

What is Perfectionism?



Perfectionism Defined

Perfectionism is not necessarily about being 'perfect'. Ask yourself this question... Is it ever really possible to be 100% 'perfect'? So, if it's not about being 'perfect', then what do we mean when talk about perfectionism?

Although there's no *perfect* definition, we understand perfectionism to involve:

1. The relentless striving for extremely high standards (for yourself and/or others) that are personally demanding, in the context of the individual. (Typically, to an outsider the standards are considered to be unreasonable given the circumstances.)
2. Judging your self-worth based largely on your ability to strive for and achieve such unrelenting standards.
3. Experiencing negative consequences of setting such demanding standards, yet continuing to go for them despite the huge cost to you.



The Paradox of Perfectionism

Many people think of perfectionism as something positive. It is often seen as the pursuit of excellence, setting high standards, and working hard to challenge one's self. People often have good reasons for being perfectionists. They may say that it allows them to be efficient, organised, or prepared for anything.

Although having high standards and goals may help us achieve things in life, sometimes these standards get in the way of our happiness and can actually *impair* performance. This is the **paradox of perfectionism!**

The excessive drive to achieve ever-higher levels of performance is self-defeating as it leaves you little chance of meeting your goals and feeling good about yourself. This kind of pressure is likely to cause you to feel constantly on edge, tense, and stressed out.

Perfectionism can also make your self worth particularly vulnerable as not reaching the (possibly unachievable) standards you set for yourself may result in you feeling like a failure.

Pursuing these personally demanding standards can have a significant impact on your wellbeing, and can lead to frustration, worry, social isolation, depression and a persistent sense of failure.

When am I a Perfectionist?

Being a perfectionist doesn't necessarily mean you have unrelenting high standards in every area of your life. It is possible to be a perfectionist in one area of your life (e.g., work), but not another (e.g., grooming).

Areas of life in which your perfectionism may flare up include:

- ◇ Work,
- ◇ Study,
- ◇ Housework/cleaning,
- ◇ Close relationships,
- ◇ Eating/weight/shape,
- ◇ Grooming/personal hygiene,
- ◇ Sport,
- ◇ Health & fitness.



How am I a perfectionist?

Some common types of perfectionistic behaviours include:

- ◇ Struggling to make decisions in a timely manner (e.g., not being able to decide what to wear to work each morning).
- ◇ Reassurance seeking. (E.g., asking others to check your work to ensure it is acceptable).
- ◇ Excessive organising and list making. (E.g, repeatedly writing and re-writing lists of the tasks you want to get done in the day).
- ◇ Giving up easily. (E.g., giving up flamenco after two lessons because you can't keep up with the teacher (even though nobody can)).
- ◇ Procrastinating. (E.g., putting off starting an assignment for fear that it won't be good enough).
- ◇ Not knowing when to stop. (E.g., arguing a point over and over, long after others have lost interest).
- ◇ Checking. (E.g., repeatedly looking in the mirror for facial blemishes).
- ◇ Hoarding. (E.g., keeping your bank statements for 20 years just in case you might need them).
- ◇ Slowness. (E.g., speaking slowly to ensure you say the right thing).
- ◇ Avoiding situations in which you may 'fail'. (E.g., not applying for jobs for fear that you will not get them).



For more detailed information regarding What is Perfectionism, see Perfectionism in Perspective Module 1.