

PART

I

Understanding Your
Perfectionism

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1

Definitions and Types of Perfectionism

“You’re such a perfectionist.” Are we supposed to feel insulted or flattered when we receive this comment? And what do people mean when they say that anyway? Do they label us as such because we are detail-oriented, organized, and systematic? When people enter my office as the executive director of the International OCD Foundation, they typically remark how neat and organized it is: “Suffer from the same affliction you claim to treat, huh?” Do they mean that being neat and organized qualifies me for obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD)? I thought I was just trying to give a good impression! You know, look competent—like an executive director should look. I mean, wouldn’t it be a little strange if I had all of my files and books strewn around the office with the past three days’ worth of coffee cups piled up?

So, what are we referring to when we say someone is a perfectionist? Is perfectionism a behavior that includes being detail-oriented and organized? Is it an intention, like giving feedback to help improve someone’s performance and achieve a certain standard? Is it an attitude, one in which you are always concerned about not making mistakes and

giving others the “right” impression of you? Or, is it about outcomes only? In other words, can you still be a perfectionist if you have a messy office? What behaviors and attitudes define perfectionism?

As a result of discussions with my patients and my research on perfectionism, I’ve put together the following list of possible ways to define and describe perfectionism. Try to determine which of the following definitions might apply to you as you read through. To help you get a better sense of how each aspect of perfectionism operates I will also give examples of healthy and unhealthy perfectionism. For now though, just notice how many different ways there are to think about what being perfectionistic means and whether each of these categories resonates with you. I will have you think through the healthy and unhealthy dimension in the next chapter.

Absence of Mistakes or Flaws

We often consider something to be “perfect” when we can no longer find any errors, mistakes, or flaws. Copy editors, for example, review and reread manuscripts looking for spelling errors, grammatical mistakes, and so on. If they don’t turn in “error-free” manuscripts, they may lose their jobs.

Emma is one such copy editor who truly enjoys her work—particularly the detail-oriented aspect of it. Although she might miss something on occasion, this is rare. Emma is considered a go-to person in her office, and she takes great pride in the fact that manuscripts she edits come out “flawless.”

John, on the other hand, works in the same office doing the same kind of work, but can become so consumed with finding errors, that he spends too much time reviewing each manuscript. He begins missing deadlines, thinking about how terrible it would be if a mistake slipped by him. What would his boss say? What would others think of him if this was the kind of product he turned in? He gets so stressed at work now that he finds himself surfing the Internet rather than doing his job. He simply finds it too anxiety provoking to go back to that manuscript.

In both cases, each person defines a good product as one with minimal errors. The way in which each person goes about making this happen, however, is quite different. Emma’s problem-solving approach

stays focused on what she enjoys doing, whereas John gets bogged down in “what if” scenarios that leave him preoccupied and stuck.

Personal Standards

Sometimes when you’ve done something “perfectly,” it simply means that you achieved a particular standard you set for yourself. For example, you earned *As* in your classes, which ensured a high grade point average (GPA), which got you into graduate school or helped you land your first job. Striving to achieve a personal standard like this can lead to increased endurance, accomplishment, and feelings of satisfaction. However, when taken to an extreme, these standards can become a source of diminished self-esteem, a feeling that “nothing is ever good enough,” and a belief that you’ll never be able to achieve true perfection. It can also lead to a rigid adherence to following a rule: “It has to be done this way,” “It’s always been done this way,” or “Do something right or don’t do it at all.”

Dan is a marketing executive who works collaboratively with his team, enjoys the brainstorming process, and feels comfortable making final decisions about where projects are going. He regularly produces high-quality work, feels satisfied in his accomplishments, and uses feedback from his clients as indications that he’s met the appropriate expectations. Another marketing exec named Sophia tends to take a different approach. She dictates to her team and rarely compliments others for their ideas. She also seems to make decisions about projects based on fear of being evaluated negatively rather than inspiring a creative process. Sophia’s employees regularly doubt themselves, and many describe Sophia as controlling, critical, and undermining, claiming that “everything has to be done her way.” Sophia also seems unhappy at work, never satisfied with her own projects and outcomes.

Meeting an Expectation

One might also define *perfectionism* as having matched an expectation that someone else has set. For example, let’s say that your boss informed you that you just gave an excellent presentation. As a result

of this praise, you feel good about your effort and outcomes. Alternatively, however, you can also feel that others always have high standards for you—whether this is real or perceived. You worry that they're constantly pushing you to adhere to those standards and evaluating you negatively when you don't. (Notice that this is different from comparing your performance to your own personal standards as mentioned earlier.)

Hannah recognizes that her hard work pays off when she receives praise and recognition from her boss. She is open to feedback and uses input from others to improve her outcomes. As a result, she receives better projects, as well as promotions and bonuses. Bill, on the other hand, is constantly stressed and anxious about getting recognition from others. He feels guilty and constantly assumes that he has let everyone down. He becomes so preoccupied with pleasing others that he doesn't really have a direction or clear plan at work.

Order and Organization

Order, organization, and having “everything in its place” are yet other ways to think about perfectionism. An organized filing cabinet increases efficiency; a clean, uncluttered office is attractive to clients; and a bookshelf with books arranged by subject or author makes it easier to find things quickly.

I have 32 file folders on my computer. If someone asks me for a document, I know which category or folder to go into to retrieve it. It increases my efficiency and saves me time. However, Elizabeth—an office manager—can't seem to start work until her desk is cleaned up and organized. Not only does she like her space clean and organized, she always seems to be arranging everything around the office. She gets lost in the details of organizing, which in turn makes her less efficient. Because she is always reorganizing and rearranging everything, she is regularly in conflict with her coworkers, who find her behavior intrusive and interfering with their own work.

