

Perfectionism

What is it?

In psychological terms, Perfectionism is considered to be a personality trait that requires you to do your absolute best at all times, without making any mistakes. For some, or in certain situations, this might not be a bad thing. It can have positive effects in motivating us to reach ambitious goals and it can make us feel good about our efforts.

However, perfectionism is not a requirement for success. In fact, there is no such thing as 100% perfect. It's not possible! So, when is perfectionism unhelpful? If you are a perfectionist, you might find that even when you achieve and do well, you might still feel unsatisfied and find it difficult to congratulate yourself on your achievements.



Perfectionism and Mental Health

The relationship between perfectionism and mental health problems is not clear cut, and having perfectionist traits does not mean you will experience mental health problems, nor does it mean that by having any of the following common mental health problems that you are more likely to be a perfectionist.

However, the eternal pursuit of meeting unrelentingly high standards can contribute to **chronic anxiety and stress**. In addition, concluding that we are a failure because we can't meet such high standards *all of the time* can contribute to **depressed mood**. We can experience **anger and frustration** if we have exceptionally high expectations of others, and while anger in itself is not a problem, it may have an impact on our relationships if we do not deal with it appropriately.

If you apply unrelentingly high standards to everything you do, that frequently cause you to miss out on other aspects of life, or if you tend to judge your self-worth based on the achievement of such high standards then perfectionism may be holding you back.



What Causes It?

There is no simple answer as to what causes perfectionism, or why some people experience it more than others, as people differ in terms of their experiences and personalities

Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) can help us understand perfectionism in terms of our experiences and how they shape our beliefs and attitudes, about ourselves, others and the world. CBT assumes that it is not

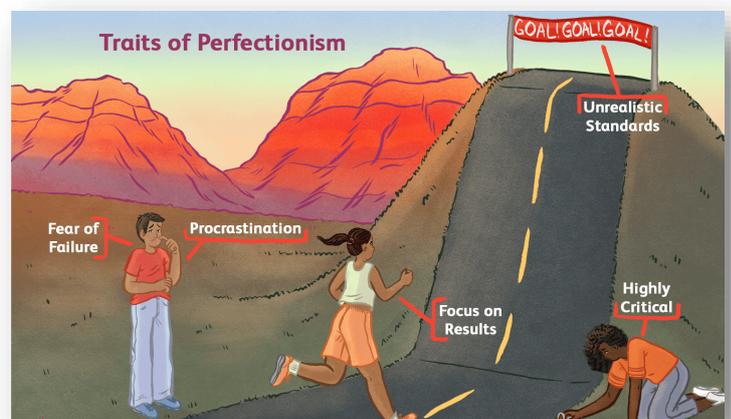
the experience or situation itself that causes distress, but our beliefs and perception of it. For more information on CBT please see our CBT information sheet and/or audio resource on our website: www.wellbeing-glasgow.org.uk

It is important not to blame yourself or others if you have developed perfectionism. As you will see from the list below, not all experiences are necessarily negative. But in order to make sense of our problems, and be able to treat them effectively, it can be helpful to reflect on where they might have started.

There are many factors that may contribute to perfectionism:

- **Receiving praise for doing well** – you may have learned to associate praise for achieving with feeling accepted and valued as a person. There is nothing wrong with feeling good about getting praise from others. In fact it's often a great feeling that can help us feel valued, accomplished and motivated. However, this can be problematic if, over time, we become dependent on receiving praise to feel good about ourselves
- **Receiving punishment for making mistakes** – maybe you were harshly criticised or punished for making mistakes. Being on the receiving end of such punishment can lead us to believe that unless we do everything perfectly, we will be apprehended or ridiculed. This can lead us to develop a rule for living that we must *never* make a mistake, which can lead to problematic behaviours ranging from overworking to avoidance
- **Role Models** – It may be that you cannot recall any experiences of being punished or receiving excessive praise for your efforts. Sometimes perfectionism can stem from how we learn from others. For example, your parents might have had a very strong work ethic and worked very hard. Or maybe you idolised an older sibling, teacher or celebrity figure because they were particularly good at one thing. This is normal to an extent, but it can lead to unhealthy comparisons and low self-esteem if we apply these standards to ourselves in all situations.

It's ok if you don't relate to the experiences listed above, you can still overcome perfectionism regardless of how it developed, as CBT provides you with techniques to help you in the **here and now**.



