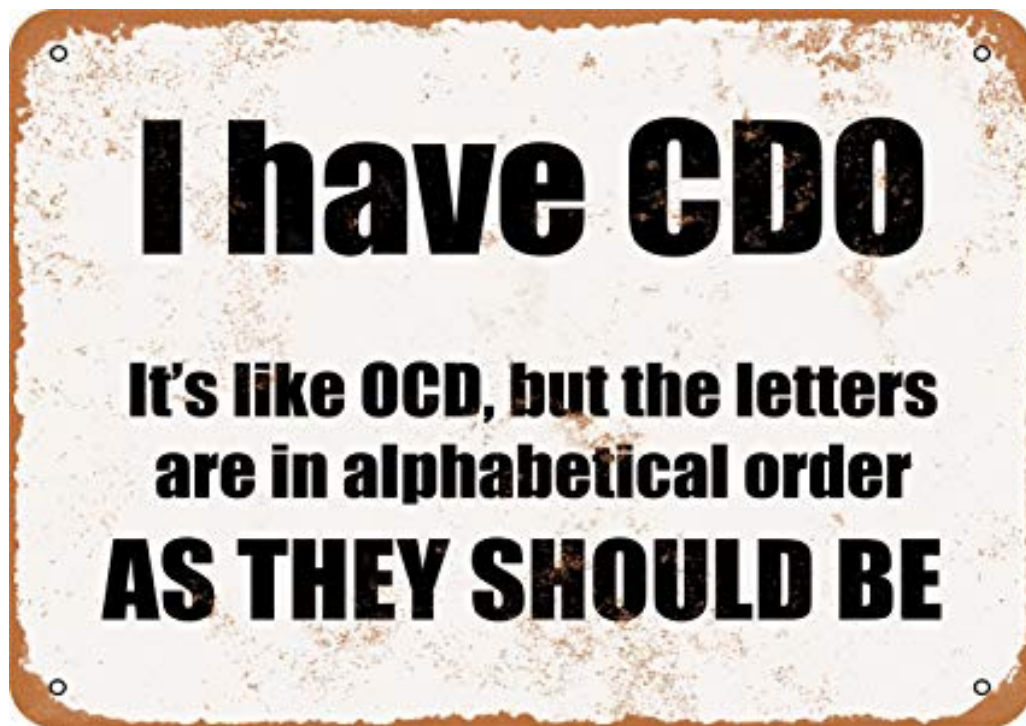


How To Overcome Perfectionism: 4 Secrets From Research

bakadesuyo.com/2018/07/perfectionism/

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Before we commence with the festivities, I wanted to thank everyone for helping my first book become a *Wall Street Journal* bestseller. To check it out, [click here](#).

We all know someone who needs everything to be “just right.” Someone who spends way too long on even simple tasks – often driving themselves and others crazy in the process.

Whether it's with work, with chores or in relationships, many of us have an area of life where we're total perfectionists. And while the thing we're focused on gets better because of our high standards, oftentimes a lot of other things suffer. And sometimes the thing that suffers is us.

When perfectionism shows up, it often brings its close friends: depression, anxiety and anger.

From [When Perfect Isn't Good Enough: Strategies for Coping with Perfectionism](#)

People with high levels of perfectionism (particularly self-oriented perfectionism and socially prescribed perfectionism) are at a greater risk of experiencing depression than nonperfectionists, especially during periods of stress (for example, at school, work, and in their relationships) and after experiencing failure (Hewitt and Flett 1990; 1993).

Oh, one other little thing — it can also kill you:

After baseline assessment of health and personality traits as predictors of mortality, 450 participants were followed over a period of 6.5 years. Consistent with our hypotheses, findings demonstrated that risk of death was significantly greater for high scorers in perfectionism and neuroticism, compared to low scorers at the time of base line.

And while I'm sure your death would be three times as efficient as the average person's, perhaps that's something we can agree to procrastinate on, okay? Perfectionism is a problem you can fix.

From When Perfect Isn't Good Enough: Strategies for Coping with Perfectionism:

Riley et al. (2007) used strategies... to provide ten sessions of treatment designed to help people who suffer with high levels of perfectionism. In this study, the symptoms of 75 percent of the participants were significantly improved following treatment.

With some insight from When Perfect Isn't Good Enough: Strategies for Coping with Perfectionism and Too Perfect: When Being in Control Gets Out of Control we're going to learn, um... how to get better at being worse? Okay, that didn't come out right. Superiority through inferiority...?

Anyway, you know what I mean. Let's get to it...

What's So Wrong With Trying To Improve?

