

## Coping with Perfectionism

Ed Beckham, Ph.D. and Cecilia Beckham, L.C.S.W., B.C.D.

So what's wrong with perfectionism? Is it really a problem, or is it maybe strength for us? Perfectionistic individuals are sometimes contented with their expectations of themselves and others. They can find it rewarding to do things extremely well. On the other hand, there is also a downside to perfectionism. It often requires long, detailed routines which can slow us down. Simple tasks can become large, time consuming ones. Whether you are perfectionistic or not is your own decision to make. The purpose of this chapter/handout is to help you decide whether it is really helpful to you or not.

Perfectionism is one of the problems that counselors and therapists encounter over and over again. While the client may not see it as a problem at first, therapists often recognize that perfectionism is at the root of many psychological difficulties. A close look often reveals that this style of living creates more problems than it solves. For example, perfectionists and their exacting standards can sometimes be upsetting to the people around them. This sometimes happens when others feel they are being judged by the unrealistically high expectations that the perfectionist has for themselves. But the main problem with perfectionism is not how it affects others. The main problem is how it affects us.

There are three different types of perfectionism. The **self-blaming perfectionist** sets up rigid and unrealistic expectations for themselves. They want to do things extremely well and they are willing to put out the effort to do so. They have thoroughly incorporated perfectionism into their values and belief system. The downside of this is that whenever they make a mistake, they focus on it intensely. As a result, they usually see their flaws much more clearly than their strengths. The **task master perfectionist** has allowed their high standards to spill over from applying just to them to pertaining to others as well. They expect that their wife, children, subordinates, and everyone else will perform according to their exacting specifications. Clearly, this type of attitude tends to alienate other people. Finally, the **conforming perfectionist** feels that friends, family, or society in general expect them to be perfect. They accept this role to some degree, but it is primarily from a need to please. These three forms overlap considerably, and one person might have characteristics of all of them. For example, consider the housewife who has to vacuum her carpets so that they rows line up exactly. When the kids get home and want to walk across the floor, she may become very upset with them and scold them. Her self-blaming perfectionism has spilled over into being a task master. Moreover, she may be concerned about what her mother will think of her as a housekeeper if the carpet looks messed up, thus involving a desire to conform to the expectations of others as well.

### Getting Personal--Do You Have a Perfectionistic Style of Dealing with Problems?

*You are painting a room in your house and you have put up all of the paints and supplies. A few hours later you notice a small spot that you missed. It is not going to be noticed by other people. Do you*

- a. Immediately drag out the paints again and fix it, even though it is going to make you late for something else?*
- b. Decide to wait until a better time to work on it?*
- c. Worry that somehow people are going to see it and think negatively about it or you?*
- d. Picture the mistake over and over in your mind until it gets bigger and bigger in your imagination?*

*You notice a small flaw in a dessert you are taking over to another person's house. Do you*

- a. Figure it doesn't make any difference because it is going to be eaten anyway?*
- b. Worry what people will think of you?*
- c. Spend so much time fixing it that you end up being late going to their house?*
- d. Let it play on your mind so that it seems like a much bigger problem than it actually is?*

*You have just finished cleaning the inside of your car. Your child accidentally gets ice cream on it, leaving a small stain which you will have to get up later. Do you*

- a. Become extremely upset at how this mars the beauty of what you have just done?*
- b. Scold him for being careless?*
- c. Sigh and let him clean it up when you get home?*
- d. Make a major issue of it and then spend considerable time cleaning it up "perfectly" when you get home?*

*No answers are provided to the above questions. Instead, ask yourself what your responses tell you about possible perfectionistic tendencies.*

### **The Role of "Should" Thoughts in Perfectionism**

Perfectionists often think that they "should" do things in a particular way. It is not always clear what they believe will happen if they don't. Nor is it always clear where such an attitude came from in the first place. It may be that they had a parent who was always telling them that they "should" do certain things. Or it may be that for some reason, they decided for themselves that they "should" always do things perfectly. Sometimes, a child may decide that their parent will finally pay attention to them, if they just make better grades, win more sports contests, and so on. Sadly, this strategy often fails to win the attention of critical or self-absorbed parents, but it can

start the person on an impossible lifetime quest for perfection.

