

# Perfectionism

A Thrive Worldwide Resource

**Do you find yourself working harder and getting less done? Do you have a hard time delegating? Do you feel dissatisfied with your work? Has it been a while since you've celebrated a personal accomplishment at work? If you answered 'yes', then this info sheet may be for you.**

Perfectionism is a personality trait characterised by a person's exceedingly high and often unattainable standards,

accompanied by self-critical feelings if standards are not met.

Adaptive perfectionists are able to channel their need for orderliness, work towards high goals and derive pleasure from their efforts, while maladaptive / negative perfectionists encounter enduring feelings of inadequacy regardless of their performance. The root of negative perfectionism is a fear of failure.

We have written this infosheet because perfectionism is common, yet there is minimal understanding about it as a psychological risk factor, particularly in humanitarian and development work. Our industry tends to attract people with

perfectionistic qualities, often with unconscious drives for pleasing or impressing others. Perfectionist traits in a context of low resource / high demand combined with a chaotic environment and workflow may lead to increased anxiety, depression, and burnout.

Perfectionism is also closely linked to eating disorders, OCD and suicide. Perfectionism serves as a stop-gap to keep overwhelming feelings of anxiety and shame at bay.

Perfectionism takes many shapes and creeps into several areas of life, from work performance, to what you eat and the way you look, to the level of external order you need to feel okay. Perfectionists tend to produce outstanding work, make outstanding editors and be excellent logisticians given their often phenomenal attention to detail. Perfectionism is usually rewarded and reinforced in the workplace, but what about its shadow side?

Take a look at the six dimensions of Perfectionism (Frost, et al.) and see if it resonates with you:

1. Overly concerned about making mistakes
2. High personal standards (striving for excellence)
3. The perception of high parental expectations
4. The perception of high parental criticism
5. The doubting of the quality of one's actions, and
6. A strong preference for order and organisation.



**Perfectionism is usually rewarded and reinforced in the workplace.**

Whilst usually developing in the early years, patterns of this learned behaviour persist into adulthood. People with perfectionist tendencies often feel shame if they feel they've 'missed the mark'. What looks like insubordination or procrastination is a paralysing fear of getting it wrong or incomplete.

## PERFECTIONIST TENDENCIES

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These may include:

- Feeling deeply ashamed if their work is sub standard
- Finding any deadline is too early as there is always more to say or write
- Researching and preparing endlessly before starting a task and then researching more in case they miss something (this looks like procrastination)
- Being highly self-critical
- Being highly concerned by the opinion of others

## WHAT CAN YOU DO ABOUT IT?

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Try collecting evidence that 'good enough' is actually good enough. Here's a few practice activities for you...

- Play with failing at something that doesn't matter - Jenga, boiling an egg, ironing, drafting the kitchen rota. Notice the actual reactions of others and contrast them with what you feared.

- Try sitting at a messy desk or walk past a sink full of dirty dishes and notice your reaction.
- Develop a humorous approach to perfectionism and start to experiment with playing.

And finally, even though you don't feel it, assume that your work tends to be top-notch, and you have some space to play around with the ideas below. Bring a humorous and curious and mindset to these practice activities:

- Shorten your deadline. Remember Parkinson's Law that says "work expands so as to fill the time available for its completion". Produce without overthinking, then edit what has been produced.
- Try sending a rough draft oral outline; then ask for input.
- Focus on your thinking style. Notice "all or nothing" thoughts, then reframe them in more realistic terms.

- Catch the voice in your head saying mean things about your efforts, thank it, and let it go from your mind – it's just trying to keep you safe.
- Watch out for “shoulds” and “musts” in your inner dialogue and try introducing a more balanced perspective

Now, take a moment to reflect on how it felt doing these and what the impact was for yourself and others.

## GETTING ON TOP OF PERFECTIONISM

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Consider working with a personal coach or, if the paralysis is wreaking havoc with your emotions, a counsellor (consider starting with 4-6 sessions of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, CBT).



**Notice 'all-or-nothing' thoughts, then reframe them in more realistic terms**

Whichever you choose, the approach is always the same – gently and kindly face the fears. The fears that are in your head and only in your head. Gently learn to tolerate them, kindly ask how your work might be received other than with outright rejection. See that the world does not end with a comma out of place, a misplaced statistic or inconsistent formatting.

## LOOKING FOR FURTHER SUPPORT?

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We have counsellors based in Kenya, Middle East, Europe and the UK available to you via Zoom. Get in touch with us via email [info@thrive-worldwide.org](mailto:info@thrive-worldwide.org).

Thank you for accessing this resource.  
For more resources and dedicated support:  
**visit [www.thrive-worldwide.org](http://www.thrive-worldwide.org)**  
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