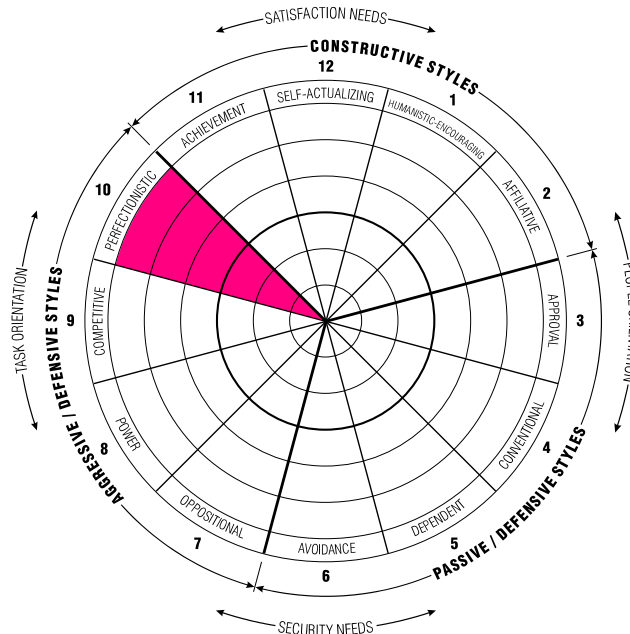


The Perfectionistic Mindset

Attitudes, Values and Beliefs for Working Effectively with People



Perfectionism

Ten o'clock position

Style Description: unrealistic goals, fear mistakes, tries to hard to prove self

Measures the degree to which we feel a driven need to be seen by others as perfect. A dramatic difference exists between the act of perfecting something and the concept of perfectionism. Rather than working to make things the best they can be, perfectionists need to seek flawless results. They perform at a very high level to attain feelings of self-worth. Perfectionism originates in a fear of failure: perfectionists tend to believe that unless they are “perfect,” they are nothing. Perfectionists typically work unceasingly on tasks and set unrealistically high performance standards. Since their drive for perfection practically guarantees failure, these individuals tend to remain dissatisfied with even their best work. Nothing is ever good enough for perfectionists.

Perfectionistic Mindsets - A Possible Obstacle to Your Leadership Effectiveness

If you score a high Perfectionistic score (35/40 or 80% or higher) this may indicate that you feel a need to be seen by others as perfect. Although you are task-oriented, you frequently see high-quality results as unsatisfactory because they don't meet your unrealistic standards. You may be using perfectionistic behaviour to a degree that is ineffective and unhealthy for you.

The Perfectionistic scale measures the degree to which we feel a driven need to be seen by others as perfect. A dramatic difference exists between the act of perfecting something and the concept of perfectionism. Rather than working to make things the best they can be, perfectionists need to seek flawless results. They perform at very high levels to attain feelings of self worth. In general, society rewards the perfectionist's diligent approach to task accomplishment, although the results produced by perfectionists are often disappointing. When measured for management effectiveness, perfectionistic managers tend to rate significantly below the average as seen by others, but far above average as they see themselves. Perfectionistic thinking creates this unrealistic gap.

Perfectionism at its core is a defensive system, not a positive motivational system. It is not a trait to be fostered or admired but one to be reduced, for your own well-being and personal effectiveness. Although perfectionism gives the illusion of perfection, it seldom represents the attainment of that state. Being perfectionistic will cause you to work tirelessly on tasks, make excessive demands on others and set unrealistically high goals and performance standards - only to reap all the resistance, latent anger and, ultimately, failure associated with this style.

You are inclined toward the idea that nothing you ever do is good enough. If you have adopted and choose to sustain this style of thinking, you may pay a very high price: Namely, increased physical symptoms, alienation in personal relationships and distorted perspective on priorities and details. You tend to believe that unless you are "perfect," you are nothing. This belief can cause you to be overly controlling and obsessively concerned with details. You are likely to have difficulty delegating responsibility. Your need for perfection may begin in an inordinately strong fear of failure. If this is true for you, your fear of failure continues to generate your perfectionistic beliefs and behaviour. In turn, the purpose of your perfectionistic behaviour is to mask the fear and keep it from intruding on your daily activities. Keep in mind that it will be easier for you to confront and deal with this unrealistic fear than to just work on reducing your perfectionistic behaviour.

The demands you place upon yourself and others are not likely to reflect the needs of today, but instead probably stem from your past. If you are to change your tendency to be perfectionistic - and it can be changed - you will need to examine your deep, private convictions about needing to prove something, often in order to feel loved and accepted.

Extreme perfectionistic behaviour can result in stress-related medical symptoms characteristic of the cardiac-prone "Type A" personality. This style that is predominant in you is linked to a rate of illness, from various causes, that is **more than seven times the normal rate**. Because your body interprets what you think as reality and reacts accordingly, if you maintain this style of thinking, you will be under constant and unrelenting stress and self-manufactured pressure. Your need for perfection will make you unable to ease up on many things. You will probably have difficulty relaxing because of a nagging feeling that something might go wrong or there is still more to do.

