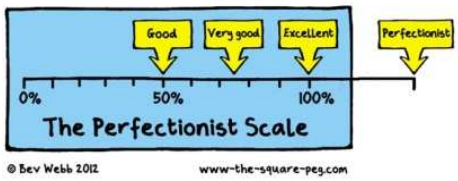
Perfectionism:

Done is better than Perfect



LSE Student Counselling Service
June 2018

Aims

- Signs of perfectionism.
- What is perfectionism?
- Causes and how it develops.
- Faulty thinking.
- Strategies to overcome perfectionism.
- Sources of help.

Signs of perfectionism

- **What you accomplish is never quite good enough.**
- **Putting off handing in papers or projects, waiting to get them just right.**
- **Feeling you must give more than 100% or risk failure or mediocrity.**
- **Mastery or failure.**

Perfectionism: *what is it exactly?*

Q: How do you define **Perfectionism**

What is perfectionism?

- **the desire to be faultless.**
- **a fear of imperfection.**
- **equating errors as personal defect.**
- **viewing perfection as the only route to personal acceptance.**
- **Self-defeating thoughts and behaviours associated with high ideals, not realistic goals.**

Is Perfectionism Bad?

- Studies show that perfectionist attitudes actually **interfere with success**.
- The desire to be perfect can deny you a sense of satisfaction and cause you to **achieve far less** than people with more realistic goals.
- Perfectionism is often **mistakenly** seen as desirable or even necessary for success.

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Key Elements

- **Your expectations of yourself**
- **Your expectations of others**
- **Others expectations of you**

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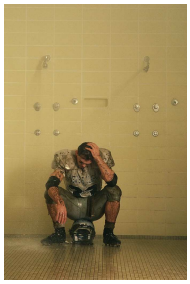
Causes of perfectionism

- **you learned early in life that you were mainly valued for your achievements.**
- **You value yourself on the basis of other people's approval.**
- **Your self-esteem may be based primarily on external standards.**
- **This can leave you vulnerable and sensitive to the opinions and criticism of others.**
- **To protect yourself you may decide that being perfect is your only defence.**



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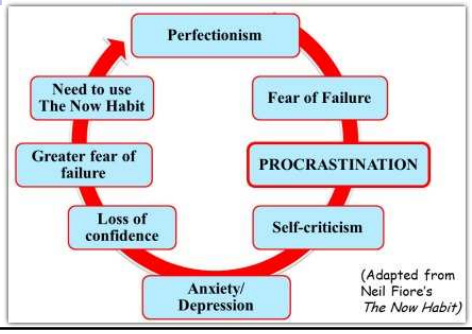
The Perfectionism – Procrastination Cycle



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The Vicious Cycle of Procrastination

- **Set an unreachable goal.**
- **Fail, as the goal was impossible to begin with.**
- **Constant pressure reduces personal effectiveness.**
- **Becoming self-critical and self-blaming, leading to low self-esteem, anxiety and depression.**
- **Giving up completely on the original goal and setting another unrealistic goal, thinking:**
  "This time if only I try harder I will succeed".

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How does it develop?

- **Early experiences**
  - parents' expectations
  - rewards and reinforcements
  - punishments
  - modelling behaviour and information
- **Negative assessment of worth:** *'I am stupid'*
- **Positive thoughts to manage it:** '
  I am okay. You are okay.
  Even though neither of us are perfect.'

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Negative thoughts and feelings

- **Fear of failure.**
- **Fear of making mistakes.**
- **Fear of disapproval.**
- **All-or-nothing thinking.**
- **Over-emphasis on 'should', 'must' and 'ought'.**
- **Never being good enough.**

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How is it maintained?

