

Chapter 11

Perfectionism: The Voice of the Oppressor

If perfection is your standard, of course you will never be fully confident, because the bar is always impossibly high, and you will inevitably and routinely feel inadequate.

—Katty Kay and Claire Shipman

PERFECTIONISM ERODES CONFIDENCE and affects how we think, feel and act. It may invade all areas of our life from home to office, from sports to relationships.

Typical Thinking of Perfectionists:

- All-or-nothing or black-and-white thinking that characterizes events or situations as either “perfect” or “failure”
- Magnifying negative details and dismissing positive data
- Tunnel vision or missing the forest for the trees
- “Mind reading” or assuming knowledge of what others are thinking and that their thoughts about the perfectionist are negative

- Magnifying or minimizing events, with the result that they are blown out of proportion or viewed as insignificant
- Seeing failure as an indication of worth or ability
- Using “should” in describing possible actions

Typical Behavior of Perfectionists:

- Embracing standards and creating expectations that are very difficult or impossible to meet and may actually interfere with performance and hinder achievement
- Attempting to improve projects by redoing them until they meet lofty standards
- Agonizing over small details or over making decisions
- Checking and rechecking work to be certain there are no errors
- Avoiding challenges and new activities to eliminate the possibility of making mistakes
- Trying to control others
- Ruminating over past failures and potential future obstacles
- Chronic procrastination

Typical Negative Feelings of Perfectionists:

- Depression
- Anxiety
- Frustration
- Irritability

I am a recovering perfectionist who in the past embraced a number of these warped thinking patterns, engaged in several of these self-defeating behaviors and experienced some of these difficult emotions. My predisposition to see failure as a statement of my worth increased the pain when I was fired. Not only was I unworthy of my job, I was unworthy of my identity as a superstar woman lawyer.

Learning to subdue my perfectionism has taken years. It over-shadowed my life for decades both at work and at home. Unfortunately, the lawyers at my firm were operating in a setting where “being perfect is zero; it’s the baseline. You have to rise above that, do something more to succeed.” At least that was the explanation I received from a senior associate who was sincerely trying to help me when I started at the firm. I was so eager to succeed that I stifled the urge to ask if I would have to walk on water too. It seemed ridiculous, but after all, this was one of the most prestigious law firms in the country. The admonition stuck.

Sad to say, my fixation on perfection came home with me. The most egregious example was deciding the wood floor in my dining room needed to be refinished before my mentors came to a celebratory dinner after I made partner. Was it perfect before? No, but it was acceptable for any occasion except one so elevated in my mind.

I can’t claim that my perfectionism has been eradicated, but mindfulness has been key to catching myself as I start to head down one of these paths. Adopting a growth mindset, self-compassion, and savoring the good all played a role. Muzzling my inner critic when she yapped about my performance helped too. The foundation for all of these is mindfulness because if I don’t catch myself, I can fall back into the old patterns. Building up new neural pathways for confidence takes practice, but it does work.

Women are much more likely than men to hold themselves to unrealistically high standards. The most common motivation for perfectionism is approval seeking—a particularly big driver for women.

Brené Brown observes:

Perfectionism is, at its core, about trying to earn approval.

Most perfectionists grew up being praised for achievement and performance (grades, manners, rule following, people pleasing, appearance, sports). Somewhere along the way, they adopted this dangerous and debilitating belief system: “I am what I accomplish and how well I accomplish it. Please. Perform. Perfect.”

Perfectionism is a self-destructive attempt to avoid blame, judgment, and shame. The drive to escape these experiences is so strong that perfectionism becomes addictive. Like other addictions, its effects overshadow many aspects of a perfectionist’s life. Workaholism is just one malignant manifestation.

Toning down perfectionism requires first that you recognize it has seized you. Chances are, that’s no surprise. You may have heard that your standards are too high or maybe that you hold others to too high a standard. Even if others haven’t spotted your perfectionism, you can get a firsthand view by becoming mindful.

Reducing your perfectionism will allow you to get off your back and on your side. Here are some strategies to help you do that.

Strategies for Overcoming Perfectionism

Identify the Downside. Make a list of the drawbacks of your elevated standards. Perhaps the benefit is the approval of your boss or client. They can count on you to “get it right.” But maybe getting it right means pulling an all-nighter or not getting home to see your kids before bed—pretty big downsides.

How often do you experience drawbacks from striving for perfection? It could be that your efforts have an undesirable cost in terms of lost opportunities at work when you’re unavailable because you spent too much time to make a project perfect. If you bill by the hour, the dollar cost of meeting your own high standards may be more than your client is willing to bear.

