Perfectionism: Session 6

1. Assessment
2. Review Homework: Exposure
3. Discuss Unhelpful Rules and Assumptions
4. Practice Adjusting Rules and Assumption worksheet
5. Homework: Adjusting rules worksheet

Perfectionism in Perspective

Module 7

Adjusting Unhelpful Rules & Assumptions

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Introduction

You have now learned strategies to reduce your perfectionism behaviours (Module 5) and challenge your perfectionistic thinking (Module 6). At this point you have the tools to work on having your life less controlled by your unrelenting high standards. We hope you are enjoying the benefits! However, you may still wish to work on the underlying issues that influence your perfectionism. It is not always necessary to work on the underlying reasons in order to overcome perfectionism but there may be some added benefits. Remember that the underlying issues are more entrenched and difficult to shift so this may take more intensive work with a mental health professional specialising in cognitive-behavioural therapy. In any case, here are some strategies to get you started. We will focus on your unhelpful rules and assumptions that keep you caught in the vicious cycle of perfectionism.

Rules for living

As we mentioned in Module 2, we all have rules by which we live our lives. Although we aren't specifically taught rules, we learn them through our early experiences and from observing other people who influence us in our early years. You may not even be aware that you developed these rules but they consistently influence your behaviour anyway. They are different from automatic thoughts in that they guide our behaviour explicitly.

Rules for Living: What's Helpful and What's Not

As we've mentioned earlier, some rules are healthy and helpful and some are not. We all need rules for living to help us make sense of the world and to cope with our everyday lives. So having rules, in itself, is not a bad thing. Helpful rules are realistic, flexible and adaptable. An example of a healthy rule is that drivers should stop at red lights. This is a helpful rule because there is evidence to suggest that not stopping at a red light may result in a car accident. So keeping this rule can help ensure our survival!

Helpful rules are also flexible and adaptable and this helps us to adapt our behaviour to different situations. For example, having the rule that "it is good to try to eat healthy food" is helpful because there is evidence to support the fact that you will have fewer health problems if you eat healthy foods. But there is also flexibility in this rule so that it takes into account occasions when it may be preferable to eat foods that are less healthy (e,g,, birthdays or Christmas) without feeling guilty.

Unhelpful rules are those that are inflexible, rigid, and unreasonable. For example, holding the belief "I must never make mistakes" is unreasonable in the sense that it is unlikely that we would be able to maintain this standard and this means we are likely to feel bad when we made any mistake. It is not possible or reasonable to expect yourself to "never" make a mistake so this type of unhelpful rule will only keep you feeling bad about yourself.

Therefore we need to view helpful rules as *guidelines* which help us function in the world. Let's have a look at how we can adjust unhelpful rules so that they are more realistic and flexible.

Adjusting Unhelpful Rules & Assumptions

When generating a more helpful rule or assumption, this involves thinking of another way to see yourself and the world that is more balanced, flexible to different circumstances, and realistic given the real state of

affairs. When thinking of how to put the new rule or assumption into practice, this involves working out how you would act in everyday life if you already believed the new helpful rule or assumption, and then making a point of acting that way. Often when we act as if something were true, we actually start to take it on board and believe it.

To challenge your unhelpful rules and assumptions about your perfectionism, there are six steps to take. You will need to:

- Clearly identify what your unhelpful rule or assumption is
- Work out where it comes from or how it developed
- Question whether your rule is realistic or reasonable or achievable
- Recognise the negative consequences of having and keeping this rule
- Identify a more helpful rule or assumption you could try to adopt
- Plan how you would need to act in every day life to put this new helpful rule or assumption into practice

In Module 2 we identified some rules and assumptions common to perfectionists. Now we will look at them again, showing the steps to follow in order to adjust them. Read through the examples below to get an idea of how to complete the steps. On Page 8 you will find a worksheet to guide you through the steps for your own unhelpful rules and assumptions.

Fear of Failure

What is the unhelpful rule of assumption I would like to adjust?
It could be:

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 put my work out there, then others will think badly of me

Where did this rule or assumption come from?
It might be from:

Messages I received from my family (e.g., "It's not worth doing something if you don't do it perfectly", or, "People who don't do well are failures")
Past experiences of having failed and having negative consequences of this
Recent experiences of seeing how successful people are admired and unsuccessful people are not

In what ways is this rule or assumption unreasonable? Unrealistic? Unfair?
It's impossible to do anything absolutely perfectly all the time. It is reasonable to think that I'll be good at some things and not so good at others. Making some mistakes is normal. I can't always control what others think of me. If I never even try, then I won't know whether or not I can succeed.

What are the negative consequences of having this rule or assumption?
If I think I can't do something perfectly then I sometimes don't even try. I put things off because I'm afraid to fail. I have to work SO hard and for SO long in order to get things just right. I never have any free time.

