



PERFECTIONISM



Striving to be the best you can be is considered by most people to be a positive attribute. Not only does it show that you are a hard worker, have a sense of duty and do what is right, but striving to be your best can also be rewarding. For example, you can learn new skills or others may ask for your advice because they value your opinion. It can even help you get a promotion at work, and as a result a better salary and an improved quality of life for you and your family. If you are an athlete, striving to be your best can help you improve your strength and endurance in order to win a marathon or competition. There are instances however in which striving too much can have more of a negative rather than positive effect.

Perfectionism involves striving to set standards that are so high they are unrealistic and unattainable. Perfectionists believe that falling short of being perfect is horrible and that it will lead to some catastrophe. Perfectionism also typically leads to anxiety and depression. For example, perfectionists are so afraid making mistakes that they are continually anxious about doing something wrong. Or perfectionists can end up feeling depressed because they cannot live up to their standards and they think that this means they are flawed or incompetent as people.

TYPES OF PERFECTIONISM

Research has identified three types of perfectionism that can adversely affect a person's life (Hewitt & Flett, 1990, 1991):

- 1. 'Socially-Prescribed' Perfectionism:** The person believes that they will be valued by others only if they are perfect. This has been associated with depression and suicide, possibly because there is an associated sense of hopelessness and helplessness if you cannot achieve perfection and fear that other people evaluate you as flawed or incompetent.
- 2. 'Other-Oriented' Perfectionism:** The person demands perfectionism from their family, friends and co-workers. This type of perfectionism typically leads to relationship problems because the person is continually and excessively critical of others' behaviour.
- 3. 'Self-Oriented' Perfectionism:** This type of perfectionism is an internally-motivated desire to be perfect and flawless.

If you are wondering whether you are a perfectionist, here are some ways in which perfectionism presents itself:

- Not disclosing personal information that may make you look imperfect or flawed.
- Avoiding situations in which you may be imperfect.
- Making elaborate lists.
- Avoiding situations in which you made mistakes and were not perfect.

- Feeling anxious, depressed and frustrated when you make a mistake or are not perfect.
- Are excessively harsh on yourself and self-critical.
- Procrastinate or have difficulty starting or completing tasks.
- Avoid delegating because you fear others will not complete the task to your liking.
- Take excessive time to complete tasks when compared to others (e.g. taking 3 hours to write a one-page summary while it takes others 15-minutes).
- Checking things over and over (e.g. rereading an email for spelling mistakes a dozen times).
- Problems in your relationships because of your standards.
- People stating you should lower your standards.

HOW TO OVERCOME PERFECTIONISM

1. Learn to identify perfectionism. Identify the ways in which you are trying to be perfect using the list above as well as any other situations. Next, evaluate whether these are a problem by evaluating: 1) the amount of time you require to complete the tasks or; 2) whether you feel anxious, depressed or frustrated when you try to complete the task or; 3) you are unable to attain your standard or others tell you lower your standards.

2. Evaluate the costs/benefits of being perfect. Use the following Cost Benefit Analysis Worksheet to help you out.

3. Change you negative thinking related to perfectionism. Perfectionists frequently have a self-critical inner dialogue or negative thinking. Here are some common examples:

- “If I make a mistake I’ll look like a fool.”
- “I should never be nervous or anxious.”
- “I’m a failure if I am not perfect.”
- “I should never make a mistake.”
- “Being less than perfect means I’m a failure, no good, incompetent.”
- “I know I’ve forgotten something or haven’t done a good job.”

The key in changing your negative thinking related to perfectionism is to be less self-critical of yourself. Although the toolkit Change Your Negative Thinking will be useful, here are a few ways to help you out:

a. Keep things in perspective. People who are perfectionistic tend to focus on the little details and miss the big picture. Think of the saying, “Missing the forest for the trees”. Ask yourself the following questions to keep things in perspective:

- What is the worst thing that can happen?
- What is the chance or probability that the worst will happen? If it does come true, can I survive it?
- Will I think or focus on this one-day or one-week? If the answer is no, is it really that important then?

- Is this really a big deal?
- b. Try taking the perspective of another person.** Perfectionists are so focused on how they see things they have a hard time seeing another person's point of view. In order to change perfectionistic beliefs, try taking another point of view. Ask yourself the following questions:
- If a friend had this thought, what would I tell them? For example, if you think that an 85% on a test is horrible, what would you say to a friend who obtained the same mark?
 - How might another person see this situation? For example, if you think that working less than 10 hours per day makes you a lazy person, how would a close friend or family member see this?
- c. Try compromising your belief.** If you feel that you need to make absolutely no mistakes during a presentation, can you live with making one or two mistakes? If you think that not running two miles on the weekend means you are lazy, can you change your thinking and accept that you were tired or need to work up to a two-mile run? Trying to compromise on your beliefs will help you become less critical and experience relief from anxiety, frustration and disappointment.
- d. Add some positive coping statements.** Some examples include:
- "I'll do the best that I can."
 - "I'll learn from my mistakes! It doesn't mean I'm stupid or incompetent."
 - "No one is perfect!"
 - "Who cares if they think I'm dumb."
 - "It's not worth feeling frustrated for such a small detail."

4. Change you perfectionistic behaviours using Exposure Therapy. The final step in overcoming perfectionism is to change perfectionistic behaviours in order to learn that it is normal to make mistakes and that doing so does not mean we or others are flawed, no good or incompetent. By making mistakes and exposing yourself to them, you learn that nothing bad really happens and that all the associated negative emotions are not worth it! Use the toolkit on Exposure Therapy to help you. Make sure to write down your fears before the exposure exercise and to then evaluate whether your fears came true or not in order to help change you attitude and beliefs regarding perfectionism. Here are a couple of examples of exposure exercises related to perfectionism:

- Leave a room in your house messy.
- Take an extra day to do the dishes or laundry.
- Reread an email only once.
- Reveal that you have a weakness. For example, "I feel tired" or "I didn't do all the readings".
- Show up late for an appointment.
- Purposely leave a few mistakes in something you have written.
- Try to do something new without researching it. For example, try a new restaurant or pick a meal on the menu or a movie at random.



Hint: The goal in overcoming perfectionism is not for you to become a lazy person who has no standards or values related to doing a good job. Rather, the goal is to develop realistic standards that do not cause you anxiety, disappointment or anger and frustration. A good way to look at perfectionism is to change the belief from “I have to be perfect all the time” to “I will strive to do the best I can and learn from my mistakes in order to become better at what I do ... a better person, etc.”