A famous psychiatrist, Karen Horney, outlined a way of thinking called the “tyranny of the shoulds.” In a very well known passage, she described the attitudes of someone whose thinking is dominated by such thoughts:

“He should be the utmost of honesty, generosity, considerateness, justice, dignity, courage, unselfishness. He should be the perfect lover, husband, teacher. He should be able to endure everything, should like everybody, should love his parents, his wife, his country; or, he should not be attached to anything or anybody, nothing should matter to him, he should never feel hurt, and he should always be serene and unruffled. He should always enjoy life; or, he should be above pleasure and enjoyment. He should be spontaneous; he should always control his feelings. He should know, understand, and foresee everything. He should be able to solve every problem of his own, or of others, in no time. He should be able to overcome every difficulty of his as soon as he sees it. He should never be tired or fall ill. He should always be able to find a job. He should be able to do things in one hour which can only be done in two to three hours.”

Clearly, the person who subjects themselves to a great number of should thoughts is going to feel burdened by them. They are only words and thoughts, and yet they can drain a person of energy and zest for life.

## **Getting Personal**

*Try counting your “should” thoughts one day and see how many you have. Imagine that you add a small weight to your shoulders each time you have a should thought. If each weight is 1 pound, how much of a burden are you carrying around by the end of the day? Imagine how much energy would be required to carry that weight around.*

## **Perfectionism Can Lead to Depression**

Research has clearly shown that perfectionism creates a vulnerability to depression. The reason for this is that it creates unobtainable standards. Unrealistic goals have to be met in order for the person to feel worthwhile. Even normal stresses, such as having to take a test, the perfectionist is vulnerable to feeling inadequate, worthless, or guilty. A less than perfect performance is likely to lead to a loss of self-esteem. In this way, it can eventually cause depression. Anything less than perfection can bring on self-recriminations, such as:

“I should have done better.”

“I should have known that would be on the test.”

“I should have studied that chapter more.”

“I should have remembered that formula for the test.”

“I shouldn’t have yelled at the kids; I’m a bad mother.”

“I should always keep calm.”

“I should have known this was going to happen.”

And so on.

Living with perfectionism is like standing on top of a ladder which has all of its rungs missing. One misstep--just one step down--and there is a total collapse. That is because there are no other rungs in the middle of the ladder. With perfectionism, the collapse is not a physical collapse but a collapse of self-esteem. There are no middle rungs in the way the person can see themselves. It is all or nothing--the best or the worst.

### **Perfectionism Can Lead to Procrastination**

Perfectionists often have an excessive, irrational anxiety about failure and about not doing things right. The fear of failure can be strong enough that they would rather do nothing than try something and not perform extremely well. One client stated that it was worse to make a 99 on a paper than a lower grade because it meant that he had come close to perfection but narrowly missed it.

When we expect ourselves to do things perfectly, even small tasks can seem monumental. One person, for example, wanted to fix a rattle in his car dashboard. He knew how to fix it, but he also knew that once he began taking it apart, he would experience the need to lay out all the parts and clean each one thoroughly. The dash would have to be put back together perfectly. As a result, he was very reluctant to work on it. He knew that it would become a major task, and he dreaded having to do all of that work. So, as a result, the rattle in his dashboard remained.

Even though perfectionists may procrastinate, it is inevitable that deadlines eventually arrive, and something has to be done. Typically, anxiety builds until they feel they to do something about it. The final product may be a very good one but accomplished at the price of high anxiety and the pressure of doing it at the last moment.

### **Perfectionism Can Lead to a Loss of Productivity**

This can be most easily seen in someone who is artistic. A painting or sculpture may never seem quite good enough. More and more time has to be spent perfecting the product. As a result, new artistic creations have to wait. A perfectionistic college professor might be writing more articles except that he is still polishing the one he started several years ago. The homemaker could be spending time playing with her children, but she is too busy scrubbing the baseboards. There is a point past which trying to make something better is counterproductive and needs to give way to new projects.

### **Our Extreme Efforts to Do Things Perfectly May Not Be Appreciated by Others, and So We May Become Resentful**

Perfection does not come easily, and when we are through with our project, our house cleaning, or whatever we have accomplished, we are likely to expect some special type of recognition from

others. Unfortunately, they often do not see just how much effort we have put into the task. The difference between doing a good job and doing a perfect one is often great in terms of the effort expended but small in terms of visible results. If others do not recognize the very hard work we are putting in to be perfect, then we may feel resentful that they are not giving us the accolades that we feel we are due. For this reason, perfectionism can lead to anger towards family and friends.

### **Perfectionism Can Lead Us to Be More Critical of Others**

Often, when we hold perfectionistic standards for ourselves, we also hold others to those same expectations. We believe that they should also do things extremely well--not just adequately. This can keep us upset with others, and it can also keep them upset with us. Perfectionistic standards, when applied to our spouse or children, can lead to them being put out with us, or even resenting us. Because the perfectionist has such rigid expectations about how things should be, it is easy for them to be upset by what they see as the lackadaisical and substandard performance of others. Since human frailties are in plentiful supply and not likely to be eradicated any time soon, perfectionism towards others means that we are going to be frustrated and upset. To be frustrated with the inevitable means that we will be inevitably going to be frustrated.