Adjust Your Standards. Try applying the Pareto principle to your to-do list every morning. The Pareto principle suggests applying our efforts in the 20 percent of our tasks that will get us 80 percent of the results we want to achieve. A simple example is skimming some of the assigned reading for a course while focusing on the 20 percent of the text dealing with the subjects the instructor emphasizes in class. This requires abandoning the all-or-nothing approach typical of perfectionists and may result in a slightly lower grade, but it will also allow devoting more time to other classes or even to fun!

Here's an example from Geoffrey James on how to use the Pareto principle with your to-do list each morning.

Prioritize each item by the effort required (1 to 10, with 1 being the least amount of effort) and the possible positive results (1 to 10, with 10 being the highest impact).

Divide the effort by the possible results to get a “priority” ranking. Do the items with the lowest resulting priority number first.

Here's a simple example:

Task 1: Write report on meeting during recent trip

Effort=10, Result=2, Priority=5

Task 2: Prepare presentation for marketing

Effort=4, Result=4, Priority=1

Task 3: Call current customer about referral

Effort=1, Result=10, Priority=0.1

The Pareto Principle means you do Task 3 first, Task 2 second, and Task 1 last, if at all.

Put in more general terms, the result of applying the Pareto principle may be decreasing your standards somewhat. That's a revolutionary concept for a perfectionist, but it may be one that lets you breathe easier.

The key to this system is paying attention to the possible positive results—think of it as value. What task has the potential to be the most valuable? Depending on the effort it requires, that's what you should do.

If the mathematical approach doesn't appeal to you, simply *relax your standards* and see what happens. Are there any negative consequences? Does your boss notice? Did anyone complain? If you can answer no to each of those questions, try decreasing your standards again and consider the results, but be realistic about the quality demands. Does the standard really matter?

Budget Your Time. Set realistic time parameters on your projects. If you work on large projects that typically run on for days, break your work into smaller pieces and set a time budget for each. When the time has expired, move on to something else. Adhering to a time allotment may help you overcome procrastination, which is a typical problem of perfectionists. Using the Pareto principle will help with time allocation.

Limit Meticulousness. Be realistic about the scope and precision demands of your work. A common shortcoming of perfectionists is *doing too much to achieve a goal*. This may seem like an oxymoron, but if you're a perfectionist, you understand. Overkill is the MO of a perfectionist. But overdoing a project until it meets lofty standards is unlikely to be a good use of your time.

Remember that time is a precious resource whether you're charging A client for your time or you're running down the clock of your life span. If you're billing a client for your time, they wouldn't be pleased to know you went through a hundred-page document line by line to be sure each period was followed by only one space instead of two. Sounds crazy, but an associate working with me did it. I wrote off much of her time when I learned that was the reason for the outrageous number of hours she'd recorded.

Put differently, consider the benefit to be derived from your efforts.

Delegate. Consider whether the result or task that you want to make perfect can be delegated. Want to have fabulous food at your party? Hire a caterer if you can. If your child wants a birthday cake that looks like a steam train engine, take a photo to the baker rather than attempt it yourself.

Bottom Line It. Keep your eye on the big picture when you're agonizing over meeting your elevated standards. Ask yourself:

"Does meeting that standard really matter?"

"Will my performance on this project still matter next month? Next year?"

"What is the worst thing that could happen if I relax my standards?"

Ask "Then What?" If the worst that could happen does occur because you relaxed your standards, can you survive it? We perfectionists get shaken by the prospect of "the worst thing happening." Realize that death and destruction are many steps down the line. Try putting some reality on the skeleton of the "worst thing" by asking a series of "then what" questions.

Suppose you make a mistake at work despite your intention to produce perfection. Maybe the first "worst thing" that comes to your mind is that you'll get fired. Ask your frightened perfectionist, "Then what?"

You might answer, "I can't pay my rent."

Ask, "Then what?"

You might answer, "I'll get evicted."

Ask, "Then what?"

"I'll have to move in with my sister."

Ask the "then what" question again and again until you've calmed your panic and realized your resourcefulness.

Re-characterize Mistakes. See mistakes as learning opportunities. Suppose a partner asks you to draw up an asset purchase agreement for one of his clients that you've never worked for before. That happened to me as a mid-level associate. I copied the partner on my transmittal letter addressed to the client at his business, F. M. Goetz & Co. I was crushed when the partner stepped into my office and said the draft looked good, but there were no periods in the company name. I apologized profusely, and the partner joked, "at least you didn't screw up the dollar amount!"

My lessons were (a) to be gracious when telling someone about a mistake, (b) don't assume, and (c) some parts of a document are worth

double-checking, like names and dollar amounts. Most important, I learned I could survive a mistake!