- **Current triggers:** *e.g.,* exams, presentations
- **Negative predictions** – *'I may not do it well/ others will think I am stupid*
- **Unhelpful behaviours,**
  - eg avoidance of writing, constant checking
- **Confirming our negative beliefs**
- **Self-Critical thoughts** – *'I've failed again'*
- **Depression and low mood**

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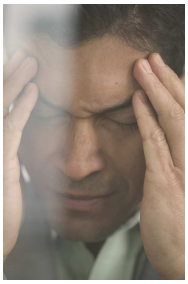
4 common myths with perfectionism



- **You can't succeed without it.**
- **It gets you the best results.**
- **It enables you to overcome obstacles.**
- **It helps you achieve and please others.**

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Myth 1: I wouldn't be the success I am if I weren't such a perfectionist

REALITY:

- **No evidence that perfectionists are more successful - more likely the reverse!**
- **Success may be achieved despite compulsive striving.**

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Myth 2: Perfectionists get things done and they do things right.

REALITY:

- **Procrastination, missed deadlines, low productivity.**
- **Small tasks become overwhelming.**
- **Agonizing over non-critical details.**

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Myth 3: Perfectionists are determined to overcome all obstacles to success

REALITY:

- Can't concentrate on the process of getting the task done.
- Writer's block
- Depression and anxiety.

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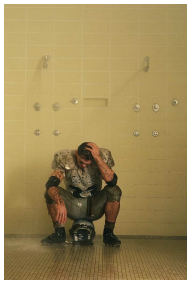
A4 Fear of failure. Perfectionists often equate failure to achieve their goals with a lack of personal worth or value.

- Fear of making mistakes. Perfectionists often equate mistakes with failure. In building their lives around avoiding mistakes, perfectionists miss opportunities to learn and grow.
- Fear of disapproval. If they let others see their flaws, perfectionists often fear that they will no longer be accepted. Trying to be perfect is a way of trying to protect themselves from criticism, rejection, and disapproval.
- All-or-nothing thinking. Perfectionists frequently believe that they are worthless if their accomplishments are not perfect. Perfectionists have difficulty seeing situations in perspective. For example, a straight 'A' student who receives a 'B' might believe, "I am a total failure".
- Over-emphasis on 'should', 'must' and 'ought'. Perfectionists often live with an endless list of rigid rules for what they must accomplish. With the emphasis on how everything has to be done, perfectionists rarely listen to what they really feel like doing.
- Never good enough. Perfectionists tend to see others as achieving success with a minimum of effort, few errors, little emotional stress, and maximum self-confidence. At the same time, perfectionists view their own efforts as unending and forever inadequate.

Administrator, 17/10/2006

Myth 4: Perfectionists just have this enormous desire to please others

REALITY:



- **Relationships become complicated**
- **Achievers are willing to make mistakes and risk failure.**
- **Imperfection is part of being human.**

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5 Quick strategies

1. Do the one thing at a time.

2. Set deadlines.

3. Done is better than perfect.

4. Take a walk without thinking.

5. Get to work.

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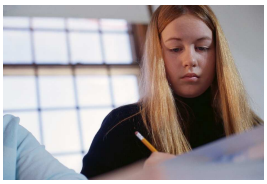
What can I do about it?

- **Realize that perfectionism is undesirable**
  - perfection is an illusion that is unattainable.
- **Challenge self-defeating thoughts and behaviours** that fuel perfectionism.
- **Cost benefit analysis** of keeping high standards.
- **Identify goals** – general and specific – to be less perfectionistic



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Challenging Perfectionism - I

- Identify negative/ faulty thoughts
- List possible alternatives
- Consider the positive and negative of the original and alternative thoughts
- Choose a more realistic way to view the situation or that fuel perfectionism.

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Recording thoughts and feelings

SITUATION	EMOTION INTENSITY (RATE 0 -10)	PERFECTIONISTIC BELIEFS AND INTERPRETATIONS	ALTERNATIVE THOUGHTS
Rewriting an essay	Anxiety – 5 Frustration – 7	If I don't get each sentence right, my tutor will think I'm stupid	They are more concerned with my ideas than each sentence
Rewriting an essay	Anxiety – 8	I have to know everything or else people will see me as a useless failure	

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Challenging Perfectionism - II

- Exposure based strategies
  - Hierarchy – rank and practice
- Stopping negative actions (eg constant checking, rewriting)
- Communication
  - Being assertive
  - Listening and paying attention to non verbal communication
- Effective Prioritising
- Overcoming Procrastination

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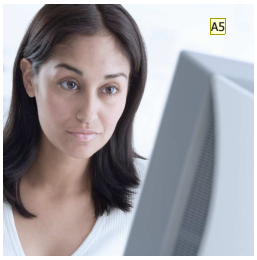
Strategies to move forward – I

- Set realistic and reachable goals
- Set subsequent goals in a sequential manner
- Experiment with your standards for success.
  Try for 80% or even 60%
- Focus on the *process* of doing an activity not just the end result.
- Evaluate success in terms of what you accomplished and whether you enjoyed the task.

