

Perfectionism



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Foreword

Do you feel that nothing you do is ever good enough? Do you tend to postpone handing in your essays because you are always aiming to make your work just a little bit better? Or is there always a nagging doubt in your mind, an idea that you should have studied harder, even though you have sweated 10-12 hours a day for the exam?

If you recognise any of these situations, you may be one of the many people who strive for perfection – and put themselves under constant pressure to perform – academically and personally.

Perfectionism can be explained in many ways. Whatever the cause, most people find that the process of changing patterns of behaviour in order to reduce the burden of perfectionism is both long and arduous. Many people need long months of introspection – and they may need professional help from a student counsellor or adviser.

This leaflet describes the most common consequences of perfectionism and provides plenty of good advice. We hope that you will be inspired to tackle your perfectionism and realise that things do not always have to be faultless.

At the Student Counselling Service, you can get help and advice. You are welcome to call us to learn more about how we can help.

Our telephone number and addresses are at the back of the brochure.

Director of the Student Counselling Service
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What is perfectionism?

On the face of it, perfectionism is all about trying to prevent everything anyone could point a finger at and demonstrating that you always are in complete control of everything.

Under the surface, there often lurks a suspicion that your self esteem and reputation depend on never being criticised. Perfectionists are most often afraid and disdainful of their own (ordinary human) weaknesses and vulnerability. They are envious of people who make no attempt to hide the fact that they are human and make mistakes. They will also idolise others, seeing them as amazingly strong because they can live with their own faults.

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In many ways, having ambition and the desire to do things right is a strength which can get you far in this world. But perfectionism and ambition are two very different things. The difference is that an ambitious person is able to enjoy the process, can live with her mistakes, is receptive to advice and plays an active role in a learning process. By contrast, the perfectionist stresses herself, making harsh, critical judgements on everything she does. A perfectionist always judges herself from a negative perspective; what she doesn't recall from the curriculum or didn't manage to read up on. A perfectionist will tend to dwell on minor criticisms from her mentor.

In short: for the perfectionist, the process leading up to an examination or submitting an essay is pure purgatory. The perfectionist either submits the essay at the very last moment or studies all semester as if she was writing an examination paper – all the time.

The desire to achieve perfection may be so strong that she fails to feel any form of personal satisfaction. The perfectionist either under-performs relative to her academic prowess and the energy invested or is unable to take pleasure in achieving the high grades she has striven for, when she achieves them. When one examination is over, she is already anxious about the next assignment, the next examination and the next struggle to get high grades – at high personal cost.

This means that the desire to achieve perfection often results in the opposite - the perfectionist may inadvertently bar the way to her own success. The perfectionist is constantly dogged by her conscience, feels inferior and may often feel powerless when she realises that the road to "perfect results" is too long and too tough to travel.

Perfectionism is often expressed in the following ways:

A fear of making mistakes

The perfectionist interprets a single error or criticism as a sign of general weakness, generating a downward spiral which may ultimately erode her self-respect. She sees criticism of her work as a personal attack. Mentoring sessions can therefore become something of a nightmare, as there is a real danger that her weaknesses might be exposed. Mentoring never develops into a learning space in which the counsellor acts as a mentor and she ends up repeatedly "inventing the wheel" – starting over – every single time.

All or nothing

One characteristic of the perfectionist is that she tends to think in absolutes, all or nothing. She has to score a 10 or a 12 – a lower grade counts for nothing. The first sentence in her essay has to be outstanding – if it is anything less than amazing, she can't write at all. She has to have planned her essay in detail before she can even start work on it.

The perfectionist skips the intermediary phases and fails to experience how educational it feels to take two steps forward and one step back, to make mistakes and then correct them. The learning process is blocked by paralysis and negative thoughts.

"Your performance is consistently evaluated in relation to the negative..."

Adverse criticism knocks you for six

If your mentor has a critical response to your essay and recommends that you rewrite a specific section of it, you feel that you – as a person – are exposed to criticism.

You do not allow your mentor to guide you, show you the way, warn you of the pitfalls ahead, recommend detours, ask you to change direction or take the easy way out.

Many perfectionists attempt to do everything themselves and only submit work for critique if they are certain to receive praise for it. Not surprisingly, this is a tough and lonely road to travel.

You should also...

Your thoughts and assessments revolve constantly around the things you imagine you should or must do. You exert mental tyranny on yourself, seldom taking into account your own personal wishes and resources. You focus not on what you are doing but on what you don't get around to doing.

