

Perfectionism

Is Perfectionism Problematic?

Having high standards for yourself is not necessarily problematic in itself. It can be extremely useful, facilitating academic and personal fulfillment. It can promote self-efficacy, enhance your life or even enable you to come to the counseling center.

However, there are times when having high standards isn't so useful and instead prevents you from achieving certain goals. It can impede academic and social functioning or be associated with problems such as anxiety and depression.

This handout briefly describes aspects of unhelpful perfectionism and suggests simple strategies that can be useful in managing them. It might be worth noting that this handout is not perfect, so it might be only partly useful to some of you.

Some Simple Strategies

Unhelpful perfectionism can be persistent. It seems to be self-perpetuating. Successful strategies, therefore, need to target the ways in which it is maintained.

Listed below are six thought patterns associated with perfectionism and suggested strategies for managing them.

1. Cognitive Biases

Unhelpful perfectionism generates stress that, in turn, influences the way in which we view the circumstances. Quite unintentionally we can develop beliefs and unhelpful thinking styles that aren't logical or rational. Examples of these include:

All-or-nothing Thinking

This occurs when a situation is viewed in extremes, also known as black and white thinking. Example: "If I haven't done at least eight hours of work by the end of the day, I will have failed."

Anticipating Negative Outcomes

This happens when a negative prediction is made and/or a catastrophic outcome is seen as inevitable. This is often characterized by "what if" questions. Example: "What if I don't do well in my degree? My life will inevitably be bleak and dull."

Mental Filter

This is found when specific negative details are focused on and the broader picture is disregarded. Example: Focusing on one difficult conversation or interaction with someone rather than putting it in the context of your friendship/relationship.

Over-generalization

This takes place when a sweeping negative conclusion goes far beyond the current situation. Example: "I got really anxious in that seminar group. Anxiety is always going to get the better of me and stop me from achieving things that I want in life."

“Should” and “Must” Statements

These involve precise, fixed expectations that lead to an overestimation of negative consequences if these expectations are not met. Example: “I should always prioritize work. If I don’t, I will very quickly end up letting myself down and failing.”

Maladaptive Thinking

This focuses on problematic thoughts that may actually be quite accurate, but the ruminative process of dwelling on these thoughts creates greater anxiety and interferes with progress.

Suggested Strategy

Write down your anxious thoughts and identify any unhelpful thinking styles. Once you recognize an unhelpful thought, you are in a position to challenge it. Consider evidence that contradicts your thought. Is there another way of viewing your situation? This can help you to discredit unhelpful thoughts and enhance your self-worth.

2. Setting of Strict Rules (with Stringent Adherence)

Unhelpful perfectionism thrives on absolute rules and unconditional compliance that does not take current circumstances into account. A useful start is to identify any unhelpful thinking styles you may have. You might also find it helpful to consider your response to the laws and rules that you encounter in your everyday life—is your adherence equally rigorous for all of them? This can help you identify evidence of any variation in the application of rules and your response to them which can highlight the irrational bias in your thinking.

3. Failure Motivates Self-criticism

Sadly, this is a common problem, and one that is often exacerbated by competitive learning environments. Would you encourage your loved ones to criticize themselves? No? Then why do it to yourself? Think of the nicest, kindest, most understanding and supportive thing that you could say to your closest friend in a time of crisis and then say it to yourself. This helps to promote self-compassion.

4. Absence of Positive Emotional Reaction to Success

We all need to learn to find pleasure in our successes. If we haven’t had the opportunity to learn this at an earlier point in our lives, success can feel quite empty. At the end of each day, take some time out to review the events of the day and identify anything that did not go completely wrong. It doesn’t matter if it might have gone better. If it didn’t go wrong, for the purpose of this exercise, say it was successful. Then make a plan to give yourself some sort of reward the following day. Think about it, and look forward to it. This helps to behaviorally reinforce achievement by having fun (a positive emotional reaction).

5. Fear of Failure Promotes Avoidance

Quite naturally, we tend to put things off if we believe that we’re going to fail. Instead, focus on the task not the outcome. Stop thinking and start doing. Sports psychologists use this successfully, and it can be extremely effective when dealing with unhelpful perfectionism.

6. Imminent Failure Promotes Escape

Sometimes the erroneous belief that failure is unavoidable leads to the task being abandoned before its completion.

As with number 5, keep focused on the behavior and simply keep going. Alternatively, take a break, write down your anxious thoughts and identify any unhelpful thinking styles. This can enable you to further develop your self-efficacy by using behavioral and cognitive approaches.