Choose to do it if you wish, but realize that you are placing unrealistic demands on yourself. You will have a hard time letting go of the need to control everything because, to you, not being in control means risking the chance of error. Any error, no matter how small, means that you failed. You must, therefore, feel compelled to anticipate everything, for the chance for failure exists everywhere.

By over controlling, over-anticipating and overreacting, you experience only this fear of failure - with little chance for success. If all that energy was directed toward more realistic goals, you would enhance your performance and reduce your stress. Your relationships are also very likely to improve under these changed conditions. Your high score suggests that perfectionism is a burden for you and will continue to be, unless you decide to shed it and change your thinking style for the better.

This paper will help you to explore the series of choices you have made as a result of your tendency to be perfectionistic. It describes the characteristics of perfectionistic behaviour, discusses the origins of such an idea and suggests ways you can reduce or eliminate this ineffective approach.

Your Perfectionistic Characteristics

Your high score on the Perfectionistic scale indicates that these characteristics may describe you:

- A tendency to attach self worth to accomplishment of tasks.
- Repetitive, sometimes ritualistic behaviour.
- Lower self esteem.
- A tendency to place excessive demands on self and others.
- A preoccupation with detail that distorts perspective and judgment. An excessive concern with avoiding mistakes.
- An inability to deal with, or express, emotion.
- Fear if you let others down they may not do the damn dishes, accept or care about you.

Achievement with Perfectionistic

Your self-description indicates that you need to be seen as “perfect” and strive to attain a standard of excellence in accomplishing personal goals. This combination of styles suggests that you may be more prone to setting unrealistic goals that are impossible to accomplish, rather than goals that are realistic and attainable.

Constantly setting impossible goals means that you are constructing a “no-win” situation for yourself that can result in frustration and, ultimately, stress-related physical and psychological symptoms.

Self-Actualizing with Perfectionistic

You have described yourself as being both perfectionistic and self-actualizing. While your perfectionistic thinking and behaviour can in some ways be self defeating, your self-actualizing tendencies are likely to have a positive impact on your life. Your need to be seen by others as “perfect” is probably associated with any area(s) in your life where your performance and relationships are below your personal standards.

On the other hand, your self-actualizing characteristics such as self-confidence, a strong sense of self worth and meaningful approach to task accomplishment are probably associated with areas in your life that you feel are going well.

Perfectionistic-based Thinking:

Although perfectionistic leaders tend to see themselves as highly effective, their approach to management / leadership is actually self-defeating. Their concern with detail leads these leaders to produce overly systematic goals and plans, which they often formulate without enough staff involvement.

Perfectionistic leaders need to oversee all aspects of a project, and tend to get so lost in details that they often lose sight of what they are trying to accomplish. Because they feel things won't get done "correctly" unless they do them, these leaders tend to discourage self-directedness, empowerment or autonomy for staff members especially when high quality results are required. Subordinates typically find leaders like you somewhat emotionally isolated and difficult to approach when you are hijacked into the perfectionistic style of leadership.

Perfectionistic-Thinking: Low Range Under 50% (Most Effective)

You are relatively free from perfectionistic drives and take a more casual approach to completing projects. While you may want to do your best, you are probably realistic about what you can accomplish. You can be a good organizer and coordinator of projects, although you typically do not put unnecessary pressure on yourself or others to get the job done. You may consider people's feelings and level of satisfaction, as well as the quality of their work.

Perfectionistic-Thinking: Medium Range 50% - 65% (Less Effective)

If you scored closer to the Low range, you will generally work hard to attain quality results. You tend to have an efficient, business-like approach to tasks. Although you may want to do things well, you can separate your sense of self-worth from the quality of your accomplishments.

If you scored closer to the High range, you tend to see your ability to accomplish tasks as a measure of your self-worth. While people may see you as a diligent worker, your over-concern with being perfect can cause you to be abrupt and somewhat unresponsive to others' feelings.

Perfectionistic-Thinking: High Range 65% and Above (Least Effective)

You probably have difficulty simply doing your best. You tend to seek recognition by making sure that some or all areas of your life are flawless. Although you are task-oriented, you frequently see high quality results as unsatisfactory because they don't meet your unrealistic standards. To demonstrate your competence, you often set goals for yourself that are higher than anyone else's. You tend to expect too much from others as well, causing them to see you as rigid and too demanding.

Your perfectionistic tendencies can actually limit your productivity at work (you may spend more time than is necessary on some projects), and its effects on your health can result in cardiovascular problems, frequent headaches, migraines, sleeplessness, ulcers, and anorexia. Constantly striving to be seen as perfect becomes a vicious circle: if you choose to let it, this drive could begin to rule your life.

Perfectionistic Behaviours Defined

Core Thinking Patterns for Individual, Team and Organizational Effectiveness

A Perfectionistic Culture...

Characterizes organizations in which perfectionism, persistence, and hard work are valued. Members feel they must avoid all mistakes, keep track of everything, and work long hours to attain narrowly-defined objectives. While some amount of this orientation might be useful, too much emphasis on perfectionism can lead members to lose sight of the goal, get lost in details, and develop symptoms of strain. Measures the degree to which we feel a driven need to be seen by others as perfect. A dramatic difference exists between the act of perfecting something and the concept of perfectionism.

