Session 2 Summary:

1. Complete Assessment
2. Review definition of perfectionism: High Standards; Concern Over Mistakes
3. Review homework: Perfectionistic Behaviors Sheet
4. Explanation: How does someone become a perfectionist?
5. Perfectionistic Rules Explanation
6. Unhelfpul Rules and Assumptions Worksheet
7. How Rules and Assumptions Guide Behavior
8. Explanation of Concern over Mistakes
9. What Mistakes am I afraid of Making Worksheet?
10. Explanation of High Standards
11. Homework: What Standards Have I set for Myself Worksheet?

In What Areas of My Life am I Afraid of Making Mistakes?

Area	*Yes/No*	*What Mistake/s Am I Afraid Of?*
Performance at work/school		
Grooming & Personal Hygiene		
Organization & Ordering		
Close Relationships		
Sport		
Eating/Shape/Weight		
Housework/Cleaning		
Health & Fitness		
Other Area:		

In What Areas of My Life do I Set High Standards?

Area	*Is this standard flexible and achievable? (Yes/No)*	*Standard I set for myself*
Performance at work/school		
Grooming & Personal Hygiene		
Organization & Ordering		
Close Relationships		
Sport		
Eating/Shape/Weight		
Housework/Cleaning		
Health & Fitness		
Other Area:		

Perfectionism in Perspective

Module 2

Understanding Perfectionism

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Introduction

In Module 1 we introduced a definition of perfectionism and described the positive and negative aspects of perfectionism. We asked you to identify specific areas of your life in which perfectionism is problematic and to identify your perfectionism behaviours. You may be wondering: "How did I become a perfectionist?" We are now going to look at the underlying reasons for perfectionism. In later modules you will learn practical strategies to reduce your perfectionism – these can be helpful whatever the underlying reasons are.

How Did I Become a Perfectionist?

There is, of course, no simple answer to this question, as everyone is different. The point of view taken in these modules is that the core reason that people become perfectionistic is related to the way they see themselves and the world. Our view of ourselves and the world starts to develop very early in life and is influenced by our early experiences (e.g., our family, society, school, peer group etc.) and by our temperament. Perfectionists have had experiences that lead them to develop a view of the world that encourages the pursuit of unrelenting high standards (e.g., "I must never make mistakes").

It is important that you don't blame yourself or others for your perfectionism but it may be helpful to think about some of the most common early experiences that can influence its development.

Direct learning - reward and positive reinforcement

If people praise you when you do well at something, you might learn that setting very high standards for yourself makes you feel good, and is worth pursuing. For example, if you did well on an assignment at school you were probably praised by your teachers *("Excellent work")* and your parents *("We are so proud of you")*. Praise for your achievements made you feel good about yourself and you probably started developing a belief such as: "Mum and Dad like it when I do well at school" which may later have developed into a more generalised belief such as: "People are proud of me if I succeed". This belief encouraged you to continue trying to be successful. Unfortunately, over time, a belief such as this can become rigid and inflexible (e.g., "People will only be proud of me if I am successful").

Direct learning - punishment and lack of positive reinforcement

Another type of learning that can influence the development of perfectionism occurs when you are punished for mistakes. For example, a parent might criticise a small child for making a mess while playing *("How many times do I have to tell you not to make a mess?")*. Punishment for mistakes makes you feel bad about yourself and you may develop a belief such as: "I must never make a mess, I must always be neat". Sometimes you are not directly punished, but there is just an absence of praise. For example, you might get a "B" on an exam and notice that your parents did not praise you for this. In this instance you may develop a belief such as: "Mum and Dad don't like it when I don't get As" and this may develop into a belief such as: "People are not proud of me when my work is less than perfect".

Indirect learning (modelling)

Some perfectionists cannot recall being punished for making mistakes, and say that as they were growing up people were proud of them no matter how successful they were. Another way that perfectionism can develop is through indirect learning. We also call this "modelling" as we may learn to act in a particular

way based on the way we see people around us (our 'role models') behaving. For example, it may be that your parents worked very hard in their jobs and often took work home to complete at night or on weekends, leaving little time for relaxation. You may have developed a belief such as: "Work is more important than relaxation". Over time this belief may become more rigid (e.g., "Succeeding at work is more important than anything else").