What is an alternative, more helpful and balanced rule or guideline?
Possibilities include:

Not being perfect doesn't mean being a failure
Trying my best is reasonable – in some areas I'll do well, and in others I'll do less well
It's OK to do things well rather than 'perfectly'

What can I do to put this rule or assumption into practice daily?
Make a spelling mistake on purpose to see if people criticise me – or even if they notice! Find some time for relaxation. Remind myself that it's not possible to be perfect. Ask for some constructive criticism and practice being able to tolerate it.

Shoulds, musts, and all-or-nothing thinking

What is the unhelpful rule of assumption I would like to adjust?
It could be:

I must make sure that every room in my house is always spotlessly clean
I must always complete my work quickly or my boss will think I am incompetent
If I eat anything at all before noon, it's proof I have no willpower
I can't eat any chocolate or I might lose all control and binge

Where did this rule or assumption come from?
It might be from:

My mum always made me keep my bedroom spotless
We were never allowed any chocolate, so when I did get some, I'd eat it all secretly and quickly

In what ways is this rule or assumption unreasonable? Unrealistic? Unfair?
Some of the demands I impose on myself are impossible to achieve. I see things as black and white, whereas other people see shades of grey.

What are the negative consequences of having this rule or assumption?
I set myself up to try to achieve the impossible. I give up if I'm not totally in control or successful. I put myself under tremendous pressure. When I don't meet my goals, I'm very critical and I blame myself.

What is an alternative, more helpful and balanced rule or guideline?

Possibilities include:

It's good to try hard, but you have to be adaptable.
If I don't achieve something completely, it's OK

What can I do to put this rule or assumption into practice daily?

Practice not doing something as soon as I feel I 'should' – delay it for one day or even one hour. Consider shades of grey and set my standards more leniently.

Constant Checking

What is the unhelpful rule of assumption I would like to adjust?
It could be:

I have to weigh myself every day to make sure my weight hasn't gone up
I must check my reports over and over to make sure there are no errors
I have to go over conversations in my mind to make sure I didn't say anything wrong
I have to look in the mirror every time I pass one, to make sure my make-up and hair are OK

Where did this rule or assumption come from?
It might be from:

My parents were anxious, checking their watches so they wouldn't be late, making sure the gas stove was turned off, checking the front door was locked
I once went out with my mascara all smeared and everyone laughed at me and I felt such a fool

In what ways is this rule or assumption unreasonable? Unrealistic? Unfair?
You can't control everything. Checking things that have already happened doesn't change the past. However much you check, there might be an error you miss.

What are the negative consequences of having this rule or assumption?
Checking things over takes up a lot of time. However much I check, I still feel anxious.

What is an alternative, more helpful and balanced rule or guideline?
Possibilities include:

It's good to check that things are OK, but checking once should be enough
It's not the end of the world if something is not 100% right

What can I do to put this rule or assumption into practice daily?
Practice reducing my checking. Make a deal with myself to check my face/the stove/my report only once.

Self-control

What is the unhelpful rule of assumption I would like to adjust?
It could be:

I won't let myself relax because if I do, I may become lazy
I can never go out and have fun because I can't take time off from my studies
I won't let myself have a treat because I haven't worked hard enough for it
I won't eat bread because that way I know I'm strong

Where did this rule or assumption come from?
It might be from:

My father was a workaholic and never took time off from work
I used to be overweight and I swore I'd never let myself get like that again

In what ways is this rule or assumption unreasonable? Unrealistic? Unfair?
I have to work tremendously hard in order to let myself stop - it's silly to say that I don't deserve a treat. It's unreasonable to tell myself I shouldn't relax. Eating a piece of bread doesn't really mean I'm strong.

What are the negative consequences of having this rule or assumption?
I never get to have any fun. I never get to 'chill out'. I'm too hard on myself.

What is an alternative, more helpful and balanced rule or guideline?
Possibilities include:

If I work hard, I deserve to rest and to treat myself, even if I haven't finished all my tasks
It's OK to relax occasionally and it doesn't mean I'm lazy
Being in control is about making choices that are good for me, not about limiting my choices

What can I do to put this rule or assumption into practice daily?
Make sure I relax. Put a time limit on the work I'm doing and stop at that point, however much or little I've accomplished. Choose to eat a slice of bread and practice coping with that – remind myself that making healthy choices is a healthier way to be in control of myself.

Simplicity, structure, control

What is the unhelpful rule of assumption I would like to adjust?
It could be:

I must be certain of what will happen
I should be prepared for the worst

I can't stand not knowing the outcome
If I take action, then something bad will happen
I am better off not doing anything, than risk it going bad

Where did this rule or assumption come from?
It might be from:
Growing up feeling that the world is a dangerous place
We moved often and I had to be on guard in strange towns
When I have taken action, it hasn't always worked out well

In what ways is this rule or assumption unreasonable? Unrealistic? Unfair?
You can't be sure about everything. You can only be prepared to a certain extent. You have to take some risks.

What are the negative consequences of having this rule or assumption?
I'm on guard all the time. I never feel relaxed.

