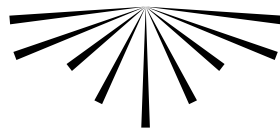


# 4

## Perfectionism



### Questions to Consider

- Do you tend to give more weight to your accomplishments or to your failures?
- Do you focus more on your strengths or on your weaknesses? Can you list each?
- Are you inclined to set very rigid standards for yourself? Provide examples.
- Do you have a hard time making decisions because you are afraid of making a wrong or bad choice?
- Do you often feel “not good enough”?

## Perfectionism

Perfectionist tendencies are often a major driving force behind negative self-talk, irrational thinking, and problems with low self-esteem. Because perfectionism is such a common problem for so many people, it deserves some further exploration.

In *The Gifts of Imperfection: Let Go of Who You Think You're Supposed to Be and Embrace Who You Are*, Brené Brown discusses perfectionism, saying it is “a self-destructive and addictive belief system.” Brown says that shame is the birthplace of perfection and describes shame as the painful experience of feeling flawed and therefore believing you are unworthy of love and belonging. She says that perfectionism does not prevent things like judgment or blame. Rather, “Research shows that perfectionism hampers success. In fact, it’s often the path to depression, anxiety, addiction, and life-paralysis.”\*

In *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead*, Brené Brown discusses perfectionism further, saying:

- Perfectionism is not the same thing as striving for excellence. Perfectionism is not about healthy achievement and growth. Perfectionism is a defensive move. It’s the belief that if we do things perfectly and look perfect, we can minimize or avoid the pain of blame, judgment, and shame. Perfectionism is a twenty-ton shield that we lug around, thinking it will protect us, when in fact it’s the thing that’s really preventing us from being seen.
- Perfectionism is not self-improvement. Perfectionism is, at its core, about trying to earn approval. Most perfectionists grew up being praised for achievement and performance (grades, manners, rule following, people pleasing, appearance, sports). Somewhere along the way, they adopted this dangerous and debilitating belief system: “I am what I accomplish and how well I accomplish it. Please. Perform. Perfect.” Healthy striving is self-focused: How can I improve? Perfectionism is other-focused: What will they think? Perfectionism is a hustle.

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\* For more, see *The Gifts of Imperfection: Let Go of Who You Think You're Supposed to Be and Embrace Who You Are*. Copyright © 2010 by Brené Brown. Center City, MN: Hazelden.

- Perfectionism is not the key to success. In fact, research shows that perfectionism hampers achievement. Perfectionism is correlated with depression, anxiety, addiction, and life paralysis or missed opportunities. The fear of failing, making mistakes, not meeting people's expectations, and being criticized keeps us outside of the arena where healthy competition and striving unfolds.
- Last, perfectionism is not a way to avoid shame. Perfectionism is a form of shame. Where we struggle with perfectionism, we struggle with shame.

From her research, Dr. Brown developed the following definition of *perfectionism*:

- Perfectionism is a self-destructive and addictive belief system that fuels this primary thought: *If I look perfect and do everything perfectly, I can avoid or minimize the painful feelings of shame, judgment, and blame.*
- Perfectionism is self-destructive simply because perfection doesn't exist. It's an unattainable goal. Perfectionism is more about perception than internal motivation, and there is no way to control perception, no matter how much time and energy we spend trying.
- Perfectionism is addictive, because when we invariably do experience shame, judgment, and blame, we often believe it's because we weren't perfect enough. Rather than questioning the faulty logic of perfectionism we become even more entrenched in our quest to look and do everything just right.
- Perfectionism actually sets us up to feel shame, judgment, and blame, which then leads to even more shame and self-blame: "It's my fault. I'm feeling this way because I'm not good enough."<sup>\*</sup>

Perfectionists tend to be very critical and judgmental, especially regarding themselves. They often engage in irrational thinking, applying rigid and unrealistic expectations to everything they do. All-or-nothing thinking is common.

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<sup>\*</sup> From *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parents, and Lead* by Brené Brown. Copyright © 2012 by Brené Brown. Used by permission of Gotham Books, an imprint of Penguin Group (USA) LLC.

