

# Overcoming Perfectionism

## What is perfectionism?

Perfectionism can be described as the belief that making mistakes is unacceptable. People who are perfectionistic often believe that making mistakes makes them less successful, less likable, and even less worthy. Perfectionistic people often work harder and harder to reach perfection.

## What is so wrong with being perfectionistic?

Expecting perfection can set you up for:

- **Frustration:** You can never achieve what you think you ought to achieve, so you are never satisfied with yourself or your performance.
- **Procrastination:** If you fear you cannot do a task perfectly, you may avoid the task altogether. For a perfectionist, it is often easier and less painful to avoid a task than to admit that the perfectionistic expectations are impossible to achieve.
- **Low Self-Esteem:** Perfectionists are their own worst critics. They frequently tell themselves that they are not trying hard enough, not doing well enough, and that they are not good enough. They often judge their worth by what they accomplish, not who they are.
- **Anxiety or Depression:** Perfectionism can leave a person feeling anxious or depressed since there is rarely a sense of accomplishment, and satisfaction. Underlying the hard-driving style of some perfectionistic people is uncertainty or fear about the future since they do not believe that they will be able to maintain high performance.
- **Fear:** If I give up my perfectionism, I'll never be successful. On the contrary, you can be quite successful without being perfectionistic. Research has found that perfectionists tend to be less successful than non-perfectionists because they spend too much time worrying about being perfect and not enough time working through challenges. Even when they fail at something, non-perfectionists often achieve more because they recover more quickly and can produce more without worrying about getting everything perfect

| <b>Perfectionistic Person</b>                                                                                            | <b>Success-Oriented Person</b>                                                                             |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Sets very difficult or impossible goals.                                                                                 | Sets realistic and achievable goals.                                                                       |
| Little or no recognition of accomplishment                                                                               | Celebrates the personal accomplishment                                                                     |
| Sets an even higher, less achievable goal when a smaller goal is achieved.                                               | Sets another realistic, achievable goal when a smaller goal is achieved.                                   |
| Takes failure as a personal failure: "I am a failure because I failed this goal."                                        | Takes failure as a goal failure: "I'm disappointed, but I'm still a good person."                          |
| Has the belief that "I must be perfect or things will go wrong; I won't get what I need; or people won't approve of me." | Has the belief that "I can and will make mistakes because I am human, and I can still be very successful." |

## Moving from a perfectionistic to success-oriented mind-set

**Overcoming perfectionism requires time, effort and practice.** Letting go of perfectionism is not easy, but being rewarded with less stress, higher self-esteem, and equal or greater success can make the effort well worth the outcome.

### Change the way you think and feel about yourself.

- Face your fears about not being perfect. Create a list of "the worst things that will happen to me if I stop." Next, go over each one and ask yourself how realistic it is. Edit your initial response with a more realistic view of what you fear.
- Catch yourself in the act of saying perfectionistic things and change your self-talk to be more self-accepting. For example: Replace "It's ridiculous that I can't understand this," with, "This is really hard, but I can understand if I keep working."
- Stop basing your self-esteem on external accomplishments and others' perceptions of you. Instead make a list of your positive characteristics that are there regardless of your performance on a specific task.

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- Replace unproductive thoughts such as all-or-none thinking, or “shoulding” (“I should...”) with more positive, realistic thoughts. For example, instead of vacillating between “I can be perfect” and “I can’t do anything right,” find a middle ground. “I won’t be able to do this perfectly, but I can still do a job I can be proud of.”
- Let go of old negative messages taught by family or friends. Focus instead on developing a belief that you are lovable for who you are, not what you accomplish.

### Modify some of your behaviors

- Set realistic goals that you can accomplish in the amount of time you have. Focus on acknowledging the small steps toward a goal.
- Make small changes in behavior that help shift you to a more success-oriented focus. For example, if you normally would spend 10 hours trying to get a paper “just right,” limit yourself to eight hours on the paper and see what happens.
- Put time in your schedule for “non-productive” free time, just to relax and get away from the pressure to always be producing.

### Shift the way you relate to others

- Ask non-perfectionistic friends for feedback on whether you are being perfectionistic.
- Practice accepting imperfection in others, and let them know you care about them a lot even though they are not perfect.
- Let go of feeling responsible for other people’s actions and feelings, and for the outcome of events you have no control over.