

## **An ~~Umpfet Mperft~~ Imperfect Look At Overcoming Perfectionism**

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This handout is not perfect! Why? Because it does not cover all the information possible about perfectionism and won't answer all your questions. Does that mean that this handout is not worth reading? Of course not. That's the point. Just because something is not perfect, it can still be very effective and useful. (In fact, if the handout perfectly discussed all the information about perfectionism, it would be so long you probably would not read it—which would make it imperfect!)

### **WHAT EXACTLY IS PERFECTIONISM?**

In general, perfectionism can be described as the belief that making mistakes is unacceptable, that whatever is done must be done error-free. People who are perfectionistic often believe that making mistakes makes them less successful, less likeable, and even less worthy people. Perfectionistic people often feel compelled to work harder and harder to reach perfection.

### **WHAT EXACTLY IS SO WRONG WITH BEING PERFECTIONISTIC?**

Assuming that you are human, it is impossible to be perfect. Expecting yourself to be perfect sets you up for all kinds of uncomfortable and unsuccessful experiences such as—

**Frustration:** You can never achieve what you think you ought to achieve, so you are never satisfied with yourself or your performance.

**Procrastination:** Perfectionism is one of the major causes of procrastination. If you fear you cannot do a task perfectly, you may avoid the task altogether. For a perfectionist, it is often easier and less painful to avoid a task (even with all the negative experiences that go along with that) than to admit that the perfectionistic expectations are impossible to achieve.

**Low Self-Esteem:** Perfectionistic people are their own worst critics and often wouldn't dream of treating a friend (or even perhaps an enemy) as they do themselves. Perfectionistic people frequently tell themselves that they are not trying hard enough, not doing well enough and even that they are not good enough as people. (They often judge their worth as people by what they accomplish, not who they are).

**Anxiety or Depression:** Severe perfectionism can leave a person feeling anxious or depressed since there is rarely a sense of accomplishment, satisfaction, and reward for hard work. Underlying the hard-driving style of some perfectionistic people is uncertainty or fear about the future since they do not believe they will ever be good enough or be able to maintain high performance long enough.

Any of this sound familiar? If these negative consequences of perfectionism are really bringing you down, you might be ready to work on giving up your perfectionism.

**BUT IF I GIVE UP MY PERFECTIONISM, I WILL PROBABLY NEVER BE SUCCESSFUL.**

On the contrary, you can be quite successful without being perfectionistic. In fact, research by Dr. David Burns has found that perfectionists tend to be less successful than non-perfectionists because they spend too much time worrying about being perfectionistic and not enough time making mistakes and finding out what works and what does not. Even when they fail at something, non-perfectionists often achieve more, because they recover from failure more quickly and can produce more without having to worry about getting everything exactly right.

It is possible to be success-oriented without being perfectionistic. Consider the differences between the two approaches.

| <b>A Perfectionistic Person</b>   | <b>A Success-Oriented Person</b>   |
|---|--|
| Sets goals that are very difficult or impossible to achieve.  | Sets goals that are realistic and achievable.  |
| Gives self little or no personal recognition of accomplishment when goals are achieved.                               | Celebrates the personal accomplishment when goals are achieved.  |
| Sets an even higher, less achievable goal when a smaller goal is achieved.  | Sets another realistic, achievable goal when a smaller goal is achieved.   |
| Takes failure at a goal as a personal failure: "I am a failure because I failed this goal."                           | Takes failure at a goal as a goal failure, not as a personal failure: "I am angry (disappointed, etc.) at this failure, but I am still a good person." |
| Has beliefs that "I must be perfect or things will go wrong; I won't get what I need; or people won't approve of me." | Has belief that "I can and will make mistakes because I am human, and I can still be very successful."   |

**EVEN IF THIS IS TRUE I HAVE BEEN A PERFECTIONIST FOR A LONG TIME. HOW COULD I BECOME MORE SUCCESS-ORIENTED AND LET GO OF PERFECTIONISM?**

**1. CHANGE THE WAY YOU THINK AND FEEL ABOUT YOURSELF**

A. Be honest with yourself about the consequences of your perfectionism. Are the consequences hurting you enough to want to change? If the answer is yes, then it is worth trying to become less perfectionistic.

B. Face your fears about not being perfect. One way to do this is to write down a list of "the worst things that will happen to me if I stop being a perfectionist." Once you have written these down, go over each one and ask yourself how realistic it is. Chances are that it is not very realistic. Then write down a "reality check," a more realistic view of what you fear. Here's an example:

**Worst fear:** "I will fail all my classes."

**Reality Check:** "It is very unlikely I will fail even one class. Even if my grades drop, they won't drop much if I keep up with my work."

C. Catch yourself in the act of saying perfectionistic things to yourself and change your self-talk to be more gentle and self-accepting. If you find yourself saying, “You are such a dummy if you can’t understand this,” replace that thought with, “This is really hard, but I believe I can understand this if I just keep working at it.” If you say, “I’ve got to do this better than anyone else can,” say instead, “I hope I can be the best, but even if I am not I can still be very successful and feel good about what I’ve accomplished.”

D. Stop basing your self-esteem on external accomplishments and others’ perceptions of you. Instead make a list of positive characteristics you value about yourself that are there regardless of your performance on a specific task (for example: generosity, kindness, etc.). Remind yourself that you are more than just what you do or how much you “succeed.”

E. Replace unproductive thoughts such as all-or-none thinking, catastrophizing or “shoulding” (“I should...”) with more positive, realistic thoughts. For example, instead of fighting between such thoughts as “I can be perfect” and “I can’t do anything right,” find a middle ground, such as “I won’t be able to do this perfectly, but I can still do a job I can be proud of.”

F. Let go of old messages and beliefs taught by family or friends about needing to be perfect or to accomplish many things in order to be loved. Focus instead on developing a belief that you are lovable for who you are, not what you accomplish.

## 2. **CHANGE THE WAY YOU ACT**

A. Set realistic goals that you can accomplish in the amount of time you have. Focus on patting yourself on the back for even small steps toward a goal. If you cannot feel good about small accomplishments you will never be able to feel good about large accomplishments.

B. Estimate how much positive feeling you anticipate getting from approaching something perfectionistically, and compare it to how positive you actually feel after the activity. You may find that you anticipate far more positive feeling than you actually get.

C. Make small changes in behavior that help shift you to a more success-oriented focus. For example, if you normally would spend 10 hours trying to get a paper “just right,” set a boundary of spending only eight hours on the paper, stick to that boundary and see what happens.

D. Intentionally make small mistakes like wearing unmatching socks or dialing a phone number incorrectly to relieve the pressure of having to be perfect.

E. Put time in your schedule for “non-productive” free time, just to relax and get away from the pressure to always be producing.

## 3. **CHANGE THE WAY YOU RELATE TO OTHERS**

A. Share your thoughts and feelings with non-perfectionistic friends and ask them to give you feedback on whether you are being perfectionistic.

B. Practice accepting imperfection in others, and let them know you care about them a lot even though they are not perfect.

C. Let go of feeling responsible for other people's actions and feelings, and for the outcome of events you have no control over.

Overcoming perfectionism requires time, effort and considerable practice at applying the above suggestions. Letting go of perfectionism is not an easy process, nor is it a perfect one. But many people have succeeded at doing so and report being rewarded with less stress, more enjoyment of life, higher self-esteem, and equal or greater success than when they were perfectionistic. For them the effort was well worth the outcome. And so it may be for you.

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