

Canadian Counselling and Psychotherapy Association

Comprehensive Treatment of Perfectionism

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Definition of Perfectionism

Perfectionism is a disposition to regard anything short of perfection as unacceptable

Merriam Webster Dictionary

Definition of Perfectionism

A perfectionist is someone “whose standards are high beyond reach or reason” and “who strains compulsively and unremittingly toward impossible goals and who measures their own worth entirely in terms of productivity and accomplishment.”

David Burns (1980)

Definition of Clinical Perfectionism

“The overdependence of self-evaluation on the determined pursuit (and achievement) of self-imposed, personally demanding standards of performance in at least one salient domain, despite the occurrence of adverse consequences.”

Shafran, Cooper, & Fairburn, 2002

Domains of Perfectionism

- Work (58%)
- Bodily hygiene (54%)
- Studies (43%)
- Physical appearance (40%)
- Social relationships (38%)
- Presentation of documents (37%)
- Spelling (36%)
- Dress (33%)

Stoeber & Stoeber, 2009 (109 college students indicated yes/no to whether they were perfectionistic in each domain)

Domains of Perfectionism

- Way of speaking (28%)
- Romantic relationships (28%)
- Eating habits (25%)
- Health (23%)
- Domestic chores / cleanliness (18%)
- Time management / punctuality (17%)
- Correspondence / mail (17%)
- Leisure activities (17%)
- Oral presentations (17%)

Domains of Perfectionism

- Although some perfectionists exhibit perfectionism across domains, most exhibit perfectionism only in selected domains

Stoeber & Stoeber, 2009

Categorical vs. Dimensional Views

- Taxometric research suggests that dimensional conceptualizations best fit the data.

Broman-Fulks et al., 2008

Transdiagnostic Nature of Perfectionism

- Social and performance anxiety
- Worry and generalized anxiety disorder
- Obsessive-compulsive disorder
- Obsessive-compulsive personality disorder
- Eating disorders
- Body dysmorphic disorder
- Anger
- Physical Health
- Depression

Egan et al., 2011; Molnar et al., 2006

Perfectionism and Psychological Functioning

- When the discrepancy between personal standards and actual academic performance increases (in high school students), depression increases and self-esteem decreases.

Accordino et al., 2000

DSM-IV OC Personality Disorder

- Preoccupied with details, rules, lists, order, organization, schedules
- Perfectionism that interferes with task completion
- Excessively devoted to work and productivity
- Overconscientious, scrupulous, and inflexible about matters of morality, ethics, or values
- Unable to discard worn-out or worthless objects
- Reluctant to delegate tasks or to work with others
- Miserly spending style toward both self and others
- Rigidity and stubbornness

Pathways to Perfectionism

- Genetics (Tozzi et al., 2004)
- Operant conditioning (e.g., reinforcement)
- Classical conditioning
- Observational learning (e.g., modeling)
- Informational or instructional learning

Peer Victimization and Perfectionism

- Recalled history of indirect peer aggression (exclusionary acts, gossiping, rumor spreading) in childhood predicts perfectionism in adults, whereas recalled history of direct aggression (e.g., physical, verbal) does not.

Miller & Vaillancourt, 2007

Social Learning

- Athletes' perceptions of their parents' perfectionism is more predictive of perfectionism among athletes than was the parents' actual levels of perfectionism.

Appleton et al., 2010

Personality and Perfectionism

- Among adolescents (ages 14-19), the trait of *conscientiousness* predicts longitudinal increases in *self-oriented perfectionism* 5 to 8 months later.
- Although the trait of neuroticism is associated with socially prescribed perfectionism, it does not predict longitudinal increases in this trait.

Stoeber, Otto, & Dalbert, 2009



ASSESSMENT OF PERFECTIONISM

Popular Perfectionism Measures

- Frost Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (Frost et al., 1990)
- Hewitt and Flett Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (Hewitt & Flett, 1991)

Frost Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale

Concern over Mistakes

- If I fail at work/school, I am a failure as a person.
- I hate being less than best at things.

Personal Standards

- I set higher goals than most people.
- I am very good at focusing my efforts on attaining a goal.

Doubts about Actions

- I usually have doubts about the simple everyday things I do.
- It takes me a long time to do something right.

Frost Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale

Parental Expectations

- My parents set very high standards for me.
- My parents wanted me to be the best at everything.

Parental Criticism

- As a child, I was punished for doing things less than perfectly.
- My parents never tried to understand my mistakes.

