

What is Perfectionism?

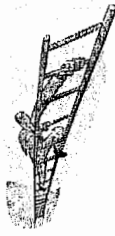


Perfectionism Defined

Perfectionism is not necessarily about being 'perfect'. Ask yourself this question... Is it ever really possible to be 100% 'perfect'? So, if it's not about being 'perfect', then what do we mean when talk about perfectionism?

Although there's no *perfect* definition, we understand perfectionism to involve:

1. The relentless striving for extremely high standards (for yourself and/or others) that are personally demanding, in the context of the individual. (Typically, to an outsider the standards are considered to be unreasonable given the circumstances.)
2. Judging your self-worth based largely on your ability to strive for and achieve such unrelenting standards.
3. Experiencing negative consequences of setting such demanding standards, yet continuing to go for them despite the huge cost to you.



The Paradox of Perfectionism

Many people think of perfectionism as something positive. It is often seen as the pursuit of excellence, setting high standards, and working hard to challenge one's self. People often have good reasons for being perfectionists. They may say that it allows them to be efficient, organised, or prepared for anything.

Although having high standards and goals may help us achieve things in life, sometimes these standards get in the way of our happiness and can actually *impair* performance. This is the **paradox of perfectionism!**

The excessive drive to achieve ever-higher levels of performance is self-defeating as it leaves you little chance of meeting your goals and feeling good about yourself. This kind of pressure is likely to cause you to feel constantly on edge, tense, and stressed out.

Perfectionism can also make your self worth particularly vulnerable as not reaching the (possibly unachievable) standards you set for yourself may result in you feeling like a failure.

Pursuing these personally demanding standards can have a significant impact on your wellbeing, and can lead to frustration, worry, social isolation, depression and a persistent sense of failure.

When am I a Perfectionist?

Being a perfectionist doesn't necessarily mean you have unrelenting high standards in *every* area of your life. It is possible to be a perfectionist in one area of your life (e.g., work), but not another (e.g., grooming).

Areas of life in which your perfectionism may flare up include:

- ◇ Work,
- ◇ Study,
- ◇ Housework/cleaning,
- ◇ Close relationships,
- ◇ Eating/weight/shape,
- ◇ Grooming/personal hygiene,
- ◇ Sport,
- ◇ Health & fitness.



How am I a perfectionist?

Some common types of perfectionistic behaviours include:

- ◇ Struggling to make decisions in a timely manner (e.g., not being able to decide what to wear to work each morning).
- ◇ Reassurance seeking. (E.g., asking others to check your work to ensure it is acceptable).
- ◇ Excessive organising and list making. (E.g., repeatedly writing and re-writing lists of the tasks you want to get done in the day).
- ◇ Giving up easily. (E.g., giving up flamenco after two lessons because you can't keep up with the teacher (even though nobody can)).
- ◇ Procrastinating. (E.g., putting off starting an assignment for fear that it won't be good enough).
- ◇ Not knowing when to stop. (E.g., arguing a point over and over, long after others have lost interest).
- ◇ Checking. (E.g., repeatedly looking in the mirror for facial blemishes).
- ◇ Hoarding. (E.g., keeping your bank statements for 20 years just in case you might need them).
- ◇ Slowness. (E.g., speaking slowly to ensure you say the right thing).
- ◇ Avoiding situations in which you may 'fail'. (E.g., not applying for jobs for fear that you will not get them).



For more detailed information regarding What is Perfectionism, see Perfectionism in Perspective Module 1.

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perfectionism behaviours



A hallmark of perfectionism is the tendency to judge your self worth largely on your ability to achieve high standards. To meet their unrelenting high standards, perfectionists tend to engage in a number of perfectionism behaviours (e.g., repeatedly checking work for mistakes), which may serve to maintain perfectionistic beliefs.

Perfectionism Behaviours

Perfectionism behaviours can be divided into two categories - the things you *actively do* as a result of your perfectionism and the things you *avoid doing* as a result of your perfectionism.

