LEARN TO MANAGE PERFECTIONISM

COUNSELLING AND PSYCHOLOGICAL SERVICES (CAPS)
The intention to “do as well as you are able” is an important value that is held by many students. It just isn’t possible (or practical!) to be perfect – or perform at your absolute best all the time. Setting the bar too high is as impractical as setting the bar too low. These pages will help you find the most useful strategies for valuing excellence in your work and performance while also recognising and stepping back from the unhelpful aspects of perfectionism.
WHAT IS PERFECTIONISM?

Perfectionism involves setting standards for yourself that are inflexible and unrelenting. Nothing short of perfect or “doing the absolutely best possible” at all times is acceptable. At the heart of perfectionism is an excessive fear of making mistakes and the concern that making mistakes might make you less successful, likeable or even less worthy.

ARE YOU A PERFECTIONIST?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CONSIDER THE FOLLOWING...</th>
<th>True</th>
<th>Somewhat true</th>
<th>Somewhat false</th>
<th>False</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nothing good comes from making mistakes</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I must do things right the first time</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I must do everything well, not just the things that I am good at</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If I can’t do something perfectly then there is no point in even trying</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>I rarely give myself credit when I do well because there’s always something more I could do</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sometimes I am so concerned about getting one task done perfectly that I don’t have time to complete the rest of my work</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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If you have answered most of the above questions with True or Somewhat True, then perfectionism might be something you want to work on.

The Paradox of Perfectionism
Perfectionism impedes excellence

Paradoxically, the demand for perfection can actually impede performance. There is a point at which the more stress you put on yourself – the LESS effective and productive you are.

Perfectionists are often LESS successful than non-perfectionists because the fear of mistakes means it is really hard to be creative, innovative or even to be genuinely open to new ideas. Non-perfectionists often achieve more because even when they fail at something they recover from the mistake more quickly and are able to absorb the feedback offered them.

Even for athletes whose sport requires perfect performance outcomes - the perfectionism paradox stands. Research shows that the more an athlete is mentally pre-occupied by the need to attain perfection the less well he/she will perform. The fear of making public mistakes can also lead to talented perfectionistic athletes to quit their sport.

At university, perfectionism very often leads to procrastination because of the fear that work won’t be good enough. This fear can make it really difficult to start assessments. Perfectionists will often hand work in late – or not at all – rather than hand in something they think is “less than perfect”.

Perfectionism also impacts on emotional well-being. Believing that others will value you only if you are “perfect” is associated with depression. Demanding perfection from yourself also makes you vulnerable to psychological problems or disorders when stressed.

Success rules such as competitiveness & perfectionism are often socially and culturally encouraged – we are bombarded by media images insisting that we must have the perfect body, perfect job, perfect car and so on.

Perfectionism is often also nurtured by a variety of earlier childhood experiences. For example, perfectionism can arise when parents’ praise for achievements is coupled with criticism or punishment for mistakes. Alternatively, a child may not be directly punished but simply ignored if they only attain B grades. Sometimes parents may also unintentionally model perfectionism through their own behaviour and attitudes.

The temperament (the personality you are born with) can also play a role. People who are nervous of novelty, dependent on others for reward and who persist with goals in the face of exhaustion or frustration, may be more likely to develop perfectionism. Regardless of how it arises, the impacts of perfectionism are similar and the paths to change the same.

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The Perfectionism Trap

Perfectionism can get you trapped in an unhelpful cycle of thoughts, physical sensations, emotions and behavioural impulses. For example, thoughts about “not being good enough” might be linked to a racing heart, nausea, anxiety, distress and a desire to escape or avoid the task at hand. Other common behavioural impulses driven by perfectionistic fears include overworking and excessive checking.

This cycle can spiral in one of two ways. One possible outcome of procrastinating (and so doing things at the last minute) or overworking (and so handing things in late) is that you can end up getting poorer marks. When your marks are lower than they “should be”, the harder you are on yourself, the worse you feel and the more difficult the next task becomes. This spiral can mean you end up performing far less well than you are capable of and you can end up dispirited and further away from your original aspirations or goals.

Alternatively, if your struggles produce high marks then the stronger the expectation becomes for continuing to obtain those results (or even better!) and so the tighter and tighter the cycle grabs you! Perfectionists therefore savour little pleasure from very real achievements – instead they immediately focus on the need to maintain the standard for the next task. The costs of this spiral can include burn-out and exhaustion and a loss of vitality and joy in living.

Both of these cycles of perfectionism involve avoidance – the well-intended efforts to push away unwanted thoughts, feelings and fears about being less than perfect.

If the consequences of perfectionism are hurting you it may be time to consider change. Change is not about giving up valuing excellence and is not necessarily about “lowering your standards” but it is about being willing to increase your acceptance and tolerance of imperfection. You can’t always perform perfectly! The demands of many situations and university workloads dictate the necessity to be more flexible about what is possible and what is “good enough”. It is also important to allow yourself permission to make mistakes and to have the courage to learn from them.

