



---

# Perfectionism - a CBT approach

## Is perfectionism problematic?

Having high standards for yourself is not necessarily problematic in itself, and can be extremely useful, facilitating academic and personal fulfilment. It can promote self-efficacy, enhance our lives or may have enabled you to come to the University of Cambridge.

However, there are times when having high standards isn't so useful and prevents us from achieving certain goals. It can impede academic and social functioning or be associated with problems such as anxiety and depression. It can also maintain significant psychological distress.

This leaflet briefly describes one model of unhelpful perfectionism and suggests some simple strategies that can be useful to manage it. It might be worth noting that this leaflet is not perfect so it might only be partly useful to some of you.

## A CBT model of perfectionism

There are many different ways to conceptualise this problem. One model<sup>1</sup> that you may find helpful specifically addresses negative self-evaluation when standards are not met, rather than the setting of impossibly high standards in the first place. In other words, the striving to achieve high standards isn't seen as the issue but, crucially, the negative response to perceived failure is regarded as the problem.

---

If our self-worth is overly dependent on striving and achievement, this model suggests that we not only set standards accordingly but also experience some form of cognitive bias (see point 1. below) in the process. If we don't meet these standards we then become self-critical and this, of course, impacts on our self-worth. Even if we successfully meet these standards our perfectionism reappraises them as insufficiently demanding and we respond by setting even higher standards.

## **Some simple strategies**

Unhelpful perfectionism can be persistent. It seems to be self-perpetuating. Successful strategies therefore need to target the ways in which it is maintained.

Six maintenance mechanisms for perfectionism have been identified<sup>2</sup> and are now described with suggested strategies for managing them:

### ***1. Cognitive biases***

Unhelpful perfectionism generates stress that in turn influences the way in which we view the circumstances and situations of our lives. Quite unintentionally, we can develop beliefs and unhelpful thinking styles that aren't logical or rational. This is a common response to human problems and not linked with intellect or academic competences.

---

---

Typical examples of these unhelpful thinking styles include:

#### ALL-OR-NOTHING THINKING

This occurs when a situation is viewed in extremes, also known as black and white thinking, e.g. 'If I haven't done at least eight hours of work by the end of the day I will have failed', whereas a more helpful perspective is probably more nuanced.

#### ANTICIPATING NEGATIVE OUTCOMES

This happens when a negative prediction is made - predicting, fortune telling - and/or a catastrophic outcome is seen as inevitable, often characterised by 'what if' questions e.g. 'What if I don't do well in my degree? My life will inevitably be bleak and dull.'

#### DISQUALIFYING OR DISCOUNTING THE POSITIVE

This is apparent when positive qualities and achievements are overlooked or regarded as irrelevant e.g. 'I have achieved well academically so far, but this challenge is beyond me, and there is no way I will be able to do it.'

#### EMOTIONAL REASONING

This occurs when something is believed to be the case because it is 'felt' (whereas, of course, our feelings are not facts) e.g. 'I don't feel like I have done as much work as other people, so am sure I will let myself down.'

---

---

## MENTAL FILTER

This is found when specific negative details are focused on and the broader picture is disregarded e.g. focusing on one difficult conversation or interaction with someone, rather than putting it in the context of your friendship/relationship.

## OVER-GENERALISATION

This takes place when a sweeping negative conclusion goes far beyond the current situation e.g. 'I got really anxious in that seminar group - anxiety is always going to get the better of me and stop me from achieving things that I want in life.'

## 'SHOULD' AND 'MUST' STATEMENTS

These involve precise fixed expectations that lead to an over-estimation of negative consequences if these expectations are not met e.g. 'I should always prioritise work. If I don't, I will very quickly end up letting myself down and failing.'

## MALADAPTIVE THINKING

This focuses on problematic thoughts that may actually be quite accurate, but the ruminative process of dwelling on these thoughts creates greater anxiety and interferes with progress.

### ***Suggested strategy***

Write down your anxious thoughts and identify any unhelpful thinking styles. Once you recognise an unhelpful thought you are in a position to challenge it. Consider evidence that contradicts your thought. Is there another way of viewing your situation?

---

---

This can help you to discredit unhelpful thoughts and enhance your self-worth.

## **2. *Setting of strict rules (with stringent adherence)***

Unhelpful perfectionism thrives on absolute rules and unconditional compliance that does not take account of the current circumstances.

A useful start is to identify any unhelpful thinking styles you may have. You might also find it helpful to consider your response to the laws and rules that you encounter in your everyday life – is your adherence equally rigorous for all of them?

This can help you identify evidence of any variation in the application of rules and your response to them, which can highlight the irrational bias in your thinking.

## **3. *Failure motivates self-criticism***

Sadly, this is a common problem, and one that is often exacerbated by competitive learning environments. Would you encourage your loved ones to criticise themselves? No? Then why do it to yourself?

Think of the nicest, kindest, most understanding and supportive thing that you could say to your closest friend in a time of crisis – and then say it to yourself.

This helps to promote self-compassion.

---

---

#### ***4. Absence of positive emotional reaction to success***

We all need to learn to find pleasure in our successes. If we haven't had the opportunity to learn this at an earlier point in our lives, success can feel quite empty.

At the end of each day, take some time out to review the events of the day and identify anything that did not go completely wrong. It doesn't matter if it might have gone better. If it didn't go wrong, for the purpose of this exercise class it as successful. Then make a plan to give yourself some sort of reward the following day. Think about it and look forward to it.

This helps to behaviourally reinforce achievement by having fun (a positive emotional reaction).

#### ***5. Fear of failure promotes avoidance***

Quite naturally, we tend to put things off if we believe that we're going to fail.

Instead, focus on the task, not the outcome. Stop thinking and start doing. Sports psychologists use this to good effect and it can be extremely effective when dealing with unhelpful perfectionism.

Learn to adopt a certain behaviour regardless of the feared consequence (in this case, failure).

---

---

## **6. Imminent failure promotes escape**

Sometimes the erroneous belief that failure is unavoidable leads to the task being abandoned before its completion.

As with 5. (above) keep focused on the behaviour and simply keep going. Alternatively, take a break, write down your anxious thoughts and identify any unhelpful thinking styles.

This can enable you to further develop your self-efficacy by using behavioural and cognitive approaches.

### **Useful resources**

You'll find information on a range of resources to help address perfectionism, as well as other issues, on the University Counselling Service website: [www.counselling.cam.ac.uk/selfhelp](http://www.counselling.cam.ac.uk/selfhelp)

### *References*

1. Shafran, R., Cooper, Z. and Fairburn, C.G. (2002) Clinical perfectionism: a cognitive-behavioural analysis, *Behaviour Research and Therapy*, 40, pp. 773-791
2. Riley, C. and Shafran, R. (2005) Clinical perfectionism: A preliminary qualitative analysis, *Behavioural and Cognitive Psychotherapy*, 33(3), pp. 369-374

# University Counselling Service

---

University Counselling Service  
2/3 Bene't Place, Lensfield Rd  
Cambridge, CB2 1EL

Tel: 01223 332865

Fax: 01223 760990

Email: [counsellingreception@admin.cam.ac.uk](mailto:counsellingreception@admin.cam.ac.uk)

Web: <http://www.counselling.cam.ac.uk>