

Unhelpful Perfectionism Defined

Setting goals and standards that you want to achieve is a normal part of life. Perfectionism is a problem when you become very critical of yourself when you don't meet your personal standards.

Therefore unhelpful perfectionism involves *a continual striving to achieve high standards that a person has set for themselves* (e.g. 'I must cook the perfect meal for my guests) *despite negative consequences* (e.g. feeling stressed and anxious).

It also involves *self-criticism* when the person thinks they have not met their high standards (e.g. having prepared food they perceive to be not good enough).

One of the most problematic aspects of perfectionism is that people often *base their self-esteem on how well they think that they have achieved these high standards* (e.g. thinking themselves a failure for having baked an imperfect dessert for a dinner party).

It is this continual striving to achieve very high personal standards, despite negative consequences, and basing their sense of self on how they measure up to those standards, that distinguishes *unhelpful* perfectionism from *helpful* perfectionism (i.e. *a healthy pursuit of excellence*). The fear of failure is often at the heart of perfectionism.

References

Overcoming Perfectionism 2nd Edition: A self-help guide using scientifically supported cognitive behavioural techniques (Overcoming Books) Paperback – 10 May 2018 by Roz Shafran (Author), Sarah Egan (Author), Tracey Wade (Author)

Questions to help determine if you have unhelpful perfectionism

1. Do you continually try your hardest to achieve high standards?
Yes a lot of the time Sometimes Rarely
2. Do you focus on what you have *not* achieved rather than what you *have* achieved?
Yes a lot of the time Sometimes Rarely
3. Do other people tell you that your standards are too high?
Yes a lot of the time Sometimes Rarely
4. Are you very afraid of failing to meet your standards?
Yes a lot of the time Sometimes Rarely
5. If you achieve your goal, do you tend to set the standard higher next time (e.g. run the race in a faster time)?
Yes a lot of the time Sometimes Rarely
6. Do you base your self-esteem on striving and achievement?
Yes a lot of the time Sometimes Rarely
7. Do you repeatedly check how well you are doing at meeting your goals?
Yes a lot of the time Sometimes Rarely
8. Do you keep trying to meet your standards, even if this means that you miss out on things or if it is causing other problems?
Yes a lot of the time Sometimes Rarely
9. Do you tend to avoid tasks or put off doing them in case you fail or because of the time it would take?
Yes a lot of the time Sometimes Rarely

If you answered YES to question 6 and the majority of the other questions it is likely that you will benefit from therapy that focuses on your perfectionism