

WELLBEING GUIDE

to managing perfectionism



Perfectionism

What is Perfectionism?

*Perfectionism is often defined by the need to appear to be perfect, complicated by the idea that 'perfect' is achievable. It is believed to be a positive trait, created by unsustainable high expectations and standards. **Perfection is unattainable** as it is subjective – what each of us perceive to be 'perfect' is different.*

At its core, perfectionism comes from a place of not feeling good enough as we are, and a need to 'get it right' or have approval from others to see ourselves as worthy. It can be a function of shame and low self-confidence, which creates self-defeating thoughts and behaviours, and it affects people in many ways.

How perfectionism negatively affects us every day

Perfectionism is a control mechanism for those who feel they have little control.

ACADEMIC WORK

You will feel like anything less than the top grade is a failure. You might find yourself becoming anxious over completing work and feeling dissatisfied with what you are able to do in the time available.

NEATNESS AND ORDERLINESS

You might be very concerned with maintaining neatness, cleanliness and order. You might find yourself spending so much time organising your affairs or cleaning your room that you have little time for anything else.

You might not want to get started on a piece of work because the standard you have set for yourself seems impossible to achieve.

Perfectionism can lead to procrastination, constant re-writing, or 'writers' block'.

PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

Perfectionism is an important element in the development of eating disorders and compulsive exercising. The pursuit of unrealistic goals around size and appearance can lead to anxiety and ill health as well as impacting on relationships with friends and partners.

SPEAKING AND MAKING PRESENTATIONS

Speaking in public or even in one-to-one conversations can be difficult for people who worry about making mistakes in front of other people. It is not uncommon for people to worry about mispronouncing words or about making mistakes with grammar.

HEALTH AND PERSONAL CLEANLINESS

Some people can have unrealistic expectations around health and personal cleanliness. This might result in them developing habits or compulsions around washing and checking things or result in frequent visits to the doctor for minor health problems.

Signs of perfectionism

- ✓ Unrealistic standards; setting unattainable goals from the start, creating pressure and anxiety
- ✓ All or nothing thinking where 'almost perfect' is seen as a failure
- ✓ Being highly critical/judgemental of ourselves and others
- ✓ Demanding very high standards from other people and ourselves
- ✓ Difficulty tolerating feedback, being defensive and making excuses
- ✓ Tendency to procrastinate; further enhancing shame and self-critical thoughts and feelings, creating a vicious cycle
- ✓ Being intensely competitive and having difficulty tolerating doing worse than others
- ✓ Persevering with getting work 'just right' even if this means missing deadlines or not finishing at all
- ✓ Being highly aware of other people's demands and expectations
- ✓ Low confidence/self-esteem, being very self-conscious about making mistakes in front of other people
- ✓ Feeling controlled by fear and shame, and always fearing failure
- ✓ Over-thinking

Recognise that
to be human is to be imperfect.

Ways to support change

Create more realistic goals

- ✓ Use healthy rewards and positive feedback to achieve your goals; trust that it will get done in time
- ✓ Plan and prioritise your work – prioritise your deadlines and break down bigger ones to smaller chunks

Invest in yourself – stop multitasking, schedule breaks and recharge

- ✓ Prioritise self-care, mindfulness and self-compassion
- ✓ Reconnect with something enjoyable

Challenge negative thinking – focus on progress rather than the end goal

- ✓ Become aware of and let go of your inner critic. Encourage a growth mindset – shift your thinking from 'what will they think?' to 'how can I improve?'
- ✓ Allow yourself to make mistakes – it's part of being human
- ✓ Practise not holding others to the same standards

Let your values be your motivator – allow what you do to be guided by what is meaningful to you in your life, rather than it being based on unrealistic expectations of 'perfection'.

Failure doesn't exist
– either we succeed, or we learn and grow.

Use this space to write what you going to try to overcome your perfectionism?

Further help and support:

- **Centre for Clinical Interventions**
 - cci.health.wa.gov.au/resources/looking-after-yourself/perfectionism
- **Anxiety UK**
 - The national charity for people with anxiety has an excellent website with lots of useful information and a helpline. Student membership gets you access to multiple resources.
 - anxietyuk.org.uk
- **Danny Penman: resources**
 - franticworld.com/what-is-mindfulness
- **The Gifts of Imperfection, Brené Brown (2020)**
 - brenebrown.com/book/the-gifts-of-imperfection
- **Self-Compassion – Dr. Kristin Neff**
 - self-compassion.org/category/exercises
- **Our Life Tools programme**
 - blogs.reading.ac.uk/life-tools-programme