Session 3

1. Assessment

2. Review definition of high standards and concern over mistakes

3. Review homework: What high standards do I hold and in what areas worksheet?

4. Change process sheet

5. What would it mean to lower standards? Would there be any advantages?

6. Setting goal for change

7. My plan: Worksheet

8. Homework: Perfectionism obstacles worksheet

Perfectionism in Perspective

Module 4

Changing Perfectionism

Introduction	2
Weighing up the helpful and harmful aspects of perfectionism	2
Change Process Balance Sheet - worksheet	3
What will changing perfectionism involve?	4
Am I ready to change?	4
The next step: Setting goals for change	5
Coping tips	7
Obstacles to overcoming my perfectionism	7
Module Summary	9
About This Module	10

Introduction

You have now been introduced to the idea that perfectionism is maintained in a vicious cycle. Given that society values the pursuit of high standards and perfectionism and there may be positive consequences of your perfectionism, it makes sense to question whether or not this is something you actually want to change. In this module, we will be helping you weigh up the costs and benefits of staying the same and the costs and benefits of changing your perfectionism. We will also be telling you what will be involved if you decide to change your perfectionism. You are the only person who can decide whether the standards you set for yourself are unreasonable and costly. It is now time to decide whether or not you would like to adjust the standards you set for yourself. Don't procrastinate... the time to make this decision is now!

Weighing Up the Helpful and Harmful Aspects of Perfectionism

In Module 1 we identified that perfectionism has some positive and some negative aspects. In other words, being a perfectionist can be either helpful and healthy, or unhelpful and harmful to you. Often we find that it affects people in both ways. To help you identify the impact of perfectionism in your life, it is important to weigh up both the positive and the negative consequences of being a perfectionist.

To help you decide whether you want to change your perfectionism and loosen your unrelenting high standards, we encourage you to complete the worksheet overleaf.

Change Process Balance Sheet

Take a moment to think about your unrelenting high standards/perfectionism…

List the negative consequences of pursuing unrelenting high standards/ perfectionism. (For example, you might give up too easily on tasks, or miss out on relaxation because you are focused on achievement-based activities)	**List the positive consequences of pursuing unrelenting high standards/ perfectionism.** (For example, people praise you when you work hard, or you might believe that setting high standards motivates you to try harder)
List the personal benefits that you expect if you loosen unrelenting high standards/ perfectionism. Think about a general goal and how you will have to change in order to achieve it. (For example, if your goal is "to be able to delegate tasks to others at work" there might be more time to spend at home with your family)	**List the personal costs that you expect if you loosen your unrelenting high standards/ perfectionism.** What will you need to give up in order to change? (For example, perhaps doing things differently will take you out of your comfort zone)

What did you learn from doing this exercise? How ready for change do you think you are? Take a few moments to jot down your thoughts.

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What Will Changing Perfectionism Involve?

Relaxing unrelenting high standards and thinking in shades of grey

Remember back in Module 3 when we talked about black and white thinking and how that keeps perfectionism going? For example, *"If I don't scrub my kitchen with bleach after each meal then it's not clean"*. Overcoming perfectionism involves thinking in shades of grey. Standards are not black and white, they fall on a continuum. You are not going to be asked to give up your standards altogether, just to loosen them a little so there are fewer costs associated with pursuing them. We will be asking you to replace unrelenting high standards with reasonable high standards.

Here is an example of cleanliness in the kitchen:

No standards	Reasonable high standards	Unrelenting high standards
e.g., not caring how clean the kitchen is	e.g., wiping over the kitchen counters daily	e.g., scrubbing the kitchen bench with bleach before and after each meal

Being prepared to try new things

In order to change your perfectionism you will be asked to behave in a way that you are not used to. This might involve setting aside time for relaxation, or learning to tolerate mistakes. These sorts of activities might feel uncomfortable when you first get started. You may even feel terrified at the thought of relaxing your high standards. If this occurs you may be tempted to go back to your old habits. It is normal to feel scared about letting go of old habits but the anxiety will reduce with time. In fact, the more you practise the strategies in these modules the more comfortable you will be with reducing your perfectionism. Also remember that in the long-term there are important costs of not changing your perfectionism.

A commitment of time and effort

Changing your perfectionism will require a certain amount of time and effort. Are you able to commit to this task? You might not be able to make this commitment if you have other stressful things going on in your life (e.g., relationship difficulties, severe depression, and substance misuse). If this is true for you then you may need to get help in relation to these other problems before you are able to devote time and energy to overcoming perfectionism.

Am I Ready to Change?

