



July 2008

Don't Worry; Be Happy: Alice Domar tells women how to escape "the perfectionist trap"

Barbara A. Walsh

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/colbymagazine>



Part of the [Psychology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Walsh, Barbara A. (2008) "Don't Worry; Be Happy: Alice Domar tells women how to escape "the perfectionist trap";" *Colby Magazine*: Vol. 97 : Iss. 2 , Article 8.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/colbymagazine/vol97/iss2/8>

This Contents is brought to you for free and open access by the Colby College Archives at Digital Commons @ Colby. It has been accepted for inclusion in Colby Magazine by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Colby.



DON'T WORRY
BE HAPPY

By Barbara A. Walsh



ALICE DOMAR TELLS WOMEN HOW TO ESCAPE "THE PERFECTIONIST TRAP"

Can perfection be dangerous?

Can the desire for better skin, better cupcakes, better sex, slimmer bodies, immaculate homes, flawless children be harmful?

"Absolutely," said women's health expert Alice Domar '80. "There's nothing wrong with making a delicious cupcake, but there is something wrong when women feel inadequate if they make brownies out of a box."

A psychologist, Domar has spent the past 20 years studying women's health and teaching women skills to make themselves healthier and happier.

While it is normal to want to be perfect in some aspects of our lives, it is not healthy, Domar says, to aspire to perfection in everything, and such unreasonable expectations can create anxiety and stress.

"Stress," Domar said, "suppresses the immune system. It hastens the aging process. It can kill you."

That message is the focus of Domar's new book: *Be Happy Without Being Perfect: How to Break Free from the Perfection Deception*. Cowritten with journalist Alice Lesch Kelly and released in March, the book has attracted international attention. Dozens of radio and TV shows, magazines, and newspapers around the globe have interviewed Domar about how women can escape the "perfectionist trap."

"This," Domar said, "is the busiest I've ever been in my career. It's been a little zooey."

At 50, Domar is no stranger to success and celebrity. Considered an international expert on women's health issues, she is an assistant professor at Harvard Medical School and the executive director of the Domar Center for Mind/Body Health. At her Waltham, Mass., clinic, patients are treated for infertility, cancer, eating disorders, anxiety, and stress. Or as her youngest daughter, Katie, explains: "When people are sad, they see Mommy, and she makes them happy."

Domar has published three other books in the past 12 years: *Healing Mind, Healthy Woman; Conquering Infertility*; and the bestseller *Self-Nurture*. Her goal in publishing

her recent book is to help women "lighten up and enjoy life more." She offers techniques on relaxation, deep breathing, prioritizing, and cognitive thinking—altering thoughts from negative to positive.

"The whole mind-body connection is Ali's specialty," said Elizabeth Browning, founder of LLuminari, a network of health and wellness experts. "Ali has helped millions of women through her books and speaking engagements that have taken her all over the world."

Healing patients has been a lifelong passion for Domar, who, she recalls, proclaimed as a 13-year old candy striper: "I want to be a doctor."

The daughter of a social worker and an MIT economics professor, Domar learned as a child to be both empathetic and academic. "My mother was a giver," Domar said. "She was loving, kind, and generous, and worked so hard for her patients. She gave me the empathetic part of what I do."

Domar's father taught her that science and research also play an important role in medicine. Her parents' influence prepared Domar for her years at Colby, where she was advised by psychology Professor Edward



Alice Domar '80 speaks to a group of health professionals at the Domar Center for Mind/Body Health in Waltham, Mass.

Yeterian, a neuroscientist and now vice president of academic affairs. Domar said Yeterian was and is her mentor. “I owe my career to Ed Yeterian,” she said.

Yeterian introduced her to the new field of health psychology, Domar remembered. “That became my dream.”

In the mid-1980s, after graduating with a Ph.D. in health psychology from Albert Einstein College of Medicine, Domar decided to focus on women’s issues, a niche yet to be explored as a clinical specialty. One of her initial studies involved researching how stress and anxiety affect a woman’s infertility.