Rather than working to make things the best they can be, perfectionists need to seek flawless results. They perform at a very high level to attain feelings of self-worth. Perfectionism originates in a fear of failure: perfectionists tend to believe that unless they are “perfect,” they are nothing. Although we frequently think of perfectionism as a contributing factor in attaining excellent results, it is actually self-defeating. Perfectionists typically work unceasingly on tasks and set unrealistically high performance standards. Since their drive for perfection practically guarantees failure, these individuals tend to remain dissatisfied with even their best work. Nothing is ever good enough for perfectionists.

Organizational (OCI) Behaviours of Perfectionistic-based Thinking

- set unrealistically high goals
- personally take care of every detail
- persist, endure appear competent and independent
- keep on top of everything
- view work as more important than anything else
- be precise even when it is not necessary
- do things perfectly
- never make a mistake
- appear to work long hours

Group (GSI) Behaviours of Perfectionistic-based Thinking

1. do not spend ‘too much time’ and attention to issues discussed early on in conversation.
2. do not explore ‘every aspect’ of an idea before accepting it.
3. try not to get ‘hung up’ on details.
4. try not to ‘lose sight’ of the big picture.
5. work to keep the discussion light (verse serious and intense).
6. work not to get ‘unrealistically or unnecessarily’ precise.

Individual (LSI) Behaviours of Perfectionistic-based Thinking

| | | | |
|---------------------------------|--------------------------------|-----------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Self-centred | Can be indifferent | Often seems unfriendly | Doesn't seem to need others |
| Forceful, direct almost hostile | Seems recognition | De-emphasizes feelings | Tries hard to prove self |
| Shrewd and calculative | Believes in actions, not words | Tends to be perfectionistic | Seems to be driven to succeed |
| Tried to be best at | Impatient with own errors | Stern but fair | Persistent, enduring |
| Businesslike | Practical | Looks for challenges | Competent |

The Perfectionistic Mindset - What Can You Change?

You can't always change or influence the people around you, but you can control your reactions to them. These reactions originate in your *thoughts*, or the way you perceive and process information and experiences. Your thoughts are powerful resources; what you think defines who you are and what you do in every aspect of your life. By modifying what you think, you can change how you behave.

Using the LSI to Initiate Change in Your Perfectionistic Mindset

Completing and reviewing your LSI / LSI 360 is the vital first step in the process of changing your behaviour. The inventory has undergone over 45 years of extensive research, and has been established as a valid, reliable way to help you take an objective look at yourself.

You can use the LSI to:

- Understand what you were like now, and will cause you to be that way.
- Recognize the consequences of your behaviour and how it affects yourself and others.
- Pinpoint your own unique strengths, as well as any "stumbling blocks" to your effectiveness.
- Identifying more constructive ways of thinking and behaving.
- Decide what aspects of your behaviour you want to change.
- Develop a specific strategy to help bring those changes about.

Moving from Thought to Action

Merely completing the LSI / LSI 360 will do little to advance your desire to improve yourself in the Perfectionistic area. To receive the fullest benefit from the inventory, devote some time to interpreting your LSI / LSI 360 scores (by reading you customize leadership assessment report), thinking about what you learned, and setting goals around what you want to change. Below are some helpful change guidelines to assist you, followed by a thorough plan of action you can complete to most effectively direct your efforts.

Perfectionistic Mindset Change Guidelines

1. Acknowledge and except all aspects of yourself. Remember, the question is not "am I a good or bad person?" but rather "what is preventing me from being more effective in the Perfectionistic area, and what can I do to improve?"
2. Recognize that your sense of self-worth *is not* connected to your LSI scores or the impressions others have of you on an LSI 360 assessment. You are worthwhile because you were a human being - tying your self-worth to outside factors can limit your ability to make positive changes in your behaviour.
3. Specifically define what you want to change about being less Perfectionistic and why. Clearly describing an aspect of your behaviour, stating the problems it creates for you, listing why you want to change it, and detailing the actions you plan to take will properly focus the change process.
4. Increase your confidence by concentrating on what you do well. Overcome your preoccupation with failure by focusing on your successes. Make a list of all you do well, and read it when you were feeling under confident.
5. Practice using more effective non-Perfectionistic behaviours in your mind. These "practice sessions" will gradually begin to affect your real-life performance in 1:1 or group interactions. Picture yourself deliberately changing what you decided to change. Then, imagine yourself as you will be after successfully making the change.

Changing Perfectionistic Mindsets - Action Planning Worksheet

Step 1: My score for the Perfectionistic Thinking Style is _____ (percentile)

Step 2: My score on Perfectionistic means I tend to believe that:

Step 3: Significant Influences

We think and behave as we do because we have been influenced by significant people and situations in our lives. Consider *your* life: try to identify and isolate the influences you've experienced that may be associated with the style.

Significant Person (or situation) _____

Ideas / Behaviours You Might Have Learned _____

Step 4: Consider the consequences of using the style and list them as indicated below.