Self-criticism and perfectionism make it more difficult for persons to create and keep relationships. Perfectionists tend to be more dissatisfied with themselves and with others. Perfectionistic people also tend to be more tense and more easily irritated. They have so much to do and so little time to do it in that they may begin to see other people not as human beings to be enjoyed but as obstacles in their path. They have deadlines to meet and things to accomplish. People sometimes seem like a nuisance to the perfectionist who is trying to complete his list of tasks for the day.

### **Doing Things Perfectly Becomes Increasingly Difficult as We Get Older**

It is one thing to try to be perfect in the sixth grade and another thing entirely to try to be perfect as an adult. A sixth grader usually has well defined roles, tasks, and duties. Perfection can mean going to class every day, turning in all assignments, and making all A's on report cards. It can also mean keeping one's room clean and never getting into trouble.

Being an adult means living with a myriad of possibilities. These choices are so plentiful that before one can try to be perfect, one first has to ask the question "perfect at what?" Some people attempt to be perfect workers, perfect mothers, perfect housekeepers, and so on--all at the same time! But this is impossible. Most people don't have enough time or energy to perform multiple roles in a way that even approaches perfection. Choices have to be made, or else one is likely to be staying up later and later each night in the elusive quest for perfection.

### **Perfectionism leaves little room for fun and pleasure**

Doing things perfectly requires considerable time and energy. It means that our leisure hours will

be almost totally absorbed by everyday routine work tasks, leaving little or no time just to have fun. Cleaning the kitchen, writing a school paper, or changing the oil in the car if done perfectly will require much more time and effort than doing a good job. When all of the different workday tasks are added up, there may be nothing left for the enjoyable aspects of life.

It is true that many perfectionists take a certain kind of pleasure in doing things extremely well--for example, in seeing their house spotlessly clean. There is nothing wrong with that. However, as time goes on, many other pleasures are being sacrificed. Important aspects of life go unexperienced. The picnics at the lake, vacations, walks in the park, and time spent playing with the kids may be shelved for lack of time or energy.

### **Perfectionism is a dead end in the search for meaning in life**

One way of viewing perfectionism is that it is a way of trying to satisfy the nagging question of whether we are good enough and whether our lives are “okay.” This is a question of meaning. It is also a philosophical and spiritual question. As children and young adults, we may have found a sense of comfort in doing things perfectly. We may have hoped that our parents and teachers would approve of us because of how perfectly we were carrying out our assigned tasks, and it is true that sometimes parents respond with approval when children perform extremely well. This can reinforce perfectionism.

As we get older, however, it becomes less and less clear exactly what it means to be perfect. Does it mean having three children or five? Does it mean taking the job you want in Alaska or taking the better paying job where you don't want to be? Does it mean never getting into any trouble, or does it mean stirring up trouble when there are social wrongs being committed? Or does it mean keeping a spotless house? Or having perfect children and being the perfect parent? Or does it mean all of these? These are questions for which there are no objective answers. As we age and the authority figures we once had in our lives pass away, there are fewer and fewer persons to care whether we are doing things perfectly. It probably doesn't matter to your neighbor or your children that your closets are straight and neat or that you change the oil in your car exactly every 3,000 miles. Because of these types of changes which occur in people's lives as they get older, being perfect can lead to feeling confused and without direction.

When we allow our lives to be directed by “shoulds” and standards, it may be difficult for us to decide what we most want to do with our later years. We are not used to deciding what we really want out of life.

## **Overcoming Perfectionism**

The perfectionist tends to believe that their style of life is the most logical one for them. But the fact that you are reading this indicates that either you or your therapist believe this may actually be a problem for you. It is not often that perfectionists come into therapy to work on this problem, but they do often seek help for depression without realizing that the two are linked together. Here are some points to consider which may help you to see that it is not a logical way

to make decisions for your life.

### **Examine Where Your Belief in the Need for Perfection Came From.**

The idea that you needed to be perfect had to come from somewhere. Did you decide upon it yourself, or did someone tell you that you had to be perfect? Usually, perfectionistic attitudes come from parents. However, it is also possible that a person might decide to be perfect or the best in order to gain feelings of control or self-esteem. For example, a person might decide "If only I can please my parents perfectly, then they will love me." When children are not loved, it has little or nothing to do with them but with the inadequacies of their parents. Becoming perfect is not the solution to a lack of love. It is important to realize that if you had been born into a different situation, you might have had parents who would behaved very differently towards you. You might have been told that it was okay to make mistakes. If your parents were perfectionistic or expected perfection from you, this does not mean that this is gospel truth that you must be this way. There is no religious or universal law which says you have to be perfect. It is simply one way of approaching life and not a very good one at that.

