



Managing Perfectionism

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NORTHSTAR COMPASS

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WHAT IS PERFECTIONISM?

Perfectionists aspire to achieve, but do not allow themselves to make any mistakes, searching for imperfections or weaknesses in themselves and others. Perfectionism is different than striving for excellence; people who pursue excellence in a healthy way take genuine pleasure in working to meet high standards. Self-doubt, fear of disapproval, ridicule, and rejection motivate perfectionists. Where the high achiever has drive, the perfectionist is driven.

THE PERFECTIONIST VERSUS THE HIGH ACHIEVER

High achievers, like perfectionists, want to be better people and achieve great things. Both strive to do their best, but high achievers accept the fact making mistakes and risking failure are part of being human and achieving great things.

CAUSES AND CHARACTERISTICS

Fear of failure and rejection. Perfectionists believe they will be rejected or fail if they are not constantly perfect. They can become paralyzed and unable to produce or perform at all.

Fear of success. Perfectionists believe if they are successful in what they undertake, they have to

maintain and keep it up. This becomes a heavy burden.

Low self-esteem. The need for approval tends to blind a perfectionist to the needs and wishes of others. This makes it difficult or impossible for them to have healthy relationships.

All-or-nothing thinking. Perfectionists see most experiences as either perfect or imperfect. They believe a flawless product must be produced every time

and if something can't be done perfectly, it's not worth doing.

Extreme determination. Perfectionists are determined to overcome all obstacles to achieving success and are unable to enjoy the process of producing the achievement. Relentless pursuit of their goals becomes a downfall as overwhelming anxiety often sabotages their heroic efforts.

THE COST OF BEING A PERFECTIONIST

Fear can paralyze a perfectionist and they can become so rigid it becomes difficult to relate to them. Perfectionism always takes more than it gives and can produce contradictory styles, from high productivity to complete non-productivity. Examples include:

Low self-esteem. Perfectionists never feel good about themselves or their personal performance, instead continually feeling like a failure.

Gloominess. It is easy for a perfectionist to develop a negative attitude.

Depression. Because the ideal is impossible to achieve, perfectionists are often discouraged and depressed.

Guilt. Perfectionists often feel a sense of shame and guilt.

Rigidity. Since everything must meet an ideal, perfectionists tend to become inflexible and lack spontaneity.

Lack of motivation. Thinking they will never be able to do something well enough, people who expect perfection may never try new behaviors or learn new skills

Paralysis. Since most perfectionists have an intense fear of failure, they are sometimes immobilized and stagnant. Writer's block is a great example of a perfectionist's paralysis.

Obsessive behavior. When a person needs a certain order or structure in life, it is easy to become overly focused on details and rules.

Compulsive behavior. Perfectionists may medicate feelings of failure with alcohol, drugs, food, shopping, sex, gambling, or other high-risk behaviors.

Eating disorders. Many studies have determined perfectionism is a central issue for people who develop eating disorders.

EMOTIONALLY HEALTHY HIGH ACHIEVERS

High achievers do not need to be perfectionists. Those who accomplish much and stay emotionally healthy tend to exhibit the following behaviors:

- Set high, but achievable standards.
- Enjoy the process, not just the outcome.
- Recover from disappointment quickly.
- Not disabled by anxiety and fear of failure.
- View mistakes as opportunities for growth and learning.
- React positively to constructive feedback.

CONTROLLING PERFECTIONISM

Once you are aware of the ways you expect yourself to be perfect, you can start changing your behavior. Choose a few of the strategies that follow to help you accept your imperfections and humanness.

Create a Support Network for Yourself. Seek out non-perfectionist people who will keep you on an honest course. Look for those who forgive and forget mistakes, failures, offenses, or backsliding. Ask them to give positive reinforcement for any good change, no matter how small. They should also give feedback when you are being rigid, unrealistic, or idealistic in your behavior. Above all, they should have a sincere and honest interest in your personal growth.

Lower Your Expectations. You cannot expect to completely change your behavior or expectations immediately. Take small, intentional steps toward change.



List the Advantages and Disadvantages of Being Perfect. You may find perfection is too costly. The relationship problems, endless working, and other compulsive behaviors (eating disorders and substance abuse problems) maybe too high a price for the results you gain from your perfectionism.

Pay Attention to Your Behavior and Attitudes. Take note of your perfectionist behavior. If it helps, start a log to help you see problematic behaviors and thoughts. When you see those behavior areas and patterns, you can begin making appropriate changes.

Try Some New Thoughts and Behaviors. Begin to substitute the alternative behaviors you identified earlier. Ask someone from your support network for feedback. Observe and take note of your feelings and thoughts as you try new things.

Review Your Goals and Make Sure They Are Realistic. By having achievable, realistic goals, you will gradually see less-than-perfect results are not as disastrous as you thought they would be.

Set Strict Time Limits for Your Projects. When the time is up, move on to another task or take a break.

MAKE FRIENDS WITH CRITICISM

Many perfectionists take criticism personally and respond defensively. If someone criticizes you for a mistake, the easiest thing to do is simply admit it. Remind yourself that you are human, and errors will happen. Those who think they never make a mistake are no longer learning or growing.

When you let go of the idea humans must be perfect to have value, you are less likely to feel angry or embarrassed when you make a mistake. You will find criticism is information you can learn from, and no longer needs to be avoided.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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He received his Master's Degree from Wheaton Graduate School, his Doctorate of Psychology (PsyD) from the Illinois School of Professional Psychology, and his Certificate in Co-Occurring Disorders from Adler Graduate School. He serves frequently as a seminar leader, and has taught workshops in the USA, Canada, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, South Africa, and India.

He is the author of *Journeys* and *Destinations*, two books on co-occurring disorders treatment, and the co-author of *Finding Hope Again: Overcoming Depression* with Dr. Neil T. Anderson.

This information in this publication is not intended as a substitute for professional help or to be used as a diagnostic tool. If you have serious difficulties with anxiety, depression, or other mental health issues, please seek professional help.