



Far from being useful or positive, perfectionist tendencies drive us to strive for unattainable standards.

Why do we do it to ourselves? Temma Ehrenfeld discovers that there are three types of perfectionism. Which is you – and what can you do about it?

Do you expect too much from yourself?

Photographs by Jo Tyler

At 39, Rachel Fields has experienced her share of successes and failures in her personal and professional life, but, like many of us, she spends more time dwelling on the failures. So far, so normal. The problem is, Rachel doesn't allow herself any time to celebrate when something goes well in her life. 'The minute I finish a long-term project at work, I think, how can I do it better next time?'

'If I have friends round for dinner and everyone tells me they had a nice time, I can't help thinking: "It would have been better if I'd been wittier, more engaging, more entertaining." I constantly feel as though I'm letting myself down.'

Rachel had gone through life accepting her perfectionist tendencies as just another part of her, until she found herself projecting them onto her partner. 'He was passed over for promotion last year and I took it much harder than he did,' she admits. 'I had to ask myself: "Who do I want this for? Am I deeply disappointed on his behalf, or is it that I can't bear a chink of my perfect life to be out of place?"'

Perfectionism affects most of us to some degree – from the office assistant who revises her work 20 times to the working mother who won't let the illusion that she can easily manage all the demands of career and family slip for a moment. We don't want to admit that we are anything less than perfect.

At its most extreme, perfectionism can be dangerous or even deadly, a factor in depression, anxiety, social phobias, eating disorders and suicide. The common sort holds you back in life by making it harder to experiment, roll with the punches and move on. If you are a perfectionist, you probably like your high

standards and won't give them up without a fight. But you may want to think about the origin of your fears. One source is an inborn tendency to obsession and anxiety, or an unusual sensitivity to the perceptions of others. 'Perfectionism runs in families,' says Canadian psychologist Professor Gordon Flett, a leading researcher in the field. 'There's a genetic element, but there is also the impulse to imitate our parents' high standards, or live up to their expectations.'

Praise and criticism

Teachers often see perfectionism in gifted children, although psychologists disagree over whether it's built into intelligence. 'Perfectionism can result from the need for admiration,' explains Ken Rice, a research psychologist at the University of Florida. 'If you're used to praise, absence of praise is criticism. And these children can be especially attuned.' A gifted child who is overpraised, or rewarded solely for achievements, could easily learn to associate love with her performance.

To a literal child, even the apparently supportive 'Do your best' is a tough demand, notes psychologist Robert Slaney of Pennsylvania State University. 'Contingent self-esteem', a deep-seated fear that you must meet requirements to be lovable – or even acceptable – can be planted by a critical or cold home. You may have taken on adult responsibilities as a child or laboured to boost or maintain the self-esteem of a fragile parent.

Once seeded, perfectionism is fed by modern society. It may be a psychological risk factor in market economies, observes Martin Antony of Ryerson University in Toronto. 'The economy has to keep getting better. Businesses need growing profits and continuous

'I can't bear a chink of my perfect life to be out of place'

quality improvement.’ Every year the world’s athletes beat a record. Everywhere we look, we see symmetrical faces and hard bodies in advertising and the media. So we diet, follow exercise fads, hire trainers and get facelifts at 40, along with Botox and lipo. We’re equally dedicated to ‘inner growth’, at least in theory. Self-help books pile up beside our beds as we work longer hours to advance in our careers and finance ever-fancier lifestyles. It’s not enough to do a good job – you need to be scoping out your next one. Dating sites encourage singles (and mentally wandering spouses) to seek fantasy mates. We’re told to interview prospective spouses on our ‘Must Haves’ and ‘Can’t Stands’ – advice that may actually be good, since we’re asking more of our marriages and leaving them if they don’t measure up; but can also set unrealistic standards.

Perfectionist tendencies are just as likely to develop in later life, says Flett. Your career choice has an important impact. ‘Being a doctor, architect or public performer – jobs in which everybody’s watching your achievements – can turn you into a perfectionist, because you gradually become more self-conscious about how you measure up to expectations.’

In his research, Flett has devised a perfectionism scale (see overleaf), identifying three subsets of perfectionist behaviour. ‘Though extreme perfectionists may exhibit tendencies of all three, usually people have one particular orientation,’ he says. ‘Self-oriented’ perfectionists have exceedingly high standards for themselves. They often feel they have to work extra hard just to be as good as everyone else. ‘Whereas “other-oriented” perfectionists tend to project their high standards on to other people. And the flipside of that, “socially prescribed” perfectionism, happens when you feel under unreasonable pressure to be perfect, whether

that comes from parents, co-workers, loved ones or society as a whole.’ Interestingly, though these types sometimes have people in their lives who are unrealistically demanding, often they don’t. ‘It’s about how they perceive the world around them,’ says Flett.

