

perfectionism

People who are perfectionistic have unrealistically high standards for themselves and/or other people, and therefore end up feeling like they or other people are never good enough. Since achieving perfection rarely if ever happens, particularly in university, perfectionists rarely experience the sense of success and acceptance they are striving for. Instead, they usually end up with a number of negative feelings including anxiety, depression, frustration, anger, and guilt. At more severe levels, perfectionism can create such problems as low self-esteem, writers block, test anxiety, procrastination, social anxiety, eating disorders, obsessive compulsive disorder, immobilization, and suicidal thoughts or actions.

Bosco (1999) describes perfectionistic people as having the following characteristics:

- Detail oriented
- Focus on rules and structure
- High expectations
- Neat appearance
- Mistakes are avoided
- Confidence is low
- Highly organized
- Significant self-doubt regarding decisions
- Trusting the work of others is difficult

Bosco also describes two types of perfectionists:

Inwardly-focused

- Believe that who they are and what they do is never good enough
- May appear successful to other people but inside feel defective
- Worry excessively about making mistakes
- Hide their inadequacies by working harder than others and worry that their incompetencies will be discovered
- Seek treatment because they are anxious, depressed, or have low self-esteem

Outwardly-focused

- Are upset by the way others do their work
- Believe that others don't care about their work performance
- Prefer to do the job themselves rather than worry about the performance of others
- Seek help because they don't like the way their lives have gone, don't feel in control of their lives, and are very frustrated with other people in their lives

coping strategies

1 realize that perfection is unattainable

Realize that perfection is unattainable and that striving for it is self-destructive. Human beings are imperfect creations and will always be.

2 be aware of the factors

Try to become aware of which factors may have contributed to the development of your perfectionistic attitudes. Some possible factors include:

- Family history or genetic link
- Parents who responded to mistakes or performance below their standards, with disapproval and/or withdrawal of affection
- Societal demands for perfection or being valued in society for only what you achieve
- Chaotic childhoods within which being perfect gave you a sense of control
- Significant self-satisfaction when a perfect performance was achieved

3 perfectionism vs. healthy achievement

Distinguish between perfectionism and healthy achievement, and work towards becoming a healthy achiever.

Perfectionist

- Goals are unattainable
- Motivated by failure
- Can't accept own limitations
- Perceive mistakes as a personal failure
- Are defensive when criticized
- Not satisfied with less than perfection

Healthy Achiever

- Goals are high but achievable
- Motivated by a desire to succeed
- Are aware of and accept their limitations
- See mistakes as a way to learn
- See criticism as useful information
- Enjoy both the process and outcome of a task

4 establish realistic goals

Establish much more realistic goals for yourself based on your past performance and the level of effort you want to direct towards a goal. Set goals that are sequential in nature and just beyond what you have achieved before. If you experience anxiety or depression due to a specific challenge, use the symptoms as an opportunity to ask yourself whether you have set up impossible expectations for yourself.

5 establish your priorities

Clearly establish your priorities since it is impossible to do all activities perfectly. Put the most energy into your high priority tasks and the least energy into your low priority projects.

6 understand what you fear

Try to understand what you fear will happen if your performance is below your unrealistically high standards. Focus on what will likely happen and whether you could indeed handle it. The fears of perfectionists are usually out of proportion to the real consequences of less than perfect performance.

7 experiment with your expectations

Do an experiment with your expectations by aiming for 80% or 70% success rather than your usual pressure on yourself to get 100%. In this way you will see first hand that the world doesn't end when your performance is at much more of a realistic level.

8 change your view on feedback

Change the way you view negative or critical feedback. Many perfectionists see criticism as a personal attack rather than information to simply learn from. Remember that mistakes are a natural part of the learning process and do not need to be avoided at all costs.

9 be open with others

Be willing to be open with other people about the mistakes you have made so that you can see that you will still be accepted despite them. If you are not, then consider distancing yourself from these people since this is clearly an unhealthy environment. If you have been a perfectionist in the past, many people will see you as both more human and more likeable if you can admit your mistakes.

10 establish time limits

Establish strict time limits for each of your assignments, papers, or projects rather than spend all of your time on one task trying to make it perfect. When the time limit is up, move on to the next task. This technique will reduce your tendency to procrastinate, which is a common aspect of perfectionism.

11 recognize negative self-talk

Get a handle on your negative self-talk when you do not achieve a perfect performance. Develop a keen eye for what you did right rather than what you did wrong. Creatively construct a new and healthier script for yourself and practice these much more positive self-statements.

12 measure success with enjoyment

Begin to measure your success in a task on how much you enjoyed it rather than your level of achievement. As you find ways to enjoy your work, you will still perform well and be more motivated to perform other tasks.

13 focus on effort than results

Detach yourself from the outcome of your attempts to be successful by judging yourself based on the effort you put into an activity rather than the results of that effort.

14 remember how much energy is used

Remember the extra effort it takes to make something close to perfection is rarely cost effective. You could be much more efficient overall if you diverted this energy into other activities instead.

15 get support from people who are:

- Not perfectionists
- Are forgiving of mistakes and failures
- Able to give you positive feedback about any positive changes you make
- Willing to call you when your expectations are too high

16 list advantages and disadvantages of your perfectionism.

Potential Advantages

- Detail oriented
- Highly motivated
- Self-starter
- Independent
- Conscientious
- Organized
- Produce high quality work
- Neat and tidy
- Reliable
- Encourage others to perform at a high standard
- Sensitive
- Selective in their choice of friends
- High personal satisfaction when they perform perfectly
- Careful not to make mistakes
- Unlikely to act impulsively

Potential Disadvantages

- Afraid to take risks
- Reluctance to share ideas with others
- Fearful of criticism
- Work slowly
- Underestimate the time it takes to complete a job
- Unreasonable expectations
- Difficulty delegating their work
- Get lost in the details of their work
- Fear making a mistake
- Stress and anxiety
- Tension with other people
- Fatigue and exhaustion
- Anxiety when things are messy or disorganized
- Difficulty finishing projects
- End up doing much of the work
- Worrying a lot about their children
- Distrust other peoples abilities
- Critical of others
- Overly selective in choosing a friend or partner
- Unable to tolerate other peoples weaknesses
- Difficulty making decisions
- Self-conscious
- Self-doubt
- Self-criticism
- Depression

Now weigh out the advantages and disadvantages of your perfectionism and you may realize that the costs are too great. Instead of giving up all aspects of your perfectionism however, try to hold on to the advantages while letting go of the disadvantages. This would involve setting specific behavioral goals to overcome the disadvantages. For example, if one of the disadvantages of your perfectionism is that you always end up doing all the work on a project, you would establish a goal of delegating a certain percentage of the work to other people.

References

Bosco, M. (1999). *Never good enough: Freeing yourself from the chains of perfectionism*. New York: The Free Press.