

Introduction

In the last module you thought about the pros and cons of remaining a perfectionist and the advantages and disadvantages of loosening up your perfectionist standards. You identified an area of your life where you wish to start challenging your perfectionism, and chose a specific goal to work on throughout these modules. You were given some coping tips and asked to identify possible obstacles to your staying on track. Reducing your perfectionism behaviours is an important next step. In this module we will introduce some strategies for reducing perfectionism behaviours and we will encourage you to conduct some experiments to test out your beliefs and fears. The next module will focus more on your perfectionistic thinking styles.

Perfectionism Behaviours

As we have seen, in an attempt to meet unrelenting high standards, perfectionists tend to engage in a number of perfectionism behaviours (e.g., repeatedly checking work for mistakes). Just as thoughts influence our feelings and our behaviours, behaviours also often serve to maintain perfectionistic beliefs. 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 our whether their beliefs are accurate. One way to test the accuracy of perfectionistic beliefs is to see what happens when you behave differently. For example, you might delegate a task to a colleague and see whether it is completed to an adequate standard.

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

Perfectionism behaviours – *Doing*

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 would often seem excessive to other people. Examples include: excessive checking, excessive organising and list making, and correcting others.

What perfectionism behaviours of the '*doing*' kind do you engage in?

Perfectionism Behaviours – *Avoiding doing*

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. Some perfectionists will not even attempt to do a task if they think they won't be able to do it to an adequate standard.

What perfectionism behaviours of the '*avoiding doing*' kind do you engage in?

Working towards Goals

We have some strategies to prepare you for changing your perfectionism behaviours successfully. To remind you: we have suggested that you work on one goal area and one specific goal at a time. This is not a race! You have probably been a perfectionist for many years, so it is worth taking a deep breath and following the steps we outline, to prepare yourself for working on your goal. We know it will be tempting for some perfectionists to jump straight into achieving their goals and ‘doing it perfectly’, and others who might be tempted to procrastinate because they fear ‘failure’. So we have devised some steps to take, to make it more likely that you will achieve your goal and feel good about yourself.

Look back to Page 6 of the previous module, and write in the specific goal you set yourself:

My Plan

| | |
|---|--|
| Perfectionism behaviour I will be working on: | |
| Specific goal towards reducing this perfectionism behaviour: | |
| Time frame: | |

Building stepladders

It is important that you start with a relatively easy task. Remember, loosening up your unrelenting standards involves becoming ‘less perfect’ and this might be quite difficult for you. It might help if you first tackle a task that you feel is manageable and then later you can build up to a harder task. For example, someone who feels compelled to scrub the kitchen counters several times a day with bleach might start with only using bleach once a day, and build up to only using bleach once a week.

You need to break down each goal into small steps, like steps on a ladder leading towards your main goal. The number of steps depends on how stressful a particular goal is. A high-challenge goal will need more steps than a medium-challenge goal. Below is an example of building a stepladder. Overleaf is some space for you to complete the steps for your own goal listed above.

Peter had chosen to reduce his checking, although he was worried that he would miss something serious. He decided to do this in steps, giving him the chance, for a few weeks, to correct anything he had missed after his first check.

Stepladder for Goal (Peter’s Example)

| GOAL: <i>I will aim to check my work only once</i> | |
|---|--|
| STEP | |
| 1 | <i>Check my work twice - and then once again when I’ve completed the whole job - for two weeks</i> |
| 2 | <i>Check my work only once - and then once again when I’ve completed the whole job - for two weeks</i> |
| 3 | <i>Check my work only once</i> |

Remember, your stepladder might have more or fewer steps depending on how difficult the challenge is. You can also include more 'in-between' steps if you think the jump between one step and the next is too big. You can break goals into smaller steps by changing WHO is there, WHAT you do, WHEN you do it, WHERE you do it, and HOW long you do it for.

Stepladder for My Goal

| | |
|--------------|--|
| GOAL: | |
| STEP | |
| | |
| | |
| | |
| | |
| | |

Completing a Step on the Stepladder

So, you've selected a goal that you want to work on first and identified some steps that will help you achieve that goal. Where do you go from here? Let's have a look at how you can prepare for reducing your perfectionism behaviours – even *before* you take the first step. Make an appointment with yourself to take the first step. By setting a date, time, and place you are making a commitment to yourself to begin the process of change. Here are a few points that will help you to complete each step successfully:

Expect some anxiety. Remember that you'll probably experience some anxiety - at any step. That's why it's important to start small and work your way up. This gives you the chance to adapt to that level of anxiety, so that you aren't overwhelmed by higher levels of distress. After all, the only way to get used to those feelings and your fears is by facing them.



