



▶▶ **ACCEPTING YOURSELF AS AN IMPERFECT PERSON AND TACKLING PERFECTIONISTIC TENDENCIES WILL HELP YOU GAIN MORE CONTROL OVER YOUR LIFE. DEPRESSION AND ANXIETY LEVELS SHOULD DECREASE AS YOU BECOME LESS SELF-CRITICAL AND YOU REALIZE YOU HAVE THE POWER TO CHANGE YOUR INTERNAL STANDARDS.**



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Maladaptive Perfectionism

Defeating the “Will I ever be good enough?” trap.

IN WORKING WITH LAW STUDENTS, lawyers, and judges I am often confronted by the high internal and external expectations that legal professionals face and set for themselves in their professional and personal lives. When I do an assessment of legal professionals, they often tell me:

- “I don’t feel good enough;”
- “I worry what others think of me;”
- “I never feel proud of my accomplishments;”
- “I feel like I always need to prove myself;”
- “I have a hard time delegating tasks to others;” or
- “I feel like a fraud and failure.”

When I ask what they consider an achievement or accomplishment, they often fail to ascribe graduating college, taking the LSAT, getting accepted to law school, graduating from law school, passing the bar, finding gainful employment, making a living in the law, having a stable personal partnership, or having children as tangible evidence they have achieved success. Why is that?

What is perfectionism?

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, perfectionism is defined as “a refusal to accept any standard short of perfection.” In the field of psychology, perfectionism is viewed as a multidimensional concept that has several different components. Canadian psychologists Gordon Flett and Paul Hewitt identify three types of perfectionism:

- self-oriented perfectionism**—the tendency to have unrealistically high standards for yourself that are impossible to attain;
- other oriented perfectionism**—the tendency

to demand others meet your unrealistically high standards; and **socially prescribed perfectionism**—the tendency to assume others have expectations of you that are impossible to meet.

These concepts of internal and external expectations for self and others lead to high levels of self-criticism, depressive tendencies, a lack of acceptance of our mistakes and failures, high levels of anger, problematic relationships, low resiliency, eating disorders, body-image problems, and social anxiety. They create a host of problems that lead people to feel low levels of life satisfaction and happiness, and a continual striving toward goal achievement as a personal barometer for success. Unfortunately, high levels of perfectionism can also lead to exhaustion, fatigue, performance issues, clinical depression, and anxiety.

Does this sound familiar? As a clinician and individual who struggles with perfectionism, I know the debilitating impact maladaptive perfectionism can have on a person’s life. Accepting personal imperfections and imperfections of others is a difficult and challenging task. But it is the first step on the journey to recovery. People with perfectionist tendencies have an extreme need for control related to thoughts, feelings, behaviors, performances, and appearance of ourselves and others. Although it is important to have internal and external standards for ourselves and others, the intensity and frequency of these standards experienced by perfectionists is what sets us apart. Strangely, what we believe provides order and control in our lives wreaks havoc, chaos, and unhappiness instead.

Behaviors involving maladaptive perfectionism fall into two types:

- behaviors that help a person meet his or her own unreasonably high standards; or
- behaviors that involve avoidance of situations that predispose us to perfectionistic tendencies.

Behaviors that may suggest perfectionist tendencies can include overcompensation, reassurance seeking, repeating behaviors, correcting or micromanaging others, excessive organizing and list making, and difficulty making decisions. Avoidance behaviors can include procrastination; not knowing when to quit or end a project; prematurely giving up on difficult tasks; difficulty delegating to others; and avoiding fearful people, situations, activities, thoughts, and feelings.

Managing perfectionism

If you identify with qualities of perfectionism, and these tendencies are causing some level of impairment in your life, what strategies can you use to manage them?

The first thing is to conduct an honest personal assessment or have a mental health specialist do one to determine and isolate your perfectionist thinking patterns and the triggers for your perfectionism. Once you assess whether your internal and external standards are reasonable or unreasonable, you need to determine how severe the problem is, and whether these perfectionist qualities are causing emotional, professional, and interpersonal impairment.

You then need to set general and specific goals for yourself that will improve the quality of your life by lowering personal standards—for yourself and others. General goal setting with specific priorities may include being less hypersensitive about your personal appearance, becoming more tolerant of others, being less critical about cleanliness, being less worried and hypersensitive to feedback and criticism, and being less detail oriented. You may need help from someone you trust or from a mental health professional to help you

navigate your frustrations, anxiety, and expectations during this change process.

Accepting yourself as an imperfect person and tackling perfectionistic tendencies will help you gain more control over your life. Depression and anxiety levels should decrease as you become less self-critical and you realize you have the power to change your internal standards.

Struggles with perfectionistic tendencies can increase during periods of life transitions, when under increasing stress, and after experiencing any form of personal or work-related failure. However, we can use mindfulness techniques to become 1) more aware that any discomfort is temporary and not a reflection of our self-worth and 2) decrease our tendency to engage in negative self-talk. Managing perfectionism requires constant vigilance to achieve happiness and life satisfaction. While perfectionism increases our ability to achieve and accomplish aspirational goals, left unchecked, it may prohibit us from enjoying the fruits of our labor and hard work. **IEI**

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