Personally

Positive Consequences

Self-Defeating Consequences

Professionally

Positive Consequences

Self-Defeating Consequences

Step 5: Consider how your life would be different if you change your behaviour to be less Perfectionistic.

Some Positive Differences

Some Negative Differences

Step 6: Changing your Perfectionistic behaviours

Changing your Perfectionistic behaviour involves changing your mind regarding some ideas you hold around how you value and interact with people. Consider what you will have to give up and what you will gain. What cherished ideas must you challenge? Go back to your LSI leadership report and review both the words and statements that identify this style and your responses to them.

How would you like things to be different? (Same suggestions below)

Becoming More Effective: Continuing To Improve

While some perfectionism may reflect a desire to improve things, too much can cause stress. Your score for this style is a good indication of your tendency to be perfectionistic. If you have perfectionistic inclinations, you may want to explore ways of thinking that are less defeating to you. The following suggestions will get you started:

- Recognize that your drive for perfection is very self-defeating and is rooted in your basic values about life.
- Realize that only you can continue to maintain this state and only you can change it.
- Accept that your present striving for perfectionism represents an impossible goal and by definition is not attainable.
- Understand that your work is not your worth. Your feelings of self worth should not be tied to how hard you work or how effective you are on the job.
- Seek input from others. Your behaviour will be very clear to them, but perhaps not to you; in fact, you are likely to be the only one who does not realize the impact you are having on yourself.
- Alter your standards in some activity to see how the results differ. You may be pleasantly surprised.
- Learn to express feelings: Doing so will improve your relationships. Learn to express good feelings first.
- Examine your alternatives. Read more about the Achievement and Self-Actualizing styles. Studying these styles can show you there are more effective ways to approach your life and work. By developing the positive characteristics of these styles, you can gradually eliminate your perfectionistic behaviour.

Step 7: What barriers now exist to making this change?

- a) _____
- b) _____
- c) _____

Step 8: How can you overcome these barriers? Try to *challenge your assumptions* about your behaviours.

- a) _____
- b) _____
- c) _____

Step 9: What will you gain by making this change and becoming more Affiliative?

- a) _____
- b) _____
- c) _____

Step 10: What do you plan to do to bring this change about?

- 1) _____
- 2) _____
- 3) _____

Step 11: Seeking Support

Depth psychologists know that our capacity for growth relates to our ability to internalize and take personal responsibility for the following three parts of our lives –

- a) Insight** (self awareness and internal motivation to grow and transform is essential here - LSI mindset assessment helps by providing a language and framework);
- b) Endurance** (courage and alignment with your core values helps here);
- c) Action** (moral strength and motivation to grow / learn helps here).

Seek support for your change efforts. Ask one or two trusted family members, friends or work members for their help. Solicit feedback from them on your progress.

With whom will you share your intentions and plans to change? _____

How can they best assist you? _____

Step 12: Accountability - By what date do you intend to take action? _____

Additional Techniques for Rewiring the Perfectionistic Mindset - Action Steps for Change

Now that you have reviewed the Perfectionistic Style, review the following suggested actions, and rate them in terms of your perceived need for change, where 0 is little or no need and 3 is a strong need.

- | | |
|---|---------|
| 1. Realize that I expect too much of myself. | 0 1 2 3 |
| 2. Start setting goals that are attainable; not impossible. | 0 1 2 3 |
| 3. Accept myself as a human being with human flaws. | 0 1 2 3 |
| 4. Lower my unrealistic standards. | 0 1 2 3 |
| 5. Allow myself to make mistakes and learn from them. | 0 1 2 3 |
| 6. Stop driving others away with my demanding behaviour. | 0 1 2 3 |
| 7. Learn to relax more. | 0 1 2 3 |
| 8. Stop expecting so much of others. | 0 1 2 3 |
| 9. Stop getting hung-up on details. | 0 1 2 3 |

Any statement that you have rated as a two or three you should integrate into your action plan “Process for Change” (below)

In the areas where you score a 2 or a 3, What are you noticing about “yourself”?

Additional Reflections:

The Realities of Perfectionism

Your high Perfectionistic score indicates that you feel a need to be seen by others as perfect. Although you are task-oriented, you frequently see high-quality results as unsatisfactory because they don't meet your unrealistic standards. You may be using perfectionistic behaviour to a degree that is ineffective and unhealthy for you.

Perfectionism is primarily a defensive system, not a system for positive motivation and it is an extremely effective one – so the nature of the problem is often well-hidden from perfectionists, even if it is sometimes more obvious to those around them. Perfectionism is often defended under the ostensibly constructive guise of having a desire to perfect something. But it only feeds an illusion, building a false sense of worth in a most self-defeating way. It is critical that Perfectionists take the following three steps;

- Develop an awareness of the problem of perfectionism;
- Accepting that you have a problem, and that you need to change;
- Developing and following an action plan towards change.