Organization

- Organization is very important to me.
- I am a neat person.

Hewitt and Flett Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale

Self-Oriented Perfectionism

- When I am working on something, I cannot relax until it is perfect.
- I demand nothing less than perfection of myself.

Other-Oriented Perfectionism

- I seldom criticize my friends for accepting second best.
- The people who matter to me should never let me down.

Socially Prescribed Perfectionism

- Those around me readily accept that I can make mistakes too.
- My family expects me to be perfect.

Positive and Negative Perfectionism

Maladaptive Evaluative Concerns

- Hewitt & Flett MPS: SPP
- Frost et al MPS: CM, PE, PC, DA

Positive Striving

- Hewitt & Flett MPS: SOP, OOP
- Frost et al MPS: PS, OR

Bieling et al., 2004; Frost et al., 1993

General Perfectionism Measures

- **Almost Perfect Scale - Revised** (Slaney et al., 2001)
- **Behavioural Domains Questionnaire** (Lee et al., 2011)
- **Burns Perfectionism Scale** (Burns, 1980)
- **Clinical Perfectionism Questionnaire** (Fairburn et al., 2003)
- **Consequences of Perfectionism Scale (COPS;** Kim, 2010)
- **Multidimensional Perfectionism Cognitions Inventory (MPCI;** Kobori, 2006)

General Perfectionism Measures

- **Neurotic Perfectionism Questionnaire** (Mitzman et al., 1994)
- **Perfectionism Cognitions Inventory** (Flett et al., 1998)
- **Perfectionism Inventory** (Hill et al., 2004)
- **Perfectionistic Self-Presentation Scale** (PSPS; Hewitt et al., 2003)
- **Positive and Negative Perfectionism Scale** (PANPS; Terry-Short et al., 1995)

Child Perfectionism Measures

- **Adaptive/Maladaptive Perfectionism Scale** (AMPS; Rice & Preusser, 2002) (for children)
- **Child and Adolescent Perfectionism Scale** (CAPS; Flett et al., 1997)
- **Childhood Retrospective Perfectionism Scale** (CHIRP; Southgate et al., 2008)
- **Perfectionistic Self-Presentation Scale – Junior Form** (PSPS-JR; Hewitt et al., 2011)

Domain-Specific Perfectionism Measures

- Perfectionism in families and relationships
- Perfectionism in sports and athletics
- Perfectionism in body image and eating disorders

Questions to Determine Whether Standards are Overly Perfectionistic

- Are my standards higher than those of other people?
- Am I able to meet my standards? Do I get overly upset if I don't meet my own standards?
- Are other people able to meet my standards? Do I get overly upset if others don't meet my standards?

Questions to Determine Whether Standards are Overly Perfectionistic

- Do my standards help me to achieve my goals or do they get in the way (e.g., by making me overly disappointed or angry when my standards are not met; by making me get less work done, etc.)?
- What would be the costs of relaxing a particular standard or ignoring a rule that I have?
- What would be the benefits of relaxing a specific standard or ignoring a rule that I have?



TREATING PERFECTIONISM

Cognitive Features

- All-or-nothing thinking / should statements
- Excessively high or inflexible standards
- Double standards
- Probability overestimations
- Overgeneralizing
- Being overly focused on details
- Catastrophic thinking
- Excessive need for control
- Biases in attention and memory

Examples of Should Statements

- I should always push myself to achieve
- I should always do things thoroughly
- I should never waste time
- I should always be productive
- I should always be trying to better myself
- I should leave as little time as possible for tasks so I don't waste time, even if I am late
- I should work harder
- I should try to be the best

Egan, Wade, Shafran, & Antony, in press

Changing Perfectionistic Thinking

- Examining the evidence
- Education
- Perspective shifting
- Compromising with self and others
- Hypothesis testing
- Changing social comparison habits
- Looking at the big picture
- Tolerating uncertainty and ambiguity

Identifying Double Standards

- Do you have one set of rules for yourself, and another set of rules for other people?
- Are the rules for yourself harder than your rules for others?

Egan, Wade, Shafran, & Antony, in press

Challenging Double Standards

- Is it fair to have harsher rules for yourself than for everyone else?
- What is the impact of holding a different set of standards for yourself than for others?
- What would you say to a friend who had a harder set of rules for him or herself than others?
- How does it follow that rules need to be harder for yourself than for other people?