Perfectionism Active Behaviours

Most perfectionists engage in actions aimed at reaching the unrelenting standards they have set for themselves, and perhaps others. They are so concerned about reaching these high standards that they engage in behaviours that they see as necessary but that often seem excessive to other people. Examples include:

- ◊ Excessive checking,
- ◊ Excessive organising,
- ◊ List making,
- ◊ Correcting others.



Perfectionism Avoidance Behaviours

Many perfectionists also attempt to meet their unrelenting standards and avoid 'failure' by *avoiding doing* tasks. Although this may not seem like perfectionism, it is really the other side of the same coin as engaging in actions aimed at meeting your unrelenting standards. When perfectionists fear that they will not be able to reach their high standards, they may be too afraid of failure to try. Some may procrastinate by putting off a task, often indefinitely, while others will wait to the last minute before doing a task. Other examples include:

- ◊ Giving up too soon,
- ◊ Indecisiveness,
- ◊ Avoiding tasks you fear you are unable to do adequately.

How these Behaviours maintain Perfectionism

Perfectionism behaviours keep you from learning whether or not your perfectionistic beliefs are true. For example, a person who has difficulty delegating tasks to colleagues may hold the belief that this is necessary to maintain their high standards in the work place. By continuing to *not* delegate work, the perfectionist is unable to test out whether their beliefs are accurate.

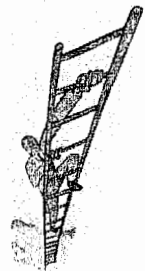
Perfectionism Behaviours can also be problematic in that: they are often time consuming; they are sometimes done at the expense of other important activities; they can impair relationships; and sometimes can actually interfere with attempts to meet the standard set.

Reducing Perfectionism Behaviours*


One way to test the accuracy of perfectionistic beliefs is to see what happens when you behave differently.

Stepladders Towards Change

- ◊ Choose a specific goal behaviour to change,
- ◊ Break the goal down into small steps by changing who is there, what you do, when you do it, where you do it, and how long you do it for.
- ◊ Complete each step, one at a time, beginning with the least difficult and working your way up.
- ◊ Do a step frequently and repeatedly, to make sure you are comfortable with it before you move on.



Behavioural Experiments

 Behavioural Experiments help loosen the grip of your perfectionism and test out the accuracy of your perfectionistic beliefs by seeing what happens when you change your perfectionism behaviours.

We encourage you to try reducing your perfectionism behaviours. You may be pleasantly surprised at how much more time you have, and how little it affects your performance!

*For more detailed information regarding the use of these techniques see Perfectionism in Perspective Module 5.

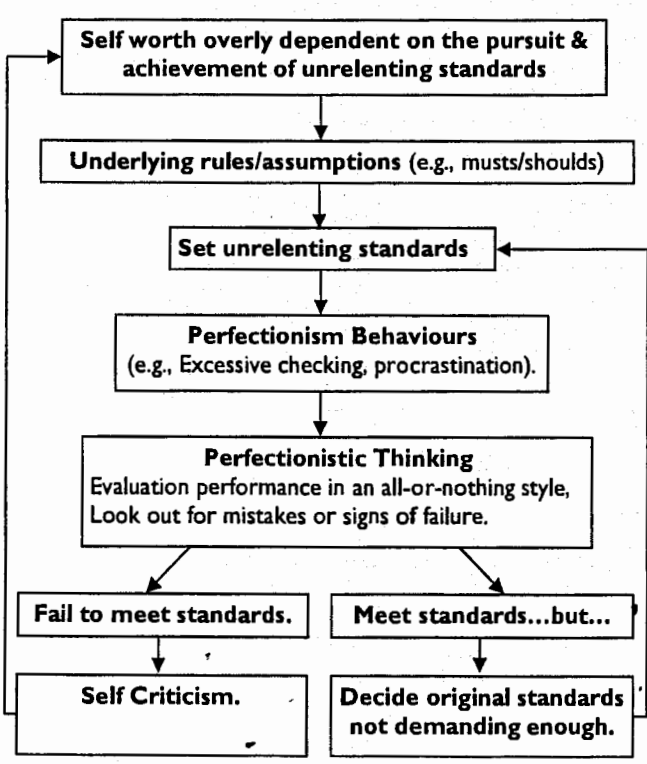
what maintains perfectionism?



