

Overcoming Perfectionism

What is perfectionism?

Perfectionism involves setting excessively high standards that are inflexible, unrelenting, and unrealistic.

Why is it a problem?

Perfectionistic thoughts and behaviours appear to be positive traits because they seemingly lead to many benefits: they can bring success and our high standards are often praised by others. Perfectionism may also help to prevent mistakes and give a sense of control over life, protecting us from fears, harm, and uncertainties.

However, the constant desire for perfection can be very costly. Research shows that perfectionism can actually result in worse performance, missed opportunities, strained relationships, poor mental and physical health, and unhappiness.

In your quest for perfection, do you recognise any of the following?

- **Feelings:** Do you find it hard to relax or enjoy things because there is always “something” that needs to be done? Do you feel overwhelmed because of the effort it requires to do things perfectly? Are you often stressed, anxious or depressed because of your high standards? Do you feel ashamed when you don’t do well?
- **Thoughts:** Do you have nagging thoughts that something is never quite right until it is “perfect”? Are you always analysing situations for potential consequences and bothered by what’s not “right”? Are you highly critical if things fall short? Do you constantly doubt your decisions and actions, fearing that you’ve made mistakes? Do you find it difficult to stay in the present moment, with your thoughts focused on worrying about the future or ruminating about the past? Do you obsess over details?
- **Behaviours:** Are you ever paralysed by perfection where you procrastinate or fall behind because of a need to do something “just right”? Do you work on something to the extent of avoiding other important things in your life? Do you never quite achieve what you feel you should? Are you too cautious to try new things in case you don’t do them well? Are you indecisive, delaying until you can make the “correct” choice?

Challenging your perfectionism

Thought *I need to be perfect otherwise people won't like me.*

Alternative Most people are very accepting. I am accepting of others who are not perfect. Besides, not everyone will like me even if I am “perfect” – no matter how hard I try, I can’t completely control other people’s reactions.

Thought *I failed, therefore I am worthless.*

Alternative Things did not go to plan but one failure does not define me. Everyone makes mistakes yet they get to try again. What can I learn for next time?

Action *I tend to get behind in my work because it takes me a long time to do something “right”. It takes me a long time to begin as I get overwhelmed by everything I ought to be doing.*

Alternative Sometimes I just need to get things done on time. I need to give it a good go but not at the expense of all other demands and opportunities.

What can I do differently?

Actions

Achieving high standards; getting started and finishing on time

Wanting to excel at everything is surely a good thing, yet it comes at a significant cost. It might be helpful to be more selective about where and when you apply your high standards. In which aspects of your life are these standards most important to you? Will these standards actually lead to a better result, or will it not matter much in the end? How do your friends and colleagues get good results without going to extremes?

Explore: *Realistic goal setting; SMART goals; achievement; procrastination; time management and planning.*

The maxim, "Nothing prevails but perfection," may be spelled PARALYSIS.

Winston Churchill

Concerned with mistakes

Sometimes our concern over not making mistakes is so strong that it prevents us from moving forward or trying new things. Not all mistakes are worth the worry, even if it seems that errors are a barrier to high standards.

In fact, trial and error are essential for learning and achievement. You didn't learn to walk by doing it "perfectly" first time—you had to fall and stumble many times, making many adjustments to do it well.

Take small risks. Fail often. Give yourself the freedom to err—utilise the early stages to try things; it takes many steps to achieve high standards.

Explore: *Fear of failure; indecisiveness; positive risk-taking; trying new things.*

I've missed more than 9000 shots in my career. I've lost almost 300 games ...I've failed over and over and over again in my life. And that is why I succeed.

Michael Jordan

Discomfort and being on guard

We may find it difficult to relax and enjoy ourselves because we never quite achieve the "just right" feelings of perfection we crave. This leaves us with a feeling of discomfort and we are constantly on the lookout, expecting things will go wrong. Part of being comfortable is learning how to accept that we cannot control the world, or even our reactions to it. We can however control how we manage our responses, and learn techniques for calming our distress.

Explore: *Relaxation techniques; managing worry; discomfort tolerance; Mindfulness; Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT); Highly Sensitive Person (HSP).*

If you look for perfection, you'll never be content.

Leo Tolstoy

Self-esteem and the need for approval

We may feel that we need to be perfect so that others will value us. However, we are often our own worst critics, being overly critical of our performances. Being perfect won't make others love us—acceptance comes from within.

Explore: *Self-esteem; self-acceptance; assertiveness; positive psychology.*

It's an imperfect world, so you fit in perfectly.

Bryant McGill

Resources

Resources For more tips and resources see www.adavic.org.au/PG-fact-sheets-perfectionism.aspx

Courses Swinburne University Psychology Clinic runs a perfectionism course, Ph: (03) 9214 8653

Talk to others ADAVIC can refer you to therapists who specialise in working with perfectionism. You may also want to share your experiences and seek support from fellow 'perfectionists'—we can link you to peer support groups and online forums

Books

- *Too Perfect: When being in control gets out of control* (Mallinger & DeWyze)
- *Overcoming Perfectionism: A self-help guide using CBT* (Shafran, Egan, Wade)



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