“It was the first time anyone had looked at this issue in depth,” Domar said.

Two decades later, Domar is known internationally for her infertility research and has trained psychologists all over the world on the “mind-body connection.”

“She was a pioneer in how stress and lifestyle choices can affect a woman’s ability to conceive,” said Melissa Freizinger, a psychotherapist at the Domar Center.

On a warm April morning, Chinese music played softly in the waiting room, where miniature waterfalls gurgled among ferns and

vases of yellow and pink flowers.

Dressed in a royal blue pantsuit so soft and comfortable that her neighbor accused her of wearing pajamas to work, Domar sat at her desk, surrounded by photographs of her husband, David Ostrow, and her two daughters, 12-year-old Sarah and 7-year-old Katie.

Fertility symbols and statues (gifts from grateful patients) compete for space on her windowsill. Stacks of self-help and medical books fill her bookshelf; pictures of sunflowers (Domar’s favorite flower) brighten her office walls.

At 9:30 a.m. Domar had already crammed much into her morning. She had biked 10 miles, gotten her daughters off to school, reviewed her never-ending flow of e-mail, planned her daily meetings with patients, colleagues, and staff members, and responded to media requests. The popularity of her new book and the increased demand for Domar’s time has tested the psychologist’s multitasking skills.

“I am,” she said, laughing, “insane.”

In addition to doing interviews and leading the Domar Center, with its staff of acupuncturists, nutritional counselors, yoga teachers,

social workers, and psychologists, Domar is also a professor of obstetrics, gynecology, and reproductive biology at Harvard Medical School; senior psychologist at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center; executive board member for LLuminari, the women’s health education company; and an editorial committee member for *Parents* and *Health* magazines. Aside from those jobs and commitments, Domar is also working on her fifth book, *Pretty Healthy*, a guide to help women live well by following reasonable habits.

Asked about her dizzying and demanding schedule and whether she is striving to do too much herself, Domar smiled and said, “I juggle a lot of balls—but I am *sooooo* not perfect.”

The daughter of a “perfectionist” father and “very casual” mother, Domar concedes that she sometimes struggles to balance work, family, speaking engagements, and media interviews.

“I have insomnia on and off,” she said. “And those are the times I recognize I’m on overload—too much on my plate.”

What suffers when Domar’s life gets too frenetic? The house, which is “clean but cluttered,” and the cooking. “I haven’t done much

“Women look in the mirror and see their stretch marks instead of their beautiful hair. Men look in the mirror and say, ‘Hey, I look pretty good.’” —Alice Domar ’80

of that lately,” she said.

The nonnegotiable part of her schedule is her mommy time. “My daughters,” she said, “are my top priority.”

The irony of Domar’s hectic life is not lost on her friend since childhood, Carolyn Horn.

“I tease her a lot about how she leads one of the most stressful, jam-packed lives of anyone I know, yet here she is talking to other women about reducing their stress,” Horn said. “But, to give her credit, being busy and doing good for others brings her joy.”

And, unlike many of her patients, Domar does not feel guilty or classify herself as a failure if her home is messy, her sink full of dishes, or if she decides to spend an hour alone rather than with her daughters.

“Women are judged by so many things,” Domar said. “And Martha Stewart hasn’t helped; she has brought the home and kitchen to a whole new level of perfection. I had a patient come see me because she couldn’t live up to Martha’s Thanksgiving table.”

So why don’t men obsess? In her research Domar found that, while women are more likely to judge themselves harshly, men tend to focus on their positive attributes.

“Women look in the mirror and see their stretch marks instead of their beautiful hair,” Domar said. “Men look in the mirror and say, ‘Hey, I look pretty good.’”

Why the difference? Men typically worry about three things, Domar says: family, money, job. (They don’t worry about sex, Domar says. They just want it.) Women fret about a dozen things, on average: their kids, their kids’ social life and after-school sports activities, the house, their husband’s job, how much they volunteer, the clothes they wear, and the makeup they wear. “You name it,” Domar said, “women worry about it.”

