

Worksheet

Professional Version | US English

Exploring 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. Potential sources of demanding standards include one’s family, social networks, institutions (e.g., schools or religious practices), social media, and wider society. In addition, standards can be communicated overtly (e.g., the client was told to adhere to the standard) or covertly (e.g., striving to meet the standard was modelled by others).
- 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, the pursuit of standards that are personally challenging leads individuals with perfectionism to strive to do better.

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 they 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.

The *Exploring Your Demanding Standards* worksheet is designed to help clients examine a demanding standard, including its advantages and disadvantages. This can highlight the negative consequences of pursuing high standards and motivate clients to experiment with adjusting their self-imposed rules.

Instructions

Suggested Question



We have talked about some of the demanding standards you set yourself. I think it would be useful to explore whether these standards work for you or not. Can we look at this worksheet together? We can use it to explore one of your demanding standards, where it comes from, and the consequences of trying to meet it. This will help you decide whether it's a standard you want to adjust.

- 1. What is a demanding standard 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. Where does this standard come from?** Explore where and when the client developed the standard. Clients often view demanding standards as their own, so identifying their origins may require exploration (e.g., "Who taught you that this standard is important? Looking back, can you think of anyone who embodied this rule?"). Furthermore, the standard may have been communicated explicitly (e.g., in the form of family sayings) or implicitly (e.g., a family member modelled the standard).
- 3. How do you know when you are trying to meet this standard?** Explore how the standard manifests in the client's life, including how the client thinks, feels, and behaves when they strive to fulfill it. The client may find it helpful to explore a recent time when they tried to meet the standard (e.g., "Tell me about the last time you strived to be the best at work – what happened?").
- 4. What are the advantages of setting this standard for yourself?** Ambivalence about change is common amongst people with demanding standards. Discuss what the client sees as beneficial about pursuing the standard. If the client finds this difficult, explore these advantages from another person's perspective (e.g., "What would someone who cares about you say are the good sides of setting this standard for yourself?"). Exploring the client's fears about relaxing the standard can also highlight its perceived benefits (e.g., "Suppose you stopped cleaning your house so thoroughly – what's the worst thing you imagine might happen?").
- 5. What are the disadvantages of setting this standard for yourself?** Discuss the problems and personal costs that come with pursuing the standard. This can include negative effects on the client's thinking, feelings, behaviors, relationships, and other life domains. If the client finds it difficult to identify disadvantages, explore these from another person's perspective (e.g., "What would your partner say are the downsides of you striving to meet this standard?").
- 6. If you were to continue trying to meet this standard, what would the positive consequences be?** What are the long-term benefits of continuing to pursue the standard (if any)? Some clients find it helpful to have a timeframe when reflecting on long-term consequences (e.g., "Suppose five years have passed – how might your life have improved because of pursuing this standard?"). Timeframes often need to be shortened for younger individuals (e.g., six months' time rather than five years).

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7. If you were to continue trying to meet this standard, what would the negative consequences be? Explore the problems that pursuing the demanding standard is likely to cause in the long term across key life domains (e.g., work, relationships, health, hobbies, etc.). This discussion can include the client's worst fears about not changing (e.g., "What is the worst thing that might happen if this standard doesn't change?"). Egan and colleagues (2014) also recommend highlighting that doing things the same way doesn't necessarily mean that the situation will stay the same – it may worsen.

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Exploring 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 learn more about one of your demanding standards.

What is a demanding standard you try to live up to?

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

Where does this standard come from?

Standards are learnt. When you think about this standard, do any memories, life experiences, specific individuals, or family sayings come to mind?

How do you know when you are trying to meet this standard?

How do you think, feel, and act when you're trying to meet this standard?

What are the advantages of setting this standard for yourself?

How is this standard helpful or beneficial to you?
What risks might come with giving it up?

What are the disadvantages of setting this standard for yourself?

How is this standard unhelpful to you?
What difficulties has it caused you, now and in the past?

If you were to continue trying to meet this standard, what would the positive consequences be?

Think about how striving to meet this standard is likely to affect you and your relationships over the coming years. What positive impact will it have on different areas of your life?

If you were to continue trying to meet this standard, what would the negative consequences be?

Think about how striving to meet this standard is likely to affect you and your relationships over the coming years. What negative impact will it have on different areas of your life?

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What is a demanding standard you try to live up to?

I should always be perfectly presented.

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

Where does this standard come from?

My parents made sure I always looked neat because they cared a lot about what other people thought. They would say "You don't get a second chance to make a good first impression."

Standards are learnt. When you think about this standard, do any memories, life experiences, specific individuals, or family sayings come to mind?

How do you know when you are trying to meet this standard?

I check myself a lot in the mirror. I feel very conscious of the way I look.

How do you think, feel, and act when you're trying to meet this standard?

What are the advantages of setting this standard for yourself?

People compliment me on how I look. I always look professional at work.

How is this standard helpful or beneficial to you?
What risks might come with giving it up?

What are the disadvantages of setting this standard for yourself?

It takes me a long time to get ready. I get fed up with worrying about the way I look. I feel bad when I wear more relaxed, comfy clothes.

How is this standard unhelpful to you?
What difficulties has it caused you, now and in the past?

If you were to continue trying to meet this standard, what would the positive consequences be?

I'd look smart and professional all the time.

Think about how striving to meet this standard is likely to affect you and your relationships over the coming years. What positive impact will it have on different areas of your life?

If you were to continue trying to meet this standard, what would the negative consequences be?

I'm going to wear myself out with all the effort.
Getting dressed will always be stressful.

Think about how striving to meet this standard is likely to affect you and your relationships over the coming years. What negative impact will it have on different areas of your life?

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