



Perfectionism: Strategies for Change

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Perfection vs. Excellence

Many students struggle with the fine line between striving for excellence and suffering from perfectionism. This handout is designed to help you distinguish motivation for healthy achievement from perfectionism and to overcome some of the pitfalls of perfectionism.

What do we mean when we talk about perfectionism? Perfectionism is a *determination* to be perfect, often in an attempt to win success, acceptance, or fulfillment. But, paradoxically, despite – or even as a result of – such determination, the opposite often occurs. The rigid belief structure of perfectionism makes it difficult for us to be resilient and flexible. Even when we do achieve, perfectionist attitudes can deprive us of the very joy and satisfaction we wanted so badly to gain.

Of course, you don't want to change your desire to strive and to pursue your goals. Both perfectionists and healthy achievers strive for excellence, but in different ways and with different outcomes. What are some of these differences?

The Perfectionist . . .	The Healthy Striver . . .
. . . sets <i>unrealistically</i> high standards, beyond reach and reason	. . . sets high standards, but just beyond reach
. . . is never satisfied with anything less than a perfect outcome	. . . enjoys the process as well as the outcome
. . . experiences failure and disappointment as overwhelmingly negative events	. . . bounces back from failure and disappointment quickly and with energy
. . . is preoccupied with fear of failure and disapproval – this can <i>deplete</i> energy	. . . keeps normal anxiety and fear of failure and disapproval within bounds – uses them to <i>create</i> energy
. . . sees mistakes as evidence of unworthiness; allows self-doubt to interfere with productivity or performance	. . . sees mistakes as opportunities for growth and learning; uses mistakes as feedback and as motivation to move forward and make change
. . . becomes overly defensive when criticized	. . . takes criticism in stride and with perspective

Perfectionist Thinking

A number of negative feelings, thoughts, and beliefs might be associated with perfectionism. As you read through the list below, pay attention to whether any of these thoughts seem familiar to you.

Fear of failure. You equate failure to achieve your goals with a lack of personal worth or value. This fear can lead to avoidance, procrastination, or missed opportunities.

Fear of making mistakes. You equate mistakes with failure. In orienting life around avoiding mistakes, you miss opportunities to learn and grow.

Fear of disapproval. You fear that if you let others see your flaws, you will no longer be accepted. Trying to be perfect is a way of trying to protect yourself from criticism, rejection, and disapproval. The cost is that you miss out on genuine, real connections.

All-or-nothing thinking. You frequently believe that you are worthless if your accomplishments are not perfect. You might have difficulty seeing situations in perspective. For instance, if you tend to get “A” grades and you receive a “B,” you might believe “I am a total failure.” You might also believe that if something can’t be done perfectly, it’s not worth doing. So you might turn in a paper weeks late (or not at all) rather than turn it in on time with a less-than-perfect argument or with writing that doesn’t meet your high standards for eloquence and clarity. Or you might spend so much time agonizing over some non-critical detail that a critical project misses its deadline.

Overemphasis on “shoulds.” Your life is structured by an endless list of “shoulds” that serve as rigid rules for how your life must be led. With such an overemphasis on what you think you ought to do, you rarely take into account your own wants and desires. Moreover, the desire to garner others’ acceptance by fulfilling all of these shoulds ties your self-esteem to a need for external validation.

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

It is difficult to challenge these thoughts and to distinguish motivation for healthy achievement from unhealthy perfectionism. Often, each of us is holding on to at least one underlying myth about perfectionism that makes it hard for us to shift our attitude and change our behavior, despite recognizing the costs of the above listed beliefs. Let’s take as an example the common myth “My perfectionism has helped me to get this far.” By identifying this underlying myth, we can work to challenge it. For instance, is it possible that your conscientious behaviors and striving helped you to achieve *despite* the perfectionist thoughts, related negative feelings, and behaviors you had to overcome along the way?

What underlying myth are you holding on to that makes it hard for you to let go of your perfectionist attitudes and behaviors? How might you challenge that myth? What evidence might you use to support your efforts to challenge it?

Strategies for Change

Overcoming perfectionism requires courage because it means accepting our imperfections and, ultimately, our humanness. The strategies for change that follow are offered as a menu of options, some of which might apply to some situations and not others. As you go through these strategies, think of how you might experiment with each in your own life to reduce your perfectionist habits.

Change Strategy: Make a list of the advantages and disadvantages of trying to be perfect and a list of the advantages and disadvantages of being more accepting of imperfection.

The first step toward change is to do the hard work of identifying why perfectionism is undesirable for you. When you make your own list of costs and benefits, you might find that the costs are too great. You might discover that problems with workaholicism, eating issues, substance abuse problems, other compulsive behaviors, and relationships – as well as the accompanying anxiety, nervousness, feelings of inadequacy, and self-criticism – actually outweigh whatever advantages perfectionism holds for you.

