

WELLNESS TIPS

PERFECTIONISM

Many students describe themselves as being a perfectionist, with the belief that it provides motivation to be productive and reach one's goals. However, there can be a downside to perfectionism, making life more difficult.

Experts who study perfectionism disagree on the definition. Some firmly believe the need to be perfect is never helpful, that it is associated with unreachable goals, focuses on past and possible future mistakes, contributes to worry about others' disapproval, and reinforces fear of failure. There is a sense of never being good enough. Research shows a correlational relationship between perfectionism and stress, anxiety, and depression and other health problems. Others contend perfectionism can be adaptive in motivating and contributing to persistence and organization in working towards one's goals. They describe adaptive perfectionism as not encompassing all aspects of one's life, but specific areas and not interfering with one's ability to adjust if a goal is not reached.

PERFECTIONISM MIGHT BE DISRUPTIVE IF YOU:

- Consistently have trouble meeting your standards and self-expectations
- Frequently receive feedback that your standards are too high
- Have a pattern of missing deadlines, or not completing tasks
- Procrastinate and get stuck in preparation or analysis mode
- Have trouble prioritizing; everything seems equally important
- Are rarely satisfied with your performance because you "could have done better"
- Have feelings of failure, anxiety, depression
- Dismiss and discount extenuating circumstances
- Have relationship problems because others do not meet your standards

WHAT YOU CAN DO:

- Identify long term goals, taking into consideration past achievements and 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. Do not necessarily change the plan

because you become anxious or stressed. Decisions are less well thought out at these times and can be impulsive.

- But be flexible. Have back-up plans and make changes if indicated.
 - Include reasonable time expectations.
 - Practice not being perfect. Arrive a little late. Quit working in the allotted time, even if you have not completed a project to your satisfaction. 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.
 - Do not set yourself up for failure. If you are exhausted by 9PM, do not study until 11:30. Sleep/rest helps consolidate learning and you are not being effective anyway.
 - Focus on the process of doing an activity, not just the end-result. Recognize what you are enjoying or gaining through the process.
 - Pay attention to your thoughts. Unhelpful thinking patterns include:
 - All-or nothing thinking - either it is 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?
- Seek help if needed to receive feedback and review your expectations

Do not confuse high standards and desire to excel with the desire to be perfect. They are not the same thing. High standards are part of perfectionism but alone are not enough to make a person a perfectionist. Giving up perfectionistic expectations allows for 1. moderating self-imposed stress; 2. planning and acting more effectively to address concerns and demands and direct your energy; and 3. 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>

Verywellmind.com . "Healthy and Unhealthy Perfectionism." Owen Kelly. July 24, 2020.

<https://www.verywellmind.com/what-is-perfectionism-2510538>

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign Counseling Center. "Perfectionism."

<https://counselingcenter.illinois.edu/brochures/perfectionism>

Check the MSCC Website for past Wellness Tips <https://medicine.uiowa.edu/md/student-support/student-counseling/mscc-wellness-programs-and-resources>

Feel free to contact the MSCC to talk with a counselor or schedule an appointment for questions and concerns.

Stay safe and stay well!

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