The following information on Rules for living can help you understand how beliefs, developed in the past, shape your attitude and behaviours in the here and now by illustrating typical perfectionist behaviours. This list is by no means exhaustive; there are many ways in which perfectionism can impact on our behaviour.

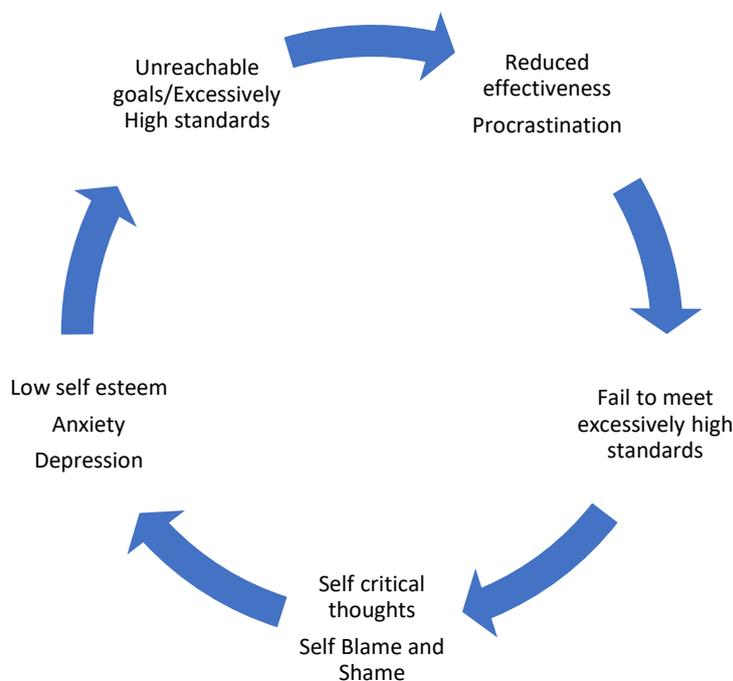
Perfectionism and Rules for Living

Theme	Example Rule	Example Behaviour
All or Nothing Thinking	<i>'If I receive any criticism or negative feedback it means I have failed'</i>	Become upset at receiving critical feedback on work
	<i>'If I don't do things perfectly, it means I have failed'</i>	Avoid doing tasks Spend excessive amount of time checking over work to ensure it is perfect
Fear of failure	<i>'If I make a mistake then I will be rejected'</i>	
	<i>'If I fail, then it means I am a failure'</i>	Being self critical Procrastinate (put off doing a task)
Control	<i>'I can't delegate work to others in case they do it wrong'</i>	Take on too much work
	<i>'I must work very hard to deserve rest'</i>	No work/life balance
Shoulds and Musts	<i>'I should never eat sugary foods'</i>	Restrict eating
	<i>'When I clean the house it must be absolutely spotless or there is no point'</i>	Spend excessive amounts of time on one task

Our rules for living are part of our belief system and our belief system is shaped by our experiences (usually early childhood experiences). Rules for living are the guiding principles we develop, which are based on our beliefs. We have a mixture of helpful and unhelpful rules. Unhelpful rules tend to be quite rigid, inflexible and extreme. Basically, they are impossible to live by in every situation.

Vicious cycle of Perfectionism

Perfectionistic rules trigger a vicious cycle of thoughts, feelings and behaviours. Let's look at this illustrated:



This cycle shows how unrelenting high standards (based on our rules for living) can trigger a vicious cycle of reduced ability to be effective. This often comes in the form of avoidance, overworking or procrastination. Setting such excessively high standards often means that failure to meet them *all of the time* is inevitable. This apparent 'failure' leads to self critical thoughts, and sometimes difficult feelings such as shame and guilt, which can lead to anxiety, stress, depression or even anger. At this point, perfectionists tend to set even higher standards, thinking "*I must try even harder next time*", setting the vicious cycle in motion again. In fact, even when perfectionists meet their high standards they often conclude that their success was down to fluke, or that their standards weren't high enough to begin with! This vicious cycle can be very hard to get out of.