It is definitely possible to value excellence and success without being a perfectionist. Consider these differences:

<table>
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<tr>
<th>A PERFECTIONISTIC PERSON</th>
<th>A PERSON VALUING EXCELLENCE</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sets goals that are constantly difficult to achieve</td>
<td>Sets goals that are flexible and realistic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Takes little pleasure in successes</td>
<td>Celebrates successes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fears failing and making any mistakes</td>
<td>Courageously accepts failing and making mistakes as part of learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sees self-worth as the same as superior performance</td>
<td>Sees self-worth as build on a broader base than “marks”</td>
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Diagram: Cycle of Perfectionism

Urge: avoid or procrastinate, check &/or overwork

Thoughts: “it won’t be good enough”

Emotions: scared, anxious

Bodily sensations: nausea, racing heart
Pushing back at perfectionism starts with thinking about what you want your life to stand for. Of course, doing well can be part of that but do you want “Got High Marks” to be the only thing that you are remembered for? If not, then it is time to start paying attention to what else is important to you and what else can make your life vital and meaningful. It is equally important to think about the qualities in you that your friends or family care about. Do your friends only like you because of your marks? Changing perfectionism involves changing both the way you act and the way you think and feel about yourself.

CHANGING YOUR BEHAVIOUR

GOOD TIME MANAGEMENT

Another useful counter to getting caught up in perfectionistic behaviours such as procrastinating or over-working is to ensure that you approach your academic work with good time management skills. These include:

- Setting clear timelines and firm behavioural limits on how much time you spend on tasks. After all, spending the same amount of time and effort on a 10% assignment as on a 40% one isn’t really practical in a busy semester is it?
- Breaking tasks down into smaller, more manageable parts also helps stay focused on the task rather than on the outcome. Set practical time limits on these subtasks, too.
- Ensuring that you include vital and fun activities in your week by timetabling them into a schedule or routine

SET REALISTIC AND KINDER GOALS

Perfectionists often set standards that are not realistic for them.

For example: Do you look for everything ever written on a topic before you start to write? (Do you ever use it all?!) In this instance the perfectionistic fear of “missing something and so getting it wrong” is driving over-working. Try an experiment with a fair but strict deadline on the amount of time on research and reading you do for an essay and see what difference it really makes.

You might also intentionally try making small mistakes like wearing mismatching socks or bringing the wrong textbook to class just to allow yourself to be “less than perfect” and see what happens.

Exercise

What experiments could you undertake?

For more information about setting up your own behavioural experiments explore a workbook on perfectionism from the Centre For Clinical Interventions.

INCREASE EXERCISE

Exercise has been shown to be terrific for both good mood and brain function. Exercise or other stress management skills like relaxation or meditation help you to bring out the best in your brain. Paradoxically, you can healthily optimise your academic performance by managing your stress levels. (remember the Yerkes Dodson Curve)
CHANGING THE WAY YOU THINK AND FEEL

All of us continually experience an unending cascade of thoughts, memories, images, physical sensations and behavioural urges. The perfectionism cascade includes “frequent flyer” thoughts like:

– “Doing well isn't good enough, I have to do better!”
– “If I don’t get an HD I don’t deserve to be here”
– “If I get it wrong – they will think badly of me”
– “If I don’t do the best I will let them (parents, teachers, others) down and they won’t approve of me”
– “I have to do an excellent essay or else they’ll know I’m a fraud”

There are a number of ways that you can work with these thoughts and feelings. One way is to develop skills in re-examining and challenging unhelpful thoughts with a view to finding more accurate and constructive alternatives. (eg. see the section on Challenging Unhelpful Thinking in Learn To Deal With Procrastination or visit the Centre For Clinical Interventions website for information on challenging perfectionistic thinking [PDF]).

Another way is to develop defusion and mindfulness skills (See the Guided Mindfulness exercise above). Mindfulness involves learning to notice what is happening moment by moment with a non-judging attitude. Practicing mindfulness helps us to “step back” from unhelpful or anxiety producing thoughts and feelings. If we can step back from strong thoughts, feelings and urges we can avoid being caught up by them and swept away into unhelpful actions. You can also attend a mindfulness-based workshop at Counselling and Psychological Services.

OTHER USEFUL LINKS AND RESOURCES

Check out the Centre for Clinical Interventions workbook on perfectionism. You can also explore our Learn To Deal With Procrastination and Learn To Manage Stress and Anxiety pages.

INDIVIDUAL ASSISTANCE

If after accessing all of the resources on our website you are still needing some further help in learning skills to managing perfectionism or are concerned about symptoms you are experiencing, please make an appointment with one of our counsellors at the CAPS or see your doctor who can provide assessment and referral to resources in your local area.