Perfectionism

Perfectionism can push us to excel, but it can also influence us to tear ourselves (or others) down when unreasonable expectations and standards aren't met. I hope this handout sheds light on the disadvantages of perfectionism while helping you develop a healthier mindset.

From, Lexi

What is perfectionism?

1. Perfectionism sets standards and expectations—about anything a person does, says, or thinks—that are unrealistic, unreasonable, and often unattainable.
2. Perfectionism can be:
    a. Directed at self,
    b. Directed at others, or
    c. Imposed on us by other people or by society.
3. Perfectionism is not officially classified as a disease or a disorder, although some studies have shown a genetic component. Rather, you might call it a mindset, habit, or way of being.
4. We tend to pick up perfectionistic tendencies beginning in childhood as we:
    a. Observe the behavior of others, and
    b. Are impacted by external messages (e.g., from family, friends, institutions, society).

When does perfectionism become a problem?

1. Perfectionism becomes unhealthy when it causes us to harm ourselves (or others) physically and/or emotionally. For example, when I have unreasonably high standards, I might work too much overtime, push myself past my body's limits, or judge, criticize, and insult myself when I don't measure up.

Note: I am not targeting perfectionism if it presents as "high but attainable" standards that encourage us, help us do well, and let us strive for more. If you're someone who can aim for "perfect" and not be cruel to yourself when you don't reach it, more power to you!

2. Notice how perfectionism often involves "<u>all-or-nothing</u>" thinking. For example:
    a. If I don't get *every question* right, I failed.
    b. If there is even a tiny flaw, the *whole thing* is ruined.
    c. If it doesn't meet my standards, it is *completely* unacceptable.
    d. I must *always* or *never* do something (e.g., always get an "A," never make mistakes).

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3. When I don't meet perfectionistic standards and expectations, it can cause negative thoughts and feelings about myself (or about others). For example:
    a. If I see myself as "failing" or "ruining" something, then I might think: "I'm a bad person, a loser, stupid, sloppy, weak, deficient, incompetent, worthless, etc."
    b. If I have those critical, judgmental, and insulting thoughts, then I feel: Discouragement, frustration, impatience, anger, resentment, guilt, shame, embarrassment, self-hate, self-rejection, worthlessness, etc.
    c. This punitive thought-feeling cycle can contribute to anxiety, depression, lost confidence, and low self-esteem (to name a few).

4. Perfectionism can lead to spin-off behavior, such as *procrastination*.
    a. We may delay (or never even start) certain tasks because we believe they have to be done in a perfect or near-perfect manner.
    b. If I have to do something perfectly, that feels hard, which can create more resistance on the front end (i.e., it can be discouraging and intimidating to start a difficult task).
    c. Fear that the end result won't be "good enough" can contribute to a sense of paralysis and dread.
    d. We might think, "I'm probably going to mess it up, so why try?"

    For example: I've noticed that I get frustrated and overwhelmed when I dust because there are always leftover particles no matter which method I use. Since my perception of "not being able to do it right" feels really bad to me, putting it off spares me from that discomfort… but then that leaves me with a dusty house, which gives me a different reason to feel bad because I'm "failing" to keep it clean! See the vicious cycle here? I'm doomed either way unless I can figure out how to be easier on myself.

5. Another spin-off behavior of perfectionism can be *excessive checking.*
    a. We may check things three, four, five+ times to avoid mistakes and errors.
    b. This drains us of time and energy as well as feeding into anxiety.
    c. It can turn into a type of procrastination since it delays completion of the task.
    d. Checking behavior is reinforced by the thought: "If I can eliminate any mistakes or errors, then I won't feel bad about myself, and others can't judge me."

6. Perfectionism can have a negative impact on personal relationships. For example, we may:
    a. Criticize how something is done,
    b. Question someone's skills,
    c. Over-scrutinize versus neutrally observing or periodically checking in, or
    d. Take over a task because someone "isn't doing it right" (or not allowing them to try in the first place).

7. In addition to the points above (#6), <u>workplace relationships may also be affected</u>:
    a. It may feel hard to delegate tasks to others in the workplace, meaning, "I can't trust others to do it right."
    b. We might feel a need to "micro-manage" others which may offend or upset them.
    c. We may be perceived as unapproachable if we show low tolerance for human errors.

Positive Mindset / Tools

1. Who gets to decide whether something is or has to be perfect? Okay, there *are* situations in which someone else has to judge our actions or output (e.g., teachers, bosses, parents). However, many times we are in charge of our own evaluation. This gives us a chance to choose kind, reasonable, and attainable standards and expectations of ourselves and others.

2. Keep in mind: "Nobody's perfect." So-called "failure" is a normal part of the human experience. All of us will make mistakes, fall short, or otherwise "not succeed" at times.

3. In order to combat perfectionism by thinking differently, I first need to **be aware** of how it affects my life and when it is active in my mind. You might ask yourself:
    a. In what scenarios and relationships do I notice myself setting unreasonably high standards for myself or for others?
    b. When do I hear myself being harshly critical?
    c. When do I feel like a "failure?"
    d. When am I mad at myself or someone else for not "getting it right?"
    e. When do I avoid and put things off?

