

Do You Have What It Takes to Be a Perfectionist?

Description

There are lots of books and articles out there about perfectionism, but they are all a little biased. Specifically, they all deal with how *not* to be a perfectionist. That's all fine and dandy, but what about all those poor underrepresented souls who want some advice on how to become a more perfect perfectionist? Well, here it is.

Perfectionism defined

Perfectionism has been defined as “the setting of excessively high standards of performance in conjunction with a tendency to make overly critical self-evaluations” (Frost, Marten, Lahart, & Rosenblate, 1990).

Well, do you think you have what it takes? Like anything else, becoming a true hard-core perfectionist takes a lot of hard work, dedication, and persistence. If you think you might be up to the task, read on.

Two criteria of perfectionism

For one, you need super high standards. The more excessive, unrealistic, and demanding, the better. No problem? Um, ok...let's move on.

Second, nothing can ever be good enough. You have to obsess over and beat yourself up for every little bitty mistake you make and when there are no obvious mistakes, identify anything that was not completely perfect and find a way to make a mountain out of this molehill.

This second criteria is actually the key to being a perfectionist. The ability to magnify any deficiency, no matter how small, and blow it out of proportion is what will get you from perfectionist-in-training to black belt status.

Become a better perfectionist in 5 easy steps

Step 1: Create a set of expectations for yourself that are so far beyond where you are now, that there is no possible way you could even come close to attaining them — even if you have the performance of a lifetime.

Step 2: Identify and dwell on everything that isn't absolutely perfect in practice sessions. Emphasize every mistake, every imperfection, and pay no attention to anything that sounds good.

Step 3: Focus on every little mistake both during and after every performance. Consider any less-than-

perfect performance a total failure. And if you're really serious about this, you'll chalk up any halfway decent performances to pure luck or fortuitous circumstances.

Step 4: Dismiss any positive feedback you get from others. Either they are just being polite (after all, they have probably just lost respect for you after that stinker of a performance), or if they *are* being sincere, their standards are way too low.

Step 5: When preparing for your next performance, recall all of your worst previous performances and how horrible you felt. Don't waste any time thinking about previous performances that actually went well (if there even were any such occasions).

There you have it. Five easy steps. Do you have what it takes? Can you be a true perfectionist's perfectionist?

Tradeoffs

As much fun as it sounds, being a perfectionist is not all peaches and cream. There are some unfortunate drawbacks to being a perfectionist, and it's only fair that I warn you about these before you make any sort of commitment to the perfectionist's way.

Drawback #1: Failure becomes the norm

If you set standards for yourself that cannot be met, you are, by definition, going to experience failure more often than not. Every performance will fall short of what you "should" or "could" sound like. That has to sting a bit, especially when it becomes the norm.

Drawback #2: You'll be less confident going into performances (and it'll be even worse in auditions or competitions)

If you habitually fail to perform up to your expectations and become increasingly used to feeling like you never measure up, your confidence will take a nose dive. When you have a big audition or performance, particularly in which you know you will be judged by others, you'll likely begin to doubt your abilities, feel unprepared, and experience extra anxiety in the days and hours leading up to the big moment.

Drawback #3: You'll be more stressed out

With your confidence down in the dumps, the natural thing will be to worry about whether you'll be able to get through the audition without embarrassing yourself (never mind winning or sounding spectacular). Of course, all this worrying and anxiety will stress you out and start to wear you out before the day even comes. You might even start to feel burned out or apathetic by the time the audition rolls around.

Drawback #4: Performance quality suffers

When the day finally arrives, your mental, emotional, and physical state will be nowhere near ideal.

Even if things start off ok, it'll be a real struggle to ignore or quickly move past mistakes, which becomes a distraction, which in turn leads to more mistakes.

An alternative, for those who aren't perfectionist material

If you don't think you have what it takes to be a hard-core perfectionist, that's ok. Try these instead.

Step 1: Set high standards for yourself, but give yourself a break.

Remember that you're not going to be able to set a personal best every time you step out on stage. A good rule of thumb is to aim for 80-90% of your max – particularly when you're under pressure. When you're nervous, it's awfully risky to play at the extreme edge of your current abilities.

Step 2: Be sure to acknowledge the good parts of your performance.

No matter how many mistakes you may have made, few performances are completely devoid of positives. Don't fail to notice what you did well, as these are the things you want to build on for next time.

Step 3: Give yourself some credit

If you do a great job, give yourself a pat on the back. Don't tell yourself you were just lucky, or that the music was easy, or that the competition must have been weak. Give yourself some credit for the hard work you put in, the focus you maintained while performing, crafting a great pre-audition ritual, etc. Don't cheat yourself out of praise that is well-deserved. That won't help you be any more confident or play any better.

Step 4: Take talent off the table

If you do make mistakes, avoid assuming that this means you're not talented enough. Successful individuals tend to assume (even though there's no way for them to know for certain) that they can do better next time if they can just figure out how.

Does this sound naive? Maybe, but it's an assumption that leads to working harder, whereas the former assumption leads to giving up. And giving up doesn't generally lead to improvement.

How much of a perfectionist are you anyway?

Want to see how much of a perfectionist you are? Take the Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (Frost, Marten, Lahart, Rosenblate, 1990) online [here](#). The MPS is an actual instrument used in sport settings, with established psychometric properties and research behind it.

The one-sentence summary

“You can't do better than you can do.” -Neal Newman, Ph.D.

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