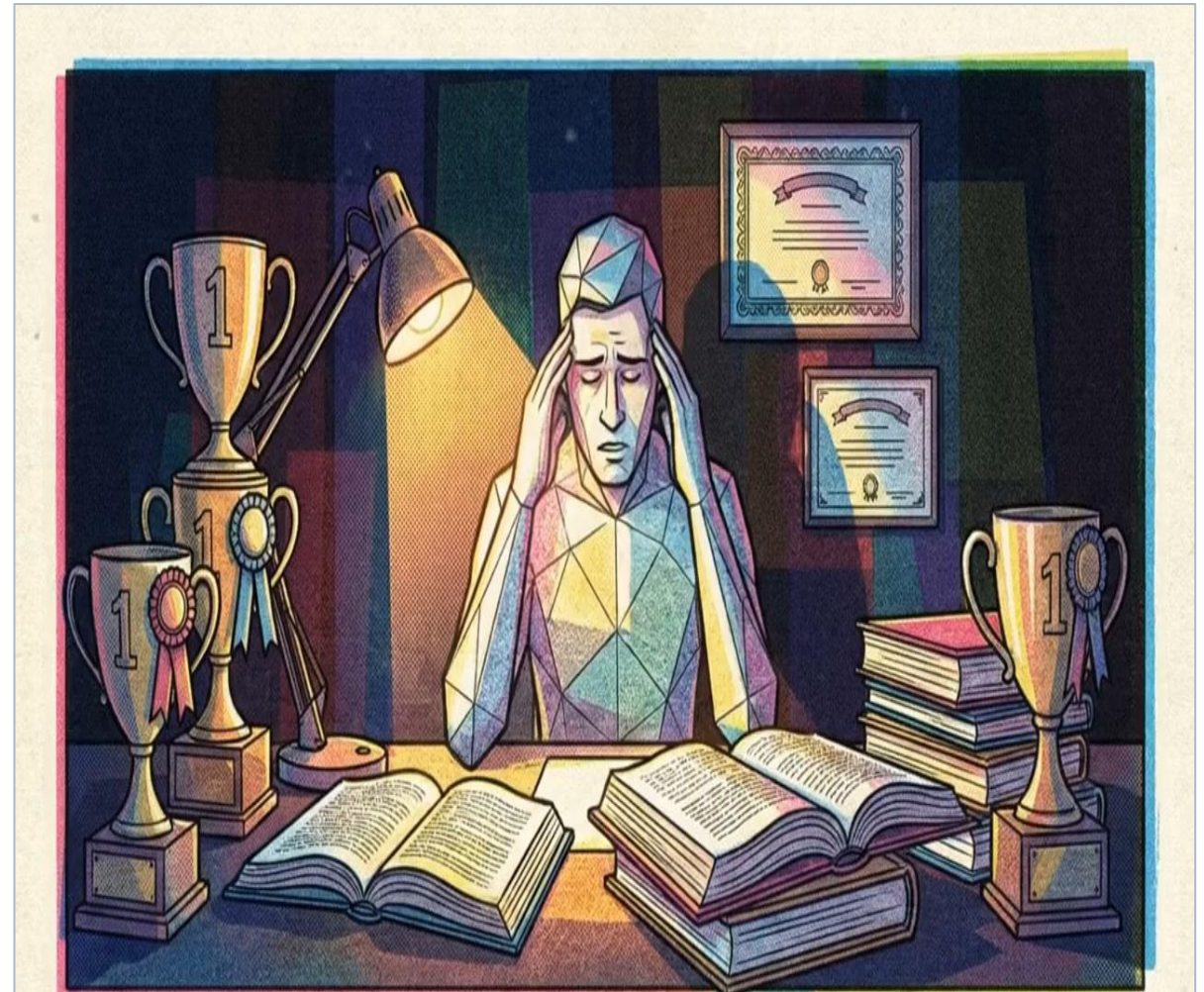


The Price of Perfect

One simple message:

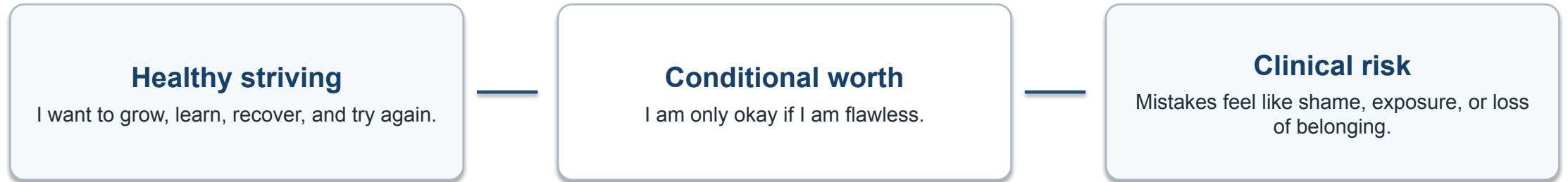
**Striving is healthy.
Conditional worth is not.**

Stephan M. Carlson, MD, MBA, FAPA
APA Annual Meeting 2026 | May 18, 2026



Session 1210: Hyper-Perfectionism and Emerging Risks

Healthy striving becomes harmful when it becomes conditional worth.