You see others as amazing – or as losers ... (no grey areas)

You may have a tendency to believe that others achieve success with minimal effort, and that they make few or no mistakes at all and almost entirely avoid

emotional stress. By contrast, as a perfectionist, you see yourself as a struggler who never seems to make the mark. You idealise others and vilify yourself. Self-vilification is and will always be discouraging.

Excessive focus on the negative – trivialises the positive

A perfectionist trivialises the positive. She generally finds it difficult to accept a compliment, and is either embarrassed to receive praise or regards praise as empty words. Paradoxically, the perfectionist is dependent on external recognition and will do anything to earn it. Unfortunately, recognition has only a short-term effect, because the perfectionist focuses excessively on the negative and basis dissatisfaction with her own performance.

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A downward spiral

If you have perfectionist tendencies, you will ultimately usually find yourself in a downward spiral. In the initial phase, you set yourself unrealistic and impossible goals. The result is that you are less productive and less creative because you feel you are constantly under pressure. You become more self-critical, you feel guilt and you lose self-esteem.

The consequences of finding yourself in this downward spiral are often stress and depressive symptoms, such as lack of concentration, dejection, insomnia and restlessness. You easily find yourself expressing a pessimistic attitude to the things you have to do and you throw yourself into new assignments with a flurry of unrealistically ambitious goals. You imagine: "If I try just once more and if I work even harder, then maybe I will succeed."

Perfectionism also raises its ugly head in interpersonal relationships. An inner feeling of inadequacy means that the perfectionist tends to assume that she can count on being rejected by others. This pre-emptive fear of rejection, in tandem with the desire to appear to be infallible and in complete control, means that the perfectionist immediately adopts a defensive attitude – possibly also a self-righteous one – and therefore risks offending others in an attempt to explain and protect herself. If then, the perfectionist detects no interest or recognition from others, she feels that her assumed worthlessness is therefore confirmed.

Relationships with other people are also affected by the perfectionist's fear of intimacy and attachment. If you get close to another person, you risk being exposed. The perfectionist fears that the other person will discover that she is ordinary and therefore imperfect.

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Focus on the cause

The perfectionist often feels that something is missing; she is dissatisfied with her performance, finds it difficult to perform adequately and feels that others people cope much better than she does.

To address the frustration, dissatisfaction and loneliness which often pursue the perfectionist, it is important to examine where they come from and how they affect your life.

It's generally true to say that perfectionist tendencies are due to some kind of basic insecurity. For example, the seeds of perfectionism may have been sown by a very strict parent who expected great things of you. You may have gained the impression that being perfect is a prerequisite for being loved and accepted.

"The desire to achieve perfection may be so strong that you fail to feel any form of personal satisfaction."

Conversely, perfectionism may also develop from a chaotic and insecure upbringing. As a child, the perfectionist may have done everything in her power to keep herself and her family together – for example, by showing no weakness and working hard at school. The child learns that faults and mistakes are synonymous with chaos and insecurity, and she may have a strong will not to end up living like her parents – rather the opposite.

Regardless of the origins of your perfectionism, all the signs are that your past exerts far too strong an influence on the present, and that you demand too much of yourself.

Good advice

Accepting that no-one is perfect

Coming to terms with perfectionism is often a long and difficult process. As a rule the process requires long months of introspection, a strong will to change, reflection, close contact with relatives and friends, and possibly also professional help from a student counsellor at the Student Counselling Service.

However there is a lot you can do to change your perfectionist attitudes and adopt a more manageable and realistic approach.

First of all, you need to recognise that attempting to achieve perfection or to act as if you were perfect are not desirable courses of action. Perfection scares people away. Perfectionism creates a barrier between you and society and impairs your quality of life.

If you imagine that everything is perfect – every dinner, every academic performance, every romance – you remove every opportunity that we as human beings have to develop and change. Perfection is an illusion. Imagining how terrible it would be to reveal oneself to be an ordinary human being is much worse than the reality.

This is what makes it fundamentally better to be open, critical and receptive and to show respect for the challenges inherent in everything being less than perfect. Share your doubt and insecurity with others. Don't be afraid to make mistakes. Mistakes are an important part of any learning process and provide endless opportunities for personal development. Don't avoid crises. Focus on managing them as best as you can and accepting help from people around you – including your mentor.

"The labour market is not looking for perfect candidates. It needs motivated people who are able to learn from the mistakes they will inevitably make."

