

PERFECTIONISM

Perfectionism is not necessarily about being 'perfect'. Ask yourself this question...is it ever really possible to be perfect? So, if it's not about being 'perfect', then what do we mean when we say someone is a perfectionist?

What is perfectionism?

Perfectionism involves setting standards for yourself that are inflexible and unrelenting. Nothing short of perfect or 'doing the absolute best possible' at all times is acceptable. According to some researchers perfectionism is used by many people as a shield to protect against the pain of blame, judgment and shame. At the heart of perfectionism is the fear that if a mistake is made that it might make you less successful, likeable or even less worthy.

While most people do engage in perfectionistic behavior from time to time in certain areas of life, those who are truly perfectionistic are often unable to perform a task unless they know they can do it perfectly. Rather than focusing on the process of learning or simply aiming to complete a task to the best of their ability, people with perfectionism tend to view the end product as the most important part of any undertaking, and they can not see the project or task as finished until the result is, according to their standards, perfect.

Question	True	Somewhat true	Somewhat false	False
People will probably think less of me if I make a mistake	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I rarely give myself credit when I do well because there's always something more I could do	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
If I can't do something perfectly then there is no point in even trying	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
No good comes from making mistakes	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I should be upset if I make a mistake	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sometimes I am so concerned about getting one task done perfectly that I don't have time to complete the rest of my work	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Source: Adapted from the Centre for Clinical Interventions: Perfectionism in Perspective. Module 1. What is Perfectionism? P.5 www.ccci.health.wa.gov.au/resources/infopax.fcm? Info_ID=52

If you answered most of the above questions True or Somewhat True, then perfectionism might be something you want to work on.

The perfectionism trap

Many people think of perfectionism as something positive and often visualise a high achiever however, whilst having high standards and goals may help us achieve things in life, sometimes these standards get in the way of our happiness. The drive to achieve may actually impair performance. The idea of high standards and working hard to maintain these standards making things worse is known as the **paradox of perfectionism!**

Often perfectionists are less successful than their non-perfectionistic counterparts because the fear of mistakes means it is really hard to be creative, innovative or even open to new ideas.

When we strive for perfection we can get trapped in an unhelpful cycle of thoughts, physical sensations, emotions and behavioural impulses. Thoughts about 'not being good enough' could lead to an increase in your heart rate and create a desire to escape or avoid the task at hand. This could result in you either engaging in procrastination or overworking. Either way you are going to continue to be hard on yourself and the cost could include burn-out and exhaustion and a loss of vitality and joy in living.

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.

Active behaviours may include excessive checking, excessive organizing, list making and correcting others. Avoidance behaviours on the other hand could include giving up too soon, indecisiveness and or avoiding tasks that you fear you are unable to do adequately.

Reducing Perfectionism Behaviours

One of the ways to test the accuracy of perfectionistic beliefs is to see what happens when you behave differently. Behavioural experiments are a great way to do this. They help loosen the grip of your perfectionism and test out the accuracy of your perfectionistic beliefs by seeing what happens when you change your perfectionistic behaviours. You could do this by engaging in the stepladder towards change that includes;

- Choose a specific goal behavior 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.

Useful links and resources

You can find more resources for managing perfectionism and more at www.vu.edu.au/counselling

If you would like to talk to someone about perfectionism and ask a few questions about individual support, contact **Student Counselling on 9919 5400**

You can also access:

- Kids Helpline – 1800 55 1800
- Headspace – (03) 9027 0100
- Lifeline – 13 11 14