

Personality Styles that Perpetuate Anxiety: Perfectionism

About Perfectionism

Perfectionism has two primary aspects:

- You have a tendency to have unrealistically high expectations of yourself, others and life in general.
- You tend to be overly concerned with small flaws and mistakes in yourself or your actions and to ignore your positive aspects.

Seven Guidelines to Shifting from Perfectionism to Acceptance & Peace

1. Let go of the idea that your worth depends on your outer accomplishments and expressions. It doesn't. You were born, and have remained since that day, worthy and deserving of your personal place on this planet. You don't need to earn it. The world wouldn't be the same without your unique gifts: your smile, thoughts, feelings, ideas, affections, quirks, talents, desires and hopes. Your only obligation is to be as you as you can be. And to cover your mouth when you sneeze.

2. Recognize and overcome perfectionistic self-talk. Shift from globalizing mistakes to putting them in perspective, and from measuring by some imaginary (and usually impossible) outer standard to using a kinder, gentler inner yardstick – one that honors and cheerfully accommodates your humanness.

Perfectionistic Self-Talk:

- “I can never do anything right.”
- “I always make a fool of myself at parties.”
- “I can't do this right so I can't do it at all.”
- “I can't count on anyone to do anything right.”
- “I'm not supposed to make mistakes.”
- “I should know this already.”

Non-Perfectionistic Self-Talk:

- “I'm having an off day. I'll try again tomorrow.”
- “I got nervous and said something silly. It happens!”
- “With practice, I'll get better at this.”
- “People do their best and that's good enough for me.”
- “I made a mistake. The world didn't end. Neat!”
- “I'm a learning being; I can't know anything I haven't learned and practiced yet.”

3. Stop magnifying the importance of small errors. In the grand scheme of things, small errors don't matter. In fact, small errors are a key way we engage our minds and resourcefulness to overcome obstacles, an emotionally maturing experience. It's also how we learn anything at all, in the absence of a Dummies guide. The world is *full* of imperfection and yet it continues functioning, and we all survive and find ways to have fun. Think of small errors as acts of heroic resistance to that bland, minimalist, terrifying hive-mind society they show in the scary futuristic movies.

4. Focus on positives. Once you get the hang of it, they're just as easy to spot as the negatives and feel much better to dwell on. At the end of each day, make a list of five or more things you appreciate about yourself from the day. What ways, small or large, were you helpful or pleasant to others? What small steps did you take toward your goals? What insights did you have? Shifting your attitude to really give these little pluses their due can help turn the tide in your favor.

5. Work toward goals that are realistic by taking small, doable steps. A serious pitfall of perfectionism is to set goals so high that no one could possibly blame you if you failed (no one except you, that is). This is a defense against giving any goal an honest try. Also, it's a way of showing that you're in denial about how prevalent imperfection is in the world. Choose a heartfelt, doable goal and break it down into the smallest steps you can think of. Then take steps patiently, one at a time, and celebrate your progress. If you need, check out the reasonableness of your goal with a therapist or non-perfectionist friend.

6. Cultivate more pleasure and recreation in your life. Perfectionism has a tendency to make people rigid and self-denying. This mindset may be expected to increase productivity but it does quite the opposite. It also may be a way of punishing yourself for not being good enough, which is deeply unjust. The antidote is play. Play is an incredibly powerful experience that contributes to inner peace, emotional balance, and increased energy, intuition, creativity and yes, productivity. Play is the act of engaging in an activity with no agenda for the outcome and with deep curiosity about the possibilities. Try it out as often as possible. And do at least one thing each day that you enjoy, for no other purpose than to enjoy it.

7. Develop a process orientation. Rather than focusing all your energy on the end goal, which in some cases lasts only moments before you're on to the next thing, reserve some attention for the positive aspects of the journey itself. Yes, the project will feel good when it's over, but in the meantime, isn't it kind of fun to discuss progress over lunch, or to see it coming together, or to get to know people in the process? The sages speak of the journey being the destination. See if you can tune in to what they're talking about. They are sages, after all.