"Trying to get better" isn't perfectionism any more than having a single beer is alcoholism. But when you're drinking so much that you get fired from your job, it's a problem. And when you're so focused on doing things "right" that a lot of other things start going wrong, well, bingo.

Because, in the end, real perfectionism isn't about "having high standards." It's about control. Trying to have an impossible, irrational level of control over a world that is, by and large, uncontrollable.

From Too Perfect: When Being in Control Gets Out of Control:

As hard as the best-intentioned, most conscientious person might try, it is impossible to control every aspect of one's existence; we are vulnerable. Despite such lip service to these truths, however, somewhere near the center of their inner being, far from their conscious awareness, obsessives are trying to deny this reality. Their subtle but constant efforts to control everything in the world around them (and inside them) are an attempt to do the impossible: to guarantee security; to assure safe passage through the risks and uncertainties of living. Sometimes these efforts may "work" for years. Their conscientiousness and thoroughness bring obsessives admiration in their workplace... And the rewards for being responsible, consistent, alert to details, safety-conscious, and well organized are legion. But all this security comes at a price... Many obsessives suffer the endless agony of having to do everything well—an unnecessary imperative that can ruin even the most enjoyable of activities... They struggle daily under the weight of a massive inner rulebook, an overgrown sense of duty, responsibility, and fairness.

A perfectionistic outlook is no fun. You live in the future, and the present is a high-stakes situation where every mistake has enormous ramifications later. You're under perpetual threat, constantly scanning for worst-case scenarios, always trying to dodge any potential for error or criticism.

And those possessing this toxic level of vigilance often hold others (commonly known as "mortals") to the same standards, lacking compassion or flexibility. This alienates such lesser beings and results in a lack of trust in them, leaving you unable to delegate or realistically cooperate.

So why don't perfectionists just change?

Because having high standards and working hard really does produce results. And that's what's so insidious about the problem. Being conscientious and thorough are praised, workaholism is among the most acceptable of addictions and we often throw around maxims like "you can never be too careful." (Spoiler alert: actually, you can.)

From a study aptly titled, "Doing better but feeling worse":

Students with high maximizing tendencies secured jobs with 20 percent higher starting salaries than did students with low maximizing tendencies. However, maximizers were less satisfied than satisficers with the jobs they obtained, and experienced more negative affect throughout the job-search process.

But when you're rewarded all your life for being thorough, detailed, and producing high quality results, it doesn't merely become a habit — it becomes your identity.

From Too Perfect: When Being in Control Gets Out of Control:

The non-perfectionist doesn't need to be right all the time. His security doesn't depend upon having a spotless record or being viewed as the ideal person. But when he does achieve a goal or overcome an obstacle, he feels gratification, fulfillment, even joy. The perfectionist, on the other hand, is apt to experience any given task or interaction as a test that will reflect his adequacy. So it's always important for him to do things correctly, know the answer, make the "right" decision... To perfectionists, being wrong isn't something negligible. It's a threat to the very essence of their self-image...

So many perfectionists don't think they have a problem — it's this world full of slackers producing all the grief. The qualities they are most proud of are often the ones causing their problems. And in their chosen arena perfectionists definitely produce great results...

What they are consistently blind to are the costs.

(To learn more about the science of a successful life, check out my bestselling book [here](#).)

Are you relating to this? Or do you know someone else who might? Alrighty, time to get out the toolbox and learn how to fix what's already "perfect"...

1) Reevaluate Your Standards

That's a polite way of saying, "get confirmation that your expectations are completely out of whack." Plain and simple: you need a reality check that includes results and the costs involved.

You need to find out what normal standards are. You want to get some accurate information to counter your very unrealistic beliefs and expectations — and prove to yourself just how irrational they are. A common problem perfectionists face is that they never relax their standards and so it's impossible for them to see that their level of effort might be total overkill.

So if your perfectionism is primarily at work, look at (or ask) what other employees do. How long do they take on a project? How often are they staying late at the office? And are their lower standards getting them fired? Do they still accomplish good work?

From [When Perfect Isn't Good Enough: Strategies for Coping with Perfectionism](#)

Are your standards higher than those of other people? Are you able to meet your standards? Are other people able to meet your standards? Do your standards help you to achieve your goals or do they get in the way (for example, by making you overly disappointed or angry when your standards are not met or causing you to get less work done)? What would the costs be of relaxing a particular standard or ignoring a rule? What would the benefits be of relaxing a particular standard or ignoring a rule?

Most perfectionists will struggle with this. "Of course everything I do is necessary." (It's the equivalent of the alcoholic's "I can stop whenever I want.")