Change Strategy: Increase your awareness of your all-or-nothing thoughts and how they affect other people in your life.

Stop and notice when your all-or-nothing thoughts indicate not constructive criticism but condemning criticism of your own imperfect performance. Stop and notice, too, when you are not constructively critical but actually condemning of someone else’s less-than-perfect performance. Ask yourself

- What do I regard as my hopes in taking an all-or-nothing, exacting stance?
- What do I see as the risks of taking that stance?

- How does my all-or-nothing regard affect what follows next? I.e., how does it affect my own energy, motivation, resilience, and experience? How does it affect the energy I bring to my encounters with others? How does it affect their energy, motivation, resilience, and experience?

Looking ahead, know that you can learn to substitute more realistic, reasonable thoughts for your habitually critical ones. When you find yourself berating a less-than-perfect performance, whether your own or someone else's, force yourself to look at and acknowledge the good parts of that performance. Then ask yourself questions like these:

- Is it really as bad as I feel it is?
- How do other people see it?
- Is it a reasonably good performance for the person(s) and circumstances involved?
- If I were to offer constructive criticism rather than condemning criticism, what might that be?

Looking back, think of a recent example of a less-than-perfect performance for which you criticized yourself or someone else harshly. In that particular instance, how might you substitute those condemning thoughts with more realistic, reasonable ones?

Change Strategy: Be realistic about what you can do.

By setting more realistic goals, you will gradually realize that “imperfect” results do not inevitably or necessarily lead to the punitive consequences you expect and fear. Suppose you swim laps every day, not as athletic training, but for relaxation and exercise. You set yourself the goal of twenty laps, and you can barely swim fifteen. If you are perfectionistic, you soon feel disappointed at your poor performance and anxious about improving it. You might even give up swimming because you're not “good enough.”

Suppose that instead you tell yourself fifteen laps is good enough for now. You accept the possibility that you might never be able to swim twenty laps easily, if at all. So you continue swimming without anxiety. You don't necessarily stop trying to improve, but you swim for fun and exercise and relaxation – for however many laps you can. Perfectionists often miss out on fun, relaxation, and satisfaction.

Use negative feelings (e.g., anxiety, depression) as opportunities to ask yourself, “Have I set up impossible expectations for myself in this situation?”

Now pick one specific area of your life where you might apply this strategy.

Change Strategy: Set strict time limits on each of your projects. When the time is up, move on: attend to another activity.

This technique reduces the procrastination that typically results from perfectionism. Suppose that you must find references for a term paper and also study for an exam. Set time limits. For example, decide that you will spend only three hours looking up references, then only three more hours studying for the test. If you stick to your time limits, you won't spend the entire day searching for elusive references, nor try to study late at night when you are too tired to be effective.

This also requires learning 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 forth less effort. Ask yourself:

- What's a reasonable amount of time to spend on this task?
- Is this a high priority task or a lesser priority task?

Change Strategy: Be discriminating about when and where to employ your perfectionistic approach.

We might want rocket scientists, neurosurgeons, and pilots to be perfectionists when they are engaged in activities with life-and-death consequences. But those same people would be impossibly difficult friends, parents, spouses, and co-workers if they demanded perfection of themselves and others in all domains of life

at all times. Regard your perfectionistic tendency as a capacity rather than a compulsion, and be discerning about when and where to engage that capacity and when and where to engage your capacity to allow for and accept imperfection.

Change Strategy: Learn how to deal with criticism.

Perfectionists often view criticism as a personal attack, responding to it defensively. Concentrate on being more objective about the criticism and about yourself. If someone criticizes you for making a mistake, acknowledge the mistake and assert your right to make mistakes.

Remind the person and yourself that if you stop making mistakes, you also stop learning and growing. Once you no longer buy into the fallacy that humans must be perfect to be worthwhile, you won't feel so angry or defensive when you make a mistake. Criticism will then seem like a natural thing from which to learn, rather than something to be avoided at all costs.

Think of a recent mistake you have made and list all the things you did learn or can learn from it.

Putting It into Practice

Briefly describe one situation or part of your life in which you would like to be less perfectionistic.

What is your motivation to change – how is your perfectionism problematic in that situation?

What are some specific ways that you could be less perfectionistic in that particular situation/area using one or more of the strategies described above?

What negative consequences might follow from such changes?

What benefits might you experience from such changes?

“Finish each day and be done with it. You have done what you could. Some blunders and absurdities no doubt crept in; forget them as soon as you can. Tomorrow is a new day. You shall begin it serenely and with too high a spirit to be encumbered with your old nonsense.”

– Ralph Waldo Emerson

Further Reading

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