Egan, Wade, Shafran, & Antony, in press

Identifying Overgeneralization

- What do you think of yourself as a person overall when you make even just a small mistake?
- What happens to your self-esteem when your performance has not met your standards?

Egan, Wade, Shafran, & Antony, in press

Challenging Overgeneralizing

- How does it follow that someone's worth as a person can be judged from one mistake or one instance of not meeting a goal?
- What is the universal definition that people in society would hold of a "failure?" How do you compare to that definition? In what ways are you similar or different?
- What does your belief that one small makes you are a complete failure do to your self-esteem and mood?

Egan, Wade, Shafran, & Antony, in press

Identifying Should Statements

- What runs through your mind when you think of the "to do" list that you have to get through?
- How often do you say "should" and "must" to yourself when you are thinking of everything you have to do?

Egan, Wade, Shafran, & Antony, in press

Challenging Should Statements

- How does saying “should” to yourself constantly make you feel? In what way does it impact on your sense of self?
- What impact do you think it might have if you applied the sort of pressure you apply on yourself to a close friend?

Egan, Wade, Shafran, & Antony, in press

Behavioral Experiments

General Principles

- Make sure rationale is clear.
- Be clear about the belief to be tested (as well as the alternative or helpful belief).
- Ensure that perceived risk is low, and that experiment is likely to yield useful information.
- Design experiment collaboratively.
- Ensure that predicted outcomes are specific and measurable.

Egan, Wade, Shafran, & Antony, in press

Behavioral Experiments

Steps

- Identify belief to be tested.
- Collaboratively brainstorm possible experiments.
- Elicit predictions and design a method to assess the outcome.
- Anticipate problems and brainstorm solutions.
- Conduct the experiment.
- Review the experiments (and predictions) and draw conclusions.

Egan, Wade, Shafran, & Antony, in press

Behavioral Experiments

Example

- Belief: I must always be busy. It is wrong not to be busy. I could not tolerate being idle. Belief rating = 100%.
- Alternative Belief: It's okay to be idle sometimes.
- Experiment: Sit in a café for 20 minutes and read a newspaper.

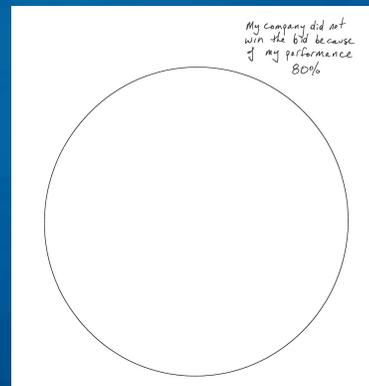
Egan, Wade, Shafran, & Antony, in press

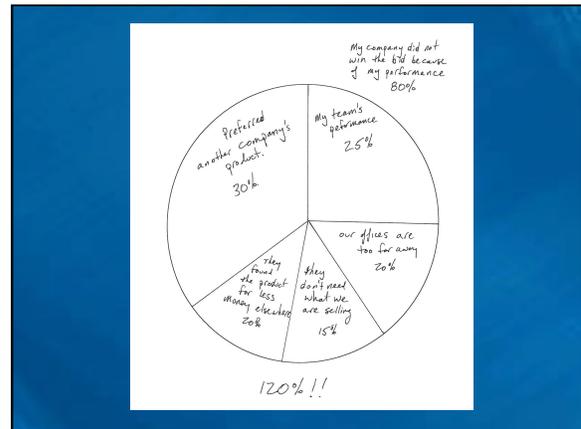
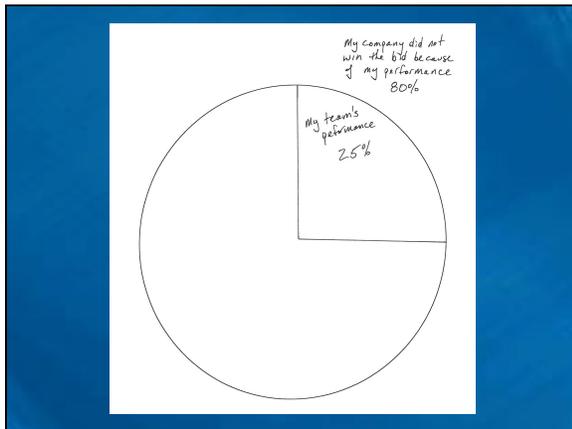
Pie Chart Technique

Example

- David recently gave a presentation (along with his boss and two coworkers) to representatives from another company with the goal of making a big sale.
- The company chose not to purchase from David's group.

