

Worksheet

Professional Version | US English

Evaluating Your Demanding Standards



Description

People with perfectionism pursue demanding, self-imposed standards in one or more areas of their life and base their self-worth on meeting these expectations, despite the negative consequences this has (Shafran et al., 2010). While perfectionism is not a formal diagnostic category, it has been associated with multiple forms of psychopathology, including anxiety, depression, eating disorders, and suicidality (Egan et al., 2011; Limburg et al., 2017; Smith et al., 2018). For this reason, perfectionism represents a “transdiagnostic” factor that is implicated in several disorders.

Individuals can set demanding high standards in almost any life domain, including their work, appearance, bodily hygiene, social and romantic relationships, eating habits, health, time management, hobbies, leisure activities, sports, orderliness, and several others (Stoeber & Stoeber, 2009). However, the demanding standards associated with perfectionism tend to have three common characteristics (Egan et al., 2014):

- 1. They are self-imposed.** The individual views their demanding standards as their own, although they may have originated elsewhere.
- 2. They relate to domains which are important to the individual.** For example, a painter might pursue demanding standards related to artistry but is unlikely to have equally demanding standards in an area that is less personally significant, such as their cleanliness.
- 3. They often take the form of rigid rules (e.g., ‘must,’ ‘ought,’ or ‘should’ statements)** about how the individual needs to perform in the domain where perfectionism exists. For example, a perfectionistic student may hold the standard “I must be at the top of the class” or “I should never make grammatical errors”.

Shafran and colleagues (2002) note that while these standards are sometimes objectively demanding, their subjectively demanding nature is often more pertinent in perfectionism. In other words, it is the pursuit of standards that are personally challenging that leads individuals with perfectionism to continuously strive.

Striving to meet demanding standards can be a rewarding process and lead to significant gains (e.g., praise, social status, financial rewards, etc.). For this reason, perfectionistic individuals often dislike the notion of ‘lowering’ their standards or ‘relaxing’ their rules. However, demanding standards can also have adverse consequences and cause emotional (e.g., depression), social (e.g., isolation), and behavioral (e.g., procrastination) difficulties (Egan et al., 2014). Moreover, cognitive behavioral models of perfectionism have highlighted how these negative consequences can reinforce demanding standards.

Description

Examples include:

- **Dichotomous (black-or-white) evaluations of performance.** Because demanding standards tend to be inflexible and dichotomous (the rule is either met or not met), they often lead to 'all-or-nothing' evaluations of performance. Unfortunately, individuals with perfectionism are inclined to believe that have not met their standards due to two cognitive biases: selective attention (i.e., focusing on errors) and discounting (e.g., dismissing achievements that are less than perfect).
- **Failure and self-criticism.** Because demanding standards are inherently challenging, individuals will inevitably fail to achieve them at times. This can lead to distress and self-criticism, reinforcing the belief that self-worth depends upon meeting their demanding standards.
- **Avoidance.** For some individuals, trying to meet demanding standards is so aversive that it leads to avoidance (e.g., procrastination or giving up). Avoidance behaviors are likely to result in actual or perceived failures, which intensifies self-criticism and reinforces the notion that self-worth is contingent upon meeting demanding standards.
- **Reappraisal.** Individuals with perfectionism often view personal achievements as evidence that their standards are not demanding enough (e.g., "If I can meet my standards, they must be too low"), which leads them to 'set the bar higher'. Resetting standards at higher and higher levels not only reinforces striving but increases the risk of failure.

- **Narrowed interests and domains for self-evaluation.** Striving to meet demanding standards may cause individuals to overinvest in the domains where they hold these rules. Consequently, other life domains may suffer (e.g., relationships, physical and emotional health, etc.). Over time, pursuing demanding standards may become the individual's primary source of self-worth, reinforcing the need to achieve them.

Information processing biases play a central role in the maintenance of perfection and so represent an important target for intervention (Egan et al., 2014). Cognitive biases commonly associated with demanding standards include:

- **Dichotomous 'all-or-nothing' thinking** (e.g., judging that the standard has either been fully met or not met at all).
- **Selective attention** (e.g., focusing on the aspects of performance that fall short of the standard and discounting achievements).
- **'Should' or 'must' statements** (e.g., assuming that standards are more significant than they really are).
- **Double standards** (e.g., adopting extreme standards for oneself, but more lenient expectations for others).
- **Overgeneralizing** (e.g., concluding that not meeting a standard means that one is a total failure).

For this reason, cognitive strategies are a valuable tool for addressing demanding standards. The *Evaluating Your Demanding Standards* worksheet is designed to help clients re-evaluate their demanding standards and develop more flexible and helpful guidelines for their performance.

Instructions

Suggested Question



It sounds like striving to meet this standard is causing difficulties. Can we look at this worksheet together? It will help you think through whether this demanding standard is fair and realistic. If it isn't, the worksheet will help you develop a new guideline for reaching your goals that works better for you.

- 1. What is one of the demanding standards you try to live up to?** Ask the client to identify a demanding standard that they strive to meet. Demanding standards are usually phrased as 'should', 'must', and 'ought to' rules the client feels compelled to follow. Note that these standards can exist in almost any life domain.
- 2. What experiences show this standard is 100% fair and accurate?** Explore evidence that seems to support the veracity of the standard. Can the client identify experiences that show the demanding standard is reasonable and consistent with the facts?
- 3. What experiences show this standard is not 100% fair and accurate?** Help the client identify events and experiences that indicate the standard is unreasonable and inconsistent with the facts. This can be combined with literature outlining common 'thought distortions' (e.g., dichotomous thinking) that might be applicable.

