

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.

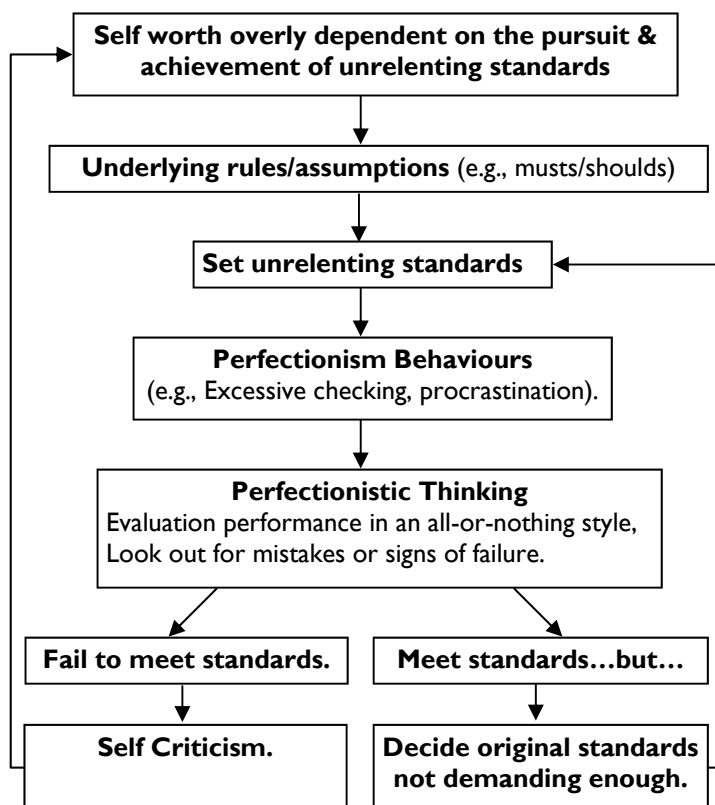
what maintains perfectionism?



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 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.

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.

Re-evaluating the Importance of Achieving



People who are perfectionists tend to be overly concerned with achievement and the pursuit of unrelenting standards. They often rely on their ability to achieve unrelenting standards as a basis on which to judge their self-worth. In turn, this can have a big impact on the balance of their lives.

How can Over-evaluation of Achieving affect an Individual's Self Worth?

Most people evaluate their self-worth based on a variety of things. When judging their self-worth, they might consider their *personal qualities* such as kindness, loyalty, willingness to help people, sense of humour, *relationships* with family, friends, partner, and *skills* such as achievements at work or school, ability to play sport, cook, or play a musical instrument. They might evaluate how happy they are based on how well important things in their life are going.

Perfectionists tend to judge their self-worth based almost entirely on achieving their unrelenting standards. They *overvalue* achieving and achievement. They may have other interests, but over time these seem to take a lesser place in their lives.

This system of self-evaluation may have developed through particular life experiences and/or positive reinforcement from people around them. People who try hard and are successful are often rewarded by others (e.g., praise, high marks, promotion at work) so achieving can become equated with being hard-working, conscientious, and intelligent – in short, being of worth. Perfectionists come to believe that they are **only** of worth if they are pursuing or achieving the high standards they set for themselves.

The Impact of overly-relying on Achievement to Judge Self Worth

Since perfectionists base their self worth on their ability to achieve unrelenting standards, they tend to work extremely hard to achieve these standards. Perfectionists often perceive this as highly beneficial. They may argue that by focussing all their energy on one area they are more likely to achieve their standards. Indeed, because of their hard work they have the potential to perform well.

However, when people base much of their self-worth on only one thing in their lives, they are putting a **tremendous** amount of pressure on themselves to make sure that it works out. That's why it's not surprising that perfectionists tend to be overly focused on achieving the high standards they set themselves. And they often feel stressed, irritable, depressed, anxious or guilty, and think negatively about themselves. When a goal is achieved they may feel relieved, but they don't tend to feel happy for very long. In fact, perfectionists tend to dismiss their success ("I was just lucky") or conclude that the standard set was too low ("anyone could have done that") and re-set the standard higher for next time.



Tackling the Over-evaluation of Achieving

You may find it helpful to think about the amount of importance you place on each of the areas of your life that contribute to your self-worth.



If you find that your self esteem overly relies on your ability to achieve, you may want to consider broadening your interests. This will give you a chance to develop other ways of feeling good about yourself, apart from the pursuit of those relentless high standards.

Identify the other areas of your life that may have once been important to your self-worth but have now taken a lesser place. Choose one area you would like to start with and then think of some activities you could engage in to help you do that.

You might find yourself thinking that you don't feel like doing this activity and want to put it off until you feel ready. Don't — act now! People often want to wait until they feel motivated before they act. However, an important thing to bear in mind is, motivation may not come on its own, but when you **ACT** first, motivation will then follow. Remember, **ACTION** before **MOTIVATION**, and you'll soon find that your life will be more balanced. You will be less preoccupied with only one aspect of your life, and less dependant on that success and achievement for your self-evaluation.

*For detailed information regarding the use of these techniques see Perfectionism in Perspective Module 8.