For example, “If I’m not perfect, I must be terrible,” “If I mess up, I must be incompetent,” or “If I’m always perfect, people will like and respect me.” Minimization and magnification are also used to discredit accomplishments and instead focus on shortcomings. For example, “I finished the race but I didn’t win” or “Nobody will like me because I’m not the best.” Perfectionists sometimes extend their rigid standards to seemingly simple tasks. For example, it’s not enough just to shovel a clear path in the driveway; all of the snow must be perfectly removed. Laundry must be folded into perfectly neat piles. Doing a half-assed job is never acceptable under any circumstances. Anything less than perfect results in feelings of unworthiness and failure.

Perfectionists often fail to meet personal expectations because the criteria they set are so inflexible. They then focus on what was *not* accomplished rather than what was. Perfectionists tend to be self-deprecating and self-punishing. They derive self-worth from being perfect; but, because perfection is impossible, the perfectionist will often be left with feelings of unworthiness and damaged self-esteem. Low self-esteem creates an even stronger urge to obtain perfection in order to boost feelings of self-worth. Thus, perfectionism and low-self esteem become a vicious cycle.

Perfectionists may also struggle with procrastination and decision-making. Because they are afraid of making choices that are anything less than perfect, perfectionists often delay or avoid making decisions altogether. They often rely on others to make decisions, even including choices that seem fairly simple, such as which restaurant to go to for lunch. This inability to choose or voice an opinion can create a weakened personal identity and a diminished sense of self-worth.

### *Characteristics of Perfectionists*

In *On the Wings of Self-Esteem*, Dr. Louise Hart lists the following characteristics exhibited by perfectionists:<sup>\*</sup>

- Their impossible expectations constrict and inhibit their expression, stifle their creativity, and set them up for failure. They are frequently frustrated, disappointed, and angry.
- No matter how successful they are, they are seldom satisfied, they rarely appreciate their achievements or give themselves a pat on the back.
- They don’t feel “good enough.”
- They are rigid and controlling of themselves—and others.

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<sup>\*</sup> Copyright © 1994 by Dr. Louise Hart, from *On the Wings of Self-Esteem*. Oakland, CA: Uplift Press. Reprinted by permission of Uplift Press.

- They don't try, don't start, procrastinate, or don't finish projects.
- Mistakes, to perfectionists, are proof of total failure; they can devastate self-esteem.
- They are judgmental and critical of themselves and of everyone else.
- They always focus on what is wrong—the shortcomings, flaws, and imperfections—and miss all the things that are “right.”
- They have difficulty with decisions because they're trying to make a “perfect” decision.
- Entangled in trivia, they can't see the big picture. They usually end up doing all the work themselves because no one else can do it “just right.”
- Either-or thinking is common; as one woman learned from her mother, “You are perfect or you are nothing.” Perfectionists don't know how much room there really is between “perfect” and “total failure.”
- Focusing on appearances, they miss the rich, internal dimensions of life. Instead of just allowing her feelings when her husband died, one woman ran out and bought several etiquette books on the subject so she could grieve “perfectly.”

### *Other Consequences of Perfectionism*

In addition to affecting the individual's self-esteem and creating feelings of frustration and disappointment, perfectionism can also have a negative impact on relationships. Perfectionists often seek to obtain intimacy and approval through appearing perfect at all times. A perfectionist doesn't believe that others will accept her flaws and imperfections; thus, she puts on a façade, hiding her true self from others. This tendency to maintain a front limits closeness in relationships. In reality, people actually tend to feel uncomfortable around those who appear too perfect because they often seem unapproachable, closed-off, or fake.

Perfectionists may be viewed as controlling, inflexible, or mean-spirited due to their rigid standards. This can create tension and conflict in all types of relationships, including those with family, friends, and co-workers, and even with various strangers you encounter throughout the day, such as customer service representatives, store clerks, and restaurant servers.

The roots of perfectionism tend to develop over time and can often be traced to the messages in our culture that we began witnessing in childhood and

incorporated into our thinking as we were growing up. Our society is filled with media and advertising that portray unrealistic standards of existence. For example, airbrushed and photoshopped models in the majority of commercials and magazines, or the indication that we are supposed to be multitasking superheroes, easily juggling all of our personal, family, and career responsibilities. We need to recognize these standards as unrealistic and begin to let go of the perfectionist desire to measure up.

In your childhood, you may have received messages that created a foundation of perfectionism. Instead of receiving recognition for your inherent worth as a person and appropriate guidance from caretakers as you were growing up, you may have encountered too much criticism, creating a constant quest for approval. Your caretakers may have held expectations or set goals that were poorly defined or too accelerated, or you may have received praise only for major accomplishments, while values such as effort and perseverance were overlooked.