You have completed several exercises aimed at getting you to think about the costs and benefits of perfectionism and what change will involve. It is now time to make a decision. Has achieving and achievement become the main way that you judge your self-worth? Do the costs of perfectionism outweigh the benefits? Are you able to commit some time and effort towards changing? And finally... are you ready to commit to changing your perfectionism? Tick one of the boxes below:

- ❑ YES – I am ready to change my perfectionism
- ❑ NO – I am not ready to change my perfectionism right now

If you have ticked "YES" then read on and we will tell you how to get started!

The Next Step: Setting Goals for Change

Congratulations! You have made the decision to change your perfectionism. Before we talk about HOW to do this, you need to identify WHAT aspect of perfectionism you want to change first. To start with we will ask you to select a particular area of your life in which perfectionism is a problem. Then we will ask you to identify specific goals towards reducing your unrelenting high standards and your perfectionism behaviours in this area of your life. Use the step-by-step procedure below to work out your own general and specific goals towards reducing your perfectionism.

Step 1: Choose a general goal area to work on first

We will be asking you to start work on *one* area of your life first. You will be working on this particular area throughout the rest of this 'Perfectionism in Perspective' Information Pack. We know you may want to tackle all of them at once. Or do them all 'perfectly'! But remember that perfectionism is an old habit. To develop a new habit of readjusting your expectations of yourself and pursuing healthy high standards, you need to start slowly and take it one step at a time. Choose one area of your life where you can start applying the techniques you will read about in the modules. It is a good idea to start with the easiest area first. When you have made some progress in this area you can then choose another area to tackle. It might help to review the areas of life in which you identified perfectionism to be a problem in Module 1.

Tick *one* of the boxes below to indicate the area of perfectionism that you would like to tackle first:

- ❑ Work
- ❑ Study
- ❑ Housework/cleaning
- ❑ Close relationships (e.g., partner, family, friends)
- ❑ Organising things
- ❑ Eating/weight/shape
- ❑ Grooming/washing
- ❑ Driving
- ❑ Sport/Fitness
- ❑ Other

Step 2: Adjusting your unrelenting high standards

Identify the unrelenting high standards that are driving your perfectionism in this area of your life. If you need some help, take a look at Module 2 (page 6) to remind yourself of the standards you set for yourself in this area. Next, you will be asked to identify a more reasonable standard. What would other people consider to be a healthy high standard that you could work towards?

Step 3: Identify the perfectionism behaviour you wish to work on

This behaviour should be related to the standards you identified above. What do you do in your efforts to maintain this unrelenting high standard?

Step 4: Identify a specific goal towards reducing this perfectionism behaviour

This goal should involve the perfectionism behaviour you identified above.

Step 5: Set a time frame

It is also helpful to think of a specific time frame, such as one month or 6 weeks. You will then know if you have achieved your goal within your time frame. If you haven't, perhaps your goal was too difficult or the time frame allowed was not long enough (you set your standards too high again!).

Overleaf is a record of the area Peter selected to work on, and his specific goals towards adjusting his unrelenting high standards and changing his perfectionism behaviours.

Peter's Plan

General goal area:	*To be less perfectionistic at work*
Adjusting the standards I set for myself in this area of my life Current unrelenting high standard: A more reasonable standard:	 *The job isn't done unless it is perfect* *I can try to do a job well but it does not have to be perfect*
Perfectionism behaviour I will be working on:	*Checking my work three times*
Specific goal towards reducing this perfectionism behaviour:	*I will aim to only check my work once*
Time frame:	*One month*

Some Examples

Here are some examples of areas of life in which perfectionism may be a problem, the typical unrelenting high standards that keep perfectionism going in this area, and the perfectionism behaviours a person might engage in to pursue these high standards. Use the examples to help you write your own plan for getting started on overcoming your perfectionism.

Goal Area	Unrelenting High Standard	Perfectionism Behaviour
Work	I must never make an error	Looking over my work, searching for errors
Grooming	I have to look immaculate	Spend 3 hours a day checking my make-up and clothes in the mirror
Cleaning	The kitchen must be spotless and hygienic	Cleaning over and over with bleach
Study	I must always get a distinction or higher	Procrastination, never getting started
Lists	I must never forget to do something	Writing lists over and over

My Plan

General goal area:	
Adjusting the standards I set for myself in this area of my life Current unrelenting high standard: A more reasonable standard:	
Perfectionism behaviour I will be working on:	
Specific goal towards reducing this perfectionism behaviour:	
Time frame:	

Coping Tips

Change is not easy! As a perfectionist, you are likely to set yourself high and perhaps unreasonable standards. We encourage you to be realistic and to keep your efforts to change your perfectionism in perspective! Below we outline some suggestions to help you on this journey of change.

