

# Information Handout

Professional Version | US English

# What Keeps Perfectionism Going?



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## Description

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Striving to achieve your goals and ambitions can be satisfying and help you grow as an individual, but it can also become a problem. If you set demanding standards for yourself (such as how you should behave, or how much you should achieve), there's a risk you won't meet them. If you base your self-worth on achieving those standards, or if trying to meet them causes you a lot of trouble, you may be struggling with perfectionism. Signs of unhelpful or problematic perfectionism include:

- Having high standards which are difficult to achieve or maintain over time.
- Harshly criticizing yourself when you don't meet your standards.
- Judging your self-worth mainly in terms of your successes and achievements in life.
- Discounting achievements you see as less than perfect.
- Avoiding or postponing tasks where there's a risk you might fail.
- Sacrificing your interests, relationships, or rest to strive and achieve.
- Pushing yourself to the point of feeling depressed, overwhelmed, or exhausted.
- Fearing failure, or feeling like you always fail.

Research studies have shown that cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) is a helpful psychological therapy for perfectionism. CBT therapists work a bit like firefighters: while the fire is burning they're not so interested in what caused it, but are more focused on what is keeping it going, and what they can do to put it out. This is because if they can work out what keeps a problem going, they can treat the problem by 'removing the fuel' and interrupting this maintaining cycle.

In 2002, three leading mental health professionals – Roz Shafran, Zafra Cooper, and Chris Fairburn – published an influential model of perfectionism, which was updated in 2010. The model describes some of the 'parts' that keep perfectionism going. The *What Keeps Perfectionism Going?* information handout describes some of the key factors which act to maintain perfectionism. It illustrates them in a vicious flower format in which each 'petal' represents a separate maintenance cycle. Helping clients to understand more about these processes is an essential part of cognitive therapy for perfectionism. Therapists can use this handout as a focus for discussion, or as a template from which to formulate an idiosyncratic model of a client's experiences.

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# Instructions

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## Suggested Question



*One interesting way of thinking about perfectionism is to look at why, for some people, it does not get better by itself. This handout shows some of the most common reasons why some people keep experiencing symptoms of perfectionism. I wonder if we could look at it together and think about whether it describes some of what is happening for you?*

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# References

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# What Keeps Perfectionism Going?

High standards are difficult to achieve and hard to maintain. When you meet them, you feel good about yourself. If you set yourself difficult goals, you might have significant successes...

...but it's impossible to meet them all the time, and failing can make you criticize yourself and feel low. High standards can also discourage you from trying – you might avoid activities if you think you might not succeed, or because your standards make them so unpleasant. Either way, you feel like you have failed, which makes you more focused on striving and succeeding next time.

When you meet a goal or standard, you may focus on what was imperfect (“I got one of the questions on the test wrong”), or discount your achievement and set even higher standards for yourself (“The house is clean but I need to be faster and more thorough next time”).

This makes you feel like you are always falling short, and leads to having higher and higher expectations of yourself. It feeds your fears about failing and your beliefs about the importance of meeting your standards.

**Setting impossible standards for yourself**

**Being dissatisfied with success**

What keeps it going?

**Perfectionism**

**Using behaviors that keep you striving**

**Basing your self-worth on success and achievement**

To meet your standards, you might do things to monitor, evaluate, and improve your performance. These behaviors might include checking your work, being very thorough, and multitasking. When used the right amount, they can help you to achieve your goals...

...but when you use these behaviors too much or too intensely, they can impair your performance, increase your anxiety, and make you feel uncertain, or doubt yourself. This can lead to fears about failing or actual setbacks, which cause you to use these strategies even more, and fuel your striving.

Trying to meet your high standards can lead you to focus your time and energy on meeting and maintaining your standards. As a result, other parts of your life may get neglected. Over time, your standards can become the main – or only – source of self-confidence. If your life and self-worth start to revolve around meeting your standards, achieving them can feel even more vital.

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