Perfectionism involves: The relentless striving for extremely high standards; Judging your self-worth based largely on your ability to achieve these standards; And continuing to set demanding standards despite the cost associated with striving for them.

Sometimes when a person's self worth depends on their achievements they push themselves to attain unrealistically high standards. They may act in ways intended to ensure that they meet these standards (e.g. checking, correcting); judge themselves harshly and focus on their mistakes. They may criticise themselves when they fail to meet their standards, affecting their self worth. If they meet their standards they may suggest that they were too low and set higher ones.

Model of Perfectionism: Maintenance



Underlying Rules & Assumptions

Rules and assumptions that are flexible and accurate provide helpful guides for living. However, rigid rules such as "the job is not done unless its perfect" and inaccurate assumptions such as "if I make a mistake the business will fail", tend to cause people to focus single-mindedly on doing things 'perfectly'.

Unrelenting Standards

Unrelenting high standards are so unrealistically high and inflexible that we are unlikely to be able to meet the standard, or will only be able to meet the standard at considerable cost.

When an unrelenting high standard is not met, instead of concluding that it was unrealistic, perfectionists will conclude that they did not work hard enough or failed. In future, some will give up altogether while others will try even harder. Unfortunately, even if a high standard is achieved, most perfectionists do not feel happy about this for very long. Some might see it as a "fluke" or decide that the standard set was not high enough, and set a higher standard the next time.



Perfectionism Behaviours

Perfectionists also engage in a range of unhelpful behaviours to make sure they continue to meet the high standards they set for themselves. E.g., procrastinating, avoidance, checking, correcting, list-making, slowness etc. These behaviours keep perfectionistic thinking going because, if you keep behaving this way, you never have the opportunity to test out whether your perfectionistic thinking is true. These behaviours may be time-consuming, done at the expense of other important activities and may even delay or interfere with attempts to meet the standard set.

Perfectionistic Thinking

We usually to attend to and interpret things according to what we expect. Perfectionists tend to pay attention to any evidence that they are not achieving so they can correct these immediately. Perfectionists also have an extreme view of what success and failure is, with no middle ground, causing them to judge themselves more harshly than others would.

Often perfectionists evidence a pattern of unhelpful thinking styles, including:

- ◊ Black & white thinking: seeing only extremes - no shades of gray;
- ◊ Shoulding & Musting: putting unreasonable demands on self and others;
- ◊ Catastrophising: blowing things out of proportion;
- ◊ Jumping to conclusions: assuming that we know what others are thinking, or can predict the future.

For more information regarding what maintains Perfectionism see Perfectionism in Perspective Module 3.

