

Conquering Perfectionism

**5 Ways to Win Against the
Urge to be Perfect**



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Conquering Perfectionism

5 Ways to Win Against the Urge to Be Perfect

High achieving people seem to be perpetually in search of the perfect result, the perfect piece of writing, the perfect answer. They strive to reach a level that surpasses that of most other people around them, and seek to make their life experiences no less than outstanding.

Positive Perfectionism

For the most part, this is an admirable goal. These kinds of people are the ones who truly make changes in the world; the ones who won't settle for half a job, or give up as soon as the going gets tough. They're the ones who reach for goals that haven't yet been explored and thereby reshape and reenergize their world.

Being perfectionistic is one element of having high-reaching aims that pushes world changers forward and propels them confidently into unknown territory. High achievers search with perfectionism, not for any answers, but for the *ultimate* answers to the *ultimate* questions. And the discovery of these answers gains them an ultimate sense of joy and accomplishment.

Negative Perfectionism

But what can happen to those who consistently live or think outside of the norm? The rest of the world can be quick to tell them that what they're doing is wrong, even if it isn't, because their actions aren't readily understood or accepted. And so eventually they begin to internalize the criticisms until, even when no one around them is saying anything is wrong, *they tell themselves* something is.

And at this point, negative perfectionism silently settles in.

Perfectionism in this negative state carries with it an underlying message which Barbara Sher captures so clearly when she says, "I want to do something so well that no one will criticize me."

Looking to avoid criticism, *perceived or actual*, is what negative perfectionism is all about.

So when perfectionism moves past a feeling of success into a sense of never being able to find what's being sought – of having a destination so distant that, by its design, impossible to reach – there are no longer any feelings of satisfaction and happiness. There are only feelings of failure, resentment, loss, and inadequacy.

And this the place you don't want to go.

Finding the Balance

The objective then is to master the state of perfectionism so that you are positively empowered and propelled forward, and resist the extended state of perfectionism where your thoughts and emotions are negatively affected.

But if you already find yourself caught up in the kind of perfectionism that holds you back, brings you down, or gets you caught up in spending many hours than is necessary doing your tasks, don't despair. There's still hope.

Beginning right now you can make some positive changes that will bring you back to where you want to be.

Let's explore them.

1. Look in the Mirror, Literally

You probably do this every day, even many times a day, but have you ever really *looked* in the mirror? Bring this book with you and go there right now.

When you observe your reflection, notice that your eyes aren't exactly the same shape, and your ears don't sit perfectly evenly on the sides of your head. The shape of each of your nostrils is different, and your hair isn't identical on both sides of your head either.

However you look at it, your face and body are not perfect. Each part has its own uniqueness that makes it different from everything and everyone else.

Congratulations!

Put it into Practice

Every time you see your reflection specifically take note of all of your distinctive features. Use this process as a quick reminder that perfection doesn't exist in physical form and therefore striving for it yourself in all that you do is futile.

Remember that little freckle above your left eyebrow, or whatever is it for you, and let it prompt you to leave that speck of imperfection in the things you do.

This is a simple step, but one that acts as a constant physical reminder to let go of extreme perfectionism. The next methods will help you begin the releasing process.

2. Follow the 80/20 Rule

The 80/20 Rule, or Pareto's Principle, basically says that 80% of your results come from 20% of the effort you put in. The remaining 80% of your efforts only improve your final outcomes by, at most, 20%.

So for those of you who are who are currently negatively perfectionistic, what does that mean?

It means that you spend a lot of your time trying to perfect the last 20% of your work instead of focusing on and congratulating yourself for the majority that you have already done excellently. You get stuck on the last details for excessive amounts of time instead of moving on to bigger and more exciting things.

In simplest terms, it's time now to recognize the difference between when you've done well and feel good, and when you begin to waste too much time and end up feeling bad.

Put it into Practice

Notice when you find yourself beginning to stress when working on something. At the first point of negativity ask yourself why you're beginning to feel this way.

Is it because:

- you have so much more to do and not much time to do it? (i.e., you're making the task seem insurmountable)
- you're questioning your ability to do the task? (i.e., you've associated negative feelings with it)
- you've done it well enough but not exactly to your liking? (i.e., you've moved from positive perfectionism into negative perfectionism – you've passed into the final 20% red zone)

- you're thinking your final product won't get the praise you want? (i.e., you're worrying about what *you think* other people will think)

Whatever the reasons are for your negative perfection, recognize them, accept them, and *move on*.