So a good way to come at it is by looking at costs — not merely results. Perfectionists produce good results but they often act like time and driving other people crazy don't matter. Is the extra hour you spend reviewing your work really worth finding that one grammatical error?

And think about your own prior experiences with less-than-perfection. Did you ever turn in a report without checking it 300 times? Did you survive? If it didn't work out, were the results as bad as you thought?

So, when all the factors are taken into consideration — time, stress, having a life, not making others fantasize about your demise — are your standards realistic?

If this exercise is difficult, get a friend to help you be more objective. And do not spend four hours making a spreadsheet to determine which friend would be optimal for the job. Just don't.

(To learn the two-word morning ritual that will make you happy all day, [click here](#).)

Alright, so you've probably established that your standards are out of control. Other people do not require that their kitchen be more sterile than the average hospital operating room...

But you probably still think the Earth will melt if you change how you do things. So what do you do? Well, if you want to stop being worried there are monsters under the bed, ya gotta look under the bed...

2) Use “Hypothesis Testing”

I prefer the term “strategically half-assing it.” Try pressing “send” on that email without proofreading it. Try showing up five minutes late for that meeting. Try buying pants online without reviewing every option available. And then wait...

So did the Earth actually melt?

From [When Perfect Isn't Good Enough: Strategies for Coping with Perfectionism](#)

An excellent way to test the accuracy of your perfectionistic thoughts and predictions is to carry out small experiments, a process also known as hypothesis testing. Carefully designed experiments will provide an opportunity to disprove your perfectionistic beliefs. For example, if you tend to write papers that are too detailed, try leaving out some of the detail and seeing what happens. Regardless of the outcome, you will obtain valuable information. If there is no consequence, you will learn that your beliefs about the importance of including all of the details are not true.

Even if the result was negative, was it as bad as you thought? And how much did you gain in terms of time, effort, and not driving yourself — or others — crazy? Could less actually be more?

(To learn 5 secrets from neuroscience that will increase your attention span, [click here](#).)

It probably wasn't as bad as you expected. But your brain was likely going crazy with worry

because, hey, dropping your standard from 99.9999% error-free to 99.9% error-free is a big jump.

So how do you deal with those thoughts that shout you should go back to your old extremes of control?

3) Challenge Your Perfectionist Thoughts

That voice in your head starts going, “They’re not doing it right. They should do it correctly.” And we usually listen to that voice. Which, frankly, can cause a lot of problems because that voice is not divine truth but is often bad habits shouting from a neurological megaphone.

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy — the most scientifically validated form of therapy out there — says we need to identify and rationally challenge our thoughts in order to see why we’re getting so bothered. Because most of our problems with the world are caused by irrational thoughts.

From [When Perfect Isn’t Good Enough: Strategies for Coping with Perfectionism](#)

In general, asking yourself some of the following questions may help you to challenge the perfectionistic thoughts that contribute to your anger: Is this situation really as important as it feels? What if this situation doesn’t go my way? Does it really matter? Do I need to control this situation? Is my way the only way to view this situation? Would another person necessarily see this situation the same way as I do? What if things don’t work out the way I want them to? Do I know for sure that things will turn out badly if I don’t get my way?

So notice your perfectionist thoughts, generate some alternative thoughts, compare them, and choose a more realistic way to look at the situation. For instance, let’s say your friend is late to pick you up:

- **Perfectionistic Thoughts:** My friend should never be late. Clearly this is a nefarious plot to ruin my life and therefore I am perfectly justified in raining down judgment on them and making them feel bad.
- **Alternative Thoughts:** It’s unrealistic to assume people will never be late. Heck, sometimes I’m late. This isn’t that important anyway. It’s not rational to think this is a nefarious plot because, frankly, people who are often late aren’t very good at organizing nefarious plots.
- **Evaluating Perfectionistic Thoughts and Alternative Thoughts:** My alternative thoughts are far more realistic. My perfectionistic thoughts get me wound up and serve no good purpose.
- **Choosing a More Realistic and Helpful Perspective:** This isn’t that bad. And if it becomes a regular issue I can politely mention it to my friend without all the negativity.

(To learn the secret to never being frustrated again, click [here](#).)

Replacing troublesome thoughts will help — but you may still feel really uncomfortable in situations where your Inner Optimizer wants to cross every T and dot every I.

And that fear of not having control can be powerful, leading to procrastination or altogether avoiding areas where doing things “properly” feels overwhelming. But there’s a way out of this trap...

Fear is the problem, right? So we treat it the same way we treat phobias...