When we use the term Perfectionism, we are not referring to achievement based on high standards. Neither are we referring to the often casual use of the term to describe a desire to perfect something. We are referring instead to a manner of thinking, however well intended, that gets people caught up in the “impossible dream.” Perfectionism is developed mostly to hide deep dissatisfactions. The perfectionist experiences a constant nagging feeling. The thinking goes: “Things should be better than they are; you should be better! I should be better! The world should be better.” There is an essential difference between the laudable pursuit of excellence – the attempt to perfect something – and the destructive machinations of perfectionism. The concepts of achievement and perfectionism are close in theory but worlds apart in action. It is the difference between effectiveness and ineffectiveness, health and illness. Although both aim for excellence, the perfectionist sets impossible goals, while the achiever sets sights on realistic and achievable standards. And although both are driven, the perfectionist has a nervous quality stemming from an abject fear of failure with the desire for success. We also make a distinction between perfect and perfecting. The word “perfect” is defined as “complete in all respects; without defect, or flaw.” To be perfect, then, is to be the pure, complete, correct, accurate, and exact state of something – which is not only difficult for any human, but impossible, if not absurd. The act of “perfecting,” or improving, on the other hand, is far more compatible with the human state. With perfectionism, the self is rejected, and self-esteem suffers whenever anything is less than perfect.

The Dirty Dozen of Perfectionism

1. Perfectionism is the ultimate goal.
2. Human worth is judged in terms of performance and accomplishment (task).
3. Motivation to achieve arises out of feeling the nothing is all right as it is – everything must be transformed into what it should be.
4. If imperfections are accepted as they are, the highest standards and values have been abandoned.
5. We are morally obligated to judge ourselves and others, and to insist upon accuracy and correctness.
6. Demanding perfectionism – and dictatorial imposing those expectations on others – is a right.
7. Thinking must have a practical goal and a higher purpose or it is a waste of time.
8. Acting for enjoyment alone is neither noble nor praiseworthy: Recreation, unless it has a purpose is a frivolous self-indulgence.
9. Self esteem derived from others' assessment is surpassed only by the self-esteem that comes from being “Right!”
10. If in the right, do not compromise; compromise exhibits weakness of character.
11. Stand with firm resolve and dedication to one's principles, no matter the circumstances; without strict adherence to principle, there is no integrity.
12. It is “natural” to worry about the uncertainty of the future; loss of full control over one's life causes great insecurity.

The Dangerous Downsides of Perfectionism

Many of us believe perfectionism is a positive. But researchers are finding that it is nothing short of dangerous, leading to a long list of health problems – and that it’s on the rise.

In one of my earliest memories, I’m drawing. I don’t remember what the picture is supposed to be, but I remember the mistake. My marker slips, an unintentional line appears and my lip trembles. The picture has long since disappeared. But that feeling of deep frustration, even shame, stays with me. More often than I’d like to admit, something seemingly inconsequential will cause the same feeling to rear its head again. Something as small as accidentally squashing the panettone I was bringing my boyfriend’s family for Christmas can tumble around in my mind for several days, accompanied by occasional voices like “How stupid!” and “You should have known better”. Falling short of a bigger goal, even when I know achieving it would be near-impossible, can temporarily flatten me. When an agent told me that she knew I was going to write a book someday but that the particular idea I’d pitched her didn’t suit the market, I felt deflated in a gut-punching way that went beyond disappointment. The negative drowned out the positive. “You’re never going to write a book,” my internal voice said. “You’re not good enough.”

That voice didn’t care that this directly contradicted what the agent actually said. That’s the thing about perfectionism. It takes no prisoners. You might also like:

- Is social media bad for you?
- Why exhaustion and burnout are so common.
- The surprising downsides of being clever.

If I’ve struggled with perfectionism, I’m far from alone. The tendency starts young – and its becoming more common. Thomas Curran and Andrew Hill’s recent meta-analysis of rates of perfectionism from 1989 to 2016, the first study to compare perfectionism across generations, found significant increases among more recent undergraduates in the US, UK and Canada. In other words, the average college student last year was much more likely to have perfectionistic tendencies than a student in the 1990s or early 2000s.

“As many as two in five kids and adolescents are perfectionists,” says Katie Rasmussen, who researches child development and perfectionism at West Virginia University. “We’re starting to talk about how it’s heading toward an epidemic and public health issue.”

The rise in perfectionism doesn’t mean each generation is becoming more accomplished. It means we’re getting sicker, sadder and even undermining our own potential.

Perfectionism, after all, is an ultimately self-defeating way to move through the world. It is built on an excruciating irony: making, and admitting, mistakes is a necessary part of growing and learning and being human. It also makes you better at your career and relationships and life in general. By avoiding mistakes at any cost, a perfectionist can make it harder to reach their own lofty goals. But the drawback of perfectionism isn’t just that it holds you back from being your most successful, productive self. Perfectionistic tendencies have been linked to a laundry list of clinical issues: depression and anxiety (even in children), self-harm, social anxiety disorder and agoraphobia, obsessive-compulsive disorder, binge eating, anorexia, bulimia, and other eating disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder, chronic fatigue syndrome, insomnia, hoarding, dyspepsia, chronic headaches, and, most damning of all, even early mortality and suicide.

There are studies that suggest that the higher the perfectionism is, the more psychological disorders you’re going to suffer – Sarah Egan

“It’s something that cuts across everything, in terms of psychological problems,” says Sarah Egan, a senior research fellow at the Curtin University in Perth who specializes in perfectionism, eating disorders and anxiety. “There aren’t that many other things that do that.