If you're worried that over time you'll begin to accept less than the best from yourself, try this technique:

Train yourself to keep up your high levels of achievement and creativity by recording – *writing down* – any ideas that come to mind as they appear, no matter what they are. Keep those ideas in a safe place like a notebook or file box for if, or when, you need them again.

By doing this you subconsciously tell yourself that your thoughts are important and useful. Your mind begins to accept the validation of those thoughts and generates even more powerful and beneficial ideas.

By doing this your creativity and sense of accomplishment remain high and your level of perfection stays in the positive and motivational range.

3. Leave it Undone

If you are like many other people, especially those who fall into the gifted category, the very thought of leaving things undone probably gives you the shivers. And that's OK, for now. It just means that you've internalized other people's ideas that you need to be perfect in order to be accepted, in order for you to be *good enough*.

Perfectionism in the negative sense is the feeding of these internalized ideas. It's working to make something so good that there is no way it can be improved and therefore no way any part of you could be faulty as a result.

Put it into Practice

So to combat this strong feeling of having to finish everything to a state of absolute perfection before moving on, try setting aside your dinner plate, a book you're reading, a story you're writing, or a project you've been working on before you're done. And don't come back to it. At all. *Ever.*

Leaving some non-essential tasks undone will teach you that you'll survive if your things aren't all completed down to the detail. Once you break the pattern of obsessing over crossing all of your *t*'s and dotting all of your *i*'s, so to speak, you'll find a lot of freedom in doing the bigger tasks you're required to do.

And maybe before you know it, you'll be able to recognize the thoughts and feelings that go along with the different kinds of perfectionism. Then you'll be much more able to catch yourself before you start moving too close to the negative end.

4. Rewrite the Program

If you often find yourself stuck or frustrated when you try to finish a task, it may be because you've developed a subconscious behaviour pattern about it – an inner program that tells you that a job isn't finished until it's absolutely perfect.

So what do you do if you can't move forward because you haven't reached the perfection you're expecting? Change the program!

To change what happens on a subconscious level, you have to begin changing what happens on a conscious level. Then acknowledge and feel the emotions of those changes as fully as possible.

When you break the emotional chains of negative perfectionism you'll find that the positive changes in emotional state that occur will bring about positive changes in your physical state as well.

Put it into Practice

So this is what you can do: Start doing things you would usually be afraid of doing for fear of failing or not being perfect. Choose things that aren't necessarily extremely significant so if you aren't perfect it won't really matter. Hand in a project that didn't take you an extraordinary number of hours to do; sing your favourite song out loud in front of others; share something you've written without reading it over, even once.

A sense of panic will probably quickly set in because you're so used to correcting yourself to a great degree. When it does, recognize that this is just your internalized defense mechanism trying to protect you from perceived emotional harm from the outside world. Feel the feeling, see it for what it is, then let it go thanking your defense system for doing its job.

As you practice allowing yourself the *potential* for having mistakes, not even necessarily actually having them, you'll find it easier and easier to let go of the debilitating need to be perfect. What you'll have left is the capacity to set your standards high and the ability to enjoy your successes all at the same time.

5. Focus on the Big Picture

With the intense focus that many highly achieving people have, it's very easy to get lost in the details. And when you give too much attention to what's going on with you right now in this moment you sometimes forget what is it that you're actually trying to achieve.

When you're working with insane perfection on something, what is it that you're trying to accomplish by doing that? Is it getting an A on that assignment, or receiving a positive comment from someone you care about? Or is it more like reaching a higher level in work or school, or being financially successful in life?

When you shift your focus from the minute detail to the grand destination you'll find that the details become seemingly small and insignificant. If you want to get promoted in some way you can do that using many paths. If you're looking for success in life there are a multitude of ways to accomplish it.

Put it into Practice

Prevent yourself from stressing over 88% instead of 90% on a test, for example, by keeping your eyes on the grand prize. Keep looking at the destination you're headed for in the long term.

And ask yourself questions like:

- What is my ultimate goal in doing this?
- How many different ways can I reach this goal?
- How else could I be successful?
- What would it take for me to be excellent without being obsessive?

Remember, when you're looking at the mountain in the distance you don't even notice the pebbles in the road. But when you're focusing on the pebbles you'll stumble on them every time.

Final Thoughts

Wherever you are in your experience of perfectionism, know that you can always find that place where the desire to excel carries with it a feeling of joy and satisfaction, once you know where to look for it.

May your efforts bring you *perfect* success. 😊