

Perfectionism (and procrastination)

It's likely that universities contain a higher proportion of perfectionists than most environments. Many of the positive aspects of being a perfectionist such as conscientiousness and self-reliance equip students well for university life. At the same time there are aspects of being a perfectionist that can undermine both work and general well being. One of the most common of these is procrastination, which is often the result of setting oneself impossible standards of perfection.

Am I a perfectionist?

- Are you hard working and disciplined, but at the same time have a tendency to think you never do enough?
- Are you happier when there is a system or set of rules to follow? Is it important to you that activities should always be purposeful?
- Do you have a strong sense of right and wrong? Do you make great effort to act reasonably and expect the same from others?
- Is it hard for you to let go and relax?
- Do you have a tendency to micro-manage, driven by a fear of making mistakes?

Well being and Perfectionism

There is nothing wrong with being a perfectionist but it can put great strain on a person and seeking to change this is not a sign of failure. If you are a perfectionist you might consider:

- **Letting go more.**
The world will not collapse if not under close control. Everything does not depend on you. Schedule a minimum of 30 minutes relaxation time each day. This may be anything from just sitting still and becoming mindful of your breathing to creative activities such as music, drawing or dance.
- **You don't have to be perfect in order to be worthwhile.**
Failure is an option and often when we learn most. Nothing terrible will happen if you don't get it right every time. Don't let your inner critic get the better of you, develop a supportive and soothing mantra, something like, 'I'm OK even when I don't know the answer.'
- **Putting your fears to the test.**
Record how you do when you don't take so long deliberating over every decision and when you allow yourself more time for relaxation. You may be surprised to find that you actually achieve more when you slave drive yourself less!
- **You don't have to be perfect at not being perfect!**
If you are up for modifying your perfectionism, try not to criticise your self for not being able to change more quickly. Developing new ways of thinking and doing takes time.

Perfectionism and Relationships

Just as you can set impossibly high standards for yourself you may also do this for others. This can put a lot of pressure on romantic relationships, relationships with friends and even academic staff. While you are reliable and a good organiser, you can also be overly critical and your constant activity may be a barrier to intimacy.

You may want to consider:

- **Trying to cut people some slack if they don't perform to your standards:**
This does not mean sitting on your disappointment and silently fuming, rather hold your frustration in awareness, mentally take a step back and ask yourself if you can see where the other person is coming from. Use 'I' statements – 'when you said 'X' I felt 'Y', 'what I think is', rather than making absolute statements such as 'that's ridiculous' or 'you're wrong'.
- **Allowing space for others:**
You may be a bit controlling: while many will value your organisational skills they may also feel suffocated by them. Experiment with letting other people make the decisions every now and again. Once you have calmed any anxiety that relinquishing control may bring up, it is likely to be a great relief to discover that not every decision is down to you.
- **Giving more freely:**
You already give much in terms of reliability and commitment but often your critical tendency goes hand in hand with a lack of generosity in giving of compliments and encouragement, small gifts and your time. These habits are relatively easy to change and can have a big impact. Even the smallest words of praise offered can challenge your prevailing mode of relating, loosen the tension you hold in your body and open the door to more connected and fulfilling relationships.

Procrastination

If the characterisation of a perfectionist above struck a chord it may be that you sometimes struggle with procrastination. A perfectionist's fear of making mistakes and desire to do the right thing can result in excessive ruminating and inertia. If you can't see how to do a job perfectly you can't get going!

But procrastination and perfectionism are **not** always linked. People sometimes procrastinate as an act of rebellion – "Nobody's going to tell me what to do." Others procrastinate as they don't want to appear too successful or they think to be seen to be trying hard is unattractive. Some people have long-standing issues with concentration such as Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD).

Whatever the cause, there are common stories that those who procrastinate tell themselves:

- 'I need to do more research before I can start'
- 'I work best under last minute pressure'
- 'Research is interesting, writing up is boring'
- 'I must mail my friend/tidy up my room etc. before I get started'
- 'I've been disturbed by x or y and lost my momentum and I can't get it back'
- 'I've made a good start, that's enough for one day.'

Overcoming Procrastination

A little procrastination from time to time is inevitable. Energy levels and motivation ebb and flow. Some tasks are simply more boring than others and may require more determination and skill to get going on. What might help?

- * If your procrastination is linked in with perfectionism acknowledge the connection – the fear you feel around starting a project that may not turn out perfectly. Take a step back, soothe this anxiety and tell yourself that you don't need to be so careful. There is no disaster waiting to happen. If you don't understand some aspect of the task there is nothing wrong with asking for help along the way.
- * Instead of dwelling on why a task is difficult/boring/pointless put your energy into thinking how you can do it, breaking it down into manageable parts.
- * Working on your general study skills such as time management, writing essays and presentations will boost your confidence and make the task seem less daunting.

Useful resources

www.reading.ac.uk/studyadvice; www.reading.ac.uk/counselling, <http://www.ocduk.org/>;
<http://www.bemindful.co.uk/>

relax@reading.ac.uk for details of weekly relaxation classes on campus

Books: The Pursuit of Perfect (2009) by Tal Ben-Shahar