The following **behaviours** can keep the vicious cycle going:

- Excessive checking (work, appearance, texts)
- Seeking reassurance from other people
- Giving up easily (e.g. giving up after two guitar lessons because you can't keep up, despite this being a common experience in the initial stages of learning a new skill)
- Avoiding situations where you might 'fail'
- Procrastinating (putting off doing a task because you fear it won't be good enough)

How CBT can help you break the vicious cycle:

- Set realistic and achievable goals based on your own wants, needs and past accomplishments (**SMART goals is another available worksheet on our website: www.wellbeing-glasgow.org.uk**)
- Try an **experiment** to test out your predictions of what happens when you don't do your absolute best. For example, instead of giving a task the usual 100%, ask yourself what would 90% effort look like? Or 80% and 70% effort? Gradually try this out and reflect on the outcome. Ask yourself did your predictions come true? This might feel difficult at first, so be sure to adopt an experimental attitude and try with a task you feel comfortable about giving less effort. This technique can help you realise that the world does not end when you don't give 100%
- **Challenge Negative Thinking**
 - Use your feelings of anxiety or low mood to check in and ask yourself:
 - Am I thinking in all or nothing terms right now? Is there a grey area?
 - Am I being self critical?
 - Am I applying unrealistically high standards to myself in this situation?
 - Does one mistake really mean I have failed?
 - What would I say to someone I cared about who was feeling the same way?

For more information on thought challenging techniques try our **available worksheet on our website: www.wellbeing-glasgow.org.uk**.

Perfectionism can be closely related to low self-esteem. Why not complete our **CBT Self-esteem Course available on our website: www.wellbeing-glasgow.org.uk**. This will help you understand more about thoughts, feelings and behaviours related to low self-esteem.

Be compassionate towards yourself. The following resource booklet (available freely online) can help you learn more about how to understand and introduce self-compassion **[Compassion Booklet](#)**

Think about what gives your life meaning and purpose. Once you have identified what your **values** are, think about whether or not your goals are in line with your values. Use this resource as a starting point to help you identify your own values and goals **<https://www.getselfhelp.co.uk/values.htm>**.

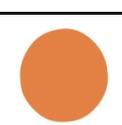
When you are living your life in accordance with what you value, whether or not you achieve your goals becomes less important. In fact, what really matters is the process of getting where you want to be. Watch this video for a great explanation of the difference between values and goals **[Russ Harris explains goals and values](#)**

Learn to distinguish the tasks that are more important to you, and that you want to prioritise in terms of workload. We hope this information has been useful in helping you understand perfectionism. Please feel free to browse our website for more information, or complete one of our virtual groups.

Our recommended resources (click for direct access):

NHS Inform	Offers the most up-to-date advice on dealing with varying mental health difficulties, including the 5 Steps to Mental Wellbeing. Please visit: NHS Inform
Wellbeing	Our website offers a variety of self-help materials, groups, and courses for all sorts of problems that you may be facing. Anyone can download the self-help materials. Please visit: Wellbeing Website Glasgow
Mental Health Foundation	A range of content designed to give you more information about mental health and to help you to look after your mental health. Please visit: Your Mental Health - Mental Health Foundation
NHS Every Mind Matters	Interactive website providing you the opportunity to complete a short quiz which creates a Mind Plan of what you can do to improve your mental health. Please visit: Every Mind Matters
Psych Central	Run by mental health professionals offering reliable, trusted information to individuals struggling with a mental health. There is also an excellent quiz section allowing you to find out more about your symptoms and how to manage these. Please visit: PsychCentral for Mental Health
MIND	Information hub provides advice on how to support your mental wellbeing. Please visit: MIND Information Hub
SAMH	Hub of information and guidance about looking after mental health. Please visit: SAMH Guidance for Mental Health

Useful Apps:

	Mind Shift	Rather than trying to avoid anxious feelings, Mind Shift stresses the importance of changing how you think about anxiety. It can encourage you to take charge of your life, ride out intense emotions, and face challenging situations
	SAM	SAM might be perfect for you if you're interested in self-help, but meditation isn't your thing. Users are prompted to build their own 24-hour anxiety toolkit that allows you to track anxious thoughts and behaviour over time and learn 25 different self-help techniques.
	Happify	Need a happy fix? With its psychologist-approved mood-training program, the Happify app is your fast-track to a good mood. Try various engaging games, activity suggestions, gratitude prompts and more to train your brain as if it were a muscle, to overcome negative thoughts
	Headspace	The Headspace app makes meditation simple. Learn the skills of mindfulness and meditation by using this app for just a few minutes per day. You gain access to hundreds of meditations on everything from stress and anxiety to sleep and focus.
	Calm	Calm provides people experiencing stress and anxiety with guided meditations, sleep stories, breathing programs, and relaxing music.
	Smiling Mind	Smiling mind is a way to practice daily meditation and mindfulness exercises from any device. This is helpful during times of stress and is a fun and unique way to help you put a smile on your mind.