Persist. It might be tempting to resort to your perfectionism behaviours if you feel uncomfortable. Keep going until the anxiety reduces so you can see that, as scary as the feelings are, they are not dangerous and they do subside. If you give in just as the level of anxiety reaches its highest point, it may be more difficult to accomplish the same step the next time. On each attempt, you should 'keep on keeping on'.

Use your skills. It may seem that there is a lot to remember. Use the coping tips from Module 4.



Climbing the Stepladder

OK, so now that you have some tips on how to get through one step, how do you keep moving upwards? Here are some guidelines for how to continue to climb each step to reach your goal.

One step at a time. Climbing a stepladder is not about taking a giant leap. You begin with the least difficult step and work your way up. With each step your anxiety may get higher, but you also get used to the anxiety at each step. Your aim at each step is to complete that step alone.

Over and over again. Do a step frequently and repeatedly, and try to do each in close succession to make sure you are comfortable with the situation before you move onto the next step. It might take 3 or 4

times. If you only enter a situation once, you might convince yourself that it was luck or a fluke. If you can, repeat them in a short period of time so that you can get used to the situation more quickly and become comfortable. This helps to build up the evidence for when you are disputing any unhelpful thoughts (see Module 6).

Use your skills. That's right – use your skills again! Work through any unhelpful thoughts about the situation after you have completed or repeated a step. Allow yourself to unwind with a relaxation session.

Acknowledge the steps you've made. When you are comfortable with a particular step, recognise your successes and acknowledge the steps that you've made so far.

Stepbacks. Some days you might think you've taken a 'stepback' because the behavioural experiment didn't go as well as you'd hoped. That's why it's important to do a step over and over until you are comfortable with it.

Troubleshooting stepbacks. If you think that a situation hasn't gone as well as you hoped, or you've taken a step backwards, there are a number of things you can do:

- Use a Thought Diary as a way of challenging any unhelpful thoughts that might arise (see Module 6).
- Set a time and date to try the step again (remember – over and over).
- If you have tried it a few times and you still find it too distressing, you may find it useful to create an 'in-between' step, by planning another step that is slightly less distressing.
- You may find it helpful to go back and repeat the previous step. If it has been a while since you've completed a behavioural experiment, or if you weren't completely comfortable with the previous step, you may need extra experiments to make sure you are ready for the next step. You might think of these as 'refreshers' in the same way that people take 'refresher courses' to bring them up to speed.

Behavioural Experiments

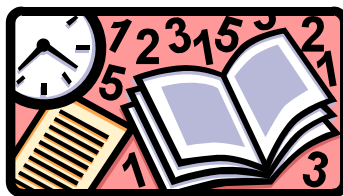
Now that you've decided on a reasonable goal and you've planned the steps you'll take to reach that goal, it is time to experiment with new behaviours. **Behavioural Experiments** help loosen the grip of your perfectionism and help you reach your goal by allowing you to test out your perfectionistic beliefs to see how accurate they are. This is like a scientist doing an experiment, and you are going to be the scientist. You will be asked to change your perfectionism behaviours in order to test out how accurate your thoughts and expectations really are.



It may be that you need to experiment by tackling tasks that you have been *avoiding doing* (e.g., procrastination) or it may be that you need to experiment with not doing your perfectionism behaviours (e.g., checking).

It might seem unusual to be asked to reduce a behaviour when you have a long-standing belief that this behaviour helps you reach your high standards or to be asked to start doing something when you are afraid that you will not be able to do it 'perfectly'. Behavioural experiments give you the chance to test out whether your beliefs are accurate by experimenting with changing your perfectionism behaviours. This is important if you are going to interrupt the vicious cycle of perfectionism.

Here are some typical perfectionism behaviours and some beliefs or predictions that might go with them. In the last column we suggest how we might test out the belief, using a Behavioural Experiment.