Egan, Wade, Shafran, & Antony, in press



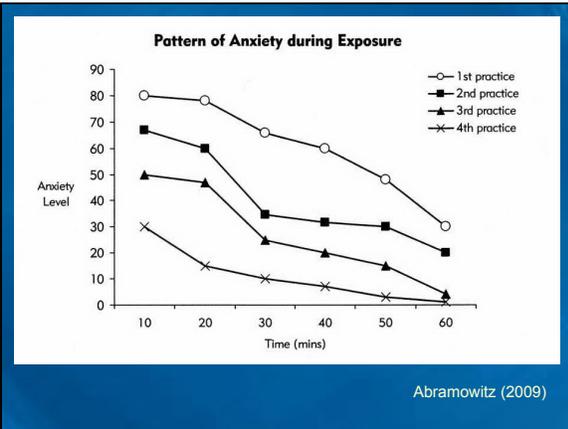


- ### **Behavioral Features**
- Overcompensating
 - Excessive checking and reassurance seeking
 - Repeating and correcting
 - Excessive organizing and list making
 - Procrastination
 - Perseverating for too long on tasks
 - Giving up too soon on tasks

- ### **Behavioral Features**
- Failure to delegate
 - Hoarding and excessive acquiring
 - Avoidance
 - Attempts to change the behavior of others

- ### **Behavioral Strategies**
- Exposure
 - Response prevention
 - Prioritizing
 - Overcoming procrastination
 - Mindfulness and acceptance-based approaches

- ### **Changing Perfectionistic Behaviour Exposure-Based Strategies**
- Design practices that are predictable, structured and planned in advance
 - Continue the practice until anxious predictions are challenged or until discomfort has decreased
 - Practice frequently and schedule practices close together
 - Expect to feel uncomfortable
 - Don't use subtle avoidance strategies
 - Use cognitive strategies to cope with discomfort following practices



Sample Exposure Hierarchy
Fear of Making Mistakes in Front of Others

Item	Anxiety (0-100)
Give a formal presentation about unfamiliar material in front of people I don't know well	99
Throw a party for people from work and prepare an unfamiliar dish	85
Purposely forget my wallet when in line at the store	85
Ask someone to repeat themselves at a meeting	75
Show up for a haircut on the wrong day	60
Have lunch with a co-worker and allow uncomfortable silences	50
Forget my ticket when I pick up my dry cleaning	40

Motivation to Change

- Clinical patients with elevated negative perfectionism report more positive and negative consequences for their perfectionism, and less willingness to change perfectionistic standards, compared to athletes who are low on negative perfectionism.

Egan et al., 2012

DOES PERFECTIONISM RESPOND TO TREATMENT?

Does Treatment Work? - Study 1

- N = 107
- Diagnosis = Social Anxiety Disorder
- Treatment = 12 sessions of group CBT for social phobia
- Ashbaugh, A., Antony, M.M., Liss, A., Summerfeldt, L.J., McCabe, R.E., & Swinson, R.P. (2007). Changes in perfectionism following cognitive-behavioral therapy of social phobia. *Depression and Anxiety*, 24, 169-177.

Does Treatment Work? - Study 1

Measure	Pre	Post	p
SPS	39.08	25.51	< .0001
SIAS	51.95	38.05	< .0001
DASS-Depression	17.07	13.27	< .0001
DASS-Anxiety	13.51	10.17	< .0001
DASS-Stress	19.72	15.88	< .0001

From: Ashbaugh, A., Antony, M.M., Liss, A., Summerfeldt, L.J., McCabe, R.E., & Swinson, R.P. (2007). Changes in perfectionism following cognitive-behavioral therapy of social phobia. *Depression and Anxiety*, 24, 169-177.

