

PERFECTIONISM

Introduction

Perfectionism is when a person lives according to a set of self-defeating thoughts and behaviours aimed at reaching excessively high and unrealistic goals. It is a stressful, self-sabotaging and exhausting way to live, but can feel essential to the individual. Perfectionism is often mistakenly seen in our society as desirable or even necessary for success. However, recent studies have shown that perfectionist attitudes actually interfere with success. The desire to be perfect can both rob you of a sense of personal satisfaction, and cause you to fail to achieve as much as people who have more realistic strivings.

Are you a perfectionist?

- Do you feel like what you accomplish is never quite good enough?
- Do you often put off handing in assignments or projects, waiting to get them just right?
- Do you feel you must give more than 100% on everything you do or else you will be mediocre or even a failure?

If so, rather than simply working towards success, you may in fact be trying to be perfect – which is humanly impossible!

CAUSES OF PERFECTIONISM

If you are a perfectionist, it is likely that you learned early in life that other people only or greatly valued you because of how much you accomplished or achieved. As a result you may have learned to value yourself only on the basis of what you produce, and on other people's approval. Thus your self-esteem may have come to be based primarily on external standards. This can leave you vulnerable and excessively sensitive to the opinions and criticism of others. In attempting to protect yourself from such criticism, you may decide that being perfect is your only defence.

A number of the following negative feelings, thoughts, and beliefs may be associated with perfectionism:

Fear of Failure

Perfectionists often equate failure to achieve their goals with a lack of personal worth or value.

Fear of Making Mistakes

Perfectionists often equate mistakes with failure. In orienting their lives around avoiding mistakes, perfectionists miss opportunities to learn and grow.

Fear of Disapproval

If they let others see their flaws, perfectionists often fear that they will no longer be accepted. Trying to be perfect is a way of trying to protect themselves from criticism, anticipated rejection, and disapproval.

All or Nothing Thinking

Perfectionists frequently believe that they are worthless if their accomplishments are not perfect. Perfectionists have difficulty seeing situations in perspective. For example, a straight "A" student who receives a "B" might believe "I am a total failure".

Over-Emphasis on "Should"s

Perfectionists' lives are often structured by an endless lists of "should"s that serve as rigid rules for how their lives must be led. With such an over-emphasis on "should"s, perfectionists rarely take into account their own wants and desires.

Others Always Do It Better

Believing that others are easily successful, perfectionists tend to perceive others as achieving success with a minimum of effort, few errors, little emotional stress, and maximum self-confidence. At the same time, perfectionists view their own efforts as unending and forever inadequate.

THE VICIOUS CYCLE OF PERFECTIONISM

Perfectionist attitudes set in motion a vicious cycle:

1. Perfectionists set unreachable goals
2. They fail to meet these goals, which is inevitable because the goals were impossible to achieve from the start.
3. The constant pressure to achieve perfection, and the inevitable chronic experience of failure, reduce productivity and effectiveness.
4. This leads perfectionists to be self-critical and self-blaming which results in lower self-esteem. It may also lead to anxiety and depression.
5. To compensate or change this, perfectionists re-commit to their original unreachable goals, or set different unrealistic goals, thinking "this time if I try harder I will succeed". Such thinking starts the cycle off again.

This vicious cycle can be illustrated by looking at the way in which perfectionists often deal with interpersonal relationships. Perfectionists tend to anticipate or fear disapproval and rejection from those around them. Based on such fear, perfectionists may feel defensive and react badly to criticism, frustrating and alienating others in the process. Without realising it, perfectionists may also apply their unrealistically high standards to others, becoming critical and demanding of them.

Furthermore, perfectionists may avoid letting others see their mistakes, not realising that self-disclosure allows others to perceive them as more human and thus more likeable. Because of these patterns, perfectionists often have difficulty being close to people and therefore have less than satisfactory interpersonal relationships.

HEALTHY STRIVING AS OPPOSED TO PERFECTIONISM

Healthy goal setting and striving are quite different from the self-defeating process of perfectionism. Healthy strivers tend to set goals based on their own wants and desires rather than primarily in response to perceived external expectations. Their goals are usually just one step beyond what they have already accomplished. In other words, their goals are realistic, internal, and potentially attainable. Healthy strivers take pleasure in the process of pursuing the task at hand rather than focusing only on the end result. When they experience disapproval or failure, their reactions are generally limited to specific situations rather than generalised to their entire sense of self-worth.

WHAT TO DO ABOUT PERFECTIONISM

The first step in changing from perfectionist attitudes to healthy striving is to realise that perfectionism is undesirable. Perfection is an illusion that is unattainable. The next step is to challenge the self-defeating thoughts and behaviours that fuel perfectionism. Some of the following strategies may help:

- Set realistic and reachable goals based on your own wants and needs and what you have accomplished in the past. This will enable you to achieve and also will lead to a greater sense of self-esteem.
- Set subsequent goals in a sequential manner. As you reach a goal, set your next goal one level beyond your present level of accomplishment.
- Experiment with your standards for success. Choose any activity and instead of aiming for 100%, try for 90%, 80% or even 60% success. This will help you to realise that the world does not end when you are not perfect.
- Focus on the process of doing an activity, not just on the end result. Evaluate your success not only in terms of what you accomplished but also in terms of how much you enjoyed the task. Recognise that there can be value in the process of pursuing a goal.
- Use feelings of anxiety and depression as opportunities to ask yourself, "Have I set up impossible expectations for myself in this situation?".
- Confront the fears that may be behind your perfectionism by asking yourself, "What am I afraid of? What is the worst thing that could happen?".
- Recognise that many positive things can only be learned by making mistakes. When you make a mistake, ask: "What can I learn from

this experience?". More specifically, think of a recent mistake you have made and list all the things you can learn from it.

- Avoid all-or-nothing thinking in relation to your goals. Learn to discriminate the tasks you want to give high priority to from those tasks that are less important to you. On less important tasks, choose to put less effort into them. Enjoy keeping some of your energy back!

Once you have tried these suggestions, you are likely to realise that perfectionism is not a helpful or necessary influence in your life. There are alternative ways to think that are more beneficial. Not only are you likely to achieve more without your perfectionism, but you will feel better about yourself, and experience life as more fulfilling, in the process.

BOOKS

Some of these books are in the Counselling Service Library and may be borrowed through the Counselling Service Administrator or through your counsellor

When Perfect Isn't Good Enough: Strategies for Coping with Perfectionism (1998) Martin M Antony. New Harbinger Publications, US

Overcoming Perfectionism: The Key to a Balanced Recovery (1990) Ann Smith. Health Communications

There is Nothing Wrong with You: Going Beyond Self-Hate, A Compassionate Process for Learning to Accept Yourself Exactly as You Are (2001) Cheri Huber. Keep it Simple Books