

Counselling Services

PERFECTIONISM

Perfectionism is the propensity to generate debilitating emotions and unproductive behaviour by setting unrealistic high standards for one's performance, rigidly adhering to these standards, and equating self-worth with one's performance.

It is common for university students to go through a phase of difficulty with perfectionism as they make the transition from high school to university.

Symptoms:

Perfectionistic thinking is relatively common, particularly in a competitive university environment. With most people, perfectionist struggles are manageable, minor difficulties. More pronounced difficulties with perfectionism can show up in a number of forms.

- Extensive procrastination, because the person cannot free her/himself from perfectionistic demands long enough to begin writing, studying, etc.
- Heightened anxiety caused by perfectionistic "what if-ing" about upcoming events (tests, speeches, dates, etc.), which can lead to high stress levels and fatigue caused by worrying incessantly about performance and adequacy.
- Depressed mood due to perfectionistic beating up on oneself when one's performance falls beneath one's rigid expectations.
- Lack of enjoyment in life, because perfectionism prevents one from enjoying rewards and leisure when there are any unjumped hurdles to contemplate (and there always are).

What Can Help:

The first step in addressing your perfectionistic tendencies is to assess the level of your difficulty by considering the following questions:

- Do you engage in dichotomous, right-wrong thinking?
- Do you construe your goals as necessities for feeling good about yourself more than as achievements that would be desirable but not necessary?
- Do you tend to worry about undone tasks in the future without giving yourself credit for feeling relief for tasks you have completed?
- Do you selectively attend to your mistakes and overlook your successes?
- Do your feelings of self-worth go up and down with your judgment?
- If you answered "yes" to several of these questions, perfectionism is probably a relatively strong trait for you, particularly if some of the indicators of perfectionistic difficulty described above are present.

What can I do to prevent perfectionism from becoming a problem:

To avoid becoming overwhelmed by perfectionistic thinking, experiment with some of the following strategies:

1. Begin a conscious campaign to tune into and moderate your perfectionistic thinking.
2. Monitor your "internal dialogue" – the phrases you mutter or videos you run in your mind.

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PERFECTIONISM (cont.)

What are your common perfectionistic “mental ruts”?

1. Dichotomous thinking (black-white, categorical classifications)?
 2. Catastrophizing (making mountains out of mole hills)?
 3. Selective attention (blaming yourself for let-downs but not rewarding yourself for successes)?
- Cultivate a more soothing, self-nurturing “coping dialogue” that enables you to be a good friend or good parent to yourself (“I can’t do everything perfectly. It’s O.K. for me to set priorities and then do the best I can”).
 - Challenge your perfectionistic thought system by purposely experimenting with deviating from it (e.g., resist your tendency to engage in overkill the night before the exam and then see how things work out).
 - Affirm your humanness by recognizing that your self-worth is independent of any single performance.

QUT Counselling Services offers professional assistance with this and other issues

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