

# PERFECTIONISM

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## Perfectionism is often overlooked as a risk factor in mental health.

It is regarded as a multidimensional personality disposition and an intra-psychic characteristic. In its purest form, perfectionism is an abstraction, an impossibility in reality.

To the core of perfectionism, is the problematic relationship that the perfectionist has with 'self'; about 'perfecting the self'. All components and dimensions of perfectionism ultimately involve attempts to perfect an imperfect self. (Hewitt 2017)

Most of us have an idea of how perfectionism looks; striving for success, fear of failure, high expectations, self-ridicule, 'striving for flawlessness', holding excessively high personal standards and having overly negative reactions to perceived mistakes and setbacks (Yap; 2018). Perfectionist often know that perfection is impossible, but the voice in their head keeps them going. It's about feeling perfect, not about being perfect.

The toxic outcome of maladaptive perfectionism is that it actually sets a person up for failure. With unrealistic goals, unrealistic demands on relationships or unrealistic work expectations from colleagues. A flawless performance is impossible. The trap of perfectionism is found in rigid thinking, where the inner critic has a very sharp response; being highly self-critical both of self and of others. It affects productivity and work performance.

Many of these attributes are self-driven and rarely determined by outside influences. At a personal level perfectionism is often characterised by low self-esteem, disappointment, procrastination, chronic stress, opportunity cost, persistent dissatisfaction, never feeling good enough, fear of being judged and or focusing on one's weaknesses or shortcomings. It can be a real achievement disrupter. The consequence of this thought-cycle, of repetitive thoughts and perceived failures creates a constant pressure. This can lead to depression, anxiety, suicidality, obsessive-compulsive, behaviour and actions and impairs resilience

There is an alternative and that is found in adaptive perfectionists. These individuals can achieve high standards, work hard, value success, desire growth but without being driven by a fear of failure.

If this difficult behaviour is intrusive and for some debilitating, consider these suggestions at first instance:

1. **Be emotionally aware.** What are your emotional triggers i.e. when do you demand perfectionism? Be honest. Can you substitute these for alternative coping strategies?
2. What **alternative strategies** can you generate? Going outside, delegating work, talking to a friend to change the inner critic.<sup>i</sup>

3. **Practice new behaviours.** It won't happen overnight and will feel uncomfortable. This requires you to be emotionally tolerant.

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