Set yourself realistic and achievable goals

Set goals in line with the resources at your disposal in the given situation and the conditions under which you will be working. It makes a difference whether you have three days or three weeks to complete an assignment. The serious illness of a close relative is not irrelevant. The fact that you got a 12 in an earlier exam or scored straight A's at high school doesn't mean that you can expect the same grades in every subject and every time.

In the Student Counselling Service, we know from experience that you will get just as good grades (if not better) – the important difference here is that you enjoy the working process and are more satisfied with the end result.

Stress, nerves, depression – how do you know?

Are you getting signals from your body and surroundings? Take them seriously! Do you find it difficult to sleep at night, do you have pains in your stomach, feel restless all the time, do you feel you need to avoid company or to work all the time? These are usually signs that the goals you have set for yourself are unrealistic and that you need to take a reality check.

Every time you are faced with an assignment and you get these signals, ask yourself: Am I demanding the impossible? Am I expecting too much of myself in this situation? Where do my expectations come from, how did things go last time I studied for a similar examination, did I write day and night and did I isolate myself? What in essence am I afraid of? What is the worst that could

happen to me? And is it at all likely to happen? For example, if you feel that you are sure to fail an examination, when you have never failed an exam before or have passed 99% of the tests you ever took.

Recognise that you can learn a lot from your mistakes

When you make a mistake, ask yourself: What can I learn from this? Think specifically about your most recent mistakes. Make a list. What went wrong? Was it the end of the world? Did you feel the worst effects were on your mood, your powers of creativity or on your working process?

Avoid taking an "all or nothing" approach to your goals

Practise thinking in shades of grey, rather than in extremes. Practise thinking "not only, but also" in place of "all or nothing". Having read and comprehended 80% of the curriculum is more than is needed to pass. The perfectionist thinks, "If I haven't read everything in the curriculum, I'm sure to fail", or "if my mentor criticises something in my assignment, it's lousy all the way through", or "I'm sure my mentor will think I'm stupid if I haven't understood everything", etc.

Learn to differentiate between assignments that are important to you and those that are less important. A good day is not a day where you manage to cover everything on your to-do list. A good day is when you achieve some or most of those things. A perfectionist tends to write far too many things on her lists, which can lead to paralysis and resignation.

Try to establish a study or work group

Talk to your fellow students about how much and how to prioritise your work. Try once (or twice) to allow yourself to experience how it feels not to be well prepared or not to have understood a text.

Get yourself a hobby

Get yourself a hobby or pastime which gives you a sense of self-expression – preferably something in which your performance is not key, rather that you engage in the activity with others. Don't be self-conscious – just have fun with other people!

Contact your mentor at an early stage

The period when your statement of intent is incomplete or not quite perfect is when you need guidance most. When you submit something in writing to your project group or mentor, don't aim to "clean up before the cleaning lady comes in".

What do you think other people are expecting of you?

Find out specifically what your mentor/group expects of your work – and of their own work. Compare their responses with your own more or less clear expectations. If, for example, you're thinking "all I need to do is pass the next

exam", then you don't have to study as hard as you would to achieve a top grade.

Think about it – when is something finished?

Decide to let go of a text you have written before it is completely finished, when it is not yet perfect. There is no such thing as a perfect text. It's an illusion. Even professional writers write and rewrite texts and must learn at some point to let them go. Think about the conditions under which you are working and let these conditions determine the quality of your work.

Lifelong learning – Don't forget that you will still be learning when you get a job

The labour market is not looking for perfect candidates. It needs motivated people who are able to learn from the mistakes that they will inevitably make. Employers don't expect to have to deal with people who crumble at minor criticism, who spend ages on their assignments and who are not equipped to adapt their efforts to the conditions available in any given situation.

Where to find the Student Counselling Service

WEB
www.srg.dk

Telephone
+45 70267500

The Student Counselling Service has published a number of leaflets describing some of the challenges student life can present:

Stress

Examinations

Maternity leave*

Perfectionism

A good study life

Rehabilitation and disability supplement*

Anxiety and panic attacks*

Ten good tips for group work*

Do you keep on putting things off?*

*Only available in electronic form

To order leaflets, please send an e-mail to pjecer@srg.dk

The leaflets can also be downloaded free of charge from www.srg.dk

The Student Counselling Service offers free advice and treatment to students at bachelor, professional bachelor and master's level. The Student Counselling Service is an institution under the Danish Ministry of Higher Education and Science. Learn more at www.srg.dk