

Perfectionism

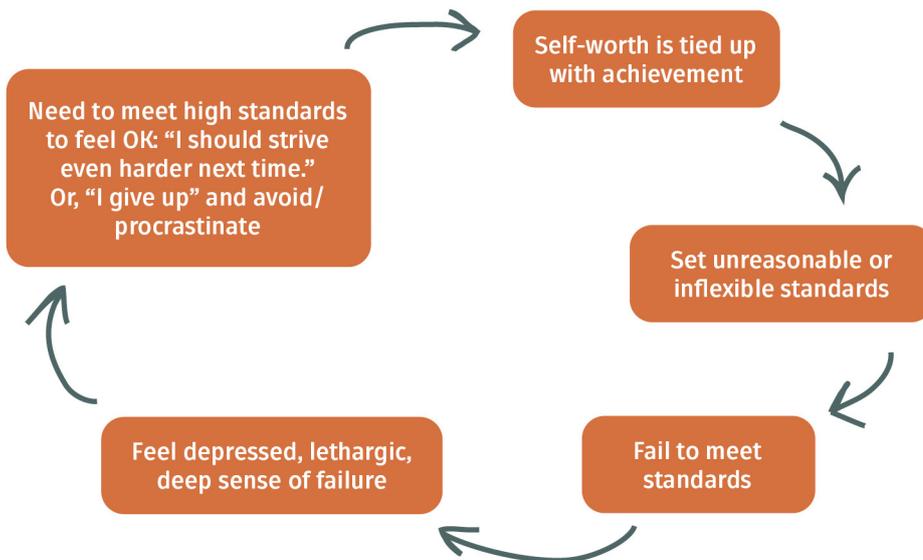


What is perfectionism?

- 1 The tendency to set standards** that are so **high** they either cannot be met, are only met with great difficulty or **cost**, or standards which are **inflexible** (do not take into account various factors that influence performance).
- 2 Measuring your self-worth** (how you feel about yourself) based on your ability to strive for and achieve such standards.
- 3 Experiencing negative consequences** of setting such demanding standards (e.g., chronic anxiety, poor relationships, procrastination, problems sleeping, poor health), yet continuing to strive for them despite the cost.

Perfectionism can often involve two types of behaviour:

- **Overcompensation** - e.g. spending too much time on a small task, checking and re-checking work
- **Avoidance** - e.g. missing deadlines, getting distracted by non-academic tasks, procrastination



Perfectionists can often end up stuck in a vicious cycle:

Sometimes, even when a perfectionist does achieve the standards they set for themselves, they dismiss that goal/standard as not being important or difficult enough, or simply being a fluke. In this way, the cycle of perfectionism continues and self-worth remains low, regardless of the outcome of one's performance.

“My work is never good enough.”

“I spend all my time studying and feel exhausted.”

“I get so anxious about my work, I cannot start.”

“I get stuck researching/re-writing one paragraph or checking for mistakes.”

“If I do not do well at something, I feel like a failure.”

“People tell me I have high expectations for myself.”

“I often avoid things if I think I will not be good at it.”

“If I make a mistake, I have failed.”

“I’ll just work on this to-do list first.”

“I got an HD but it must have been an easy assessment.”



Access support and more information

www.newcastle.edu.au/counselling or call (02) 4921 6622



Strategies to manage perfectionism:

If perfectionism is affecting your academic performance, the way you study, your emotional wellbeing, physical health, or other aspects of your life, you could try some of the strategies below:

- 1 Learn to recognise perfectionism** so you can identify when you are becoming caught up with perfectionistic thoughts and behaviours. For example, noticing if you are equating a mistake to failure, procrastinating on a task, excessively preparing, or experiencing extreme anxiety or distress.
- 2 Set yourself 'time' deadlines instead of 'task' deadlines.** Give yourself a time frame by which to finish a task, rather than continuing to work on a task until it feels 'perfect'.
- 3 "The first draft of anything is sh*t." (Ernest Hemingway)** – Often avoidance and procrastination come from anxiety about aiming to write a perfect first draft. Take some pressure off by allowing yourself to write a completed "rough first draft". Once you have answered all the questions, and if there is still time left before the deadline, you can go back and edit. It is easier to rework a rough first draft than to stare at a blank page.
- 4 Adjust your definition of success.** Consider whether your standards are reasonable or helpful. Would you expect a close friend to meet the same expectations you hold for yourself? What impact does holding onto your high expectations have on your wellbeing and performance?
- 5 Shift from self-criticism to self-compassion.** Harsh self-criticism is often an unhelpful and misguided attempt to improve performance. It can activate the 'threat' pathway in our brains leading to anxiety and low mood. To learn how to hold yourself accountable with kindness, check out the series of modules from Centre for Clinical Interventions on 'Building Self Compassion'.
- 6 Self-help for perfectionism.** Check out the series of modules 'Perfectionism in Perspective' by the Centre for Clinical Interventions or the books listed in the left sidebar.
- 7 Seek help.** The beliefs that underlie perfectionism can be deeply ingrained and difficult to shift. If you have tried a few strategies but find that perfectionism is still impacting on your life, a Counsellor at University Counselling and Psychological Services can help you to learn some new skills.

Online resources

Centre for Clinical Interventions

Free self-help workbook on managing perfectionism.

www.cci.health.wa.gov.au/resources/infopax.cfm?Info_ID=52

Centre for Clinical Interventions

Modules on building self-compassion.

www.cci.health.wa.gov.au/resources/infopax.cfm?Info_ID=57

Books

When Perfect Isn't Good Enough: Strategies for Coping with Perfectionism

by M. Antony & R Swinson

Never Good Enough: How to use perfectionism to your advantage without letting it ruin your life

by M. Adderholdt-Elliott, M. Elliott, & J. Goldberg



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