Ideals and “Just Right” Experiences

Have you ever heard about Plato’s concept of forms—the philosophical idea that asks questions like, what makes a chair a chair? What is the prototypical chair? What does it look like? Is it wood or metal? Can it have three legs and still be a chair, or does it have to have four legs? What is the “perfect” chair? In this theoretical musing, Plato was trying to discern an ideal version of something—one to which all other variations could be compared. For example—what is the “perfect” television commercial, the one that has just the right balance of novelty, humor, and poignancy, to which all others aspire?

Sometimes we “know” that something is ideal because it hits us “just right”; it looks, feels, and sounds right. “That was the ideal version of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony. Everything about it sounded *right*.” Artists, performers, athletes, advertisers, chefs, and marketers, among others, are always looking for this sweet spot of experience. Have you ever hit a tennis ball where the connection of the ball to the racket felt just right and the ball went exactly where you wanted it to go? Or looked at a photograph where the combination of color, light, and images were so well balanced you just *had* to include it in your next marketing pitch or presentation? Listen to judges on the glut of reality shows for cooking, fashion, and dance. These experts always give higher scores for a harmony of experience—in short, something that is an ideal.

Advertising executive Chloe has great taste, as well as a knack for picking out images and phrases that complement one another. She always seems to be doing her research and looking at a wide variety of mediums, colors, and ideas, and she has an instinctive way of harmonizing balance with interest. She knows how to keep concepts simple, yet engaging, and clients love her work.

The style of Chloe’s fellow ad exec Caitlin, however, is truly time-consuming. She always seems frantic, hectic, and inconsolable. Nothing is ever good or “perfect” enough for her. Although Caitlin submits projects, she always seems to have her own criticism ready, apologizing in advance even when she gets positive feedback from others. As a result, others second-guess the quality of her work as well.

Absolutes: Knowledge, Certainty, and Safety

Hyperlinks on the Internet are seductive in that they seem to offer the implicit promise to tell you everything possible about a topic. To have absolute, complete, comprehensive knowledge about something—to be convinced that this is the right direction to take—is very satisfying and reassuring. Feeling that there is no risk in an activity or option—that it is completely safe—can be very comforting. Although it’s a more subtle form of perfectionism, it is interesting to me how many people choose to “wait and see” rather than act in the absence of a guarantee that all will be well.

A variation on this is when people chronically doubt their actions. Some people are never sure that they’ve made the right decision and are always second-guessing themselves even when they do act. Waiting for the “perfect solution” to present itself (i.e., one that offers absolute guarantees of only positive outcomes and an absence of negative outcomes) can be a surefire way to sit on your hands and procrastinate.

“Make sure you do your due diligence” is the healthy core of this version of perfectionism. In other words: do all your research, think through the implications, and assess your options. Stan, a certified financial analyst (CFA) at an investment consulting firm, is known for this kind of excellent research, knowledge base, and efficiency. He always seems to know what the best options are and feels confident in his recommendations. In contrast, MBA student Sarah worries about not getting her degree because she hasn’t even begun to write her thesis. She feels that she hasn’t researched enough—even though she has already read 50 books on the subject—and worries she will be unethical or fraudulent unless she accurately represents all of the research. She ends up being handicapped by a strong need for perfect knowledge before getting started on her thesis.

Being the Best and the “Best of the Best”

Winning a gold medal at the Olympics is surefire sign of recognition that you are the best in your sport. Many of us watched Michael Phelps swim at the 2008 Beijing Olympics, wanting him to be crowned “the best of the best,” to win the most gold medals won by a single person

in Olympic history. Western cultures are seemingly obsessed with this notion of “best of the best”—the top-selling record, highest-grossing movie, or most influential scientist of all time. When running my perfectionism group, I usually ask the attendees what drove their perfectionism. What did they want the outcome to be, and what was all of their hard work aimed toward? My favorite answer: “I want a statue built of me.” Don’t we all?

Dave is driven by a need to stand out at his law firm, an approach that has worked well for him over the past 20 years. He has slowly climbed the corporate ladder and is now a partner with a corner office. He attributes this determination to be better than anyone else to his success. Although Jacob started at the same law firm at the same time as Dave, Jacob is not a partner and does not have a corner office. Jacob is no less driven than Dave; he also talks about being the “best of the best.” However, Jacob is overtly competitive, arrogant, and materialistic. He turns off both his coworkers and his boss. He constantly talks about how amazing his work is and regularly feels that others just “don’t get what he’s doing.” Part of Jacob “being the best” seems to involve getting others feel less than.

Table 1.1 **Types of Perfectionism**

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- Absence of mistakes or flaws
 - Achieving personal standards
 - Matching others’ expectations
 - Order and organization
 - Ideals and “just right” experiences
 - Absolutes: Knowledge, certainty, and safety
 - Best of the best
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Summary

Now you have a clearer sense of what the different kinds of perfectionism are. You also noticed that as I defined each type of perfectionism (Table 1.1), I gave examples of individuals who fell on either extreme of the unhealthy and healthy perfectionism dimension. That is, depending on the context and the strategy one uses, an outcome could go from outstanding to disastrous. It seems strange at first glance to think that the same intention (wanting an outcome to be “perfect”) would result in diametrically opposed outcomes. This, however, is the critical insight of understanding the difference between unhealthy and healthy perfectionism. In the next chapter, I’ll begin to clarify further how concerns over mistake making, for example, can work for you as they do for Emma, discussed earlier in this chapter—versus poor John, who seems to be paralyzed.