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PERFECTIONISM BEHAVIOURS

<p>Decision making</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Not being able to decide what to wear to work each morning <input type="checkbox"/> Being unsure what colour shirt to buy so buying one in every colour <input type="checkbox"/> Finding it so difficult to choose what restaurant to go to that it becomes too late to eat out 	<p>Overcompensating</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Giving directions to your house in excruciating detail, then sending an email repeating the information <input type="checkbox"/> Always making sure you arrive at least 30 minutes early to appointments <input type="checkbox"/> Washing the kitchen three times, with antiseptic cleaner, before preparing a meal
<p>Reassurance Seeking</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Asking others to check your work in order to ensure the result is acceptable <input type="checkbox"/> Needing everyone to compliment your meal when you do the cooking 	<p>Correcting</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Replacing an item of clothes if there is a tiny hole on an inside seam (even if it's invisible from the outside) <input type="checkbox"/> Folding and refolding laundry if you can see the edges aren't exactly even
<p>Excessive Organising and List Making</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Repeatedly writing and re-writing lists e.g. the tasks you want to get done in the day <input type="checkbox"/> Having to have your office completely tidy and organised before being able to work 	<p>Checking</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Repeatedly looking in the mirror for facial blemishes <input type="checkbox"/> Looking over work, searching for errors <input type="checkbox"/> Frequently checking your watch to make sure you know what time it is
<p>Giving Up Too Soon</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Not looking for a house to buy because you are sure you won't find one which meets all your needs <input type="checkbox"/> Taking up flamenco but giving up after two lessons because you can't keep up with the teacher (even though nobody can) <input type="checkbox"/> Quitting your job because you made a mistake and you fear being fired 	<p>Hoarding</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Cutting out recipes from the newspaper and filling them in case you ever want to make a particular dish <input type="checkbox"/> Keeping your bank statements for 20 years just in case you might need them <input type="checkbox"/> Keeping piles of old magazines in case you might want to reread an article one day
<p>Procrastination</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Putting off starting an assignment for fear that it won't ever be done well enough <input type="checkbox"/> Delaying starting a healthy eating plan until the time feels 'right', with no birthday dinners, Christmas, holidays, or celebrations in the near future 	<p>Failure to Delegate</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Staying late to do the photocopying because you don't trust the secretary to put the documents in the right order <input type="checkbox"/> Not letting others clean the house because you're afraid the tasks won't be done properly
<p>Not Knowing When to Stop</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Creating a list of first aid items to take on a trip and ending up with a whole suitcase of 'necessities' <input type="checkbox"/> Arguing a point over and over, long after others have lost interest 	<p>Slowness</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Reading the newspaper very slowly to make sure you don't miss any important news <input type="checkbox"/> Speaking slowly to ensure you say the right thing
<p>Attempts to Change Other People</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Correcting people when they mispronounce words <input type="checkbox"/> Commenting when you feel people are being 'politically incorrect' and guiding them to behaviour you think is more acceptable 	<p>Avoidance</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Not putting in applications for jobs for fear that you will never get them <input type="checkbox"/> Never weighing yourself because you believe that any weight gain will ruin your day <input type="checkbox"/> Not asking for a pay raise for fear of being denied
<p>Other</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> 	

It is important to become aware of perfectionism behaviours because they can affect your mood, your relationships, and the way you see yourself. So next time you notice yourself doing one of the above activities, ask yourself "Am I doing this because of my unrelenting high standards?" If the answer is "Yes" then keep reading! In Module 5, we will be discussing practical strategies to reduce perfectionism behaviours.

perfectionistic thinking



Perfectionists tend to determine their self worth based on their ability to achieve unrealistically high standards. As a consequence, they may focus on information in their environment that they interpret as evidence that they are not achieving, and criticise themselves harshly when they fail to meet their standards. Such patterns of thinking serve to maintain the importance of attaining extremely high standards.

Biased Information Processing

The way we make sense of what goes on around us plays a big part in maintaining perfectionism. Since there is so much happening in our environment at any one time, our brains choose what we pay attention to and how we make sense of things. We tend to pay attention to and interpret things according to what we expect.

Since achieving extremely high standards provides the basis for a perfectionist's self worth, they tend to pay careful attention to any evidence that they take to mean that they are not achieving. For example, if a perfectionist believes "I must never make mistakes", they will probably quickly pick up errors in their work that other people may not notice.

Perfectionists also have a tendency to interpret information in a way that demonstrates that they are not achieving. They often have an extreme view of what success and failure is, with no middle ground. For example, they may say "missing out on an A for this assignment means that I might as well have failed".

Self Criticism & Unhelpful Thinking

Perfectionists tend to be extremely self-critical, especially if they are unable to meet their high standards. They might say to themselves: "I am such an idiot" or "I should have done better". This self-criticism can cause people to feel a range of negative emotions including anger, anxiety, depression and guilt.

Often these negative thoughts reflect an unhelpful style of thinking such as:

- ◊ Black & white thinking: seeing only extremes - no shades of gray;
- ◊ Shoulding & Musting: putting unreasonable demands on self and others;
- ◊ Catastrophising: blowing things out of proportion;
- ◊ Jumping to conclusions: assuming that we know what others are thinking, or can predict the future.

