

Perfectionism

Never Stand Still

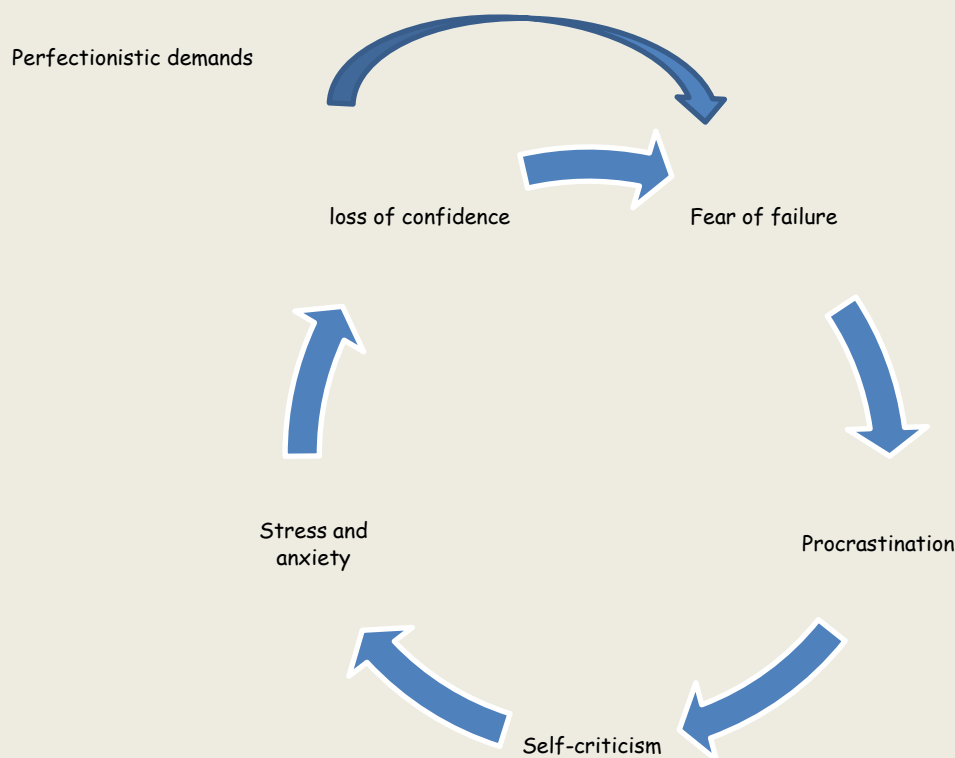
Student Life and Learning

Educational Support Service



Every student wants to produce high-quality work. However problems arise when that striving for excellence becomes a pursuit of perfection and when fear of failure becomes the main motivator. Perfectionism is mistakenly seen as desirable or even necessary for success quite often.

Perfectionists often feel that they are primarily valued for their achievements. Their sense of self-worth is often based on external standards and approval by others leaving them vulnerable and sensitive to criticism. The results can become crippling: assignments get bogged down in minor details. Perfectionism tends to lead to procrastination and to a vague sense of uncertainty regarding project completion. The challenge is to preserve a healthy strive for excellence without precluding the possibility of success



The Vicious Cycle of Perfectionism

Perfectionistic attitudes set in motion a vicious cycle.

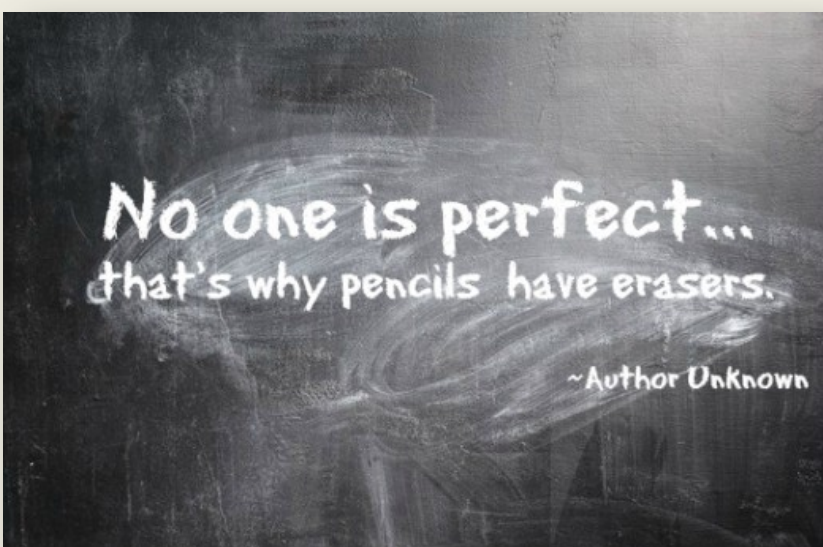
- First, perfectionists set unreachable goals.
- Second, they fail to meet these goals because the goals were impossible to begin with.
- Third, the constant pressure to achieve perfection and the inevitable chronic failure reduce productivity and effectiveness.
- Fourth, this cycle leads perfectionists to be self-critical and self-blaming which results in lower self-esteem. At this point perfectionists may give up completely on their goals and set different goals thinking, "This time if only I try harder I will succeed." Such thinking sets the entire cycle in motion again.

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

Getting past perfectionism

Perfectionism versus Healthy Striving

Perfectionism is not a healthy pursuit of excellence. There are major differences between perfectionists and healthy strivers. Perfectionists believe that mistakes must never be made and that the highest standards of performance must always be achieved.



Those who strive for excellence in a healthy way take genuine pleasure in trying to meet high standards. Perfectionists on the other hand are full of self-doubts and fears of disapproval, ridicule and rejection. The healthy striver has drive, while the perfectionist is driven.

Perfectionism	Healthy Striving
Setting standards beyond reach and reason	Set high standards that are achievable through effort
Never being satisfied by anything less than perfection	Focus more on process as well as outcome
Becoming deeply depressed when facing failure and disappointment	View failure and disappointment as temporary setbacks.
Being preoccupied with fear of failure and disapproval to the point of paralysis	Keeps normal anxiety and fear of failure and disapproval within bounds – use them to create energy
Seeing mistakes as evidence of failure and unworthiness	See mistakes as opportunities for growth and learning

What can I do about it?

The first step is to realise that perfectionism is neither attainable nor desirable. The next step is to challenge the self-defeating thoughts and behaviours that fuel perfectionism.

- **Realistic goals.** Set realistic and achievable goals.
- **Modest improvements.** Set subsequent goals in a sequential manner. As you reach a goal, set your next goal one level beyond your present level.
- **Try aiming for less than 100%.** Experiment with imperfection. The world does not end when you are not perfect.
- **Focus on process.** Focus on the process of doing an activity not just on the end result.
- **Check your feelings.** Use feelings of anxiety and low mood as opportunities to ask yourself, "Have I set up impossible expectations for myself in this situation?"
- **Face your fears.** Confront the fears that may be behind your perfectionism by asking yourself, "What am I afraid of? What is the worst thing that could happen?"
- **Celebrate your mistakes.** Recognise that many good things can only be learned by making mistakes.
- **Discriminate.** Avoid all-or-nothing thinking. Learn to discriminate the tasks you want to give high priority to from those tasks that are less important to you.

Healthy striving

You should set goals based on your own wants and desires, not in response to external expectations. These should be just one step beyond what you have already accomplished.

Goals should be realistic and potentially attainable. Take pleasure in the process of pursuing the task at hand rather than focusing only on the end result. When you experience disapproval or failure, which we all do, try to learn from your disappointments and move forward realistically.

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