This is the whole argument: protect striving, reduce conditional worth.

Gupta: What We See

Hyper-perfectionism is not a single diagnosis. It is a clinical pattern that travels across diagnoses.

Anxiety

Mistakes feel dangerous.
Performance becomes threat monitoring.

Distress

Body image, eating, mood, and sleep can all be
pulled into the pattern.

Rigidity

The young person cannot recover, rest, or feel
ordinary without shame.

Ask: what does falling short mean to this adolescent?

If the answer is shame, panic, withdrawal, or collapse in self-worth, it is more than high standards.

Krasner: Why It Feels Protective

For many adolescents, perfectionism is a safety strategy.

The adolescent logic:

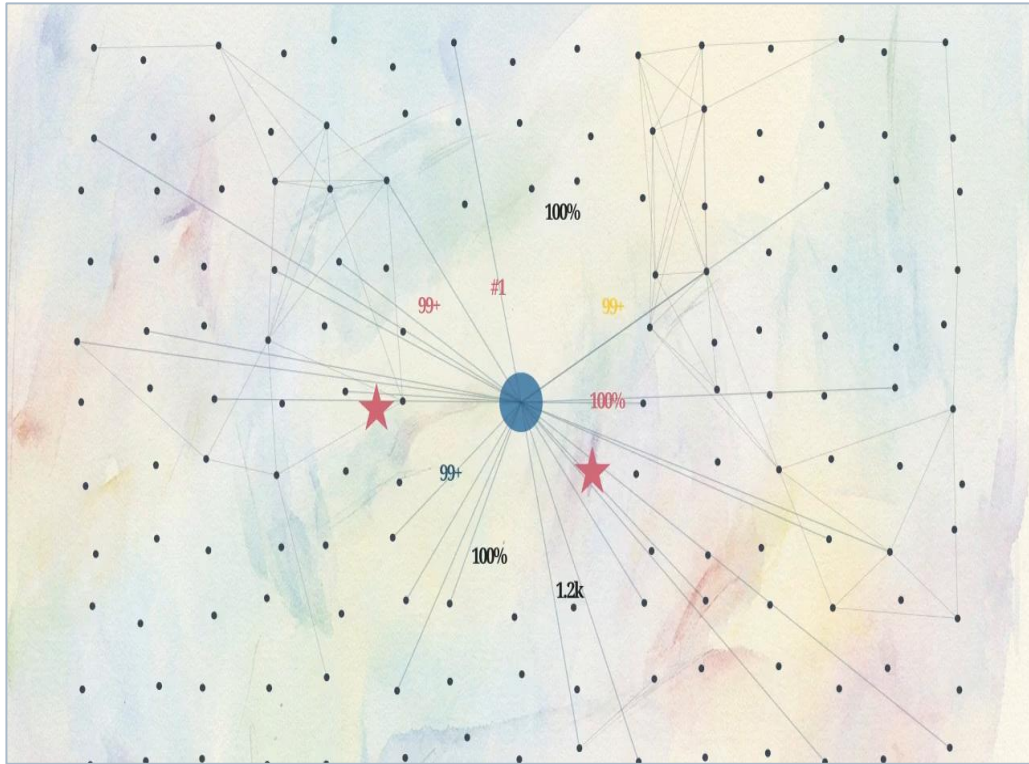
If I am perfect, I am safe.

If I fail, I may lose approval, status, or connection.

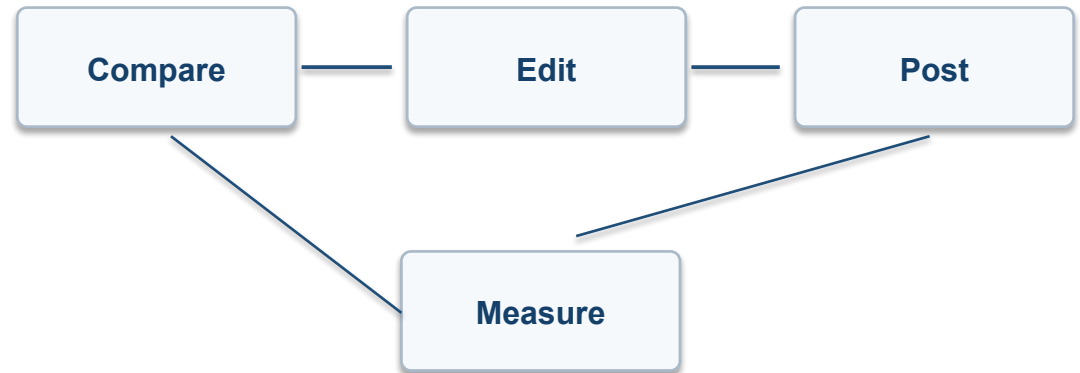
That harsh inner voice is often trying to prevent shame. So simply saying "stop being so hard on yourself" rarely reaches the function of the symptom.



