

Free e-Book

# Understanding Perfectionism



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# What is Perfectionism?

*"We can make ourselves miserable or we can make ourselves strong. The amount of effort is the same."*

- Pema Chodron, When Things Fall Apart: Heart Advice for Difficult Times

Do you find it hard to make decisions, try new things or take risks because you are scared you will fail or look stupid? Or do you have difficulty putting your plans into action, procrastinating until the last minute and causing you a lot of added stress?

Perhaps you present a perfect image to the world, yet underneath this glossy exterior you feel anxious, tense, and full of self-doubt. Maybe you criticise yourself constantly and harshly, never feeling good enough, feeling terrible about yourself no matter what you achieve.

**Perfectionism is a pattern of behaviours that are learned** and is either helpful or unhelpful for you depending on the outcomes it creates in your life.





# Unhelpful Perfectionism

Unhelpful perfectionism moves you away from what is important to you, interferes with your work, study, and relationships, and creates problems in your mental and physical health.

Despite many people assuming perfectionists are all driven over-achievers, unhelpful perfectionism looks different in everyone. Some people have good jobs, get impressive results, win awards, and gain recognition, yet inside they still feel like they are failing. Others become frozen, unable to start anything new, or work towards their goals because they are so frightened that they will fail.

Let's look at the common behaviours you'll see in unhelpful perfectionism. We'll then explore the five key processes that drive these unhelpful patterns.



# The Characteristics of Unhelpful Perfectionism

Unhelpful perfectionism looks different in everyone. On the following two pages are listed some common unhelpful perfectionistic behaviours. Check any that apply to you.

## Work and Study

- ☐ Working excessively without enjoyment; feeling as if you must do things properly
- ☐ Repeatedly checking your work for mistakes
- ☐ Having difficulty being satisfied that work is good enough; trouble handing work in
- ☐ Spending too long labouring over tasks that could be done quickly
- ☐ Procrastinating and having trouble completing tasks within deadlines
- ☐ Being excessively anxious about grades or work performance
- ☐ Getting caught up in the details and having difficulty seeing the broader context
- ☐ Having trouble making decisions; fear of making the wrong decision
- ☐ Avoiding tasks or jobs that you aren't certain you can complete to a high standard
- ☐ Avoiding feedback and performance appraisals
- ☐ Avoiding or intensely fearing situations where you might be evaluated
- ☐ Passively avoiding opportunities that are challenging
- ☐ Seeking reassurance about the quality of your work or performance

## Home Life

- ☐ Needing things to be excessively neat
- ☐ Fearing other people will judge you harshly if things are out of place
- ☐ Needing to present a perfect home life to others
- ☐ Living in mess and clutter, or hoarding possessions

## Family and Parenting

- ☐ Expecting perfect behavior from your children
- ☐ Having a low tolerance for mistakes or mess
- ☐ Being irritable, losing your temper, or being critical of others

## Health

- ☐ Being focused on achieving perfect habits such as a perfect diet or exercise routine
- ☐ Having difficulty starting or continuing with treatments or health routines
- ☐ Avoiding health activities because you can't do them properly





# The Characteristics of Unhelpful Perfectionism

## Relationships

- ☐ Feeling fearful of saying something wrong or stupid
- ☐ Always needing to say the right thing
- ☐ Worrying about being a good friend and not offending or hurting people
- ☐ Worrying about being judged negatively by others, or feeling anxious in social situations
- ☐ Withdrawing from social situations because you fear making a mistake
- ☐ Seeking reassurance that people like you
- ☐ Being overly critical, fussy, or meticulous
- ☐ Other people finding you difficult to please
- ☐ Feeling constantly let down by others
- ☐ People around you feeling they aren't good enough for you

## Appearance

- ☐ Needing to look or present perfectly
- ☐ Being overly critical or judgmental of your appearance

## Hobbies, Sporting, and Creative Pursuits

- ☐ Having a limited range of interests beyond work/study
- ☐ Being reluctant to pursue interests because you can't do them to your standards
- ☐ Being anxious about your sporting, musical, or artistic performance
- ☐ Putting yourself under excessive pressure to perform
- ☐ Fearing failure and therefore not enjoying the activity
- ☐ Completely avoiding activities because you can't do them to your standards

## Religion and Spirituality

- ☐ Needing to pray, worship, or adhere to rituals perfectly
- ☐ Being intolerant of your lapses of faith or practice or lapses by others





# The Five Processes of Unhelpful Perfectionism

There are five behavioural processes that define unhelpful perfectionism:

1. Setting extremely ambitious, inflexible benchmarks for your performance and tending to raise these standards over time
2. Intensely fearing failure or mistakes, including social mistakes, or not being liked
3. Persistent, demoralising self-criticism and never feeling good enough because you can never meet your criterion for success
4. Avoiding certain situations, places, or people so that you can avoid feelings of failure and the self-criticism that comes with this
5. Much bigger problems developing in your life because of this avoidance

In the following pages we'll look at each of the core processes of unhelpful perfectionism in more detail.





# 1) Excessive and Inflexible Personal Standards

Do you set ambitious targets for your performance and treat these standards as if they are unbreakable rules you “must”, “should” or “always” achieve? Do you discount your goals as “too easy” once you achieve them and raise the bar for next time, leaving your goals always just out of reach? If so, you probably feel like you are failing much of the time. Setting standards in this way is likely to lead to self-criticism and anxiety. You may even want to give up altogether.