“There are studies that suggest that the higher the perfectionism is, the more psychological disorders you’re going to suffer.”

Culturally, we often see perfectionism as a positive. Even saying you have perfectionistic tendencies can come off as a coy compliment to yourself; it’s practically a stock answer to the “What’s your worst trait?” question in job interviews. (Past employers, now you know! I wasn’t just being cute). This is where perfectionism gets complicated – and controversial. Some researchers say there is adaptive, or ‘healthy’ perfectionism (characterized by having high standards, motivation and discipline) versus a maladaptive, or ‘unhealthy’ version (when your best never seems good enough and not meeting goals frustrates you).

In one study of more than 1,000 Chinese students, researchers found that gifted students were more perfectionistic in the adaptive ways. (Maladaptive perfectionists, on the other hand, were more likely to be non-gifted). And while research shows that maladaptive attributes like beating yourself up for mistakes or feeling like you can’t live up to parental expectations make you more vulnerable to depression, some other studies have shown that ‘adaptive’ aspects like striving for achievement have no effect at all or may even protect you.

But that isn’t always the case. Simply having high personal standards has been linked to suicide ideation, for example. And even if there sometimes may be upsides to perfectionist thinking, they are minor – and, researchers argue, misunderstood. In a 2016 meta-analysis of 43 studies on perfectionism and burnout, for example, Hill and Curran found that athletes, employees and students experienced either a tiny or no benefit from aspects like having very high personal standards, compared to people who didn’t have them. People who expressed more ‘maladaptive’ perfectionism, on the other hand, experienced significantly more burnout.

Perfectionism isn’t a behaviour. It’s a way of thinking about yourself – Andrew Hill

“There has been some suggestion that, in some cases, perfectionism might be healthy and desirable. Based upon the 60-odd studies that we’ve done, we think that’s a misunderstanding,” says York St John University’s Hill. “Working hard, being committed, diligent, and so on – these are all desirable features. But for a perfectionist, those are really a symptom, or a side product, of what perfectionism is. Perfectionism isn’t about high standards. It’s about unrealistic standards. “Perfectionism isn’t a behaviour. It’s a way of thinking about yourself.”

In fact, many researchers say that factors often dubbed ‘healthy’ perfectionism, like striving for excellence, aren’t actually perfectionism at all. They’re just conscientiousness – which explains why people with those tendencies often have different outcomes in studies. Perfectionism, they argue, isn’t defined by working hard or setting high goals. It’s that critical inner voice. Take the student who works hard and gets a poor mark. If she tells herself: “I’m disappointed, but it’s okay; I’m still a good person overall,” that’s healthy. If the message is: “I’m a failure. I’m not good enough,” that’s perfectionism.

That inner voice criticises different things for different people – work, relationships, tidiness, fitness. My own tendencies may differ greatly from somebody else’s. It can take someone who knows me well to pick up on them. (When I messaged my partner as I was writing this story, he immediately sent back a long line of laughing emojis).

As a result, perfectionists and non-perfectionists “might look the same for a short period of time from a distance. But when you get up close and observe them over time, conscientious people have more adaptive ways of coping with things when things go wrong,” Hill says.

“Perfectionists feel every bump in the road. They’re quite stress-sensitive.”

Perfectionists can make smooth sailing into a storm, a brief ill wind into a category-five hurricane. At the very least, they perceive it that way. And, because the ironies never end, the behaviours perfectionists adapt ultimately, actually, do make them more likely to fail.

In one lab experiment, for example, Hill gave both perfectionists and non-perfectionists specific goals. What he didn’t tell them was that the test was rigged: none of them would succeed. Interestingly, both groups kept putting in the same amount of effort. But one group felt much unhappier about the whole thing – and gave up earlier. Guess which. Faced with failure, “perfectionists tend to respond more harshly in terms of emotions. They experience more guilt, more shame,” says Hill. They also experience more anger. “They give up more easily. They have quite avoidant coping tendencies when things can’t be perfect.”

That, of course, hinders them from the very success that they want to achieve. In his 60-plus studies focusing on athletes, for example, Hill has found that the single biggest predictor of success in sports is simply practice. But if practice isn’t going well, perfectionists might stop.

It makes me think of my own childhood peppered with avoiding (or starting and quitting) almost every sport there was. If I wasn’t adept at something almost from the get-go, I didn’t want to continue – especially if there was an audience watching. In fact, multiple studies have found a correlation between perfectionism and performance anxiety even in children as young as 10.

The trouble is that, for perfectionists, performance is intertwined with their sense of self. When they don’t succeed, they don’t just feel disappointment about how they did. **They feel shame about who they are.** Ironically, perfectionism then becomes a defence tactic to keep shame at bay: if you’re perfect, you never fail, and if you never fail, there’s no shame. As a result, the pursuit of perfection becomes a vicious cycle – and, because it’s impossible to be perfect, a fruitless one.

