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

Categorical vs. Dimensional Views

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

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

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.

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 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

**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)

**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)

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

**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)
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?

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?

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 a complete failure do to your self-esteem and mood?

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?
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?

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.

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.

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.

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.
**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 Strategies**

- Exposure
- Response prevention
- Prioritizing
- Overcoming procrastination
- Mindfulness and acceptance-based approaches

**Behavioral Features**

- Failure to delegate
- Hoarding and excessive acquiring
- Avoidance
- Attempts to change the behavior of others

**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
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 Treatment Work? - Study 1

- \(N = 107\)
- Diagnosis = Social Anxiety Disorder
- Treatment = 12 sessions of group CBT for social phobia

Does Treatment Work? - Study 1

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Does Treatment Work? - Study 1

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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.

Does Treatment Work? - Study 2


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)

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


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).

Perfectionism Self-Help Readings


Perfectionism Self-Help for Children


Perfectionism Book for Professionals


Perfectionism Treatment DVD