Temperament

You might think that you have been a perfectionist from the day you were born and that it is part of who you are. Some people say they have always set high standards for themselves *(e.g., "If I lost a race when I was little I would cry for hours, even though Mum told me it wasn't important")*. There is evidence to suggest that an individual's temperament may influence the development of perfectionism. Temperament refers to the characteristic way that you think, react, and behave. It is fairly stable over time and may be partly genetic. Studies have shown that people who avoid seeking out novelty, who are highly dependent on rewards from others, and who persist towards goals despite frustration and fatigue, are more likely to develop perfectionism. But having this sort of temperament does not mean that your perfectionism cannot be changed.

Perhaps you can relate to these early experiences, or perhaps not. Either way, all the strategies presented in these modules are designed to work, regardless of how your perfectionism developed.

Rules for living

So, different kinds of experiences can influence how we view ourselves and the world. We all have rules and assumptions by which we live our lives. For example, someone might have the rule: "It is important to be kind to others whenever possible" or the assumption: "If I commit a crime, then I will be punished". These rules and assumptions seem pretty *helpful* in the sense that they are fairly accurate in reflecting how things really are (i.e., punishment typically follows a crime), and they are also flexible (i.e., it is not possible to be kind to others 100% of the time, but doing so whenever possible is reasonable). We also continue to learn rules throughout life! For example, someone on probation at a new job might adopt the rule: "I must learn quickly" and have the assumption: "If I don't show that I am skilled I'll be let go".

However, we can also have unhelpful rules and assumptions by which we lead our lives. A rule or assumption tends to be *unhelpful* when it is inaccurate and inflexible in some way. Let's turn briefly to the unhelpful rules and assumptions that Peter and Polly have:

> *Peter has the rule: "The job is not done unless it is perfect" and the assumption: "If I make a mistake then the business will fail".*
>
> *Polly has the rule: "Winning is the most important thing" and the assumption: "If we lose one game then there's no chance we will be at the top at the end of the season".*

Are these rules flexible? How accurate are the assumptions that are being made? Clearly Peter and Polly both have rules that are rigid and assumptions that are inaccurate, and this is unhelpful because it makes them single-mindedly focussed on doing things 'perfectly'.

Below are some of the most common unhelpful rules and assumptions related to perfectionism. This exercise is designed to help you work out which unhelpful rules and assumptions you live by. Tick the statements you most identify with.

Unhelpful Rules & Assumptions	
Setting Even More Demanding Standards ❑ Doing well isn't good enough, I have to do *better* ❑ If I don't strive to achieve higher standards, I am a lazy and useless person ❑ Losing those 5 kg. wasn't enough. I need to get down to a smaller size	All or-Nothing Thinking ❑ If I don't get a High Distinction in this topic then I don't deserve to be doing this degree ❑ My work is never good enough ❑ There is a right way and a wrong way to do things ❑ If I eat any chocolate at all then I've blown my diet and I might as well binge
Fear Of Failure ❑ I must do things perfectly ❑ I must not fail ❑ I can't have others think poorly of me ❑ If I try, then I will only fail ❑ If I make a mistake then I will be rejected ❑ If I put my work out there, then others will think badly of me	Shoulds, Musts, ❑ I must be perfect or others will realise what I am really like ❑ I should never eat before noon ❑ When I clean my house I should always clean every room thoroughly
Constant Checking ❒ I have to go over any work I do, several times, before I can show it to anyone else ❒ I have to weigh myself several times a day to make sure I'm not gaining weight	Self-control ❒ I must work all the time or I will become a lazy slob ❒ I have to work extremely hard in order to deserve a treat
Simplicity, Structure, Control ❒ I must know what is going to happen ❒ I must be prepared for possible outcomes ❒ I can't let anyone else do a task in case it goes wrong	❒ Other

Being a perfectionist doesn't mean you have all of the unhelpful rules and assumptions listed above. You may only have one of these, some combination of them, or a less common one. Different unhelpful rules and assumptions may be relevant for different areas of your life. Don't worry if you are finding it hard to work out what your unhelpful rules and assumptions are. Just have a go. And remember that you don't always need to know the exact underlying reason for your perfectionism in order to overcome it.

So, what are your unhelpful rules that lead you to be perfectionistic?

I must…_____

I should…_____

I can't…_____

And, what are your unhelpful assumptions that lead you to be perfectionistic? That is, what do you expect will happen if you don't follow these rules?

If I… _____

then…_____

How Rules & Assumptions Guide Behaviour

You have now identified some of your perfectionistic rules and assumptions. They are likely to be the driving force behind the perfectionism behaviours you identified in Module 1. So if you have rules related to being 'perfect' you will try very hard to do everything 'perfectly' and as a result will avoid accepting anything that might be less than 'perfect'. We will be learning more about how to adjust perfectionistic rules and assumptions in Module 7.