Don’t get me wrong—there is nothing wrong with setting ambitious standards. **The problems start when these standards become excessive and inflexible.** It gets worse if you set these standards for other people too. Your friends, colleagues or family members may feel like they are never good enough for you, leading to tension and relationship breakdowns.

Fortunately, to transform your unhelpful perfectionistic habits into more helpful behaviours, you may not need to lower your standards. Instead, you might find more flexible ways to approach your objectives and make different choices that address the long-term consequences of your actions.





## 2) Fear of Failure

At the heart of unhelpful perfectionism lies fear of failure. By ‘failure’ I mean any situation where you do not meet your expectations or those of others. Failure can include:

- Making a mistake in your work or assignment
- Getting feedback on your performance
- Forgetting something simple such as locking your keys in the car
- Looking silly or embarrassing yourself
- Saying the wrong thing
- Not being liked or being rejected by others
- Unintentionally hurting someone’s feelings
- Not achieving any goal you’ve set for yourself

Fear of failure triggers feelings of shame. You experience feelings of shame when something bad happens, you believe it is your fault and happened because there is something wrong with you. **Shame is an acutely painful experience that humans try hard to avoid.** It involves seeing yourself as defective, broken, or inadequate and assuming others will judge you the same way too.





## 3) Relentless Self-Criticism

Self-criticism is one of the most invasive and debilitating perfectionistic behaviours and leaves you feeling hopeless, worthless, and useless. You might criticise what you do (“I never do anything right”), predict a bad future (“I will never succeed”), or attack you as a person (“I am so useless,” “I am a loser,” or “I’ll never be good enough”). These thoughts can hurt deeply. It’s remarkable just how nasty we can be towards ourselves.

Many people feel that they must be hard on themselves to motivate themselves to do better, believing that if they don’t, they’ll become lazy. Yet self-criticism actually has the opposite effect, eroding your self-confidence and filling you with self-doubt.

**The antidote to self-criticism is self-compassion.** Fortunately this is a skill that can be learned. Self-compassion helps you steady and soothe yourself when you are struggling in the same would offer support to a friend, with warmth and encouragement not criticism. By learning to be kind to yourself when you feel uncomfortable or afraid, you can take greater risks and feel a deeper sense of calm.





## 4) Unhelpful Avoidance

Whenever you make a mistake, you experience thoughts, emotions, and physical sensations that are unpleasant, uncomfortable, and unwanted. You might feel shame as a sinking, twisting or churning feeling in your stomach, or anxiety as shakiness, restlessness, or tension. These experiences are so uncomfortable that you naturally want to get rid of them.

**Unhelpful perfectionistic behaviours develop as a way of protecting us from uncomfortable experiences.** Sometimes called ‘experiential avoidance’, in the short term you avoid failure by repeatedly checking your work, striving too hard, seeking reassurance, procrastinating, taking safer options, or avoiding situations altogether. Unfortunately, your efforts to avoid these uncomfortable experiences often cause many bigger problems. You end up missing out on a lot. Consider how many University degrees have been lost to procrastination.

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) is a therapeutic approach that specifically targets experiential avoidance. It can help you face your fears and achieve your goals even though at times this might feel uncomfortable. ACT helps you show up to the full richness and possibilities of your life and live according to what matters deeply to you.





## 5) Bigger Life Problems

Both avoidant habits and self-criticism are likely to keep you stuck in a rut of sameness, feeling exhausted, demoralised and defeated. It is no wonder then, that perfectionism causes and maintains many mental health problems, including:

- Body Dysmorphic Disorder
- Burnout
- Chronic Fatigue Syndrome
- Depression
- Eating disorders
- Generalised Anxiety Disorder
- Hoarding Disorder
- Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder
- Panic Disorder
- Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
- Social Anxiety
- Suicide

If you are struggling with unhelpful perfectionistic patterns, it is important to mention it to your therapist. Without help you might find that your mental health problems return all over again, because the underlying processes driving it have not been addressed.



# Transform Your Perfectionism



Unhelpful perfectionistic behaviours can be changed into something that helps you live a fulfilling life.

To achieve lasting, meaningful change, you don't need to address every aspect of your perfectionism—just dialling it back 10 percent is often enough to make these habits work better for you.

By identifying your unhelpful habits and the short-term rewards that keep you behaving this way, you can face up to the long-term problems your perfectionism is causing.

Transforming these unhelpful habits into more flexible, helpful behaviours will involve taking steps towards what's important in your life rather than away from what you fear. This is made easier by learning to be kinder to yourself through the skills of self-compassion. And you can achieve this without needing to lower your standards.

Kemp, J. R. In Press. *The ACT Workbook for Perfectionism: Build Your Best (Imperfect) Life Using Powerful Acceptance & Commitment Therapy and Self-Compassion Skills*. Oakland: New Harbinger Publications.



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# About Jennifer Kemp

Jennifer is a Clinical Psychologist who works with clients who are struggling with perfectionism and the mental health problems perfectionism facilitates and maintains. Jennifer is the author of The ACT Workbook for Perfectionism. She integrates Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), behavior analysis, exposure and Compassion-Focused Therapy approaches in her therapeutic and consultation work. Jennifer presents internationally on the topic of perfectionism and is available for public speaking, conferences, and workshops. Find out more at [www.jenniferkemp.com.au](http://www.jenniferkemp.com.au).

