

## HOW TO OVERCOME PERFECTIONISM

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Most people would consider having high standards a good thing. Striving for excellence can show that you have a good work ethic and strength of character. High standards can also push you to reach your peak level of performance. For example, athletes often train long and hard to reach excellence in their sports.

**Perfectionism**, on the other hand, involves a tendency to set standards that are so high that they either cannot be met, or are only met with great difficulty. Perfectionists tend to believe that anything short of perfection is horrible, and that even minor imperfections will lead to catastrophe.

For example, most people believe it is important to try to do one's best and not make mistakes. However, most people also believe that making mistakes from time to time is inevitable and that making a mistake does not mean they have failed something entirely. However, adults with perfectionism tend to believe that they should never make mistakes and that making a mistake means they are a failure or a horrible person for disappointing others. Thinking like this makes it really scary for them to make mistakes. Trying to be perfect is also likely to make you feel stressed and maybe even disappointed with yourself much of time because you are not able to meet your standards easily or at all. Over time, you may even start to believe that you are not as capable as others. Therefore, it is worthwhile to consider *loosening up* your standards a bit to ease the stress and anxiety you may feel from trying so hard to be perfect.

### Here are the Steps to Help You Overcome Perfectionism

#### **Step 1: Learning to Recognize Perfectionism**

This is an important first step, as it helps you to figure out whether you have a problem with perfectionism. Remember, there is nothing wrong with having high standards, but when these standards are too high, they can really get in the way of your work/school, relationships, and enjoyment of life.

**If you have trouble figuring out whether you have a problem with perfectionism, you might find answering the following questions helpful:**

1. Do I have trouble meeting my own standards?
2. Do I often feel frustrated, depressed, anxious, or angry while trying to meet my standards?

3. Have I been told that my standards are too high?
4. Do my standards get in the way? For example, do they make it difficult for me to meet deadlines, finish a task, trust others, or do anything spontaneously?

**If you answered “Yes” to any of these questions you may have a problem with perfectionism.**

Perfectionism affects how one *thinks*, *behaves*, and *feels*. If you have difficulties with perfectionism, the following examples may be familiar to you:

**Examples of perfectionistic feelings:**

- Perfectionism can make you feel depressed, frustrated, anxious, and even angry, especially if you constantly criticize yourself for not doing a good enough job after spending a lot of time and effort on a task.

**Examples of perfectionistic thinking:**

- **Black-and-white thinking** (e.g., “Anything less than perfection is a failure”, “If I need help from others, then I am weak”)
- **Catastrophic thinking** (e.g., “If I make a mistake in front of my coworkers, I won’t be able to survive the humiliation”, “I can’t handle having someone being upset with me.”)
- **Probability overestimation** (e.g., “Although I spent all night preparing for a presentation, I know I won’t do well”, “My boss will think I am lazy if I take a couple of sick days.”)
- **Should statements** (e.g., “I should never make mistakes”, “I should never come across as nervous or anxious”, “I should always be able to predict problems before they occur.”)

**Examples of perfectionistic behaviour:**

- Chronic procrastination, difficulty completing tasks, or giving up easily
- Overly cautious and thorough in tasks (e.g., spending 3 hours on a task that takes others 20 minutes to complete)

- Excessive checking (e.g., spending 30 minutes looking over a brief email to your boss for possible spelling mistakes)
- Constantly trying to improve things by re-doing them (e.g., rewriting a work document several times to make it “perfect”)
- Agonizing over small details (e.g., what movie to rent)
- Making elaborate “to do” lists (e.g., when to get up, brush teeth, shower, etc.)
- Avoiding trying new things and risking making mistakes

**TIP:** You might want to write down the realistic statements on cue cards and carry them with you. This can help you when you have a hard time thinking realistically.