How Biased Information Processing and Unhelpful Thinking maintain Perfectionism

When people repeatedly focus on information in their environment that is consistent with their beliefs and ignore information that does not fit with their beliefs, it can appear as if their beliefs are well supported. Likewise a person may perceive that there is a lot of support for their beliefs if they repeatedly interpret information in a way that is consistent with their beliefs.



When perfectionists pay attention only to evidence that they are not achieving, or interpret neutral information as showing that they are not achieving, they tend to feel bad about themselves. For the perfectionist, this then underlines the importance of striving to achieve, thereby keeping their perfectionism going.

Perfectionists' repeated criticism of themselves not only causes them to feel uncomfortable emotions, it also emphasizes the importance of achieving their unrealistically high standards. The negative thinking styles that they rely on cause them to place unreasonable pressures on themselves, see only the extremes and not accurately perceive situations. Such negative thinking styles underlie perfectionists' unreasonable standards and harsh self criticism.

Reducing Unhelpful Thinking*

One way to check out the accuracy of perfectionistic thoughts and find more helpful and balanced ways of thinking is to use a thought diary.

Thought Diaries



Thought diaries are designed to help you become aware of your negative thoughts and notice how these thoughts affect how you feel and behave. Thought diaries can also help you investigate the accuracy and helpfulness of your negative thoughts and develop new more balanced thoughts.

*For detailed information regarding the use of these techniques see Perfectionism in Perspective Module 6.

perfectionism

unhelpful rules & assumptions



Since perfectionists tend to judge their self worth largely on their ability to achieve high standards, they often develop rules and assumptions designed to ensure that they meet these standards. Although many rules are healthy and useful, rigid rules and inaccurate assumptions can cause people to hold unrealistic expectations about themselves and others, which if unmet may bring about disappointment and criticism.

Helpful & Unhelpful Rules

We all need rules for living to help us make sense of the world and to cope with our everyday lives. So having rules, in itself, is not a bad thing. **Helpful rules are realistic, flexible and adaptable.** For example, the rule "it is good to try to eat healthy food" is helpful since it is based on evidence that shows that people who eat healthily have fewer health problems, and since it is flexible as it allows for times when it is preferable to eat less healthy foods (e.g, birthdays).

Unhelpful rules are inflexible, rigid, and unreasonable. For example, the rule "I must never make mistakes" is unhelpful because it not possible or reasonable that we would be able to maintain this standard and this means we are likely to feel bad when we make a mistake.

Unhelpful Rules & Perfectionism

Perfectionists' self esteem is based heavily on their ability to attain extremely high standards. Consistent with their belief in the importance of achieving these high standards, their lives are often directed by a number of rules and assumptions designed to ensure that they meet their high standards.

Some rules commonly held by perfectionists include:

- ◇ Fear of failure (e.g., "I must do things perfectly", or "If I try, then I will only fail").
- ◇ Shoulds & musts (e.g., "My house must be tidy at all times").
- ◇ All-or-nothing (e.g., "There is a right and a wrong way to do things").
- ◇ Constant checking (e.g., "I must weigh myself several times a day to make sure I'm not gaining weight").
- ◇ Control (e.g., "I must be prepared for anything").



Such unhelpful rules often form the basis for the unrealistically high standards that perfectionists set for themselves.

Identifying Unhelpful Rules & Assumptions

To identify the unhelpful rules and assumptions that underlie your unrealistically high standards, ask yourself:

- ◇ What do I expect of myself at work or school?
- ◇ What standards do I expect myself to meet?
- ◇ What do I expect of myself in my various roles – child, friend, partner, parent, staff member/supervisor?
- ◇ What might happen if I relax my standards?
- ◇ What do I criticise in other people? What standards do I expect them to live up to?



Adjusting The Rules

Generating a more helpful rule or assumption involves thinking of another way to see yourself and the world that is balanced, flexible to different circumstances, and realistic given the real state of affairs. When thinking of how to put the new rule or assumption into practice, work out how you would act in everyday life if you already believed the new helpful rule or assumption, and then making a point of acting that way. Often when we act as if something were true, we actually start to take it on board and believe it.

