You're damned if you do, damned if you don't. However, there are other options. First off, it's not a bad idea to let your coworkers, your significant other, and your friends wear some of the armor. Let them do their job; trust that they can handle it. Second, trust yourself. You are highly talented, uniquely motivated, and you are special. The cream rises to the top, you don't always have to push it there. If you don't take "you" time then you will not only self-destruct, you will miss all the good stuff that may currently be in your peripheral vision.

Mostly B's:

You admit that maybe you could try harder if you were really motivated to, and that you don't always do your very best. And that is perfectly fine: Perhaps what you value in life is friends, family, and the time you spend with them. Perhaps you don't "get" the whole run-yourself-ragged thing. You just have different priorities than overachievers. An issue only arises when your attitudes become a justification for not trying harder, or not achieving everything you want to. Do you secretly wish that your life were better? Do you feel you have more to offer, and that if you felt better about yourself maybe you could be spectacular? If you envy your overachieving sisters because they take control of their lives rather than let life happen to them—or worse, let others tell them who they are—then take a cue from some of the chapters in this book.

heaps more and more on her résumé, because she thinks that if she becomes more impressive, maybe then her mother will approve, maybe then her mother will see that she is worth something, and worthy of her love. The sad truth here is . . . yeah . . . no, ain't gonna happen.

Perhaps you are the daughter who makes it easy for your mother to disapprove by choosing an esoteric career that she not only cannot relate to, but is also easy to criticize. You may want to be a painter, actress, or singer. The disapproving mother and the artistic or creatively inclined overachieving daughter are a volatile concoction. Scientists are still trying to figure out how that chemical reaction can be harnessed for energy, and they will one day, I can feel it in my overachieving bones. Perhaps it will be me who finds the formula.

A mother like this turns you into a cheesy magician pulling rabbits out of hats and scarves out of ears—but nothing works, and she isn't impressed. Remember how in the movie *Sideways* everyone is just so daunted that Miles is even writing a book, regardless of the fact that it never gets published? You can write a book, get it published, and even sell enough copies that your publishers are thrilled with you, but unless Oprah has you on her show to talk about it, or you make the New York Times best-sellers list, you are a failure. The disapproving Mom has stories at her ready about how well everyone else's kid is doing. "Did you hear, Marion's daughter just bought an island with the money she made inventing an alternative fuel source from sweat, and next week she's climbing Mount Everest with five orphans strapped to her back, are you gonna finish that turkey club?"

Are You An Overachiever?

Studies have shown that one out of six women is an overachiever, so if you are looking around the room at your five closest friends thinking they're all slackers, it's you.

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Tales From the Treadmill: Jordan



To anyone outside looking in, Jordan was at the top of her game. She was a traffic reporter, like the one you see on your local wacky morning TV show. She was one of those girls who tell you that there is an overturned tractor-trailer blocking your favorite exit so you'll have to find a second favorite for the day. Jordan was not only on TV, she gave a radio traffic report, too. And she did both at the highest level possible, as she worked in New York, which is the top, top market for any broadcaster, regardless of what they are broadcasting. In the morning, you saw her cute little cherubic face on camera, letting you know that the roads were icy and parking rules were in effect today citywide. Then in the afternoon, she reported on the traffic for the drive-time show on the number one radio station in the number one city in America. Jordan was rumored to be dating an anchor on a national news channel, which was confirmed when she showed up on his arm to the Christmas party that year. For Jordan, it wasn't enough.

It was too easy that she got to this stage of her career by the age of twenty-five; she no longer felt challenged. The classic overachiever, Jordan needs constant stimulation and something to strive for. She became restless. She began to feel depressed regularly and to make the lives of everyone around her miserable. She was always being told she was too something: too belligerent; too saucy; too determined to wear hot pink on air though she had been warned repeatedly. Jordan was too over it!

A high-profile job can only service the overachiever when it still allows some wiggle room, but when you get to the top of your game, you need to make a lateral move, and that is what Jordan did. She admits, "Everyone was shocked when I announced I was leaving at the end of my contract, because they could not imagine what else I could possibly want."

Being an overachiever is a lot like being sixteen when you find out there is no Santa Claus: You are always the last to know. All of your life you have been building yourself into an overachiever. In high school you were in advanced placement (AP) classes and were on several teams and/or clubs, not to mention all of the extracurricular stuff you did. Whether it was volunteering in your community, being on yet another sports team outside of your school, taking acting classes at the local theater, or all of the above, you have been training for this moment your whole life. Yet on one level, you never saw it coming.

Here's what I mean. I had two moments when I was in my early twenties that hipped me to the fact I might be an overachiever. The first one was more of a metaphor for my overachieving ways, and it took my best friend, Wayne, the redhead, who knew me better than anyone else, to help me see the light. We were walking through the streets of Manhattan, running some errands, and at each store we visited I picked up yet another item that I had to accommodate in my already overstuffed leather multi-functional tote. It never occurred to me that the bag could not sustain its mass, and when it began to tear I was truly surprised. I remember the redhead saying to me: "Of course you're surprised, this is how you are with everything. You fill up as much as you can handle, never seeing that you are inches away from ripping at the seams." If that wasn't enough of a harbinger of overachieving to come, the following month my boyfriend of two years ended our relationship, telling me, "I don't know where I fit into your world. You don't just have a busy day, you have a busy *life!*" Hey, some people see the glass as half full—the overachiever sees the glass as not being big enough to hold all the liquid she needs to put into it.