4. Another way to increase your awareness is to **ask for** (kind!) **feedback from others** about when they see or hear perfectionism from you.

5. **Set an intention** that helps prevent or lessen perfectionism toward self or others:
    a. "I'd like to notice when I use perfectionism to beat myself up."
    b. "I plan set more reasonable standards."
    c. "I choose to slightly lower my expectations without compromising on what's important."
    d. "I allow for 'good enough' when I'm feeling tired, stressed, or overwhelmed."
    e. "I'd like to be kinder to myself (and others)."
    f. "I refuse to insult myself for not being perfect."

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6. **Change your language around perfectionism**. Instead of saying and thinking things like, "I completely failed, totally ruined it, royally screwed up, etc.," find other ways to describe less-than-satisfactory results. Make observations versus using emotional terms. For example:
    a. "I didn't quite reach my goal."
    b. "There were a few errors."
    c. "I wish I had done better."
    d. "I regret saying that."
    e. "That didn't turn out how I planned."

7. Continuing the examples above, you can use the word "but" to **add a positive aspect** at the end of the sentence:
    a. "I didn't quite reach my goal, but *now I know more for next time*."
    b. "There were a few errors, but *my manager still said it was a good report*."
    c. "I wish I had done better, but *I'm proud of the parts I did well*."
    d. "I regret saying that, but *I can be more mindful in the future*."
    e. "That didn't turn out how I planned, but *it's not the end of the world*."

8. I suggest that you **stay away from calling yourself "a perfectionist"** because it implies that it is a permanent state of being. People say: "It's just how/who I am. I've always done it, and I always will." (This applies to calling yourself "a procrastinator," as well.)
    a. This language applies a label to the person (i.e., "I *am* a perfectionist") versus describing the person's behavior (e.g., "Perfectionism is something I *do* quite a bit").
    b. You could validate your behavior and "soften" the label by acknowledging it while reminding yourself of your ability to change. "I've been a perfectionist for a long time, but I'm learning to do things differently."

9. **Lower your standards and expectations** without compromising on safety or overall quality.
    a. Give yourself the choice to meet minimum acceptable expectations, especially when tired and overwhelmed.
    b. Another way to describe this is allowing for "good enough." This means achieving an outcome that meets any basic requirements (e.g., deadlines, quality checks, key data) and that does not result in harmful consequences.
    c. Adjusting your standards does <u>*not*</u> mean you are: "A bad person, lazy, a slacker, incompetent, cheating, cutting corners, unmotivated, irresponsible, etc."
    d. Remember, even if you set lower standards, you can always exceed them if you have enough time, energy, inspiration, etc.

10. You may find it helpful to **use a numeric scale** to set goals. For example, "With 100% being 'perfect,' I'd like to reach at least 80-90%." You could take this one step further by defining what would still be "good enough" to meet minimal expectations (e.g., "I'll accept 75%").

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11. **Don't put yourself down** for perfectionistic thoughts and behavior.
    a. Perfectionism is not a character defect! In fact, it reflects your desire to do a great job in life, and that's a strength.
    b. Notice and stop any name-calling or insults. Reaffirm your intentions (see #5).

12. **Observe the outcome** of using revised standards. Notice the times when you allowed for more realistic expectations, and "nothing bad happened" (or any negative results were not as bad as you feared).

13. Remember that "**your best changes**." Many of us were taught to "do our best" and to be satisfied with the results, even if we did not achieve our goal (that's a healthy approach!). However, with perfectionism, it can feel disappointing and demoralizing when our best effort wasn't enough to meet the goal in the way we wanted to. "I gave it my all, and I still failed."
    a. I recommend keeping in mind that our "best" will change depending on available time and energy, and it will also be impacted by our stress level.
    b. If I do my best and only receive a "partial" result, I can ask myself to find those lower standards acceptable. "Considering how stressed I am, the fact that I got it done at all is a miracle!!"
    c. You can instill new beliefs around this. For example, "My standard for myself is to give the best effort possible under the given circumstances. I know that my best changes… And that's okay."

14. With *procrastination*, it may help to **break down an intimidating or overwhelming task** into smaller, more manageable parts (e.g., baby steps, increments, micro-movements) to be completed within reasonable timeframes (e.g., complete one step by the end of the day, by tomorrow, or by next week). Consider **asking for help** when it's available (e.g., help with the actual task or with encouragement and staying on track).
15. With *excessive checking*, you might **limit checking** by gently setting a maximum number ("I won't check more than two times") or by assigning a time limit ("I'll look at it for only 10 more minutes").

16. **Apply the "friend or loved one test."** When you notice you are insulting yourself for not being perfect (e.g., "I'm a complete and utter failure"), ask yourself if you would say that to a friend or loved one. Typically, the answer is, "Of course not!" So why do it to yourself?

I wish you kindness and compassion as you find out what role perfectionism may play in your life!

Revised 11/2026