To challenge your unhelpful rules and assumptions about your perfectionism, there are six steps to take:

1. Identify your unhelpful rule or assumption
2. Work out where it comes from or how it developed
3. Question whether your rule is realistic or reasonable or achievable
4. Recognise the negative consequences of having and keeping this rule
5. Develop a more helpful rule or assumption
6. Plan how you would need to act in every day life to put this new helpful rule or assumption into practice

Remember, practice is very important for challenging your perfectionism. We urge you to practice, and remind you that you don't have to achieve change 'perfectly' or even quickly.



For more detailed information regarding Adjusting Unhelpful Rules and Assumptions see Perfectionism in Perspective Module 7.



Resources. Results. Relief.

HOW TO OVERCOME PERFECTIONISM

Most people would consider having high standards a good thing. Striving for excellence can show that you have a good work ethic and strength of character. High standards can also push you to reach your peak level of performance. For example, athletes often train long and hard to reach excellence in their sports.

Perfectionism, on the other hand, involves a tendency to set standards that are so high that they either cannot be met, or are only met with great difficulty. Perfectionists tend to believe that anything short of perfection is horrible, and that even minor imperfections will lead to catastrophe.

For example, most people believe it is important to try to do one's best and not make mistakes. However, most people also believe that making mistakes from time to time is inevitable and that making a mistake does not mean they have failed something entirely. However, adults with perfectionism tend to believe that they should never make mistakes and that making a mistake means they are a failure or a horrible person for disappointing others. Thinking like this makes it really scary for them to make mistakes. Trying to be perfect is also likely to make you feel stressed and maybe even disappointed with yourself much of time because you are not able to meet your standards easily or at all. Over time, you may even start to believe that you are not as capable as others. Therefore, it is worthwhile to consider *loosening up* your standards a bit to ease the stress and anxiety you may feel from trying so hard to be perfect.

Here are the Steps to Help You Overcome Perfectionism

Step 1: Learning to Recognize Perfectionism

This is an important first step, as it helps you to figure out whether you have a problem with perfectionism. Remember, there is nothing wrong with having high standards, but when these standards are too high, they can really get in the way of your work/school, relationships, and enjoyment of life.

If you have trouble figuring out whether you have a problem with perfectionism, you might find answering the following questions helpful:

1. Do I have trouble meeting my own standards?
2. Do I often feel frustrated, depressed, anxious, or angry while trying to meet my standards?

3. Have I been told that my standards are too high?
4. Do my standards get in the way? For example, do they make it difficult for me to meet deadlines, finish a task, trust others, or do anything spontaneously?

If you answered "Yes" to any of these questions you may have a problem with perfectionism.

Perfectionism affects how one *thinks, behaves, and feels*. If you have difficulties with perfectionism, the following examples may be familiar to you:

Examples of perfectionistic feelings:

- Perfectionism can make you feel depressed, frustrated, anxious, and even angry, especially if you constantly criticize yourself for not doing a good enough job after spending a lot of time and effort on a task.

Examples of perfectionistic thinking:

- **Black-and-white thinking** (e.g., "Anything less than perfection is a failure", "If I need help from others, then I am weak")
- **Catastrophic thinking** (e.g., "If I make a mistake in front of my coworkers, I won't be able to survive the humiliation", "I can't handle having someone being upset with me.")
- **Probability overestimation** (e.g., "Although I spent all night preparing for a presentation, I know I won't do well", "My boss will think I am lazy if I take a couple of sick days.")
- **Should statements** (e.g., "I should never make mistakes", "I should never come across as nervous or anxious", "I should always be able to predict problems before they occur.")

Examples of perfectionistic behaviour:

- Chronic procrastination, difficulty completing tasks, or giving up easily
- Overly cautious and thorough in tasks (e.g., spending 3 hours on a task that takes others 20 minutes to complete)

- Excessive checking (e.g., spending 30 minutes looking over a brief email to your boss for possible spelling mistakes)
- Constantly trying to improve things by re-doing them (e.g., rewriting a work document several times to make it “perfect”)
- Agonizing over small details (e.g., what movie to rent)
- Making elaborate “to do” lists (e.g., when to get up, brush teeth, shower, etc.)
- Avoiding trying new things and risking making mistakes

TIP: You might want to write down the realistic statements on cue cards and carry them with you. This can help you when you have a hard time thinking realistically.