## Step 2: Tools to Overcome Perfectionism



### Tool #1: Changing perfectionistic thinking

#### a) Realistic thinking

- Because adults with perfectionism are often very critical of themselves, one of the most effective ways to overcome perfectionism is to replace self-critical or perfectionistic thoughts with more realistic and helpful statements.
- It is a good idea to practise these helpful statements regularly. Even if you do not believe them right away, enough repetition will turn positive realistic thoughts into a habit, and help crowd out the negative self-talk.

#### Some examples of positive realistic statements

- *“Nobody is perfect!”*
- *“All I can do is my best!”*
- *“Making a mistake does not mean I’m stupid or a failure. It only means that I am like everyone else – human. Everyone makes mistakes!”*
- *“It’s okay not to be pleasant all the time. Everyone has a bad day sometime.”*
- *“It’s okay if some people don’t like me. No one is liked by everyone!”*

## b) Perspective taking

- Adults with perfectionism also tend to have a hard time seeing things from another person's point of view. That is, they tend not to think about how others might see a situation. For example, you may believe that you are lazy because you are only able to exercise 1 hour instead of 2 hours every day. Learning to view situations as other people might see them can help you to change some of these unhelpful beliefs.

**Going back to the “I’m lazy” example**, you can challenge this thought by asking yourself the following questions:

- **How might someone else (e.g., a close friend) view this situation?** *Most people probably would not think they are lazy if they do not exercise 2 hours everyday. Kelly, my best friend, only has time to work out for 1 hour, 2 to 3 times a week, and feels pretty good about it.*
- **Are there other ways to look at this?** *Maybe not being able to work out 2 hours every day is understandable given my busy schedule. Not being able to meet this standard does not mean I am lazy. Most people cannot do it.*
- **What might I tell a close friend who was having similar thoughts?** *It is okay to only workout for 1 hour per day or even less. Working out regularly, say 2 to 3 times a week, is good enough!*

## c) Looking at the big picture

- Adults with perfectionism tend to get bogged down in details and spend a lot of time worrying about “the little things” (e.g., what font to use in an email). One helpful strategy to worry less about details is to ask yourself the following questions:
  1. Does it really matter?
  2. What is the worst that could happen?
  3. If the worst does happen, can I survive it?
  4. Will this still matter tomorrow? How about next week? Next year?

## d) Compromising

- This is a particularly helpful tool for dealing with *black-and-white thinking*. Compromising involves lowering or being more flexible with your very high standards.

For example, if you believe that making a mistake during a presentation means that you are stupid. You might try asking yourself, “**What level of imperfection**

**am I willing to tolerate?”** From there, you can try to come up with some lower and more reasonable standards that you are willing to accept. Because it is quite anxiety provoking when you first start trying to lower your standards, you can do so gradually, in steps. For example, the first step to more reasonable standards in this example might involve spending 3 hours instead of 5 preparing for a presentation, allowing yourself to make a mistake during 1 out of 5 presentations, or being okay with having fewer than 5 people praise your performance. *Once you are comfortable with lowering your standards a bit, lower them some more.* For example the next step might involve spending 1 hour preparing for the presentation, allowing yourself to make a mistake during 1 out 2 presentations, or being okay with not knowing what others think of your performance.



## **Tool #2: Changing perfectionistic behaviours**

Having a problem with perfectionism is a lot like having a “phobia” of making mistakes or being imperfect – you are terrified of making mistakes. Facing fears in a gradual and consistent manner is the most effective way to overcome phobias, and is called “exposure”. For example, the best way to overcome a dog phobia is to gradually spend time with dogs, to learn that they are not as scary and dangerous as you initially thought.

Similarly, overcoming your “phobia” of making mistakes or being imperfect involves doing just that—gradually and purposely making mistakes and coming across as imperfect. This technique also involves gradually putting yourself into situations that you usually avoid out of a fear that things won’t work out perfectly. For tips on how to reduce your fears, see [Facing Your Fears: Exposure](#).