### **Examine the Logic of Your Belief**

Is it logical to be perfectionistic? As we have already seen, there are many problems with being perfect. As yourself the following questions:

*Is it possible to be perfect?* Actually, no. Perfection is always an illusory goal for humans. Even if you approach perfection in one area there is not the time or energy for perfection in all areas.

*Does it benefit me to try to be perfect?* Your first answer to this may be yes, but after reading this handout you will hopefully be able to see all of the drawbacks to this lifestyle.

*Do I require perfection my friends, too?* While some perfectionists become irritated by other people being imperfect, some are quite lenient with their friends. They don't hold their friends to the same standard. It is okay for their friends to not make straight A's. It is okay for their friends to not be perfect housekeepers. If so, then why does the perfectionist hold themselves to standards which are more stringent? It is not logical to have one set of standards for one's self and another set for everybody else.

### **Perform a Cost Benefit Analysis**

In a cost benefit analysis, we look at what we are gaining and what we are losing. There is usually some benefit from our perfectionism. However, most of the time, the benefit is outweighed by the cost. What do you gain from trying to be perfect and what do you lose?

Here is an example of one person's cost/benefit analysis:

<i>What I Gain From Trying to Be Perfect</i>	<i>Drawbacks of Trying to Be Perfect</i>
The things which I get done are done really well.	I feel tense and tired much of the time.
I don't have to repeat repairs that I do. They stay fixed.	I put off doing things because they will take so much time.
My house and car look very nice.	I can only do one repair in the time that others do three repairs.
	I feel guilty when I don't do things correctly.
	I snap at the kids when they don't do their chores perfectly. They call me "picky."
	I feel overwhelmed by how much I have to do because everything takes so long.
	I don't have much time for friendships and fun because I spend so much time on my work, the house, and the car.
	More and more, I am feeling that I have to push myself to do things. I am beginning to feel that I just don't care about these things anymore.

Now, here is one for you to fill in:

<i>What I Gain From Trying to Be Perfect</i>	<i>Drawbacks of Trying to Be Perfect</i>

### **Using Cognitive Therapy on Perfectionistic Thinking**

*You may want to refer to Chapter/handout 3--"Coping with Negative Thoughts" in order to benefit the most from this section.*

Perfectionists tend to believe that they are being very logical. For this reason, cognitive therapy (working on negative thinking) is often a very powerful approach for this problem. Once persons understand how illogical perfectionism is, change often begins to occur. Here is an example of working on perfectionistic thinking. Look at the example of cognitive therapy below, and then write down an example of your own perfectionistic thoughts.

<b>Objective Situation (The “Event”)</b>	<b>Automatic Negative Thoughts</b>	<b>Negative Consequences</b>	<b>Realistic, Logical Thoughts</b>
<p>Making a B on a test</p>	<p>I should have done better.</p> <p>I should have studied more thoroughly</p> <p>This is a mediocre grade. I don't even know why I try. I should just quit school. I don't even deserve to be here.</p>	<p>Depressed</p> <p>Sad</p> <p>Down</p> <p>Discouraged</p> <p>Guilty</p>	<p>This is all or nothing thinking.</p> <p>A “B” is still a competent grade. Most people in the class made a B-.</p> <p>It's true that maybe I could have studied harder, but I did study a reasonable amount of time. Moreover, I had made a commitment to a friend to be with her and help her out with some things. She's going through a rough time, and helping her was more important than making an A on the test anyway.</p> <p>I can bring my course grade up on future tests.</p>



## Time for Practice

Use this form to challenge some of your own negative thoughts leading to perfectionism.

Objective Situation (The "Event")	Automatic Negative Thoughts	Negative Consequences	Realistic, Logical Thoughts

## FAQ: Frequently asked questions

*Isn't it better to be perfect than to be mediocre?*

*This sets up a false choice--"either I can be perfect or I can be mediocre." This is all or nothing thinking. Since mediocre sounds rather bad, this thought ends up being "Either I am perfect or I am no good." This is a false dichotomy. Life does not consist of two classes of events--the perfectly good and the perfectly bad. Instead, there are many degrees of adequacy and of quality. Being adequate and competent are not the same thing as being mediocre. But once we equate being less than perfect with mediocrity, then perfectionism will seem the only logical choice.*

