

WELLNESS TIPS

PERFECTIONISM

Many students describe themselves as being a perfectionist, that these high self-expectations provide motivation to be productive and reach one's goals. However, there can be a downside to perfectionism when it makes life more difficult.

Researchers disagree about the definition of perfectionism. Some say the need to be perfect is never helpful, that it is associated with unreachable goals, focus on past and possible future mistakes, worry about others' disapproval, fear of failure, and can be accompanied by stress, anxiety, and depression and other health problems. There is a sense of never being good enough. Other researchers contend there are adaptive aspects to perfectionism, that it can be motivating, contribute to persistence and organization in working towards one's goals. Adaptive perfectionism doesn't encompass all aspects of one's life or interfere with ability to adjust if the goal is not reached.

PERFECTIONISM MIGHT BE DISRUPTIVE IF YOU:

- have trouble meeting your standards and self-expectations
- frequently receive feedback that your standards are too high
- miss deadlines, don't complete tasks
- procrastinate and get stuck in preparation or analysis mode
- have trouble prioritizing; everything seems equally important
- are rarely satisfied with your performance; you always could have done better
- have feelings of failure, anxiety, depression
- dismiss and discount extenuating circumstances
- have problems in relationships because others don't meet your standards

WHAT YOU CAN DO:

- Identify long term goals – considering past achievements, what you want and need
- Make your goals sequential. As you meet one short term goal, move on to the next
- Identify your priorities. What is most important? What can be good enough?
- Create a plan based on your priorities and available information. Stick to your plan and trust that you made a reasonable decision. Don't necessarily change it because you become anxious or stressed. Decisions are less well thought out at these times and can be impulsive.
- Be flexible. Have back-up plans. Make changes if indicated. Seek help if needed.

- Include reasonable time expectations.
- Practice not being perfect. Arrive a little late. Quit working in the allotted time, even if you aren't completely done. Make a mistake on purpose.
- Break projects into manageable sections (both work and time)
- Create a structure that will facilitate progress. Study with or beside someone, make commitments for deadlines with someone, place check-in calls.
- Don't set yourself up for failure. If you are exhausted by 9PM, don't study until 11:30. Sleep/rest helps consolidate learning and you're not being effective anyway.
- Focus on the process of doing an activity, not just the end-result. Recognize what you are gaining through the process.
- Pay attention to your thoughts. Unhelpful thinking patterns include:
 - All-or nothing thinking - either it's acceptable or it isn't
 - Catastrophic thinking – “this will be a failure”
 - Negative predicting – “I know I won't . . . ”
 - Should statements – “I should/should not. . . ”

Practice challenging these thoughts:

- How is this thought helping you?
- How would someone you trust reply to this thought?
- Do you have any evidence that challenges this thought?

Don't confuse perfectionist expectations with high standards and desire to excel. They aren't the same thing. Giving up perfectionistic expectations allows for moderating self-imposed stress; planning and acting more effectively to address concerns and demands and direct your energy; and working towards goals in a way that is both emotionally and physically healthy.

American Psychological Association. “The Many Faces of Perfectionism.” November 2003, Vol.34, No.10. <https://www.apa.org/monitor/nov03/manyfaces>

Verywell mind. “Healthy and Unhealthy Perfectionism.” Owen Kelly. May 3, 2020. <https://www.verywellmind.com/what-is-perfectionism-2510538>

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign Counseling Center. “Perfectionism.” <https://counselingcenter.illinois.edu/brochures/perfectionism>

If you would like to talk with an MSCC counselor further, feel free to schedule an appointment.
And, as always, contact the MSCC with questions or concerns.

Stay safe and stay healthy!

Liz Schacht elizabeth-shacht@uiowa.edu

MEDICAL STUDENT COUNSELING CENTER

osac-mscc@uiowa.edu 319-335-8056 1240 MERF