Perfectionists may feel inadequate compared with their peers but they often demand much more of themselves than they would expect from anyone else – except perhaps their children. Meanwhile, other-oriented perfectionists are critical and chronically disappointed by colleagues, family, waitresses, films. They may veer

wildly from arrogance to self-hatred and back. Amy, a 35-year-old solicitor, recalls a phenomenon she called ‘Oxford syndrome’ among her fellow students at Oxford University: ‘We’d measure ourselves against Mozart and Wittgenstein, and feel like complete failures, but then we’d look around the room and say, “I’m better than anybody else here.”’

Flett calls this ‘narcissistic perfectionism’. ‘Most people think that perfectionists are anxiety-prone and defensive about making mistakes – in other words, “neurotic perfectionists” – but there is also a subset of people who believe, as extreme narcissists do, that they’re special or capable of being special. They strive for perfection because they think they can actually achieve it.’

Not all perfectionists do well in the world. If you’re wondering why a bright person isn’t more ambitious, the answer may be the opposite of what you think: not low standards but skyscraper ones. A socially prescribed perfectionist might languish in a dead-end job because she creates exaggerated (and daunting) expectations of how she should function in a more interesting position. She’s a slow worker, largely because she procrastinates and dots every ‘i’. At school, she

Overcoming perfectionism

If you are experiencing anxiety, depression or relationship problems due to perfectionist tendencies, Professor Gordon Flett advises seeking help from a loved one or therapist. But since you may find it hard to ask for help, first try these exercises on your own.

- Imagine placing your expectations of yourself on another person. Do they still seem reasonable?
- Think of the feedback you received growing up. Was it appropriate? How did it make you feel?
- If you’re overburdened, think of what you could drop. Can you delegate?
- If you fear mistakes, make a small one deliberately. Send an email with a typo and see what happens.
- If you always have to be the best, join an evening class or group where you have no experience.
- Confess to a small error. If telling a family member is hardest, start with a colleague or friend.
- Weigh the benefits of your high standards against the costs. Do you feel that the results you achieve are worth the stress and anxiety you experience?
- If you feel your perfectionism is having a negative impact on your life, seek help. You are not admitting failure.



PHOTOGRAPHS: (O) TYLER; STYLIST: ALEX TEAL; HAIR AND MAKE-UP: LINSEY POOLE; MODEL: VICKI DAVIS

she has no interest in going back to university. ‘The truth is, I would never consider it now for fear I wouldn’t come top of every class,’ she says. ‘My perfectionism certainly motivates me to succeed, but it holds me back in other ways.’

For some, it is not perfection they seek, but the appearance of it. ‘Some perfectionists are overly invested in creating an image that everything is perfect, and there’s a narcissistic component to that,’ says Flett. These people would never admit their mistakes or shortcomings, even to friends or family members. ‘They usually experience high levels of stress because they’re invested in seeming flawless; to seek help would mean admitting failure.’

Healthy high standards

Yet Brenda wouldn’t give up her drive. ‘Perfectionists see this trait as their edge,’ explains Slaney. And they’re not entirely wrong – having high standards can be good. Some psychologists even distinguish between ‘maladaptive’ and ‘adaptive’ perfectionism. People with healthy high standards – ‘adaptive’ perfectionists – have ‘higher life-satisfaction and self-esteem than maladaptive- or non-perfectionists,’ reports Jeff Ashby, a psychologist at Georgia State University. Their standards might be as exacting, but the difference is in how they deal with failures in meeting them: the woman who accepts that her husband might need to be reminded to put his clothes in the laundry basket, and the one who gets upset each time he forgets. In a study of 200 engaged couples, Ashby and his team

found that women with healthy high standards had more harmonious relationships than those with lower expectations. Not surprisingly, couples that included a self-oriented perfectionist were less happy.

‘Perfectionists can never be satisfied,’ says Flett. ‘Even when they achieve a goal, they immediately think: ‘Now I have to do it again. Or now I have

to work as hard to keep at that level.’ Or they think, ‘I’ve finally achieved my goal but I shouldn’t have had to try so hard, it shouldn’t have taken me so long.’ So how do you know if your high standards are healthy? Here’s the key: you’re not terrified of failure. When you succeed, you’re not sighing with relief – you’re happy. If you have a setback, you don’t feel worthless. You don’t beat yourself up. You revise your expectations, move on or try again.

may have missed handing in some papers because they weren’t finished – to her satisfaction. She may be painfully shy. ‘Some people are afraid to even say what film they saw at the weekend because it might be the wrong film,’ says Antony.