4) Expose Yourself

No, you don’t need to take your pants off. (I mean, you can if you want but that might lead to legal problems beyond the scope of this post.)

It’s often a disappointing fact of life that we can acclimate to anything. The second scoop of ice cream is never better than the first. But in some instances, this is a very, very good thing.

“Face your fears” is a cliché but it’s also quite true and a core part of CBT. Expose yourself to what makes you uncomfortable frequently enough and it can become just as bland as watching the same movie 300 times.

Leave the house a mess for a day. Get dressed without checking the mirror. Or let that person spout inaccurate statistics without correcting them, Eric.

From When Perfect Isn’t Good Enough: Strategies for Coping with Perfectionism

...after repeated experiences in the feared situation, the person gradually learns that nothing bad is going to happen and eventually comes to see the situation as nonthreatening and safe. In the case of perfectionism, exposure works in part by teaching a person that even if mistakes are made, the consequences are usually not terrible. Even if your performance is not to someone else’s liking, the situation is likely to be manageable. The same rule applies when someone else’s behavior doesn’t meet your high standards. It’s bound to happen, and when it does, it’s unlikely to be the end of the world. Exposure to situations where your standards are unlikely to be met is an excellent way to learn that these situations need not be threatening or that you may benefit from adjusting your standards.

If it’s too stressful to do this “in vivo” — the psychological term that translates as “for realz” — you can simulate it in your mind until you can handle direct exposure.

And if you don’t feel uncomfortable while doing this, you’re doing it wrong. Mountain climbers die from exposure, but you won’t.

Solid results will require some consistent dedicated practice. But you’re a perfectionist. That’s your specialty. Am I right or am I right?

(To learn 3 secrets from neuroscience that will help you quit bad habits without willpower, click [here](#).)

Okay, we've learned a lot. (Yes, we could have learned more. And done it better. But this will just have to do for now.) Let's round it all up, and discover the simple phrase that can help perfectionists improve their relationships...

Sum Up

This is how to overcome perfectionism:

- **Reevaluate Your Standards:** How do other people do it? Are they still getting acceptable results? Are your exacting standards worth the cost in terms of time, negative emotions and adding new members to the already long list of people who can't stand dealing with your expectations?
- **Use Hypothesis Testing:** Try relaxing your standards just a bit. Were your worst fears realized? Probably not.
- **Challenge Your Perfectionist Thoughts:** Are your underlying beliefs about how things "should" be done rational and reasonable? And, more importantly, are they useful?
- **Expose Yourself:** We all know people learn to tolerate bad behavior if they're around it enough. This is also true of non-bad behavior that you inaccurately label as "bad."

Unsurprisingly, perfectionism leads to less-than-perfect relationships:

People high in perfectionism, a hyperbelief in their own correctness and a desire to find a partner with similar traits, are 33 percent less likely to describe their relationship status as satisfying. – Flett, Hewitt, Shapiro, and Rayman 2002

So what's that magic phrase that helps perfectionists have better relationships?

Learn to say "I don't know." Another good one is "I was wrong." No qualifications, no excuses, no rationalizations. Be fallible. Be human. Be vulnerable.

We might respect people because they're competent, but we don't love people because they're competent.

From Too Perfect: When Being in Control Gets Out of Control:

Part of the Perfectionist's Credo is the notion that other people won't like you as well if you make a mistake, or you don't know things, or you allow your faults to show through. In fact, the opposite is true. Your need to be right all the time often repels friends and associates. Nobody will ever feel empathy for you, love you, or enjoy being close to you simply because you are right or because you hardly ever make mistakes. It's true that people may admire your abilities or knowledge. Being competent, circumspect, and smart is a plus, but these qualities alone will never win you love. So try this: next time you are asked a question and don't know the answer, say so. Just say, "I don't know." Don't fudge; don't reel off a dozen possibilities to avoid admitting ignorance; don't offer something you do know but that doesn't answer the question. Just "I don't know." Then keep track of how many friends you lose. See how much less loved you are. Note particularly how much less respect you get.

Trust me on this one. Look, I'm the guy who writes obnoxiously long blog posts where everything is rigorously backed by data. I'm a member of your tribe. And one thing I've learned first hand is that running around telling everyone they're doing things wrong *nyah-nyah-science-said-so* style makes for good blog posts and difficult relationships.

(Yes, there was a spelling error in that last sentence. I'm leaving it in. If the Earth melts, mea culpa.)

So give the above a try. And do not try to execute all the steps *perfectly*. You don't want to be the first person to die from irony. Be strategically half-assed about it.

Being an imperfect perfectionist makes life a lot more fun.

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