

“Un-Perfect” Your Performance for Success

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Gold cannot be pure, and people cannot be perfect. ~Chinese Proverb

Pursuit of Excellence

It is healthy to set challenging goals and to strive to achieve your personal best. These goals or performance expectations can contribute to feelings of nervousness before an important event: a romantic date, a final exam, opening night in a play, or the championship game. You may worry about making a mistake and may feel disappointed if things don't go as well as expected. If you have realistic expectations for yourself, you will be able to let go of disappointments, learn from mistakes, accept compliments from others, and feel proud of your own personal achievements.

Are you a Perfectionist?

The life of a perfectionist is a constant state of anxiety-- you may wonder if things will ever be good enough so that you can sit back and relax. Your perfectionist voice will answer, 'yes, if you just try harder next time'. Below is a list of thoughts and experiences common to a perfectionist; place a checkmark in the corresponding box for each statement you identify with:

- high standards for yourself (and others)
- difficulty making the 'right' decision
- tendency to excessively re-check and correct your own work
- trying to do "too much" on your own
- each and every mistake is magnified and is viewed as an indicator of personal failure
- starting a lot of tasks and projects, but having difficulty completing them

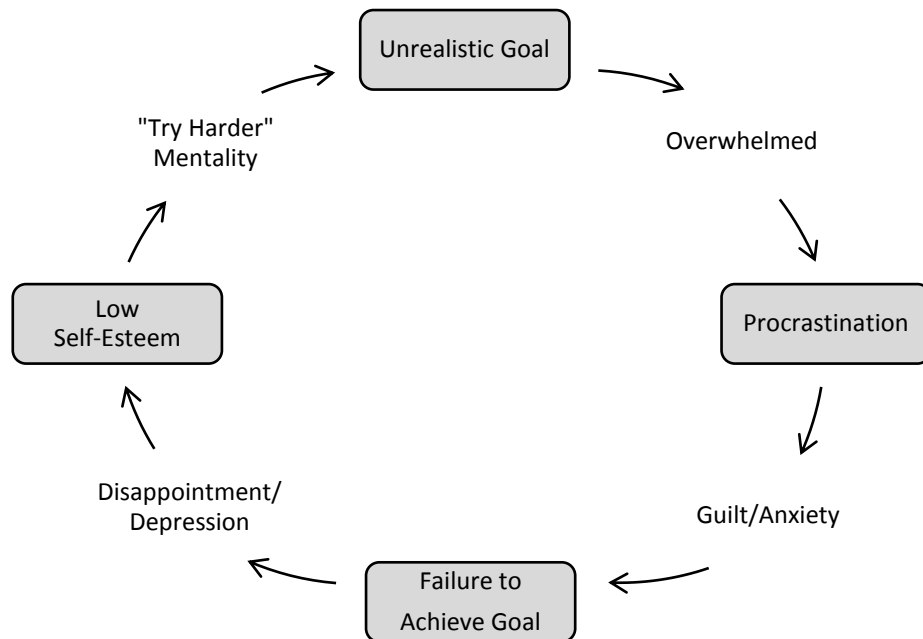
Roots of Perfectionism

Behavior is often reinforced by the receipt of rewards and the avoidance of punishments. Perfectionistic beliefs and attitudes may therefore be reinforced by the perception of success (reward) and avoidance of criticism or mistakes (punishment). Furthermore, early life experiences likely provided messages of what is considered acceptable and how to gain approval. You may have learned that your self-worth is based on your external achievements and accomplishments. You may have been told that individuality and diversity is not tolerated and that you need to compare yourself to others in order to 'fit in'. Sometimes perfectionism develops out of stressful or chaotic experiences, insofar as rigid rules and expectations can create a sense of control and stability.

Self-Defeating Cycle

If you have high expectations for yourself this may motivate you to excel and make you more conscientious. However, research has found that perfectionistic thinking impedes success. Goals are

often unrealistic and therefore unattainable. The excessive concern for doing things “just right” and the need for neatness and organization will likely serve as further barriers to completing (or even beginning) essays or projects, studying for exams, and/or practicing for the big game or upcoming music recital. In fact, perfectionistic thinking is often related to procrastination because so much time is spent over-preparing and/or criticizing your own work. When your goals are not achieved you may feel depressed and blame yourself for not working hard enough. The diagram below illustrates how perfectionism can become a self-defeating cycle.



There are a wide range of issues and situations that can be affected by perfectionistic beliefs and attitudes, including:

- Work and performance (e.g. concerns about getting only A's in school);
- Social situations (e.g. worry about mispronouncing words or saying the wrong thing and offending someone);
- Physical appearance (e.g., finding the right outfit to wear or achieving the ideal body weight);
- Relationships (e.g. never feeling comfortable just being yourself or applying your high expectations to others which might lead to alienation).

Perfectionistic Thinking and Beliefs

Listed below are common patterns of unbalanced or distorted thoughts that may support your perfectionistic voice.

- Viewing things as all or nothing, right or wrong, success or failure.
- Having a filter that magnifies negative events and thoughts, and minimizes those that are positive.

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- Assuming that you can read others’ minds (e.g., believing that you *know* what others will think about your performance).
- Overestimating the probability of negative events (e.g., failing an exam).
- Having tunnel vision that focuses on the details of a project or situation, but misses the bigger picture.
- Assuming that you could not cope with or manage negative events or situations. This catastrophic thinking, for example, could lead you to underestimate your ability to handle mistakes and errors.
- Establishing rigid standards about what you ‘should’ and ‘shouldn’t’ do. If you violate these standards then you may feel guilty, frustrated, depressed or anxious.
- Comparing yourself to others under the faulty assumption that they always succeed with confidence and without error or stress.

Challenge Your Perfectionistic Voice

After you’ve identified the thoughts that fuel your perfectionistic voice, start to challenge them by acknowledging other possibilities, developing alternative perspectives, and giving voice to healthier, balanced thoughts. Rather than comparing yourself to others, ask yourself how you can perform to *your* potential. Give yourself permission to make mistakes and use them as learning opportunities. When you set goals for yourself determine whether they are realistic and achievable or excessively high. Goals should be just within your reach, so that you feel challenged but not overwhelmed. Reward yourself for small and big successes, and ask for help when needed. Finally, allow yourself to enjoy the process of performing or completing a task instead of focusing on the outcome or end product. “The past is history, the future is a mystery and all that you have is the present” - so enjoy it!

Written by Carrie Pollard-Jarrell, MSW

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