1. Practice - *Practice makes perfect.* How many times have you heard this? How many times have you repeated a behaviour in order to "make it perfect"? Well, we would like to encourage you to practice NOT being perfect!

2. Give yourself permission to make mistakes – We all make mistakes. In fact, some of our most valuable learning comes from taking a non-judgemental look at the mistakes we've made. Making a mistake and living with it is a sign of progress!

3. Remind yourself of the unhelpful consequences of your perfectionism (page 3 of this module) – this is particularly helpful if you are struggling to stay motivated.

4. Learn to laugh – happy people know how to laugh and don't take life too seriously.

5. Reward yourself often - give yourself a pat on the back when you've accomplished something outside your comfort zone!

Obstacles to Overcoming My Perfectionism

It is always useful to be realistic and anticipate problems that might prevent you from making progress towards your goal. As we have pointed out, there are many reasons that perfectionists might be reluctant to loosen up their standards. Before launching into the process of change, you can prepare a strategy to deal with any obstacles that might occur, and then you can deal with them when, and if, they arise.

Minimising

As we have pointed out, you may feel that being a perfectionist is a good thing, and not a problem. But if you've got this far, it's likely that at some level you recognise there is a problem. Even if you think the cost of having your high standards is outweighed by the benefits, ask yourself if others close to you would agree, or if your perfectionism might really be interfering in your life. Watch out for a tendency to minimise the problem!

Fear of change

Are you afraid that if you loosen up your unrelenting standards you will have no standards at all? That you might end up a slob? If so, do remember the pitfalls of black and white thinking. It's NOT all or nothing! And perhaps look at others around you – remind yourself that it's possible to be happy and healthy and successful, without being a perfectionist.

Extreme self-criticism

If you don't manage to achieve your goal, do you get very critical of yourself? Do you tend to give up? Are you afraid to try to change, in case you don't succeed? That's your perfectionism and your tendency to procrastinate talking.

Life circumstances

Is there just too much going on in your life now to enable you to focus on overcoming your perfectionism at this time? Ask yourself, in all seriousness, if you are not just making excuses, but if you really are too

involved in an event (such as an illness or death of someone close to you; a major life change coming up such as getting married or having a baby; or a deteriorating relationship)? If so, work out when might be a good time to tackle your perfectionism, and make a commitment to yourself to reconsider this issue at a particular time in the future (e.g., in three months).

There may be other potential problems that you can identify. Spend a few moments identifying possible obstacles to your committing yourself to overcoming your perfectionism. Write these in the left hand column called "Roadblocks". Then think about why it is important for you to overcome these obstacles and write these ideas in the column called "Self-talk". Then in the "Action" column write down what you are going to do to overcome your roadblock! Then do it!

Roadblocks	**Self-talk**	Actions
Example: *I'm scared of stopping after only one hour's practice. I need to work harder.*	Example: *I know that if I make the effort to stop after one hour I may feel anxious in the short term but in the long term I will feel better. It will help me manage my perfectionism.*	Example: *Ring someone and talk through advantages of only practicing for one hour. Stop after one hour.*

We would now like to invite you to join us for the remainder of the journey where we will be offering some practical strategies to help you reduce your perfectionism behaviours and challenge your perfectionist thinking. It will take some hard work but the rewards are that you will be less burdened by the rigid and relentless pursuit of 'perfection'. Join us in the next module!

Module Summary

- There are both helpful and unhelpful aspects of being a perfectionist.
- Deciding that the unhelpful aspects of perfectionism outweigh the helpful aspects of perfectionism makes it more likely that you will want to change.
- Challenging perfectionism involves seeing the world in shades of grey, not black and white; it involves a commitment of time and effort and a willingness to try new things.
- It is important to make a commitment to taking on the challenge of tackling your perfectionism.
- Choosing an area of your life and a specific goal to focus on is helpful for loosening up your unrelenting high standards and reducing your perfectionism behaviours.
- Strategies to help you cope with change include giving yourself permission to make mistakes, reminding yourself of the consequences of your perfectionism, learning to laugh, and rewarding yourself often for the small steps you make towards change.
- It is realistic to anticipate problems that might get in the way of progressing towards your goal and identify strategies to help you overcome these.

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 5 (Reducing my perfectionism behaviours) we will be offering you strategies to change the behaviours which are problematic for you.

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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"PERFECTIONISM IN PERSPECTIVE"

This module forms part of:
Fursland, A., Raykos, B. and Steele, A. (2009). *Perfectionism in Perspective.* Perth, Western Australia: Centre for Clinical Interventions.

ISBN: 0-975799576 **Created: March 2009**

Government of **Western Australia**
Department of **Health**