Down the hall, her boss’ self-esteem may be no more secure. Successful other-oriented perfectionists attribute their achievements to their punishing habits, not talent or commitment, and live in fear of losing their status. As supervisors, they nit-pick, and when employees begin to resent their unnecessary demands and respond with passive-aggressive resistance, they become more anxious and demanding. They neglect spouses and become emotionally isolated – think of Meryl Streep’s character in *The Devil Wears Prada*.

To avoid blame or disappointment, loved ones hide their problems from a critical perfectionist, who hides her own lapses from them. They are too rigid to have fun or indulge in a hobby. Why? They may not be the absolute best. Take Brenda, who, at 44 and without a degree, has founded a successful retail business. She would love to study marketing but tells her friends

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What type of perfectionist are you?

Are you pushing yourself too hard, or do you feel that others around you expect too much of you? Dr Gordon Flett, co-author of the Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale, has devised this test exclusively for *Psychologies*. Tick each statement that applies to you, then add up your score to find out which type of perfectionism could be holding you back

<input type="checkbox"/>	●	I am not satisfied with anything less than perfection
<input type="checkbox"/>	■	I expect other people to do their absolute best for me at all times
<input type="checkbox"/>	●	I should never make the same mistake twice under any circumstances
<input type="checkbox"/>	▲	People often put too much pressure on me to be perfect
<input type="checkbox"/>	●	My work should be flawless
<input type="checkbox"/>	▲	Some people never allow me to make any mistakes
<input type="checkbox"/>	■	People must try to be perfect if they want my respect
<input type="checkbox"/>	●	I can't stand to make mistakes
<input type="checkbox"/>	■	There is nothing wrong with expecting others to be perfect
<input type="checkbox"/>	●	I drive myself to always do better, even when things are almost perfect
<input type="checkbox"/>	▲	If I want approval from certain people in my life, I can't make any mistakes
<input type="checkbox"/>	▲	I am often frustrated by the unrealistic demands placed on me to be perfect
<input type="checkbox"/>	■	Although they may not like it, I cannot tolerate other people's mistakes
<input type="checkbox"/>	■	I am more likely than other people to let others know when they have made a mistake
<input type="checkbox"/>	▲	There are people in my life who aren't satisfied with anything less than perfection from me

ANALYSIS

Two or more ● SELF-ORIENTED PERFECTIONISM

Self-oriented perfectionists strive relentlessly to achieve extremely high personal goals. Your unrealistic standards reach across all domains, at work and at home, and when perfection is not attained, you may be exceedingly self-critical. Self-oriented perfectionism involves an all-or-nothing type of thinking where the only two options are total success and abject failure. Because success is equated with being absolutely perfect, falling just short of perfection can be a source of great frustration. You find it difficult to stop thinking about your mistakes and tend to over-generalise them; for example, 'I got a speeding ticket; I am not only a bad driver, I am a bad person in general'. You often respond to failure by raising your standards even higher, striving to make up for past shortfalls.

Think about why you have placed such importance on perfection, and what it has cost you. Have you pursued perfection at work at the expense of your personal life or family? What interests could you engage in that do not involve the pursuit of achievements? You need to learn to reward yourself for a good performance and be satisfied with that, rather than perfection.

Two or more ■ OTHER-ORIENTED PERFECTIONISM

Other-oriented perfectionists focus on the capabilities and actions of those around them, setting unrealistic standards for others and placing great importance (perhaps irrational importance) on the attainment of these standards. Those who score highly on other-oriented perfectionism can be hostile and dogmatic, insisting that mistakes by other people will not be excused. You may feel that you must demand absolute perfection from others because it is in their best interests. You are often preoccupied with what other people should be doing, and interpersonal problems can arise when they don't meet your expectations. You can be openly critical of others, and have a need to control other people's behaviour.

You need to learn to be more accepting of others, and understand that demanding perfection is irrational because no one can be perfect. Anger-management techniques and role-playing exercises can be used to foster greater patience. You must learn to be more trusting of others' abilities, and try to relinquish control.

Two or more ▲ SOCIALY PRESCRIBED PERFECTIONISM

You believe that other people demand perfection from you, and you feel a great pressure to meet social expectations. Your sense of never being able to meet imposed standards of perfection can result in helplessness and hopelessness. You feel that too much is being asked of you.

Socially prescribed perfectionism is related to neuroticism and a fear of negative social evaluation. You feel controlled by forces outside of you, and you experience shame if you feel you have not met society's standards, sometimes resulting in depression and anxiety. Some people respond to this sense of imposed pressure by seeking the approval of others, while others become rebellious.

You need to gain perspective on the importance of meeting other people's expectations and gaining their approval. Do your family or work colleagues really expect perfection from you, or are you projecting these demands onto them? Does it really matter if other people approve of what you do? Either way, you need to spend time on activities that help you relax and reduce your stress levels.

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