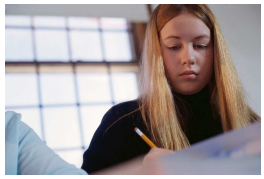


Strategies to move forward - II

- Check your feelings.
  Monitor feelings of anxiety and depression. A9
  - "*Have I set up impossible expectations for myself in this situation?*"
- Face your fears that may be behind your perfectionism by asking yourself
  - "*What am I afraid of? What is the worst thing that could happen?*"
- Celebrate your mistakes
  - "*What can I learn from this experience?*"

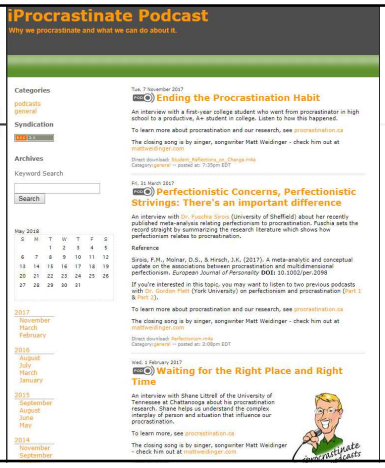
Conclusions

- Look after yourself (diet, sleep)
- Keep a supportive structure for your daily life; have relaxation time
- See writing as a time of discovery
- Recall past achievements
- Challenge negative thoughts
- Imagine looking back at the task in 3 or 6 months time.



Sources of Help

- **LSE Life**
- **Student Counselling Service**
- **Disability and Wellbeing Service**
  - Mental Health and Wellbeing Advisor
  - Dyslexia and Neurodiversity support
- **Advice Teams**
  - Student Union and Student Services
- Tutor or Departmental Tutor
- Speak to other students



Podcast: iProcrastinate

http://iprocrastinate.libsyn.com/

Carleton University (Ottawa, Canada)

LSE Student Counselling Service

- Free and confidential
- Groups and Workshops programme
  - See our "**Past Workshops**" page.
  - Esp. re: workshops on procrastination, exams, Website has information about the Service
  - Stress management handout
  - Relaxation tape MP3's
  - Links to self help resources

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A5 Realistic goals. Set realistic and reachable goals based on your own wants and needs and on what you have accomplished in the past. This will enable you to achieve and also will lead to a greater sense of self-esteem.
Modest improvements. Set subsequent goals in a sequential manner. As you reach a goal, set your next goal one level beyond your present level.
Try for less than 100%. Experiment with your standards for success. Choose any activity and instead of aiming for 100%, try for 90%, 80%, or even 60% success. This will help you to realise that world does not end when you are not perfect.
Focus on process. Focus on the process of doing an activity not just on the end result. Evaluate your success not only in terms of what you accomplished but also in terms of how much you enjoyed the task.
Administrator, 18/10/2006

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A9 Check your feelings. Use feelings of anxiety and depression as opportunities to ask yourself, "Have I set up impossible expectations for myself in this situation?"
Face your fears. Confront the fears that may be behind your perfectionism by asking yourself, "What am I afraid of? What is the worst thing that could happen?"
Celebrate your mistakes. Recognise that many positive things can only be learned by making mistakes. When you make a mistake ask, "What can I learn from this experience?" More specifically, think of a recent mistake you have made and list all the things you can learn from it.
Discriminate. Avoid all-or-nothing thinking in relation to your goals. Learn to discriminate the tasks you want to give high priority to from those tasks that are less important to you. On less important tasks, choose to put forth less effort.
Administrator, 18/10/2006