

Perfectionism

Perfectionism has three primary characteristics:

- u The tendency to set unrealistically high personal standards and goals.
- u The tendency to use all-or-nothing thinking when evaluating one's actions and to consider as a failure any achievement not meeting the unrealistically high standards.
- u A selective point of view that focuses on small flaws and errors rather than on one's overall progress or achievement.

These perfectionistic tendencies can be restricted to one or two areas of a person's life or can dominate one's entire existence. They tend to cause personal achievements to be considered inadequate and often lead to self-condemnation. When this occurs, the result is a lowering of self-esteem and a poor self-image. In addition, these tendencies can also generate a fear of failure which causes a person to avoid taking risks and trying new, unfamiliar activities.

The Irrational Belief that Perfection is Possible

- u The idea of perfection is an abstract concept that only exists in theory.
- u There is always some imperfection, some improvement that can be made in everything you see and do.
- u Because we live in an imperfect world, a person who strives for perfection is guaranteed failure.

The Irrational Belief that a Person's Worth is Determined by Achievement

Much of our behaviour is motivated by a search for belonging and significance. The combination of basing worth on achievement and perfectionistic tendencies creates a no-win situation in which we can feel worthwhile only when we achieve, yet our achievements always fall short of our perfectionistic standards. The result is a feeling that we never do enough and are always falling short of what is required in any situation. The need to excel above others in order to feel "important" can also be generated.

Adapted from Peurifoy, Reneau Z., Anxiety, Phobias, & Panic. New York: Warner, 2005.

To Challenge These Beliefs...

When older people look back on their lives, they usually find the satisfaction they received from relationships and how they lived were far more important than what they did.

As far as healthy, satisfying, long-term relationships are concerned, who you are as a person is far more important than what you achieve.

Your value as a person is entirely separate from the value of the activities you do. Equating worth with achievement is an arbitrary value system for which there is no objective support. Technically you are only a human being who does various activities. You are not those activities. While your activities may or may not be valuable, they do not add or subtract from your value as a person.

You probably treat others with respect because you believe people have value in and of themselves as a member of the human race. You have this same intrinsic value as others simply because you are human.

You do not need to be especially talented to be happy and successful in life. Many very happy and successful people have below-average talent and ability.

People usually achieve more when achievement is the result of enjoying an activity rather than the result of being sought as a source of self-worth and self-esteem.

Over-concern with achievement creates anxiety that interferes with your ability to achieve.

Clarify your religious/spiritual beliefs, as well as your beliefs about the value of people and life.

ALL mistakes are NOT terrible – Mistakes are gifts of wisdom!

Changing Perfectionistic Behaviour

Develop and practice rational self-talk that challenges perfectionistic beliefs.

Challenge the irrational beliefs that cause you to interpret events in a perfectionistic manner.

Develop a problem-solving approach to mistakes.

Identify why the mistake was made.

Identify any action that can be taken to correct the mistake and, if practical, take it.

Identify actions that can be taken to reduce the likelihood of repeating the mistake in the future and, if practical, take it.

Focus on positives.

Take a moment during any activity, no matter how small, to find something positive about it.

Eliminate the “but” habit.

Leave off negative details, and focus on the positives. You might like it!

Set realistic goals.

Consider what you would expect if you were setting the goal for someone else.

Give yourself permission to make errors and re-evaluate your goals.

Aim to “do well” instead of “doing perfectly”.

Be reasonable and fair with yourself.

Give yourself permission to experience pleasure.

Every day, do at least one thing for yourself that is fun and pleasurable.

Choose an activity for the enjoyment it brings to you rather than for the benefits or pleasure it brings to others.

Develop a *process* orientation.

Enjoy the “doing”. The journey is far more important than the destination.

Seek enjoyment rather than accomplishment.

How one lives is more important than what he/she does.

Savour the present – live now!

Stop and smell the roses.

Use the “bottom-line” technique to eliminate fears underlying perfectionistic behaviour.

Consider the worst possible outcome, and use rational self-talk to address these fears.

Learning to laugh at mistakes and enjoy being human is one of the keys to conquering anxiety and perfectionism.