Let's look at the example of Peter:

> *Peter has the rule: "The job is not done unless it is perfect" and this rule guides his behaviour. Peter checks his work three times to make sure he has not made a mistake. The consequence of this is that it takes him a long time to complete his work and his business is doing poorly as a result of this.*

Can you picture Peter's leisure time? What might he do to relax? What quality of relationships might he have? What would he be like to work with?

Have a look over the rules and assumptions that you wrote down on the previous page. How do your results and assumptions guide your behaviour on a day-to-day basis? What do you do as a result of having these particular rules and assumptions?

Unrelenting High Standards

Standards for evaluation

A standard is a guideline or principle that we use to measure success, comparison or approval. Standards provide us with a way of judging ourselves and how we are going. A standard usually illustrates what we find acceptable and unacceptable. It might relate to a particular area of our lives (e.g., "I like to do things to the best of my ability at work") or it might be a more global standard (e.g., "I like to do things to the best of my ability in everything I do"). It is important to remember that it is normal to set standards for ourselves and others, and the degree to which we meet these standards contributes, in part, to how worthwhile we feel.

What are unrelenting high standards?

The problem arises when the standards we set for ourselves or for others are unrealistically high and inflexible. Either we are unlikely to be able to meet the standard, or we will only be able to meet the standard at considerable cost. As we mentioned in Module 1, we will be referring to unrealistically high

and inflexible standards as **unrelenting high standards**. Unrelenting high standards are perhaps the most important factor in maintaining perfectionism and are a major problem for perfectionists. Let's use an example to illustrate this. Mary had a standard: "It's best not to break the law". She received a fine for speeding one afternoon and although she regretted the incident she did not feel bad about herself as a person. Polly had an unrelenting high standard: "It is completely unacceptable to break the law". She got a fine for speeding one day going down a hill. She told herself that she deserved to be punished, she felt angry that she had made this mistake, and she made a pact never to drive again.

What are your standards for evaluation?

We are often not conscious of the standards we set for ourselves or for others; they just operate in the background. In fact, we usually only notice our standards when they are not being met. For example, you might notice that you feel frustrated when your daughter doesn't clear away her breakfast bowl and this may be an indication of the standards for yourself and others in relation in relation to cleanliness: e.g., "The house must be clean at all times". Let's think about the standards you set for yourself. In the table below, list one standard you set for yourself in relation to each of the areas listed. Then ask yourself, is this standard flexible and achievable? If the answer is "yes" then the standard is probably a healthy one that helps you in your life. If the answer is "no" then it may be an unrelenting high standard.

	Standard I set for myself	Is this standard flexible & achievable (Yes / No)?
Performance at work/school		
Grooming & personal hygiene		
Organisation & ordering		
Close relationships		
Sport		
Eating/shape/weight		
Housework/cleaning		
Health & fitness		

Are your standards flexible and achievable? If the answer is "no", then it may be time to consider whether or not you want to change this. Do you have an unrelenting high standard in just one area of your life or do you notice this across different areas of your life? While you are working through these perfectionism modules, try to notice if your unrelenting high standards are operating in the background currently (e.g., "I must do these modules perfectly" or "I must not make mistakes").

The individual nature of high standards

It is important to remember that the standards we set are highly individual. What is challenging or difficult for one person may be easy for another person, so it is unhelpful to compare the standards you set for yourself with the standards set by others. For example, it would be unrealistic for me to set myself the standard of being able to play Rachmaninoff's "Prelude in C Minor" on the piano by next week.

However, it is not unrealistic for concert pianists to set this standard for themselves.

Let's look at another example. If I set the standard: "I should be able to run a marathon next week", this is unrealistic given that I have not been training. However, it is not unrealistic for Olympic long-distance runners to set this standard for themselves. It is important when thinking about high standards to consider the individual nature of the standards you set yourself. Is this standard realistic for *me*?

It is also important to remember that standards need to be adjusted depending on the situation. Look at the following example:

> *Polly always set extremely high standards for herself. She liked jogging but had not been able to do this activity for several weeks due to a knee injury. When she started running again she set herself the standard: "I should be able to run 10 kilometres". She attempted this on her first day back and struggled due to her lack of fitness but, as the standard was so inflexible, she pushed herself to keep going. She ended up hurting her knee again and this put her out of action for another few weeks.*

Polly was not able to be flexible and adjust her standard to take into consideration her knee injury. This is a common problem for perfectionists.