In *Self-Compassion: Stop Beating Yourself Up and Leave Insecurity Behind*, Kristin Neff says, “People with critical parents learn the message early on that they are so bad and flawed that they have no right to be accepted for who they are.” Many perfectionists can recall hearing messages such as, “Good report card, but why did you get a B instead of an A in math?” Or “Great game, but why did you miss that shot in the second half?” These types of backhanded compliments foster shame and create the foundation for perfectionism and low self-esteem.

Regardless of the roots of your perfectionist tendencies, learning to let go of the need to be perfect will help you to feel more happy and fulfilled in the long run. It’s okay to have goals and to strive to do your best, but the motivation for doing so should not be tied to your feelings of self-worth. It is important to accept imperfection and recognize that mistakes are how we learn and grow.

The long-term consequence of perfectionism is burnout. Eventually, perfectionists deplete themselves to the point that their physical and mental resources become exhausted. You can begin to let go of your perfectionist tendencies by first identifying what they are and why they persist. It involves picking apart the faulty messaging behind the *need* to be perfect and choosing to let go of irrational, distorted beliefs as you instead begin to incorporate more rational and realistic messages about yourself and the world into your daily thinking.

### Identifying Perfectionist Thoughts

Perfectionism is caused by distorted thinking that often involves an underlying sense of fear. Common fears include fear of failure, fear of not being accepted or liked, or fear of being viewed as inadequate. To begin exploring the origin of your perfectionist tendencies, complete the following sentence:

If I'm not perfect, \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Are you able to identify any faulty thinking or unrealistic standards in your answer? How can you change your answer to something more rational?

In *Overcoming Perfectionism: Finding the Key to Balance & Self-Acceptance*, Ann W. Smith distinguishes between overt and covert perfectionists and provides the following lists to help test the degree of perfectionism in an individual. Most people have a few positive responses, but if you check three or more items on two out of three tests, this may be an indication that you will want to work on perfectionism.

#### Self-Tests\*

##### Test 1: General Perfectionism

- I place excessive demands on myself.
- I often obsess about the details of a task, even though they may not be important.
- I have trouble letting go of something once I have finished it (e.g., a project, a writing assignment, a paint job, a letter, taxes, or a cleanup job).
- I get very upset with myself when I make a mistake.
- I get more upset when I make a mistake and someone sees it.

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\* Copyright © 2013 by Ann W. Smith, M.S., L.M.F.T., from *Overcoming Perfectionism: Finding the Key to Balance & Self-Acceptance* (Revised and updated). Deerfield Beach, FL: Health Communications, Inc. Reprinted by permission of Health Communications, Inc., [www.hcibooks.com](http://www.hcibooks.com).

- I often have a mental list of things I “should” be doing.
- I never seem to be doing enough.
- I tend to notice any error in myself or others before I notice the positive.
- I am very upset by criticism.
- I get defensive when I am corrected or criticized.
- I have difficulty making decisions.
- I get upset if I have to learn something new and I don’t catch on quickly.

#### Test 2: Overt Perfectionists

- I rarely make mistakes.
- I tend to criticize or complain about the way other people do things.
- People say I am too “together” (e.g., uptight, or neat).
- I am annoyed when others don’t act or behave as well as I think they should (e.g., in being on time or keeping order).
- Others would describe me as a perfectionist.
- My surroundings are generally in good order.
- I feel frustrated when my home is cluttered.
- I prefer routine and structure.
- I am very organized in one or more areas of my life.
- I sometimes wish I could just let go and relax.
- I have an all-or-nothing philosophy: If I can’t do it all, or do it well, why bother?
- I am sometimes hard on the people around me.

#### Test 3: Covert Perfectionists

- I procrastinate on tasks that require a lot of effort.
- I am very hard on myself when I make mistakes.
- I feel terrible when anyone sees me make a mistake.
- I consider myself to be laid-back.
- I am critical of myself in my head.
- I think a lot about what I should be doing.
- I don’t usually measure up to what I think I should be.
- I am not interested in being the best at most things.
- When I am good at something, I try harder.
- I tend to avoid things that I may not be good at.
- I often believe that people don’t think highly of me.
- Others say that I am better than I think of myself.
- I underestimate my abilities at many things.