Here are some examples to help you brainstorm items for exposure practice:

- Show up for an appointment 15 minutes late
- Leave a visible area in the house a little messy
- Tell people when you are tired (or other feelings that you consider it a weakness to have)
- Wear a piece of clothing that has a visible stain on it
- Purposely allow several uncomfortable silences to occur during lunch with a co-worker
- Purposely be a few cents short for bus fare

**Another helpful hint:** Stop yourself from engaging in excessive behaviours designed to prevent imperfection. For example, if you tend to repeatedly check written documents for mistakes, stop yourself from checking more than once. Or, spend 30 minutes instead of 2 hours to prepare for a 15-minute presentation.

- Lose your train of thought during a presentation
- Send a letter or e-mail that includes a few mistakes
- Talk at a meeting without first rehearsing what you are going to say in your head
- Try a new restaurant without first researching how good it is

**Repeated and frequent practice!** You will need to practise the technique you choose several times before you start to feel more comfortable with making mistakes. Don't be discouraged if your anxiety doesn't come down right away at first, as this is normal and expected. Keep trying and repeating the exposure as frequently as you can.

#### **More about setting realistic standards:**

Are you scared of lowering your standards because you worry that you will let too many of your standards go and make mistakes all the time? Here are some helpful tips to address your worry:

**Tip 1:** Remember, lowering your standards DOES NOT mean having *no* standards. The goal is never to make you become careless in life and perform poorly all the time. Realistic standards are standards that can actually help you to do your best without costing you things that may be important to you, such as family life, physical and mental health, and leisure time.

Do you feel ambivalent about lowering your standards? If you are not sure whether you should lower certain standards, it is a good idea to make a list of *pros* and *cons* for lowering these standards. What are the costs to holding onto these standards? Keeping the costs in mind can help you to take the brave steps towards changing.

**Tip 2:** It is okay to ask for help. Sometimes, it is difficult to know how to lower an unrealistic standard to a more reasonable level. It is a good idea to ask a supportive person who does not have problems with perfectionism to help you with setting new realistic standards.



### Tool #3: Overcoming procrastination

Many adults with perfectionism often cope with their fear of making mistakes by procrastinating. When you set “perfect” standards for yourself, sometimes it might feel easier to procrastinate carrying out a task rather than spending hours trying to do it! For example, you might find that your house is usually messy even though you have very high standards of cleanliness and organization. Or, you might put off writing a report for work because you are afraid that you won’t be able to complete the task “perfectly”, or you might be overwhelmed by how much work you have to put into it and don’t know where to start! However, procrastination is only a temporary solution, and it tends to make your anxiety worse over time. Here are some ways to help you to overcome procrastination:

- Creating realistic schedules. Break down larger tasks into manageable steps. On a chart or calendar, write down the goal or deadline, and work towards it, setting small goals for yourself along the way. Don’t forget to reward yourself for reaching each goal. It is also helpful to decide in advance how much time you will spend on a task. Remember, the goal is to complete the task, not to make it perfect! For more information on how to set realistic and doable goals, see the [Guide to Goal Setting](#).
- Setting priorities. Perfectionists sometimes have trouble deciding on where they should devote their energy and effort. Prioritize your tasks by deciding which are the most important to accomplish, and which are less important. It is O.K. not to give 100% on every task!

### Step 3: Reward yourself

It is hard work to face your fears and change old ways of doing things. So, make sure to always take the time to reward yourself for all the hard work you are doing. It is very motivating to give yourself a treat once in a while. A reward might include going out for a nice meal, taking a walk, going out with friends, or just taking some time to relax or pamper yourself.

#### **Some helpful resources for more information on overcoming perfectionism:**

*When Perfect Isn’t Good Enough: Strategies for Coping with Perfectionism* by M. M. Antony & R. P. Swinson (New Harbinger Publications)

*Never Good Enough: How to Use Perfectionism to Your Advantage without Letting It Ruin Your Life* by M.R. Basco (Simon & Schuster)

*Perfectionism: What’s Bad about Being Too Good?* By M. Adderholdt-Elliott, M. Elliott, & J. Goldberg (Monarch Books)