Suggested Questions



- In what ways does this standard seem unfair and unrealistic?*
 - Is meeting this standard all the time really as critical as it seems?*
 - Do you expect other people to meet this standard? Why not?*
 - Who holds a different perspective on this standard? What would they say about it?*
 - If someone you cared about set this standard for themselves and it was causing them difficulties, what would you say to them?*
- 4. Have there been times when you didn't meet this standard?** Did your worst fears come true? Catastrophizing about the consequences of not meeting one's demanding standards is common among people with perfectionism. Nonetheless, there are likely to be times when the client has failed to meet their demanding standards. Were the results catastrophic or manageable? What does this say about the significance of these self-imposed rules? Note that failing to meet a standard may feel catastrophic, but this might not match the objective reality (e.g., a friend didn't notice that the house was messier than usual).

Instructions

- 5. What are you hoping to achieve by setting this standard for yourself?** Discuss the intention behind setting the demanding standard. What does the client hope to achieve? Clarifying the goal that drives a demanding standard can highlight other (less demanding) ways it can be fulfilled.
- 6. What would be a more flexible guideline that could help you reach your goal?** Rigid rules break, whereas guidelines bend (Fairburn, 2013). Help the client identify a flexible guideline that would help them reach their goals. Discussing guidelines that other people use to achieve similar goals can generate ideas. Some clients find it helpful to incorporate preferences (rather than demands) into these guidelines (e.g., “I’d like to read to my children every night, but it’s ok if I don’t – it’s more important that I try to read to them regularly”). Note that guidelines are likely to entail accepting less-than-perfect performance at times.
- 7. If you truly believed and lived by this flexible guideline, how would it help you?** Explore the potential benefits of adopting the flexible guideline across key life domains (e.g., health, relationships, finances, etc.). At this point, it may be helpful to devise behavioral experiments to test the accuracy and utility of the client’s new guideline (Egan et al., 2014).

References

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Evaluating Your Demanding Standards

Standards are expectations that you set for yourself and strive to meet. If you struggle with very demanding standards, you probably experience them as strict rules that need to be followed. Use the following questions to evaluate one of your demanding standards.

What is one of the demanding standards you try to live up to?

Demanding standards are often phrased as 'should', 'must', or 'ought' rules that you need to follow.

What experiences show this standard is 100% fair and accurate?

Can you think of any evidence that shows this standard is reasonable and consistent with the facts?

What experiences show this standard isn't 100% fair and accurate?

Can you think of any evidence that shows this standard is unreasonable, or not consistent with the facts?

Have there been times when you didn't meet this standard? Did your worst fears come true?

Has failing to meet this standard ever resulted in a catastrophe? Was the outcome better than you expected?

What are you hoping to achieve by setting this standard for yourself?

What is the goal or positive intention behind this standard?

Can you think of a more flexible guideline that would help you reach your goal?

Can you think of a more helpful and realistic standard you could set yourself? Remember: rules break, but guidelines bend.

If you truly believed and lived by this flexible guideline, how would it help you in your life?

What would be the benefits of adopting this new guideline?

Evaluating Your Demanding Standards

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What is one of the demanding standards you try to live up to?

I should exercise every day and always push myself to my limit.

Demanding standards are often phrased as 'should', 'must', or 'ought' rules that you need to follow.

What experiences show this standard is 100% fair and accurate?

Professional athletes train a lot. I often say, "No pain, no gain."

Can you think of any evidence that shows this standard is reasonable and consistent with the facts?

What experiences show this standard isn't 100% fair and accurate?

I've injured myself when I train too hard. My gym buddies don't exercise every day. Even professional athletes have rest days.

Can you think of any evidence that shows this standard is unreasonable, or not consistent with the facts?

Have there been times when you didn't meet this standard? Did your worst fears come true?

I've had to take rest days when I've been unwell. Nothing bad happened – my stamina didn't change, and nobody judged me.

Has failing to meet this standard ever resulted in a catastrophe? Was the outcome better than you expected?

What are you hoping to achieve by setting this standard for yourself?

I want to be as fit and healthy as I can be.

What is the goal or positive intention behind this standard?

Can you think of a more flexible guideline that would help you reach your goal?

Regular exercise will help me stay fit, but it's important to take rest days too. It's ok to sometimes have less intense gym sessions.

Can you think of a more helpful and realistic standard you could set yourself? Remember: rules break, but guidelines bend.

If you truly believed and lived by this flexible guideline, how would it help you in your life?

I wouldn't worry so much about exercising and my fitness level. I'd have more time to rest and relax. Maybe I'd get fewer injuries.

What would be the benefits of adopting this new guideline?

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Resource details

Title: Evaluating Your Demanding Standards

Type: Worksheet

Language: English (US)

Translated title: Evaluating Your Demanding Standards

URL: <https://www.psychologytools.com/resource/evaluating-your-demanding-standards/>

Resource format: Professional

Version: 20230721

Last updated by: EB

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