To overcome perfectionism, we will be helping you learn how to adjust your unrelenting high standards, reduce perfectionism behaviours and challenge the unhelpful thoughts, rules and assumptions that guide these behaviours. But before embarking on change we will introduce you to what keeps the perfectionism going and help you identify the pros and cons of change. Join us in the next module!

Module Summary

- There are many ways people become perfectionists, including direct and indirect learning experiences, and temperament
- We all have rules and assumptions for living
- Perfectionists tend to have rules and assumptions that are related to the pursuit or achievement of high standards. They tend to be rigid and inaccurate, making them particularly unhelpful
- Rules and assumptions guide our behaviour
- Perfectionistic rules and assumptions are the driving force behind perfectionism behaviours
- A standard is a guideline or principle that we use as a basis for success, comparison or approval. Standards provide us with a way of checking how we are going
- Everyone has standards for self-evaluation.
- Perfectionists tend to have standards that are rigid and inaccurate and we call these **Unrelenting High Standards.**

What I Have Learned in this Module

Think about what you have learned in this module and any useful bits of information, tips or strategies that you want to remember. Write them down below so you can refer to them later.

Think about how you might use the information you have just learned. Write down some ways in which you could make use of this information.

Coming Up...

In Module 3 (What keeps perfectionism going?) you will learn about how your unrelenting high standards are involved in a vicious cycle that keeps perfectionism going.

About this Module

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BACKGROUND

The concepts and strategies in this module have been developed from evidence-based psychological treatment, primarily Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT). CBT for perfectionism is based on the approach that perfectionism is the result of problematic cognitions (thoughts) and behaviours.

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what maintains perfectionism?

Perfectionism involves: The relentless striving for extremely high standards; Judging your self-worth based largely on your ability to achieve these standards; And continuing to set demanding standards despite the cost associated with striving for them.

Sometimes when a person's self worth depends on their achievements they push themselves to attain unrealistically high standards. They may act in ways intended to ensure that they meet these standards (e.g., checking, correcting); judge themselves harshly and focus on their mistakes. They may criticise themselves when they fail to meet their standards, affecting their self worth. If they meet their standards they may suggest that they were too low and set higher ones.

Model of Perfectionism: Maintenance

Underlying Rules & Assumptions

Rules and assumptions that are flexible and accurate provide helpful guides for living. However, rigid rules such as "the job is not done unless its perfect" and inaccurate assumptions such as "if I make a mistake the business will fail", tend to cause people to focus single-mindedly on doing things 'perfectly'.

Unrelenting Standards

Unrelenting high standards are so unrealistically high and inflexible that we are unlikely to be able to meet the standard, or will only be able to meet the standard at considerable cost.

When an unrelenting high standard is not met, instead of concluding that it was unrealistic, perfectionists will conclude that they did not work hard enough or failed. In future, some will give up altogether while others will try even harder. Unfortunately, even if a high standard is achieved, most perfectionists do not feel happy about this for very long. Some might see it as a "fluke" or decide that the standard set was not high enough, and set a higher standard the next time.

Perfectionism Behaviours

Perfectionists also engage in a range of unhelpful behaviours to make sure they continue to meet the high standards they set for themselves. E.g., procrastinating, avoidance, checking, correcting, list-making, slowness etc. These behaviours keep perfectionistic thinking going because, if you keep behaving this way, you never have the opportunity to test out whether your perfectionistic thinking is true. These behaviours may be time-consuming, done at the expense of other important activities and may even delay or interfere with attempts to meet the standard set.

Perfectionistic Thinking

We usually to attend to and interpret things according to what we expect. Perfectionists tend to pay attention to any evidence that they are not achieving so they can correct these immediately. Perfectionists also have an extreme view of what success and failure is, with no middle ground, causing them to judge themselves more harshly than others would.

Often perfectionists evidence a pattern of **unhelpful thinking styles**, including:

- ◊ Black & white thinking: seeing only extremes - no shades of gray;
- ◊ Shoulding & Musting: putting unreasonable demands on self and others;
- ◊ Catastrophising: blowing things out of proportion;
- ◊ Jumping to conclusions: assuming that we know what others are thinking, or can predict the future.

For more information regarding what maintains Perfectionism see Perfectionism in Perspective Module 3.

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