The seeds of perfectionism were planted in the 19th century, Domar says, when women began to read books and brochures on how to improve their cooking, cleaning, and child-rearing skills. Now, more than a century later, women face enormous pressure to be flawless.

“Look at the CVS checkout counter,” Domar said. “Every magazine talks about how to make yourself better: better skin, better sex, better cupcakes. Not a single magazine says ‘You are great the way you are.’”

“And,” she added, “things aren’t going to change until the media changes the way it

portrays women and girls.”

Domar sees the media’s influence on her own daughters. Recently, her first-grader came home crying, tearfully explaining that her classmates ridiculed her for eating a cookie.

Two girls told her, “If you eat a cookie every day, you’re going to get fat.” Another boy remarked: “Boy, do you know how many calories are in that cookie?”

“My daughter was awake most of the night, upset,” Domar said.

Whenever possible, Domar tries to model the joys of imperfection to her daughters. “I tell them it’s okay not to be perfect,” Domar said. “I tell them my body isn’t perfect, but I’m happy with it.”

In her cluttered but clean house, children’s artwork hangs from the cabinets, there is plenty of ice cream in the freezer, and there are brownie mixes in the cupboard. “I love to bake brownies with my girls,” Domar said.

And, she teaches her daughters to savor the chocolate brownie instead of agonizing about the calories.

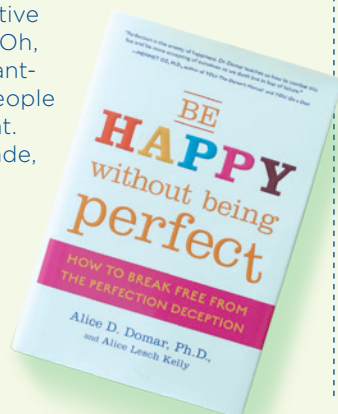
“My goal,” Domar said, “is to have women and girls be less stressed, less worried—to be perfectly happy with the way they are.”

EXCERPTS FROM

Be Happy Without Being Perfect: How to Break Free from the Perfection Deception

Whether or not we work outside the home, we hear little voices—from ourselves, from society—reminding us of what we “should” be. From the minute we drag ourselves out of bed in the morning till the minute we fall asleep at night, we are inundated with messages that tell us we should be thin, beautiful, successful, and sexy while being exceptional parents, supportive spouses, superlative employees, and cheerful volunteers. Oh, and we’re supposed to get a restaurant-quality Thanksgiving dinner for 23 people on the table without breaking a sweat. So, despite all the progress we’ve made, perfectionism is holding us back.

You can stop this perfectionism-based insanity. You don’t have to be a slave to these messages. You can change the way you respond to the expectations set by others, and you can re-script the demands that you automatically place on yourself.



While Martha and the pie-in-the-sky stores peddle perfection in the home, women’s magazines set unreasonably high standards for how we should look. For example, *Glamour* magazine offers up “10 New Flattery Rules” in its 2006 *Big Book of Do’s and Don’ts*. These rules cover everything from dressing to showcase your favorite physical feature, practicing the art of camouflage, choosing figure-flattering fabrics, using patterns wisely, and knowing that the A-line is your friend.

These rules make sense—you can’t argue with someone who’s recommending that a woman with trailer-width hips and a jelly belly avoid crop tops and pencil skirts. But *Glamour* pushes perfection a little too far when it tells women what they should do with these 10 rules. “Memorize them, believe in them, follow them, and you will leave the house fashionably every day.” That’s an awful lot to ask—I’d be happy to leave the house fashionably once a week. Plus, each rule is illustrated with a photo of a celebrity exemplar—Jennifer Aniston, Beyoncé Knowles, Lindsay Lohan, Selma Hayek, and other stunningly beautiful women that the average reader wouldn’t resemble no matter how many fashion rules she followed.