

# Perfectionism

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On a college campus, a dedication to excellence and a culture of competition can sometimes turn into a maladaptive form of striving: perfectionism. Perfectionism has been shown to be associated with stress, anxiety, and depression.

Here are some common experiences that perfectionists may have:

- Constantly comparing themselves to others, and if someone appears to be doing something better than them, they feel awful
- Spending every available minute preparing to ace an exam or making sure they don't mess up on a presentation, to the extent that they neglect other important things like relationships or self-care
- Experiencing constant stress and anxiety about whether or not they are doing enough
- Feeling as though they can never measure up to expectations
- Struggling with prioritizing efforts because everything has to be perfect
- Constantly feeling self-conscious, because they are worried about how others view them
- Feeling burnt out because they are totally exhausted from putting so much effort into everything they do
- Struggling with relationships due to criticism of others and their imperfections as well as never feeling good enough for others to care about

Perfectionists tend to set extremely high standards for themselves. High standards are not bad, in and of themselves. Individuals who set goals and work to achieve them have considerably more success in life than individuals who do not set goals. The problem is not with the goals we set, but rather with how we strive to meet those goals and how we respond when we fail to meet expectations.

## Self-Compassion

One way to avoid the negative consequences of perfectionism is by practicing self-compassion. Research shows that self-compassion can decrease perfectionism, anxiety, depression, and burnout. Interestingly, people with greater self-compassion are

also more likely to achieve their goals. Self-compassion involves three major practices:

1. Choosing self-kindness over self-criticism. Treat yourself with the same kindness you would extend to someone else who failed at something or who is going through a difficult time. When you feel like beating up on yourself, ask how you would treat a friend in the same situation. Know that you deserve the same treatment.
2. Recognizing that you're not alone. Everyone fails and messes up, or goes through hard times. It's part of being human.
3. Practicing mindful awareness. While it's important to be cognizant of our mistakes so that we can grow, it's also important that we don't over-identify with our failures. Just because you failed at something does not make you a failure. It just makes you human.

Showing yourself compassion doesn't happen overnight. It's like a muscle—it needs to be exercised regularly. Check out this website for resources to start your practice: <http://self-compassion.org/category/exercises/> [1].

## More Strategies to Help Yourself

Here are some other helpful strategies for addressing perfectionism:

- Consider what perfectionism does for you and what perfectionism does to you.
- Prioritize efforts. Discriminate between what is really important and what is not. If you find this difficult, ask for help!
- Decide what a reasonable effort is for whatever task you take on, and set this as your goal. Again, it can be helpful to ask friends what they believe a reasonable effort looks like.
- Plan for and schedule "off duty," relaxation time as well as "on duty," work-focused time. Don't let other commitments encroach on your "off duty" time. You deserve a break!
- Challenge any catastrophic, negative thinking you have about your performance and achievements. The world is not going to end if you make a mistake.
- Value your strengths and view your flaws and limitations as part of being human.
- Practice detachment from the results of your efforts. Don't worry so much about what you've achieved; rather, value yourself based on your effort.
- Celebrate the achievements of others.
- Practice gratitude, even for failure. Failure is what helps us grow!
- Pay attention to and appreciate the present moment. Try not to worry about what happened in the past or what might happen in the future—otherwise, you'll miss what's happening right now. If you struggle with this, give mindfulness meditation a try. Regular practice can help you to become more aware of the present moment.

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**Source URL:** <https://campushealth.unc.edu/health-topics/stress-and-anxiety/perfectionism>

**Links**

[1] <http://self-compassion.org/category/exercises/>