

Let go of perfectionism

Perfectionistic thinking is a recipe for misery. Because you are a human being, few things you do are perfect. If you hold perfection as a personal standard, you will constantly feel like a failure.

Researchers Paul Hewitt and Gordon Flett have identified three types of perfectionistic thinking.

Self-oriented perfectionism is a tendency to hold high personal standards for yourself.

Other-oriented perfectionism is a tendency to demand perfection from others.

Socially-prescribed perfectionism is the belief that others in your life expect you to be perfect.

This last type appears to be particularly destructive to mood and self-esteem. Depressed people often imagine that others have impossibly high standards for them, and that they are constantly letting their family and friends down. They typically do a bit of mindreading to get this idea, guessing what others might want and then trying to live up to it. It often comes as a shock to find out that others don't expect quite so much from them.

Perfectionism is difficult to overcome. It often has deep roots in childhood experiences of disapproval and feelings of inadequacy. Sometimes it can arise from well-meaning parents who focus on the room for improvement rather than on what the child achieves. *"Oh, you got 98 out of 100 on the exam! Let's see what went wrong with those two questions, shall we?"* The parents may have a genuine desire to help the child do well, but inadvertently communicate the idea that nothing will ever be good enough.

Reevaluating your standards

In which areas of your life are you plagued by perfectionistic standards? Your job, your social life, your parenting, your romantic relationships? Some other area, maybe?

If you are a perfectionist, this means that you have unreasonably strict ideas about what is "good enough." *"My baby should never cry." "My wife should always be overjoyed to see me." "I should never make an error in my records at work." "I should send birthday cards to everyone I know, including acquaintances."*

What are some of your standards? What would be good enough? Write these down in the numbered spaces below.

For each standard, ask yourself this question: Who really expects you to perform at this level? Is it you, or is it someone else? Write your answer beside the standard in question.

Then ask yourself what would be a more reasonable expectation. *"Recognize that all babies cry some of the time." "Let my wife feel what she feels." "Know that everyone makes mistakes, and try to catch and correct mine." "Remember to send birthday cards to immediate family."* Write a better personal standard beside "Revision".

1. Standard: _____

Revision: _____

2. Standard: _____

Revision: _____

3. Standard: _____

Revision: _____

4. Standard: _____

Revision: _____

5. Standard: _____

Revision: _____

6. Standard: _____

Revision: _____

Try to catch yourself in “trigger situations” that normally cause you to become perfectionistic (e.g., finding a mistake at work). Remind yourself of the more reasonable standard you have set for yourself. Repeat it to yourself, out loud if necessary.

Perfectionists often have great difficulty deciding what is reasonable. They often imagine that everyone has their impossibly high standards, and that the world would fall apart if they didn't. If this describes you, ask the people around you about their own standards. Ask other parents how often their babies cry, and whether they think this means they are inadequate caregivers. Ask people how many birthday cards they send.

If the problem is what you imagine others expect of you, ask them. *“I’ve been feeling guilty that I don’t iron your underwear. Do you expect that from me?” “How fast do you need this file back?” “I worry that you think I should be earning more money in this job. What do you really think?” “I feel inadequate if you want sex and I’m not up for it. Is it okay with you if that happens sometimes?”*

Often you will discover that the person never held the standards you had been imagining. If it turns out that they really do have unreasonable expectations of you, this may be time to practice your assertive communication. *“I’d like to get this repair job done in an hour, but unfortunately it’s going to take until tomorrow.”*

For more suggestions on overcoming perfectionism, consult *When perfect isn’t good enough* (Antony & Swinson, 1998).