Perfectionism is also dangerous. Record numbers of young people are experiencing mental illness, according to the World Health Organization. Depression, anxiety and suicide ideation are more common in the US, Canada and the UK now than a decade ago. Research shows that perfectionistic tendencies predict issues like depression, anxiety and stress – even when researchers controlled for traits like neuroticism. Worsening matters, being self-critical might lead to depressive symptoms but those symptoms then can make self-criticism worse, closing a distressing loop.

Mental health problems aren’t just caused by perfectionism; some of these problems can lead to perfectionism, too. One recent study, for example, found that over a one-year period, college students who had social anxiety were more likely to become perfectionists – but not vice versa.

It’s also been shown that one of the most robust protections against anxiety and depression is self-compassion – the very thing that perfectionists lack. And self-criticism, which perfectionists are so good at, predicts depression.

Nearly every perfectionistic tendency – including simply having high personal standards – was correlated with thinking about suicide more frequently.

When it comes to the most dramatic example, suicide, numerous studies also have found that perfectionism is a lethal contributor all on its own. One found that perfectionism made depressed patients more likely to think about suicide even above and beyond feelings of hopelessness. A recent meta-analysis, the most complete on the suicide-perfectionism link to date, found that nearly every perfectionistic tendency – including being concerned over mistakes, feeling like you are never good enough, having critical parents, or simply having high personal standards – was correlated with thinking about suicide more frequently. (The two exceptions: being organized or demanding of others).

Some of those criteria, particularly pressure from parents and perfectionistic concerns, also we're correlated with more suicide attempts. “Black-and-white thinking can lead perfectionists to interpret failures as catastrophes that, in extreme circumstances, are seen as warranting death,” the researchers wrote. “Our findings also join a wider literature suggesting that when people experience their social world as pressure-filled, judgmental, and hypercritical, they think about and/or engage in various potential means of escape (eg, alcohol misuse and binge eating), including suicide.”

Perhaps because a perfectionist's body is often awash with stress, perfectionism is correlated with earlier death. Early research from Human Synergetics found the average death due to high levels of perfectionism was at the age of 55 from stress related disease.

And while conscientious people tend to live longer, perfectionists die earlier. In many ways, poorer health outcomes for perfectionists aren't that surprising. “Perfectionists are pretty much awash with stress. Even when it's not stressful, they'll typically find a way to make it stressful,” says Gordon Flett, who has studied perfectionism for more than 30 years and whose assessment scale developed with Paul Hewitt is considered a gold standard. Plus, he says, if your perfectionism finds an outlet in, say, workaholicism, it's unlikely you'll take many breaks to relax – which we now know both our bodies and brains require for healthy functioning.

No matter how self-defeating perfectionism may seem, it's a tendency being shared by more and more people. The meta-analysis by Hill and Curran is the first to comprehensively look at rates of perfectionism over a long period of time. (There are so many ways of measuring perfectionism out there, researchers had to wait until a solid one – in this case, Flett's and Hewitt's – had been around long enough and been used across enough studies). In all, the studies added up to a pool of more than 40,000 US, UK and Canadian undergraduate students.

There were increases in every type of perfectionism from 1989 to 2016.

There were increases across the board from 1989 to 2016. But the largest rise was in ‘socially prescribed perfectionism’, characterized by the feeling that others have high demands: 32%. “The reason that's so problematic is that's the dimension most strongly correlated with serious mental illness,” says Curran. The findings align with what's been reported previously. One 2015 study of gifted suburban adolescents, for example, found “significantly higher scores of perfectionism (especially unhealthy dimensions) than previous studies”.

A decade-long look at adolescent Czech math whizzes found the same. In her clinical practice, where she often works with patients with eating disorders, Egan has seen it too. “I'm constantly shocked by the age ranges. We're seeing younger and younger presentations of girls: seven years old, eight years old,” she says. “That's often driven by perfectionism. So, I think, yes: each generation probably is getting more perfectionistic.”

Where is this increase coming from? When you keep in mind the idea that perfectionism stems from marrying your identity with your achievements, the question might become: where isn't it coming from? After all, many of us live in societies where the first question when you meet someone is what you do for a living. Where we are so literally valued for the quality and extent of our accomplishments that those achievements often correlate, directly, to our ability to pay rent or put food on the table. Where complete strangers weigh these on-paper values to determine everything from whether we can rent that flat or buy that car or receive that loan. Where we then signal our access to those resources with our appearance – these shoes, that physique – and other people weigh that, in turn, to see if we're the right person for a job interview or dinner invitation. Curran and Hill have a similar hunch. "Failure is so severe in a market-based society," points out Curran, adding that that has been intensified as governments have chipped away at social safety nets. Competition even has been embedded in schools: take standardized testing and high-pressure university entrances. As a result, Curran says, it's no wonder that parents are putting more pressure on themselves – and on their children – to achieve more and more.

"If the focus is on achievement, then kids become very averse to mistakes," Curran says. "If children come to internalize that – the idea that we only can define ourselves in strict, narrow terms of achievement – then you see perfectionistic tendencies start to come in." One longitudinal study, for example, found that a focus on academic achievement predicts a later increase in perfectionism. Similarly, the gold-star method of parenting and schooling may have had an effect. If you get praised whenever you do something well and not praised when you don't, you can learn that you're only really worth something when you've had others' approval.

