

# 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.

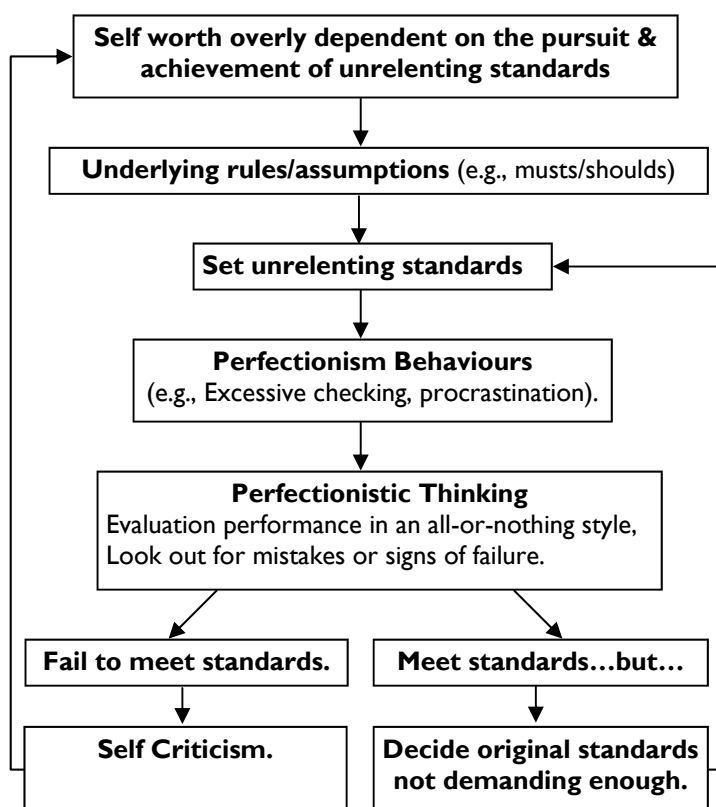
# what maintains perfectionism?



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 tend 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.

# 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.

## ABOUT PERFECTIONISM

Perfectionism is:

- \* the irrational belief that you and/or your environment must be perfect
- \* the striving to be the best, to reach the ideal and to never make a mistake
- \* an all pervasive attitude that whatever you attempt in life must be done letter perfect with no deviation, mistakes, slips-ups or inconsistencies
- \* a habit developed from youth that keeps you constantly alert to the imperfections, failings, and weakness in yourself and others
- \* a level of consciousness that keeps you ever vigilant to any deviations from the norm, the guidelines or the way things are "supposed to be"
- \* the underlying motive present in the fear of failure and fear of rejection, i.e., if I am not perfect I will fail and/or I will be rejected by others
- \* a reason why you may be fearful of success, i.e., if I achieve my goal, will I be able to continue, maintain that level of achievement
- \* a rigid, moralistic outlook that does not allow for humanism or imperfection
- \* an inhibiting factor that keeps you from making a commitment to change habitual, unproductive behavior out of fear of not making the change "good enough"
- \* the belief that no matter what you attempt it is never "good enough" to meet your own or others' expectations

### What irrational beliefs contribute to perfectionism?

- \* Everything in life must be done to your level of perfection, which is often higher than anyone else's.
- \* It is unacceptable to make a mistake.
- \* You must always reach the ideal no matter what.
- \* If those in authority say this is the way it is supposed to be, then that is the way it is supposed to be.
- \* You are a loser if you cannot be perfect.
- \* It is what you achieve rather than who you are that is important.
- \* I have no value in life unless I am successful.
- \* There is no sense in trying to do something unless I can do it perfectly, e.g., "I don't attempt things I can't do well."
- \* If I have a failure or experience a set back in my efforts to change then I should give up.
- \* The ideal is what is real; unless I reach the ideal I am a failure.
- \* There are so many roadblocks and pitfalls to keep me from succeeding. It is better just to give up and forget my goal.
- \* Unless I am "Number One," there is no sense in trying. Everyone knows what "Number Two" is. To win is the only acceptable goal.
- \* If you screw up in your efforts to achieve a goal, just give up. It must be too hard to achieve.
- \* You must always strive to reach the ideal in everything you do because it is in the achievement of the ideal that you give meaning to your life.
- \* Don't ever let anyone know what goal you're working on. That way they won't consider you a failure if you don't reach it.
- \* If you can't do it right the first time, why try to do it at all?
- \* There is only one way to reach a goal: the right way.
- \* It takes too much effort and energy to reach a goal. I save myself the aggravation and discouragement by not setting goals for myself.
- \* I'll never be able to change and grow the way I want to, so why try?
- \* I am a human being prone to error, frailty and imperfections; therefore, I won't be able to accomplish things in a perfect or ideal way. I'll just give up on achieving any of my goals or desires.

### What are some negative consequences of perfectionism?

Examples of the negative consequences of perfectionism include:

Low self-esteem. Because a perfectionist never feels "good enough" about personal performance, feelings of being a "failure" or a "loser" with a lessening of self-confidence and self-esteem may result.

Guilt. Because a perfectionist never feels good about the way responsibility has been handled in life (by himself or others) a sense of shame, self-recrimination and guilt may result.

Pessimism. Since a perfectionist is convinced that it will be extremely difficult to achieve an ideal goal, he can easily become discouraged, fatalistic, disheartened and pessimistic about future efforts to reach a goal.

