



Perfectionism



Perfectionism involves striving to achieve standards that are inflexible and unrelenting. Moreover, at the heart of perfectionism is an excessive fear that making mistakes might make us less successful, likeable or even less worthy.



What is perfectionism?

Paradoxically, perfectionists run the risk of being LESS successful than non-perfectionists because the fear of mistakes makes it hard to be creative, innovative or even open to new ideas.

Perfectionism can impact many different domains in life including performance at work, social life, physical appearance, and organisation. At university, perfectionism often leads to procrastination as we delay starting or handing in assignments because of the fear that it won't be good enough.



Am I a perfectionist?

Some common types of perfectionistic behaviours include:

- Difficulty making decisions.
- Regularly seeking reassurance.
- Excessive planning, list making, and research without any follow through.
- Giving up easily e.g. "If I can't do it perfectly, first go, then there is no point."
- Procrastinating - putting off starting something for fear that it won't be good enough.
- Checking and re-checking your work.
- Avoiding tasks/situations in which you feel you may 'fail'.
- Agonising over small details e.g. wording in an email.

The cycle of perfectionism

Because our standards for performance are so high when we approach a task/goal, like starting an assignment, it activates negative or unhelpful thoughts such as “I am going to fail” or concerns like “is it original enough?” Perfectionistic thinking generates discomfort about the task/goal as we tend to look for mistakes or signs of failure. As a result, we experience an urge to escape what is generating the uncomfortable feeling.

Engaging in procrastination activities allows us to avoid the discomfort momentarily, which feels rewarding and works to increase the likelihood that we procrastinate next time around.

Strategies for overcoming perfectionism

To overcome perfectionism, we need to adjust our performance standards from unrelenting to sustainable. The below strategies can be helpful in pushing back at perfectionism:

1. Identify the pros and cons of perfectionism

Change is hard, so it is important to remind ourselves regularly why we are putting ourselves through it. Write down the pros and cons of perfectionism and when you catch yourself being perfectionistic, remind yourself of the negative consequences of perfectionism.

2. Set sustainable goals

Rather than aiming for perfection, set goals that are flexible and attainable within the timeframe and resources available to you.

3. Allocate realistic time limits and stick to them

For many students, striving for excellence means spending too much time researching and writing assignments, resulting in late penalties and all-nighters. Before starting your assignment, create a realistic timeline for how much time you can afford to spend researching, planning, and writing each paragraph—and stick to it.

4. Focus on the task, not the outcome

Focusing on the outcome of a task (e.g. Will it be original enough?) can often lead to procrastination or over-working. Try breaking tasks down into smaller, manageable chunks to stay focused on the task rather than the outcome. Once you complete one small task, focus on which to do next and resist the temptation to think about the final product.

5. Celebrate mistakes

Remind yourself regularly that it is ok to make mistakes. Each time you catch yourself making a mistake, instead of berating yourself, look for the lesson learnt and tell yourself: “Oh well, but at least I learnt...”

6. Don't put all your eggs in one basket

If you spend all your time studying, then it is likely your self-worth becomes highly dependent on your academic achievement. Loosening the grip of perfectionism means increasing the number of meaningful and vital activities you engage in. Balance your life by actively pursuing activities outside of study such as sports, art, university clubs and societies. Find the things besides study that matter most to you.

Counselling and Psychological Services (CAPS)

+61 2 8627 8433
caps.admin@sydney.edu.au
sydney.edu.au/counselling

Level 5, Jane Foss Russell Building
Opening hours: 9am to 4.30pm,
Monday to Friday

Crisis contacts

Ambulance/Fire/Police: 000
Lifeline (24 hours): 13 11 14
Mental Health Access Line: 1800 011 511