



## “Psychology Works” Fact Sheet: Perfectionism

### What is perfectionism?

Perfectionism is a multidimensional personality style that is associated with a large number of psychological, interpersonal, and achievement-related difficulties.

It is not a disorder but a vulnerability factor that produces problems for children, adolescents, and adults. People often confuse perfectionism with achievement striving or conscientiousness.

Perfectionism is distinct from these attitudes. It is a maladaptive pattern of behaviours that can result in a large number of problems. Achievement striving and conscientiousness involve appropriate and tangible expectations (often very difficult but attainable goals) and produce a sense of satisfaction and rewards.

Perfectionism, on the other hand, involves inappropriate levels of expectations and intangible goals (i.e. perfection) and a constant lack of satisfaction, irrespective of performance.

Perfectionism is a chronic source of stress, often leaving people feeling like failures even when other people see them as successful. Perfectionistic individuals require themselves to be perfect. This constant expectation is a source of stress and pressure and contributes to maladaptive ways of coping.

### Dimensions of Perfectionism

Perfectionism involves three major components: perfectionism traits, perfectionistic interpersonal behaviours and perfectionistic thoughts concerning mistakes, expectations, failures, and self-criticism.

*Perfectionism traits* are enduring personality characteristics that reflect the need to be perfect:

- **Self-oriented perfectionism** is the requirement for the self to be perfect.
- **Other-oriented perfectionism** is the requirement that others (e.g., spouse, children, and other people in general) should be perfect.
- **Socially prescribed perfectionism** is the perception that others (e.g., parents, boss, and other people in general) require oneself to be perfect.

*Perfectionistic behaviours* involve the need to appear or seem perfect to others:

- **Perfectionistic self-promotion** involves the presentation of a perfect self-image to others.
- **Nondisplay of imperfection** involves the avoidance or concealment of any behaviour that could be judged by others as imperfect.
- **Nondisclosure of imperfection** involves the avoidance of verbally disclosing imperfections to others.





Finally, individuals with perfectionism will often engage in negative *thoughts* centered around the need to be or appear perfect and with harsh self-criticism, worry over errors, and self-blame.

## Problems associated with Perfectionism

Individuals with these perfectionistic traits, behaviours and thoughts can experience a variety of negative outcomes. These problems can be found with perfectionistic children, adolescents, and adults. Here are some problems that have been found to be associated with perfectionism:

### *Psychological/Psychiatric Problems*

- Anorexia nervosa, anxiety, binge eating and bulimic disorders, depression, suicide thoughts and attempts.

### *Relationship Problems*

- Low self-compassion and the tendency to feel responsible for fulfilling others' needs at the expense of one's own, poor marital satisfaction, sexual dissatisfaction, and excessive anger towards others, social disconnection, difficulties with intimacy, loneliness, and social hopelessness (i.e. having negative expectations concerning future relationships).

### *Physical Health Problems*

- Prolonged elevations in stress responses, sleep problems, chronic headaches, cardio-vascular responses, and early death.

### *Achievement Problems*

- Workaholism, burnout, fear of failure, procrastination and self-handicapping (i.e. where individuals spend time finding excuses for poor performance rather than preparing for a performance).

### *Treatment Problems*

- Negative attitudes toward seeking help with professionals, difficulties in self-disclosing personal information which negatively impacts treatment, not being able to engage in treatment.

## How can psychology help?

Because perfectionism is an ingrained personality style, psychotherapy is very appropriate and often tends to be fairly intensive and longer term (often more than a year).

Recent research has demonstrated the effectiveness of both group and individual therapy for treating perfectionism and its associated complications. There has been promising evidence for dynamic-relational group therapy, psychodynamic/interpersonal group therapy and cognitive-behavioural group and individual therapy in reducing perfectionism and its attendant difficulties.





Several Canadian studies are currently underway that focus on both fine-tuning current treatment approaches and evaluating the effectiveness of these treatments in children, adolescents and adults.

## Where do I go for more information on Perfectionism?

For more information visit the following:

- The Perfectionism and Psychopathology Lab at Hewitt Lab FAQs - <https://hewittlab.psych.ubc.ca/faq-2/>.
- Hewitt, P. L., Flett, G. L., & Mikail, S. F. (2017) *Perfectionism: A relational approach to conceptualization, assessment, and treatment*. New York: Guilford
- Greenspon, T. (2002) *Freeing our families from perfectionism*. Minneapolis: Free Spirit.
- Egan, Sarah J., Tracey D. Wade, Roz Shafran, and Martin M. Antony. *Cognitive-behavioral treatment of perfectionism*. Guilford Publications, 2016.

**You can consult with a registered psychologist** to find out if psychological interventions might be of help to you. Provincial, territorial and some municipal associations of psychology often maintain referral services. For the names and coordinates of provincial and territorial associations of psychology, go to <http://www.cpa.ca/public/whatisapsychologist/PTassociations/>.

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Your opinion matters! Please contact us with any questions or comments about any of the *Psychology Works* Fact Sheets: [factsheets@cpa.ca](mailto:factsheets@cpa.ca)

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