| Belief/prediction | Perfectionism Behaviour | Behavioural Experiment |
|--|---|--|
| If I don't leave so early I'd arrive late and it would be terrible and they'd think badly of me | Arriving early to appointments (by leaving 30 minutes before I need to) | Leave only 15 minutes before I need to and see if I get arrive on time |
| If I delegate the tasks to the secretary, she might get the pages of the report in the wrong order | Staying late to do the photocopying because I don't trust the secretary | Delegate the photocopying, the day before I need the report, so I can look it over and see if the pages are in the right order |
| I believe that any weight gain will ruin my day | Never weighing myself | Weigh myself once a day and make a note of this. At the end of the day make a note of my mood, on a 1-10 score. See if there's any connection. |
| If they don't say they like my cooking, it means they hate it | Needing everyone to compliment my meal | Ask them not to give me any compliments, and then ask them to rate the meal on a scale of 1-10. |
| I might choose a restaurant that is terrible | Finding it so hard to choose a restaurant that I never get out | Write a short-list of possible restaurants and stick a pin in one. Try it to see if I like it. |
| I will fail on any 'healthy eating plan' because there's always a party or a dinner and I'll overeat | Delaying starting a 'healthy eating plan' | Develop a healthy eating plan which allows for exceptions such as parties |

Guidelines

Here are some guidelines on how to complete a Behavioural Experiment. Overleaf you will find examples of a 'Doing' Behavioural Experiment and an 'Avoiding' Behavioural Experiment (Peter's). On Page 9 there is a blank Behavioural Experiment sheet for you to practise on.

You will first be asked to **Identify Your Belief**. First you need to choose an unhelpful belief or thought that you are willing to test. Make a prediction; ask yourself: "What will happen if my belief is true?" and rate the strength of this belief between 0 and 100%.

You will then be ready to **Conduct the Experiment** to test out the belief. How will you test the accuracy of your prediction? You will need to plan an experiment, thinking of the specific things you will do to test your prediction. Carry out the experiment and record what happened. Describe what actually happened. Rate your distress before, during and after carrying out the experiment (0-10).

The last step is to **Develop a Balanced Belief**. Reflect on your experiment. Compare your prediction with what actually happened and think about what you have learned. As a result, develop a more balanced belief, which is more helpful than your old fear.

It is important to note that not everything we think is inaccurate, or has no grain of truth to it. However, we often blindly believe our attitudes, thoughts, and expectations even when they are unhelpful to us. We rarely step back to question our predictions or test them out. This is a habit that is important to break. However, should your predictions be partially supported, which may happen at times, it will be important to ask yourself some questions about this. Ask yourself: *Is there another explanation for what happened? What else was happening at that time? Are there other ways of viewing what happened? What could I learn from the experience to improve or change things in the future?*

Now, it's time for you to do an experiment. Look at the examples on the next two pages to help you plan an experiment, and use the worksheet on Page 9 to test your perfectionistic beliefs in order to see how accurate your predictions really are. You can use this blank worksheet to carry out several Behavioural Experiments. You can do an experiment on each of the steps you identified on Page 4.

Guidelines for Completing a Thought Diary

1. Identify the 'A' or Activating Event. This may include an actual event or situation, a thought, a mental picture or a physical trigger.
2. Identify the 'C' or Consequences. Ask yourself: "What emotion(s) was I feeling?" There may be a few. Choose the feeling that most closely represents the emotion you actually felt at the time and underline it. Rate the intensity of this emotion between 0 and 100. The higher the number the more intense the emotion. What actions/behaviors did you engage in? What physical sensations did you experience?
3. Identify the 'B' or the Beliefs. Ask yourself: "What was I thinking? What was I saying to myself? What was going through my head at the time?" List all the self-statements linking A to C.
4. Identify the HOT thought. Choose the most distressing thought that is most closely connected to your emotion you underlined in Step 2. Don't try to challenge all your unhelpful thoughts and beliefs at once. Take them on one by one. Underline your HOT thought and rate how much you believe this thought, between 0 and 100.
5. Identify any unhelpful thinking styles that might be in operation. If you need to refresh your memory, see Page 6 of Module 3.
6. Detective work. Referring to the HOT thought, ask yourself: "What is the evidence for and against my HOT thought?"
7. Challenge your Thoughts through Disputation. Ask yourself questions such as: "How might someone else (not a perfectionist) view the situation? How else could I view the situation?"
8. Develop balanced and helpful thoughts. After looking at all the evidence for and against your HOT thought, and having considered the disputation questions, replace the HOT thought with helpful, balanced thought(s).
9. Re-rate the intensity of the emotion that you underlined in Step 2, between 0 and 100.
10. Re-rate the strength of your original HOT thought, between 0 and 100. The goal of working through a Thought Diary is to develop healthy and balanced beliefs that are not rigid and inflexible like the types of thoughts seen in perfectionism.

Look through the example on the next page and then work through your own Thought Diary. Start by thinking of a recent situation when you felt unhappy or distressed. Think of a situation that was related to your unrelenting high standards (e.g., making a mistake). You will need to practice challenging your thoughts many times before the process becomes easier and more automatic.