If other strategies, like making children feel guilty for making a mistake, come in, it can get even more problematic. Research has found that these types of parental tactics make children more likely to be perfectionists – and, later, to develop depression. Fear of failure is getting magnified in other ways, too. Take social media: make a mistake today and your fear that it might be broadcast, even globally, is hardly irrational. At the same time, all of those glossy feeds reinforce unrealistic standards.

As well as reinforcing unrealistic standards, social media gives us more reason to fear making mistakes.

Some perfectionism is inheritable. But it also arises because of environment (after all, if it were just genetic, it seems unlikely it would be increasing so much). So how can parents counteract it? Model good behaviour by watching their own perfectionistic tendencies, researchers say. And exhibit unconditional love and affection.

It's about creating an environment where imperfection isn't just accepted but is celebrated, because it means we're human – Rasmussen

"It's saying things like 'You really tried hard at that. I'm proud of the effort you put in.' It's about creating an environment where imperfection isn't just accepted but is celebrated – because it means we're human," says Rasmussen, who co-authored an analysis on how family systems can breed perfectionism. "Or communicating to the child that love and care aren't conditional on performance.

"It's the idea that you don't have to be perfect to be lovable or to be loved." Perfectionism can be a particular challenge to treat. You can train someone to be more self-compassionate in a therapeutic setting. But if they go back to the office, say, with the same demanding boss and same deep-seated behaviours, a lot of that can go out the door. Then, of course, there is that widespread (if erroneous) belief that being a perfectionist makes us better workers (or parents, or athletes, or whatever the task is at hand).

What makes it different than depression or anxiety is that the person often values it – Egan “The difficult part of it, and what makes it different than depression or anxiety, is that the person often values it,” says Egan. “If we have anxiety or depression, we don’t value those symptoms. We want to get rid of them. When we see a person with perfectionism, they can often be ambivalent towards change. People say it brings them benefits.”

She’s helped her patients by helping them prove to themselves that’s not the case. If someone says, for example, they need to do three extra hours of work at home each night to be good at their job, they might experiment with not doing that for a week. Usually the patient not only finds that it makes no difference – but that the extra rest might even improve their performance. I’ve experimented with some of that letting go myself. It’s gone hand-in-hand with becoming aware when I’m taking on too much and exhausting myself in my attempt to do ‘enough’ (an amount, I’ve realized, that for me doesn’t actually exist). The bigger piece, though, is replacing that critical ticker-tape with kinder messages – toward both myself and others. I’ve started (with varying success) consciously stopping myself from overreacting to other people’s mistakes. More difficult, but also important, has been stopping myself from overreacting to my own. Ironically, that includes trying not to criticize myself when I fall short of that goal in itself.

It’s a work in progress. But what I’ve noticed is that, each time I’m able to replace criticizing and perfecting with self-compassion, I feel not only less stressed, but freer. Apparently, that’s not unusual. “It can be liberating, allowing imperfection to happen and accepting it and celebrating it,” Rasmussen says. “Because it’s exhausting, maintaining all of that.”

(Pages 12 - 17... By Amanda Ruggeri - The Dangerous Downsides of Perfectionism)

Perfectionism Is...

Perfection is being right

Excellence is being willing to be wrong
Perfection is fear

Excellence is taking a risk
Perfection is anger and frustration

Excellence is powerful
Perfection is control

Excellence is spontaneous
Perfection is judgment

Excellence is accepting
Perfection is taking

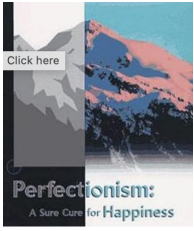
Excellence is giving
Perfection is doubt

Excellence is confidence
Perfection is pressure

Excellence is natural
Perfection is the destination

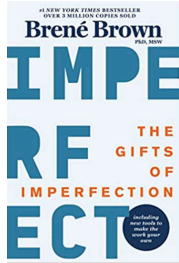
Excellence is the journey

Exceptional (Not-Perfect) Books on Perfectionism



Perfectionism - The Sure Cure for Happiness

By: Dr. Clayton Laffery, Human Synergetics International



The Gifts of Imperfection

By: Brené Brown

Nobody's Perfect

Don't hide from your mistakes or pretend they didn't happen. Own them, embrace them, celebrate them, learn from them and get better because of what you take from them.

When you've discovered an error, you've found a clear and specific path for improvement. Seize it, dive into it, transform it into new strength and effectiveness.

It is a waste of your time, your life, your energy to deny your mistakes. Even worse, it's wasted opportunity.

If you try to pretend you're perfect, that you never make mistakes, absolutely no one will believe you. Yet when you eagerly admit your mistakes and deal with them in a positive manner, people gain great respect for you.

The fact is, from time to time you'll make a mistake. So make the choice to turn that fact of life into a positive force.

Sure, do all you can to avoid mistakes, but once you've made one, transform it into something beneficial. Nobody's perfect, and in that imperfection is a whole world of progress to be made.

— Ralph Marston