Does Treatment Work? - Study 1

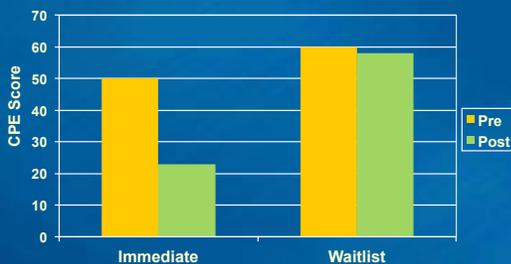
Measure	Pre	Post	p
Concern over Mistakes	29.13	26.40	< .0001
Doubts about Actions	13.65	12.70	< .05
Personal Standards	22.41	22.03	n.s.
Parental Expectations	13.71	13.71	n.s.
Parental Criticism	11.43	11.16	n.s.
Organization	21.94	20.01	< .01
FMPS Total	90.32	85.90	< .01

From: Ashbaugh, A., Antony, M.M., Liss, A., Summerfeldt, L.J., McCabe, R.E., & Swinson, R.P. (2007). Changes in perfectionism following cognitive-behavioural therapy of social phobia. *Depression and Anxiety*, 24, 169-177.

Does Treatment Work? - Study 2

- N = 20
- Participants – high scorers on the *Clinical Perfectionism Examination* and the *Clinical Perfectionism Questionnaire* (Fairburn, Cooper, and Shafran).
- CBT treatment vs. a wait-list control condition
- Treatment = 10 sessions of individual CBT over 8 wks.
- Riley, C., Lee, M., Cooper, Z., Fairburn, C.G., & Shafran, R. (2007). A randomised controlled trial of cognitive-behaviour therapy for clinical perfectionism: A preliminary study. *Behaviour Research and Therapy*, 45, 2221-2231.

Does Treatment Work? - Study 2



Riley, C., Lee, M., Cooper, Z., Fairburn, C.G., & Shafran, R. (2007). A randomised controlled trial of cognitive-behaviour therapy for clinical perfectionism: A preliminary study. *Behaviour Research and Therapy*, 45, 2221-2231. CPE = *Clinical Perfectionism Examination*.

Does Treatment Work? - Study 3

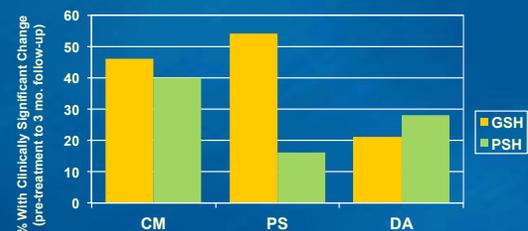
- N = 49
- Participants – high scorers (84 or higher) on *Frost Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale*
- Guided self-help (eight 50-minute sessions) vs. pure self-help (no therapist)
- Treatment based on first edition of *When Perfect Isn't Good Enough* (Antony & Swinson, 1998).
- Pleva, J., & Wade, T.D. (2006). Guided self-help versus pure self-help for perfectionism: A randomised controlled trial. *Behaviour Research and Therapy*, 45, 849-861.

Does Treatment Work? - Study 3

Results

- Generally, participants in both groups showed improvement on measures of perfectionism, OCD symptoms, depression, and anxiety.
- Overall, improvement was greater in the GSH condition than the PSH condition
- Generally, gains were maintained at 3 month follow-up.

Does Treatment Work? - Study 3



Pleva, J., & Wade, T.D. (2006). Guided self-help versus pure self-help for perfectionism: A randomised controlled trial. *Behaviour Research and Therapy*, 45, 849-861.

GSH = Guided Self-Help; PSH = Pure Self-Help

CM = Concern about Mistakes; PS = Personal Standards; DA = Doubts about Actions

Other Findings

- Providing feedback to perfectionists on their perfectionism can help to reduce psychological distress associated with maladaptive perfectionism (Aldea et al., 2010).

Aldea et al., 2010

Perfectionism Self- Help Readings

- Antony, M.M., & Swinson, R.P. (2009). *When perfect isn't good enough: Strategies for coping with perfectionism, second edition*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications.
- Shafran, R., Egan, S., & Wade, T. (2010). *Overcoming perfectionism: A self-help guide using cognitive behavioral techniques*. London, UK: Constable & Robinson.

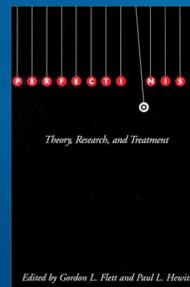


Perfectionism Self-Help for Children



- Burns, E.F. (2008). *Nobody's perfect: A story for children about perfectionism*. Washington, DC: imagination press.

Perfectionism Book for Professionals



- Flett, G.L., & Hewitt, P.L. (2002). *Perfectionism: Theory, research, and treatment*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

Perfectionism Treatment DVD

- Antony, M.M. (2008). *Cognitive behavioral therapy for perfectionism over time* (DVD Video). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