Translate the theory into plain clinical language: safety, shame, belonging, repair.



**Platforms do not create the need to belong.
They can make it measurable, public, and constant.**



Clinical point: design can intensify conditional worth.

Use the Meta testimony carefully.

Not the podium claim

Do not decide legal liability from this stage.

The clinical claim

Product choices can intensify comparison and conditional worth.

The field claim

Repair the family context and the digital context.

Public reporting described debate over beauty filters, youth well-being, and platform responsibility.

Sources: Reuters and OPB/NPR reporting on the 2026 Los Angeles state-court Meta case.

"What does a mistake cost you?"

Rigidity

Can they recover after falling short?

Conditional worth

Do they feel they must be perfect to be okay?

Comparison

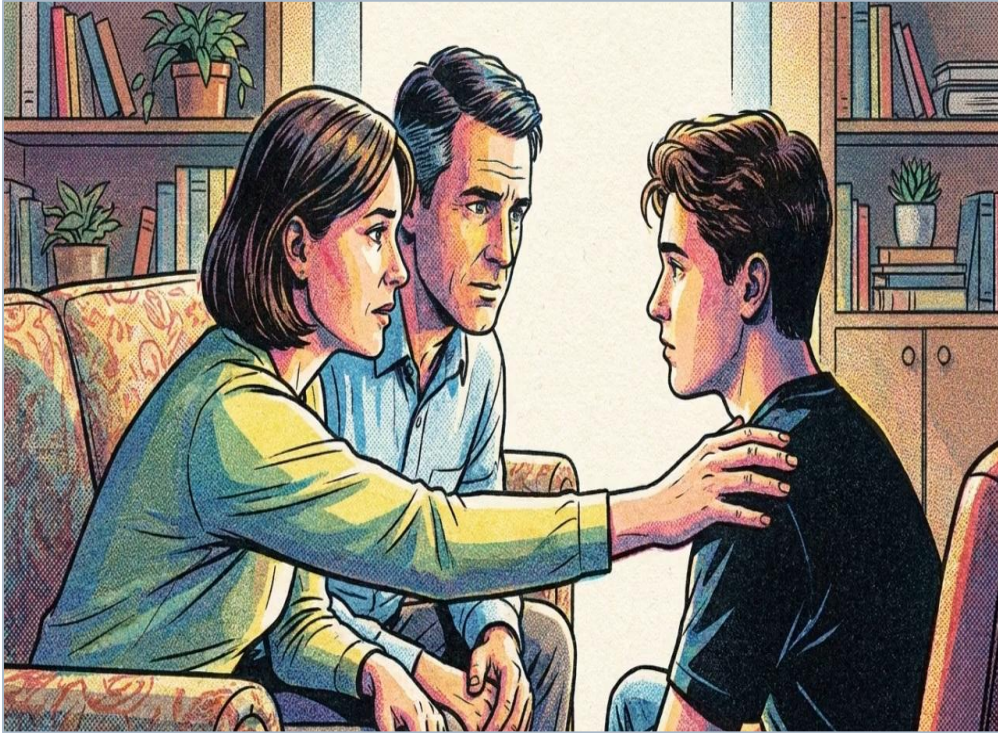
Is checking or comparing compulsive?

Impairment

Is school, sleep, eating, mood, or friendship affected?

If perfectionism protects against shame, treatment must make imperfection feel survivable.

What We Do Next



The goal is not blame. The goal is repair.

In clinic

Ask about conditional worth, checking, comparison, and impairment.

With families

Widen identity beyond grades, appearance, food, and performance.

As a field

Say clearly when environments make self-worth measurable and conditional.

The Right to Be Ordinary

The task is not to extinguish striving.

The task is to protect development from systems that make worth conditional on flawlessness.

Thank you.

Backup Sources

Use only if asked.

Perfectionism trend

Curran & Hill, Psychological Bulletin, 2019.

Clinical outcomes

Meta-analytic literature links perfectionism with depression, anxiety, eating pathology, burnout, sleep problems, and suicidal ideation.

Clinical boundary

High standards become clinically important when paired with harsh self-criticism and functional impairment.

Meta bridge

Reuters and OPB/NPR reporting on 2026 Los Angeles state-court testimony regarding Instagram beauty filters and youth mental health concerns.

Visuals

Selected stills adapted from the NotebookLM video supplied for this presentation.