

## 5 Signs That You Might Be a Perfectionist — and How To Find Balance

*Perfectionism isn't all bad, but here's how to make sure it hasn't become toxic*

Do you consider yourself a perfectionist? Some of us desire perfection in an endless quest. At its peak, this can feel noble, especially as you see strides in your pursuits. But at its lowest, you may feel profoundly inadequate, leading to feelings of anxiety and poor self-esteem.

So, how do you balance a desire for achievement fueled by perfectionism with a need for self-care and kindness?

Psychologist Susan Albers, PsyD, explains how to recognize signs of perfectionism in yourself and how to not let it cause you harm.

### What is perfectionism?

Perfectionism is the pursuit of flawlessness — and it's a term that can be used to describe a person's way of life or how they approach tasks and challenges.

While it's not an official medical diagnosis, it's a common personality trait that many people can develop. "Being a perfectionist means having very high and exact expectations and standards," explains Dr. Albers. "It's working and striving for things to be just right, or just so."

For many people, perfectionism starts in childhood. Oftentimes, authority figures in our lives, like parents or teachers, can impact the way we view our self-worth. With perfectionism, maybe you were always made to feel that you weren't doing enough. Or maybe you had parents who pushed you (even with good intentions) to always be the best you could be.

While this can create good self-discipline and ambition, this overwhelming desire for perfection can also cause harm if it leads to you thinking that your self-worth depends on your accomplishments.

### Signs that you may be a perfectionist

Again, there may not be a clear diagnosis for perfectionism, but there are certainly common signs that can help you feel out if you fit in this category.

Here are some traits that are often associated with being a perfectionist:

#### You have very high standards

If you strive for not only 100%, but for 150% success in everything you do, that may be a sign that you're a perfectionist. Not only that, but you may also put pressure on yourself to meet those high standards.

In other words, your standards are the guiding compass for you a lot of times. If things aren't in line in the way you expect or plan them to be, it's likely you feel uncomfortable or feel the need to adjust and tweak things.

#### You thrive on organization and structure

Another sign of perfectionism is the desire to have constant structure and organization. This can come in the form of someone caring a lot about cleanliness and tidiness, such as keeping your desk clear or making your bed every morning.

Beyond just being organized, a perfectionist will strive for that structure to always hit their standards.

### **You're very ambitious about your goals**

Having high standards has its benefits. It can help people improve their skills, even though (dare we say it?), no one actually becomes perfect.

"The upside of perfectionism is that it often makes people work very hard, and they're extremely motivated," notes Dr. Albers. "They are persistent. They keep working to make things better and better."

For example, it's common for musicians, athletes and even doctors to have perfectionist tendencies. These kinds of careers often require a certain amount of self-discipline and commitment, so it's understandable for people who pursue them to always be striving for improvement.

### **You have difficulty getting over small mistakes**

If you're constantly hyper-aware of every mistake you've ever made — especially more so than others around you — that can be another sign of perfectionism. And again, being aware of mistakes can be a positive. But when it's too extreme, it can cause stress.

### **You're prone to procrastination**

Procrastination is a common consequence of perfectionism. This may sound surprising because you may think of a perfectionist as being always on top of their tasks — but in fact, perfectionism in a lot of cases can lead to putting things off.

This is because you may become fixated on the results of what you're doing, instead of the process. Once you're focusing too much on the future end result, it can lead to anxiety and even avoidance of the task at hand.

"With extreme levels of perfectionism, the task can feel really daunting and create a lot of anxiety or stress, which leads to a domino effect of avoidance because there's a fear of getting started," explains Dr. Albers. "And then, it feels insurmountable to complete this task."

## **When perfectionism becomes harmful**

For some, the consequences of perfectionism are even more dire. But how do you know if your perfectionism is teetering over the line? The key is to try and get to know yourself and notice how you're reacting to things.

"One downside is that it often feels like things are never enough, that there's always dissatisfaction, feeling not good enough, and never really taking satisfaction or joy in what one has accomplished," says Dr. Albers.

Here are some ways that extreme perfectionism can negatively affect you:

**Low self-worth.** If your perfectionism is manifesting in a more positive sense — such as gently pushing yourself to do better or setting high goals for yourself — then, you probably have nothing to worry about. But the key is knowing yourself and recognizing when perfectionist tendencies are veering you into the road of negative self-talk and causing low self-esteem.

**Mental health issues.** Often, perfectionist tendencies can overlap (or even cause) mental health conditions like obsessive-compulsive disorder, eating disorders and social anxiety. In this context, toxic perfectionism can become the fuel on the fire and make your mental health symptoms worse.

**Relationships.** On top of that, this can also affect the way you interact with the people in your life, because you may be always expecting impossible standards from your relationships. If you're starting to feel a strain on your relationships, this may be a red flag that your perfectionism is becoming harmful. "If you expect other people or yourself to be perfect, you are going to be continuously disappointed," warns Dr. Albers.

**Extreme task avoidance.** Procrastinating a task here and there is normal, to a point. But if your perfectionism is preventing you from taking steps forward in your life in more ways than one, this can be another red flag. Also, if perfectionism is standing in the way of completing everyday tasks or causing you to develop a scarcity mindset, that's a sign that it may be holding you back more than motivating you.

## How to cope with perfectionism

If you're noticing that perfectionism is feeling more like a weight and less like a motivation, it may be a good idea to find some coping strategies to help you find balance.

If you're achievement-oriented, it's a matter of finding that sweet spot where you're driven (and productive) but not self-tortured.

**Embrace humility.** The first step — and this won't come easy at first — is to accept that perfection is an impossible goal. Sometimes, you'll make mistakes, fall short or embarrass yourself — just like everyone else. Embracing this concept can feel intensely liberating.

**Set realistic deadlines.** Dr. Albers stresses the importance of not giving yourself impossible goals that will set you up for disappointment. Setting realistic deadlines, whether it's for a school-related assignment, a work project or even a personal goal, will help you achieve things at a more relaxing pace. These deadlines can also help you eventually feel OK with something being "good enough," instead of constantly striving for perfection.

**Develop a capacity to laugh at yourself.** It's important to take your obligations in life, like work or school, seriously but you shouldn't let it take over your emotions in a negative way. Remember to give yourself a break and not take yourself too seriously all the time.

**Note your ability to survive mistakes.** Chances are, you can think of some pretty serious blunders you've made (everyone has!). These situations may have been distressing at the time, but you made it through. In fact, you may have even learned something.

**Weigh the costs of striving for perfection against the benefits.** You may find that the costs are higher than you realized: Constant self-blame, inability to relax, reluctance to try new things and poor self-esteem, for example. It's incredibly freeing to accept yourself as someone who is sometimes messy and imperfect.

**Experiment with intentionally making things less than perfect.** Sometimes, a little mess can be a good thing. Remember to give yourself breathing room — whether it's in your home decor or your everyday routine — to allow for some spontaneity and unexpectedness. When you practice tolerating these relatively minor imperfections, toxic perfectionism has less of a stronghold on you.

### **When to seek help**

Your perfectionism may be causing more harm than good if it's starting to affect your feelings of self-worth, sleep patterns or day-to-day life. For example, if your perfectionism is stopping you from going out and experiencing new things or impacts your mood, this can take a toll on your mental health.

Some people can benefit from a professional's help. If a perfectionist tendency is significantly impacting your life, a therapist can help you feel accepted for who you are, while recognizing any negative messages you're telling yourself. In the end, you can learn to be kinder to yourself.

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