Create a Got-Done List. Make a list of your accomplishments every day—even though you may not have met your lofty standards, you got a lot done. Include mundane tasks like grocery shopping or cleaning the refrigerator.

Risk Failure. Do something unfamiliar. Learn something new that carries the risk you won't succeed. I'm not suggesting paragliding, but how about a knitting or jewelry class? Maybe try cake decorating or sketching. Experience failure. You'll find it's not the end of the world. Failure may be the avenue to learning, and, in all likelihood, it will increase your confidence. That may seem counterintuitive, but your confidence will grow because you have learned to cope and you witnessed your resilience.

If we avoid challenges as a result of our fear, we send ourselves the message that we are unable to handle difficulty. That's another blow to our self-esteem. Accepting that failure is an inevitable part of life allows us to undertake challenges with interest—perhaps even excitement—instead of dread.

Recognize When You Engage Overdrive. Condition your brain to respond differently when you find yourself pushing or straining to create perfection. Think of the strain as a trigger. Here are some sample triggers that, with awareness, may signal to you that you're going into perfection overdrive: you're practicing your speech for the fourth time or you're revising a draft by putting back in something you've already taken out twice.

When you recognize a trigger, use a positive code word or mantra that represents an alternate state that is preferable to perfectionism frenzy. Maybe it's "Relax" or "Enough" or "Slow down." Choose a word and practice saying it the next time you find yourself in perfection overdrive, and let it prompt you to change the channel. With repetition, you will begin to rewire your brain.

Give the Judge the Day Off. The basis of perfectionism is judging. You constantly judge whether you are meeting your elevated standards. What would happen if you gave up judging? Try that for an hour or even a whole day. Remember your basic goodness. Recognize that you are struggling, whether it is a struggle to be a superstar in the office or a sex kitten in your bedroom or Julia Child in the kitchen. Practice self-compassion.

Renee was a self-confessed perfectionist. Her role as the executive assistant to a corporate CEO meant that her job performance could impact the company's success. She made a lunch reservation at the town's best steak house for a group of visiting venture capitalists from Silicon Valley and the senior officers of the company. Unfortunately, two of the three visitors ate only vegan food—something she hadn't known. She was horrified to learn that the guests had found little to eat on the menu.

Like a true perfectionist, Renee magnified the possible adverse consequences. Maybe the visitors' dining experience would color their view of the company and they wouldn't invest in it. She began to beat herself up, imagining what she could have done to prevent the problem. She should have contacted the visitors' assistants to find out about their food preferences, or she should have chosen a different restaurant, or she should have...

Suddenly, she remembered our conversations about self-compassion. Renee took a deep breath and worked her way through its elements. She was able to put the event in perspective, continue to perform her job with confidence, and finish the day with equanimity.

Minimize Comparisons. Consider whether your standards are based on inappropriate comparisons with others. Is it realistic to think your first novel will land on the bestseller list like John Grisham's? Do you look in the mirror and compare yourself to the photoshopped images in beauty magazines? You are unique. As Toni Bernhard reminds us, "There can only be one Beatles. That doesn't mean other people shouldn't make music."

Edit Your Media Diet. Avoid perfectionism triggers. Remove anything that reinforces your perfectionism. If you're worried about your weight, stop reading fashion magazines or watching programs that glorify weight loss. Don't follow people on social media who, deliberately or innocently, make you feel "less than."

Intentionally Make a Mistake. What are the repercussions? Let an email go without correcting the typos. Leave the house with a stain on your clothes. Have a friend come over without straightening up your house first.

Read Radical Acceptance. Tara Brach, a psychologist and teacher of Western Buddhism, shows the way to escape "the trance of unworthiness" through stories from her clients, interpretations of Buddhist tales, and guided meditations in her book *Radical Acceptance*. You don't need to embrace Buddhism to appreciate her wisdom. This book was another tool I used to reduce my perfectionism and to accept that I was good enough. Dr. Alice Boyes, a researcher on anxiety, observes, "When you have more self-acceptance you're likely to put more effort into correcting real problems versus ruminating about your imagined or magnified weaknesses."

Use This Book. Review the Chapters on Self-Compassion (4), Growth Mindset (9), and the Inner Critic (12). You'll find them helpful in your campaign to minimize perfectionism—especially Self-Compassion. Living with a perfectionist taskmaster under your skin can be very painful.

KEY POINTS

Recognize the costs of your perfectionism.

Relax your standards.

Stop judging yourself.

Minimize comparisons.

Allow yourself to fail.

Do something unfamiliar.