If many of the above statements are true for you, recognize that you have perfectionist tendencies; however, don’t beat yourself up for this. Watch out for negative self-talk around belittling yourself for perfectionist ways and instead recognize that perfectionism is common and is something you can work to overcome. If you blame yourself for having perfectionist tendencies, you will only



reinforce low self-esteem. Your perfectionism may even worsen as your bad feelings about yourself increase and you feel an even greater need to be perfect to compensate. Instead of blaming yourself, recognize and accept that you have perfectionist tendencies and commit to working to overcome them.

Start by making peace with your imperfections and weaknesses. Accept yourself as you are and let go of any self-destructive patterns and unrealistic expectations you hold yourself to. It is okay to have goals and standards for yourself, but it is unrealistic and unproductive to expect perfection.

Begin incorporating into your thinking messages that counter perfectionism; for example, sentences like, “I do not have to be perfect” and “I do the best I can.” Say these sentences over and over anytime you feel pulled toward perfection or find yourself fixating on shortcomings.

### *Guidelines for Overcoming Perfectionism*

In *The Anxiety & Phobia Workbook* (4<sup>th</sup> edition), Dr. Edmund J. Bourne suggests the following guidelines to help with overcoming perfectionism:

- Let Go of the Idea That Your Worth Is Determined by Your Achievements and Accomplishments...
- Recognize and Overcome Perfectionist Thinking Styles...
- Stop Magnifying the Importance of Small Errors...
- Focus on Positives...
- Work on Goals That Are Realistic...
- Cultivate More Pleasure and Recreation in Your Life...
- Develop a Process Orientation.\*

As you develop an understanding of inherent self-worth, begin reinforcing the idea that you have worth simply because you are a human being. Work to recognize that worth is not determined by your achievements or accomplishments. Rely on yourself, rather than on society and others' messages, to determine your self-worth.

Become aware of your self-talk and pay attention to your distorted thinking and mistaken beliefs, especially as they relate to perfectionist thinking styles. Look out for should statements, all-or-nothing thinking, overgeneralization, and minimization/magnification. Create counterstatements and affirmations that refute perfectionist messages. Recognize that mistakes are how we learn. Work on

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\* Copyright © 2005 *The Anxiety & Phobia Workbook* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.) by Bourne, Edmund J. Reproduced with permission of New Harbinger Publications in the format Republish in a book via Copyright Clearance Center.

forgiving yourself and accept that having some shortcomings is natural. Beware of the tendency to magnify flaws and errors.

Focus on positives, including baby steps and little victories. Take an inventory of the “good” things you have accomplished each day. Watch out for the tendency to disqualify something positive with a “but.” For example, “I got my chores done *but* I didn’t have time to make dinner.” Also recognize positives that may seem minor. Sometimes it’s enough to just say, “I made it through a tough day.”

Pay attention to whether your goals and expectations are realistic and obtainable. Again, watch out for should statements and for words like *always* and *never*. It is often helpful to set goals that are fairly easy and gradually raise the bar over time. This helps to keep you motivated rather than set you up for failure and discouragement. For example, if you set a goal to exercise seven days a week, your perfectionism will lead to disappointment and beating yourself up if you only exercise six days one week. Instead, set a goal to exercise two or three days a week. This goal is much more obtainable and allows some flexibility for days when you do not find the time or energy to workout. When you accomplish your goal, you will feel good about yourself and motivated to continue, thus able to raise the bar rather than quit.

Perfectionism creates the tendency to be rigid and self-denying. Becoming so wrapped up in striving for perfection and in focusing on failures causes the positive aspects of life to be overlooked, taken for granted, or forsaken. Try to relax your standards and make an attempt to add recreation, pleasure, and fun back into your life.

Developing a process orientation means beginning to consider that the *effort* you put into things is just as important as the outcome. Recognize that things like motivation, hard work, practice, and perseverance are significant and admirable, even when the end result is less than perfect.

## Recommended Journaling



### Perfectionism

Consider whether you have any perfectionist tendencies. Do you set too high of standards for yourself in any areas? Are you able to accept your shortcomings, weaknesses, and mistakes?

If you can identify any perfectionist tendencies in yourself, consider how they have affected you and your life. How have they affected other people in your life? How much time has trying to be perfect taken up? How has it affected the way you feel about yourself?

What would happen if you lowered your standards by some percentage? When developing an answer, rely on rational thinking and be aware of any mistaken, irrational, or distorted beliefs that creep into your thinking.