***Shouldn't we always strive to do our very best?***

*It depends on what we mean by "our very best." If it means paying attention to every small detail and giving the tiniest of issues more time that they are worth, the answer would be "no." On the other hand, if it means making the best use of our time and energy (including time to refresh ourselves with rest, relationships, and recreation), then perhaps the answer would be a qualified "Yes." But people are human, and they will not always be able to do their best. That has to be accepted and taken into account or else feelings of inadequacy are likely to occur at times.*



**Points to Ponder**

*Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote a short story called "The Birth-Mark". In it, a husband has a beautiful wife, but she has one blemish. She is almost perfect in all ways except this one. He uses all of his scientific ability to remove it, but as a result of his relentless drive to make her perfect. Hawthorne wrote:*

*"Alas, it was too true! ... As the last crimson tint of the birth-mark--that sole token of human imperfection--faded from her cheek, the parting breath of the now perfect woman passed into the atmosphere, and her soul, lingering a moment near her husband, took its heavenward flight. . . Had Aylmer [the woman's husband] reached a profounder wisdom, he need not thus have flung away the happiness, which would have woven his mortal life of the self-same texture with the celestial. The momentary circumstance was too strong for him; he failed to look beyond the shadowy scope of Time, and living once for all in Eternity, to find the perfect Future in the present.*

**Getting Personal**

*If you could succeed in having everything around you be perfect--your work, your house, your school work, your car, and so on--BUT, it would mean working 20 hours every single day, would you do it?*

*What if it meant being tired all the time? Would you still do it?*

*What if it meant that there was no time left for pleasure and the enjoyment of socializing with people, would you still do it?*

*What if you found that no one appreciated it or cared?*

*Is there any price that is too high to pay for you and the things around you to be perfect?*

*How do you feel about being “average?” Are there some things which you could accept being average and others which you couldn’t? What do you see as the problems with being average? What do you see as the benefits?*

*Do you see being average as the same thing as being mediocre? Do you equate being mediocre with failure?*

*If you had a choice between getting three things accomplished competently (“pretty well”) and one thing accomplished perfectly, which would you choose?*

*Are there some things in life which are better because they are not perfect? Consider for example, impressionist paintings. They would lose all of their appeal if they were simply photographically accurate representations of their subjects. In fact, all paintings would merely become photographs if they were perfect renderings. Is there anything in your life which would lose its value if it was perfect in every single respect?*

*Is there such a thing as a perfect parent? Consider the following: if a parent was always there for their child in every possible way, would the child ever learn to be strong emotionally and learn to deal with stresses in the real world?*

## Things to Do

*Make a list of your main daily tasks. For each one describe in writing what would be a totally inadequate job and what would be a totally perfect way of doing it. Then describe what would be halfway in between (i.e., adequate). Aim at doing things “in between” totally unsatisfactory and perfectly.*

*Make a list of activities which are not critical to you or your family’s well being and which only need to be performed competently and adequately, such as washing dishes, cleaning the bathtub, changing the oil in the car, cutting the grass, and so on. Give yourself permission to do these without devoting excessive time and energy to them. Practice doing these tasks in a non-perfectionistic manner. Write about the feelings and thoughts you have as you attempt to back off from your perfectionism.*

*If you have any negative thoughts about a competent job not being good enough, use the four column technique to overcome them.*

*Note how your friends do things. Do they keep house perfectly? Do they take perfect care of their car? If they do, does it make you like them more? If they don’t do things perfectly, does it make you like them less?*

*Make a list of all the things in your life that are more important to you than being perfect. Are you spending time trying to perfect less important things and neglecting the*

*things on your list which are more important? Set a goal of increasing the time you spend on at least one aspect of your life which you listed as being of more important to you.*

**Other chapters which you may find helpful and are relevant to coping with perfectionism include:**

- Chapter 3      Coping with Negative Thoughts
- Chapter 5      Coping with Worry and Anxiety
- Chapter 6      Coping with Negative Thinking in Depression
- Chapter 15     Coping with Anger

### **Further Reading for Clients**

- Basco, R.M. (1999). Never good enough: Freeing yourself from the chains of perfectionism. New York: Free Press.
- Mallinger, A.E., & DeWyze, J. (1992). Too perfect: When being in control gets out of control. New York: Fawcett Columbine.

### **Further Reading for Therapists**

- Blatt, S. J. (1995). The destructiveness of perfectionism: Implications for the treatment of depression. American Psychologist, *50*, 1003-1020.
- Hewitt, P. L., & Flett, G. L. (1991). Perfectionism in the self and social contexts: Conceptualization, assessment, and association with psychopathology. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, *60*, 456-470.