

# Letting Go

## OF PERFECTIONISM

New research suggests that perfectionism is maladaptive and correlates with depression, anxiety, eating disorders & other mental health problems.

The need to be or appear perfect is not the same as the desire to excel or having high personal standards. While high standards are a part of perfectionism, they alone are not enough to make a person a perfectionist. Perfectionism comes in many different forms each associated with its own set of problems. While some of the problems may be less severe than others, no form of perfectionism is completely problem-free.

- **Socially prescribed perfectionism** Believing that others will value you only if you are perfect has been associated with depression and other problems, including suicide. Why? A suggested reason is that socially prescribed perfectionism has an element of pressure combined with a sense of helplessness and hopelessness. The socially prescribed perfectionist tends to feel that *the better I do, the better I'm expected to do*.
- **Other-oriented perfectionism** The tendency to demand perfection from friends, family, co-workers, etc can be particularly damaging for intimate relationships. If you require your son or daughter to be perfect, and are critical of them, there are going to be relationship problems.
- **Self-oriented perfectionism** Studies of this internally motivated desire to be perfect have found links to mental health problems, particularly eating disorders. Self-oriented perfectionists do fine in situations of low stress but are more likely to become depressed, anxious or suicidal when things go wrong. As perfectionists deal with problems by avoiding them, the hopelessness and psychological distress experienced can be attributed to the interaction between perfectionism and avoidance coping. It is not caused by perfectionism or avoidance coping alone.



The desire to present oneself as perfect has three aspects of self-preservation: advertising one's own perfection, avoiding situations in which one might appear imperfect, and refusing to disclose situations in which they appear imperfect.

### Other Problems

Underlying beliefs around perfectionism are common for achievement-oriented individuals and can lead to tunnel vision. For example, believing that *anything less than perfect is a failure* can lead, despite ambition and the desire to do well, to procrastination and avoidance behaviours. Even after they begin a project this tendency can make it hard for them to continue. If they do not like their first attempt on a project they can find themselves almost paralyzed and fail to complete the project - *an incomplete is not a failure*. It is important to know when a job is done well enough and let it go.

### Treatment

The treatment of perfectionism usually avoids focusing on high personal standards. As perfectionists have likely been told hundreds of times to lower their standards, the therapist who repeats that risks being ignored. Some therapists work on the precursors of perfection that drive a perfectionist's behaviour - the interpersonal needs to be accepted and to be cared for.

## MYTHS OF PERFECTIONISM

**Perfectionism leads to success & fulfillment.** Evidence suggests that given similar levels of talent, skill or intellect, perfectionists perform less successfully than non-perfectionists.

**Perfectionists get things done & do things right.** As perfectionists believe that if it cannot be done perfectly, it is not worth doing, they often have problems with procrastination, missed deadlines, and low productivity.

**Perfectionists are determined to overcome all obstacles to success.** Perfectionists' relentless pursuits result in serious difficulties such as depression, performance and social anxiety - blocks to achievement and success.

**Perfectionists 'just' have enormous desire to please others & be the very best they can.** Unlike perfectionists, great achievers are willing to make mistakes and risk failure. Great achievers view imperfection as part of being human.

## Strategies to Help the Perfectionist

Five strategies to help replace perfectionistic habits with healthier behaviour patterns:

- **List the costs and benefits of trying to be perfect.** You may find that problems with relationships workaholism, eating and substance abuse, and other compulsive behaviours (accompanied by anxiety, feelings of inadequacy, self-criticism, etc) outweigh the benefits of perfectionism.
- **Learn to substitute more realistic, reasonable thoughts for your habitually critical ones.** For example, when you find yourself berating a less than perfect performance, stop, look at, and acknowledge the good parts of the performance. Ask yourself: *Is it a reasonably good performance for the person, given the circumstances?*
- **Be more objective about criticism and yourself.** Avoid viewing criticism as a personal attack and responding defensively. Acknowledge your mistakes and assert your right to make mistakes.
- **Set strict time limits on your projects.** When the time is up move on to another activity. This helps to reduce the procrastination that results from perfectionism.
- **Set more realistic goals.** This will help you realize that imperfect results do not lead to the punitive consequences you anticipated and feared.

## Letting Go

The idea of letting go is a simple concept, but for a perfectionist one of the most difficult strategies to carry out. It requires a conscious decision to- replay past situations, rehearse future situations, and practice with current situations. It also requires the perfectionist to change their perceptions of *how they think things ought to be*. This includes letting go of their expectations of outcome - *if I do this, then that will happen*. Perfectionists need to give themselves permission to release their overly responsible sense of obligation to make everything perfect for themselves and others. They need to become realistic about the limits of their responsibility.

Perfectionists need to ask themselves the question- *Will I feel this stressed about this situation tomorrow, next week, next year or in five years?* The answer is usually no, not if they let it go.

Benefits of learning to let go include:

- acquiring a greater sense of working / being in the present.
- gaining a greater sense of strength and comfort as you lose the fear of the future.
- receiving a greater acceptance by others as you go with the flow.

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**YOUR LOGO**

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