

## PERFECTIONISM

Do you feel like what you accomplish is never quite good enough?

Do you often put off turning in papers or projects, waiting to get them just right?

Do you feel you must give more than 100 percent on everything you do, or else you will be mediocre or even a failure?

If so, rather than simply working toward success, you may in fact be trying to be perfect. Perfectionism refers to a set of self-defeating thoughts and behaviors aimed at reaching excessively high unrealistic goals. Perfectionism is often mistakenly seen in our society as desirable or even necessary for success. However, recent studies have shown that perfectionistic attitudes actually interfere with success. The desire to be perfect can both rob you of a sense of personal satisfaction and cause you to fail to achieve as much as people who have more realistic strivings.

### Causes of perfectionism

- **Fear of failure** - Perfectionists often equate failure to achieve their goals with a lack of personal worth or value.
- **Fear of making mistakes** - Perfectionists often equate mistakes with failure. In orienting their lives around avoiding mistakes, perfectionists miss opportunities to learn and grow.
- **Fear of disapproval** - If they let others see their flaws, perfectionists often fear that they will no longer be accepted. Trying to be perfect is a way of trying to protect themselves from criticism, rejection, and disapproval.
- **All-or-none thinking** - Perfectionists frequently believe that they are worthless if their accomplishments are not perfect. Perfectionists have difficulty seeing situations in perspective. For example, a straight "A" student who receives a "B" might believe, "I am a total failure."
- **Overemphasis on "should"** - Perfectionists' lives are often structured by an endless list of "should" that serve as rigid rules for how their lives must be lived. With such an overemphasis on should, perfectionists rarely take into account their own wants and desires.

Change the World

NELSON MANDELA  
UNIVERSITY

### Enquiries

Student Counselling Career and  
Development Centre  
Nelson Mandela University

<http://counselling.mandela.ac.za>

[counselling@mandela.ac.za](mailto:counselling@mandela.ac.za)



[mandela.ac.za](http://mandela.ac.za)

# Perfectionism

- **Believing that others are easily successful - Perfectionists tend to perceive others as achieving success with a minimum of effort, few errors, little emotional stress, and maximum self-confidence. At the same time, perfectionists view their own efforts as unending and forever inadequate.**

### Negative consequences of perfectionism

**1. Low self-esteem.** Because a perfectionist never feel "good enough" about their personal performance, and they have feelings of being a "failure" or a "loser", it may result in low self-confidence and self-esteem.

**2. Guilt.** Because a perfectionist never feels good about the way responsibility has been handled in life (by himself or others) a sense of shame, self-recrimination, and guilt may result.

**3. Pessimism.** Since a perfectionist is convinced that it will be extremely difficult to achieve an "ideal goal," he can easily become discouraged, fatalistic, disheartened, and pessimistic about future efforts to reach a goal.

**4. Depression.** Needing always to be "perfect," yet recognizing that it is impossible to achieve such a goal, a perfectionist runs the risk of feeling down, blue, and depressed.

**5. Rigidity.** Needing to have everything in one's life perfect or "just right" can lead a perfectionist to an extreme case of being inflexible, non-spontaneous, and rigid.

**6. Obsessiveness.** Being in need of an excessive amount of order, pattern, or structure in life can lead a perfectionistic person to become nit-picky, finicky, or obsessive in an effort to maintain a certain order.

**7. Compulsive behaviour.** Over-indulgence or the compulsive use of alcohol, drugs, gambling, food, shopping, sex, smoking, risk-taking, or novelty, is often used to medicate a perfectionist who feels like a failure or loser for never being able to be "good enough" in life.

**8. Lack of motivation.** Believing that the goal of "change" will never be able to be ideally or perfectly achieved can often cause a perfectionist a lack of motivation to attempt change in the first place, or to persevere if change has already begun.

**9. Immobilization.** Because a perfectionist is often burdened with an extreme fear of failure, the person can become immobilized. With no energy, effort or creative juices applied to rectify, improve, or change the problem behaviour in the person's life, he becomes stagnant.

**10. Lack of belief in self.** Knowing that one will never be able to achieve an idyllic goal can lead a perfectionist to lose the belief that he will ever be able to improve his life significantly.

### What to do about perfectionism?

The first step in changing from perfectionistic attitudes to healthy striving is to realize that perfectionism **is undesirable.**

Perfection is an illusion that is unattainable. The next step is to **challenge the self-defeating thoughts** and behaviours that fuel perfectionism.

### Some of the following strategies may help:

- ◆ Set realistic and reachable goals based on your own wants and needs and what you have accomplished in the past.
- ◆ Set subsequent goals in a sequence of logical progression. As you reach a goal, set your next goal one level beyond your present level of accomplishment.
- ◆ Experiment with your standards for success. Choose any activity and instead of aiming for 100 percent, try for 90 percent, 80 percent, or even 60 percent success. This will help you to realize that the world does not end when you are not perfect.
- ◆ Focus on the process of doing an activity, and not just on the end result.
- ◆ Use feelings of anxiety and depression as opportunities to ask yourself, "Have I set up impossible expectations for myself in this situation?"
- ◆ Confront the fears that may be behind your perfectionism by asking yourself, "What am I afraid of? What is the worst thing that could happen?"
- ◆ Recognize that many positive things can only be learned by making mistakes. When you make a mistake ask, "What can I learn from this experience?"

◆ Avoid all-or-none thinking in relation to your goals. Learn to discriminate the tasks you want to give high priority to from those tasks that are less important to you.

◆ Forgive yourself for your shortcomings. Nobody's perfect, and everybody has strengths and weaknesses. That's not to say you should not try to grow. You can always learn something new or try to improve,

◆ Ask what's really needed. Is the real purpose to be perfect or produce a perfect result, or is it to get something done?

**NB - Perfectionism can often be the opposite of a timely result, because the uncertainty that comes with it leads to procrastination.**

### Warning signs to look out for

Excellence can attract competition, envy, and animosity. Remember how everybody feels about a teacher's pet? If you're good, don't get cocky or rub it in. Don't rest on your laurels, either.

### Contact Details

The following numbers can be called:

### SCCDC

South Campus: 041 504 2511  
North Campus: 041 504 3222  
Missionvale Campus: 041 504 1106  
Second Avenue Campus: 041 504 3854

OR

**CTLM** (Centre for Teaching and Learning) at 041 504 3207 if you are interested in attending KEYS seminars to improve your academic performance.

Unless otherwise indicated, copyright in the content of this work is the property of the Student Counselling, Career and Development Centre, Nelson Mandela University. All content is protected by South African copyright law and, by virtue of international treaties, equivalent copyright laws in other countries.

No material contained within this work may be reproduced or copied in any way without prior written permission of Nelson Mandela University.

© Copyright 2018, Nelson Mandela University. All rights reserved.