Step 2: Tools to Overcome Perfectionism



Tool #1: Changing perfectionistic thinking

a) Realistic thinking

- Because adults with perfectionism are often very critical of themselves, one of the most effective ways to overcome perfectionism is to replace self-critical or perfectionistic thoughts with more realistic and helpful statements.
- It is a good idea to practise these helpful statements regularly. Even if you do not believe them right away, enough repetition will turn positive realistic thoughts into a habit, and help crowd out the negative self-talk.

Some examples of positive realistic statements

- *“Nobody is perfect!”*
- *“All I can do is my best!”*
- *“Making a mistake does not mean I’m stupid or a failure. It only means that I am like everyone else – human. Everyone makes mistakes!”*
- *“It’s okay not to be pleasant all the time. Everyone has a bad day sometime.”*
- *“It’s okay if some people don’t like me. No one is liked by everyone!”*

b) Perspective taking

- Adults with perfectionism also tend to have a hard time seeing things from another person's point of view. That is, they tend not to think about how others might see a situation. For example, you may believe that you are lazy because you are only able to exercise 1 hour instead of 2 hours every day. Learning to view situations as other people might see them can help you to change some of these unhelpful beliefs.

Going back to the "I'm lazy" example, you can challenge this thought by asking yourself the following questions:

- **How might someone else (e.g., a close friend) view this situation?** *Most people probably would not think they are lazy if they do not exercise 2 hours everyday. Kelly, my best friend, only has time to work out for 1 hour, 2 to 3 times a week, and feels pretty good about it.*
- **Are there other ways to look at this?** *Maybe not being able to work out 2 hours every day is understandable given my busy schedule. Not being able to meet this standard does not mean I am lazy. Most people cannot do it.*
- **What might I tell a close friend who was having similar thoughts?** *It is okay to only workout for 1 hour per day or even less. Working out regularly, say 2 to 3 times a week, is good enough!*

c) Looking at the big picture

- Adults with perfectionism tend to get bogged down in details and spend a lot of time worrying about "the little things" (e.g., what font to use in an email). One helpful strategy to worry less about details is to ask yourself the following questions:
 1. Does it really matter?
 2. What is the worst that could happen?
 3. If the worst does happen, can I survive it?
 4. Will this still matter tomorrow? How about next week? Next year?

d) Compromising

- This is a particularly helpful tool for dealing with *black-and-white thinking*. Compromising involves lowering or being more flexible with your very high standards.

For example, if you believe that making a mistake during a presentation means that you are stupid. You might try asking yourself, "What level of imperfection

am I willing to tolerate?" From there, you can try to come up with some lower and more reasonable standards that you are willing to accept. Because it is quite anxiety provoking when you first start trying to lower your standards, you can do so gradually, in steps. For example, the first step to more reasonable standards in this example might involve spending 3 hours instead of 5 preparing for a presentation, allowing yourself to make a mistake during 1 out of 5 presentations, or being okay with having fewer than 5 people praise your performance. *Once you are comfortable with lowering your standards a bit, lower them some more.* For example the next step might involve spending 1 hour preparing for the presentation, allowing yourself to make a mistake during 1 out of 2 presentations, or being okay with not knowing what others think of your performance.



Tool #2: Changing perfectionistic behaviours

Having a problem with perfectionism is a lot like having a "phobia" of making mistakes or being imperfect – you are terrified of making mistakes. Facing fears in a gradual and consistent manner is the most effective way to overcome phobias, and is called "exposure". For example, the best way to overcome a dog phobia is to gradually spend time with dogs, to learn that they are not as scary and dangerous as you initially thought.

Similarly, overcoming your "phobia" of making mistakes or being imperfect involves doing just that—gradually and purposely making mistakes and coming across as imperfect. This technique also involves gradually putting yourself into situations that you usually avoid out of a fear that things won't work out perfectly. For tips on how to reduce your fears, see Facing Your Fears: Exposure.