Depression. Needing always to be perfect, yet recognizing that it is impossible to achieve such a goal, a perfectionist

runs the risk of feeling depressed.

Rigidity. Needing to have everything in one's life perfect or "just so" can lead a perfectionist to an extreme case of being inflexible, non-spontaneous and rigid.

Obsessiveness. Being in need of an excessive amount of order, pattern or structure in life can lead a perfectionist to become nit-picky, finicky or obsessive in an effort to maintain a certain order.

Compulsive behavior. Over-indulgence or the compulsive use of alcohol, drugs, gambling, food, shopping, sex, smoking, risk-taking or novelty, is often used to medicate a perfectionist who feels like a failure or loser for never being able to be "good enough" in life.

Lack of motivation. Believing that the goal of change will never be able to be ideally or perfectly achieved can often give a perfectionist a lack of motivation to attempt change in the first place, or to persevere if change has already begun.

Immobilization. Because a perfectionist is often burdened with an extreme fear of failure, the person can become immobilized. With no energy, effort or creative juices applied to rectify, improve or change the problem behavior in the person's life, he becomes stagnant.

Lack of belief in self. Knowing that one will never be able to achieve an idyllic goal can lead a perfectionist to lose the belief that he will ever be able to improve his life significantly.

### **What rational behaviors are needed to overcome perfectionist tendencies?**

To overcome perfectionism one needs to:

- \* accept self as a human being
- \* forgive self for mistakes or failings
- \* put self back on the wagon immediately after falling off
- \* accept that the ideal is only a guideline or goal to be worked toward, not to be achieved 100 percent
- \* set realistic and flexible time frames for the achievement of a goal
- \* develop a sense of patience and to reduce the need to "get it done yesterday"
- \* be easier on oneself; setting unrealistic or unreasonable goals or deadlines sets you up for failure
- \* recognize that the human condition is one of failings, weakness, deviations, imperfections and mistakes; it is acceptable to be human
- \* recognize that one's backsliding does not mean the end of the world; it is OK to pick oneself up and start all over again
- \* develop an ability to use "thought stopping" techniques whenever you find yourself mentally scolding yourself for not being "good enough"
- \* visualize reality as it will be for a human rather than for a super human
- \* learn to accept yourself the way you are; let go of the ideas of how you should be
- \* enjoy success and achievement with a healthy self-pride, and eliminate the need for self-deprecation or false humility
- \* learn to enjoy success without the need to second guess your ability to sustain the achievement
- \* reward yourself for your progress, to reinforce your efforts to change even when progress is slight or doesn't meet up to your idealistic expectations
- \* love yourself; to believe that you deserve good things
- \* to eliminate unrealistic expectations and the idea that you are infallible
- \* visualize yourself as "winning" even when it takes more energy, and more perseverance, than what you had planned
- \* let go of rigid, moralistic judgments of your performance and to develop an open, compassionate understanding for the hard times, obstacles and temptations
- \* be flexible in setting goals and be willing to reassess your plan from time to time to keep things realistic
- \* be open to the idea that you will be successful in your efforts to change, even if you are not "first," "the best," "the model," "the star pupil," "the exemplar" or "the finest"
- \* realize that the important thing is to be going in a positive direction

### **How can a social support system help in overcoming perfectionism?**

Social support systems can help you overcome perfectionism if you:

- \* select realistic people who are not perfectionists in their own life
- \* encourage your support system members to not be rigid or moralistic in their attempts to keep you on an honest course
- \* have support people who role model forgiving and forgetting when mistakes, failures, offenses or backsliding occur
- \* have given them permission to call you on being too hard, too brutal, too rigid, too unrealistic or too idealistic in your expectations

- \* have people who will give positive reinforcement for any positive change, no matter how small or slight it is
- \* select trustworthy people who are open, honest, and have a sincere interest in your personal growth

### **Steps to Overcome Perfectionism**

Step 1: In your journal, answer the following questions:

- a. What characteristics of perfectionism are true for me? How do these perfectionist traits impede my efforts to change my problematic behavior?
- b. What irrational beliefs of perfectionists do I ascribe to? How do these beliefs influence my desire to change? How do these beliefs contribute to a failure script in my efforts to change? What rational alternatives can I adopt to reduce the negative impact of perfectionism in my life?
- c. What are the negative consequences of perfectionism in my life? What am I doing to address these negative issues in my life? How do these negative issues affect my past and current efforts to change my problematic behavior?
- d. What new rational behavior do I need to develop in order to overcome the negative impact of perfectionism? How will these new behavior traits help me to fully achieve change in my life?
- e. How can my social support system help me in overcoming my perfectionist attitude? What contributes to perfectionism in my support system? What changes in my support system would reduce its perfectionist character?
- f. How does dealing with my perfectionism help me in my efforts to change? How well does perfectionism explain why past attempts to change have failed?

Step 2: In your journal, identify a problematic behavioral pattern you want to change; then list the characteristic negative behavior traits of the pattern. For each of the negative characteristics list positive alternative behavior traits. For each of the new alternative behavior list your likelihood of achieving them 100 percent of the time. How many new behavior traits could you achieve 100 percent of the time?

Step 3: Once you have recognized that no change can be achieved 100 percent of the time, continue changing your problematic behavior patterns. If you continue to be hindered by perfectionism, return to Step 1 and begin again.