Here are some examples to help you brainstorm items for exposure practice:

- Show up for an appointment 15 minutes late
- Leave a visible area in the house a little messy
- Tell people when you are tired (or other feelings that you consider it a weakness to have)
- Wear a piece of clothing that has a visible stain on it
- Purposely allow several uncomfortable silences to occur during lunch with a co-worker
- Purposely be a few cents short for bus fare

Another helpful hint: Stop yourself from engaging in excessive behaviours designed to prevent imperfection. For example, if you tend to repeatedly check written documents for mistakes, stop yourself from checking more than once. Or, spend 30 minutes instead of 2 hours to prepare for a 15-minute presentation.

- Lose your train of thought during a presentation
- Send a letter or e-mail that includes a few mistakes
- Talk at a meeting without first rehearsing what you are going to say in your head
- Try a new restaurant without first researching how good it is

Repeated and frequent practice! You will need to practise the technique you choose several times before you start to feel more comfortable with making mistakes. Don't be discouraged if your anxiety doesn't come down right away at first, as this is normal and expected. Keep trying and repeating the exposure as frequently as you can.

More about setting realistic standards:

Are you scared of lowering your standards because you worry that you will let too many of your standards go and make mistakes all the time? Here are some helpful tips to address your worry:

Tip 1: Remember, lowering your standards DOES NOT mean having *no* standards. The goal is never to make you become careless in life and perform poorly all the time. Realistic standards are standards that can actually help you to do your best without costing you things that may be important to you, such as family life, physical and mental health, and leisure time.

Do you feel ambivalent about lowering your standards? If you are not sure whether you should lower certain standards, it is a good idea to make a list of *pros* and *cons* for lowering these standards. What are the costs to holding onto these standards? Keeping the costs in mind can help you to take the brave steps towards changing.

Tip 2: It is okay to ask for help. Sometimes, it is difficult to know how to lower an unrealistic standard to a more reasonable level. It is a good idea to ask a supportive person who does not have problems with perfectionism to help you with setting new realistic standards.



Tool #3: Overcoming procrastination

Many adults with perfectionism often cope with their fear of making mistakes by procrastinating. When you set "perfect" standards for yourself, sometimes it might feel easier to procrastinate carrying out a task rather than spending hours trying to do it! For example, you might find that your house is usually messy even though you have very high standards of cleanliness and organization. Or, you might put off writing a report for work because you are afraid that you won't be able to complete the task "perfectly", or you might be overwhelmed by how much work you have to put into it and don't know where to start! However, procrastination is only a temporary solution, and it tends to make your anxiety worse over time. Here are some ways to help you to overcome procrastination:

- Creating realistic schedules. Break down larger tasks into manageable steps. On a chart or calendar, write down the goal or deadline, and work towards it, setting small goals for yourself along the way. Don't forget to reward yourself for reaching each goal. It is also helpful to decide in advance how much time you will spend on a task. Remember, the goal is to complete the task, not to make it perfect! For more information on how to set realistic and doable goals, see the Guide to Goal Setting.
- Setting priorities. Perfectionists sometimes have trouble deciding on where they should devote their energy and effort. Prioritize your tasks by deciding which are the most important to accomplish, and which are less important. It is O.K. not to give 100% on every task!

Step 3: Reward yourself

It is hard work to face your fears and change old ways of doing things. So, make sure to always take the time to reward yourself for all the hard work you are doing. It is very motivating to give yourself a treat once in a while. A reward might include going out for a nice meal, taking a walk, going out with friends, or just taking some time to relax or pamper yourself.

Some helpful resources for more information on overcoming perfectionism:

When Perfect Isn't Good Enough: Strategies for Coping with Perfectionism by M. M. Antony & R. P. Swinson (New Harbinger Publications)

Never Good Enough: How to Use Perfectionism to Your Advantage without Letting It Ruin Your Life by M.R. Basco (Simon & Schuster)

Perfectionism: What's Bad about Being Too Good? By M. Adderholdt-Elliott, M. Elliott, & J. Goldberg (Monarch Books)