What is an alternative, more helpful and balanced rule or guideline?
Possibilities include:
Prepare for a variety of possible consequences but be open and flexible
Take calculated risks

What can I do to put this rule or assumption into practice daily?
Practice taking risks – doing something with an unknown outcome, e.g., asking an acquaintance out for coffee.

Setting even more demanding standards

What is the unhelpful rule of assumption I would like to adjust?
It could be:
I had the goal of dieting till I got to 55 kg, but now I've got there it doesn't seem hard enough and I need to push myself further
I had a goal of 90% on my test, and now that I got 90% I need to get 95% next time
I got promoted last year and I must get promoted again this year

Where did this rule or assumption come from?
It might be from:
I was brought up to be competitive with my brother
Nothing was ever good enough for my parents
I went to a school that pushed you to achieve more and more

In what ways is this rule or assumption unreasonable? Unrealistic? Unfair?
It's impossible to keep on doing better forever. Making higher demands and resetting the bar – where will it end?

What are the negative consequences of having this rule or assumption?
No achievement is ever satisfying. I push and push myself and for no reward. I beat myself up for not doing better.

What is an alternative, more helpful and balanced rule or guideline?
Possibilities include:
Setting achievable, appropriate goals is healthy
Reaching a goal is a sign of success and deserves a pat on the back

What can I do to put this rule or assumption into practice daily?
Set a goal and don't move the goalposts! Give myself a pat on the back when I achieve my goal.

Now that you have an idea about the steps needed for challenging your unhelpful rules and assumptions, it is time to think about your particular rules and assumptions that you would like to work on. Remember that it will take regular practice to change some of your ingrained beliefs, and challenging them is a useful way to begin. Take a moment and jot down some of your unhelpful rules and assumptions regarding your perfectionism.

You can now give it a go yourself. Overleaf you will find a general worksheet that you can use for each of the unhelpful rules and assumptions you would like to work on. Take one at a time, and make sure you spend some time every day practicing, until you feel you are replacing your old unhelpful assumptions with more balanced rules.

Adjusting My Unhelpful Rules & Assumptions

What is the unhelpful rule or assumption I would like to adjust?
Where did this rule or assumption come from?
In what ways is this rule or assumption unreasonable? unrealistic? unfair? unhelpful?
What are the negative consequences of having this rule or assumption?
What is an alternative more helpful (i.e., balanced, flexible, realistic) rule or assumption?
What can I do to put this rule or assumption into practice on a daily basis?

Remember, practice is very important for challenging your perfectionism. We urge you to practice, and remind you that you don't have to achieve change 'perfectly' or even quickly. We encourage you to continue the challenge, without the expectation that you will be able to banish all perfectionistic thoughts. Remember, any loosening of your unrelenting standards will bring its rewards. The goal is to reduce your perfectionism – which is attainable – not to rid your self of all perfectionism!

Join us in the next module where we take a step back to look at the impact of perfectionism, specifically on your over-evaluation of achievement and more generally on the way you view yourself and the world.

Module Summary

- We all have rules for living; some rules are helpful and some are not
- Unhelpful rules and assumptions can maintain perfectionism
- Adjusting your unhelpful rules and assumptions requires going through certain steps in order to challenge them
- Practice is important, in order to shift old established messages and beliefs
- Living with more balanced rules and assumptions allows you to have more choices in life and feel more contented

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 8 (Re-evaluating achieving) we will be looking at the impact of over-evaluating achievement and the perfectionism mindset

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
unhelpful rules & assumptions

Since perfectionists tend to judge their self worth largely on their ability to achieve high standards, they often develop rules and assumptions designed to ensure that they meet these standards. Although many rules are healthy and useful, rigid rules and inaccurate assumptions can cause people to hold unrealistic expectations about themselves and others, which if unmet may bring about disappointment and criticism.

Helpful & Unhelpful Rules

We all need rules for living to help us make sense of the world and to cope with our everyday lives. So having rules, in itself, is not a bad thing. **Helpful rules are realistic, flexible and adaptable.** For example, the rule "it is good to try to eat healthy food" is helpful since it is based on evidence that shows that people who eat healthily have fewer health problems, and since it is flexible as it allows for times when it is preferable to eat less healthy foods (e,g, birthdays).

Unhelpful rules are inflexible, rigid, and unreasonable. For example, the rule "I must never make mistakes" is unhelpful because it not possible or reasonable that we would be able to maintain this standard and this means we are likely to feel bad when we make a mistake.

Unhelpful Rules & Perfectionism

Perfectionists' self esteem is based heavily on their ability to attain extremely high standards. Consistent with their belief in the importance of achieving these high standards, their lives are often directed by a number of rules and assumptions designed to ensure that they meet their high standards.

Some rules commonly held by perfectionists include:

- ◊ Fear of failure (e.g., "*I must do things perfectly*", or "*If I try, then I will only fail*").
- ◊ Shoulds & musts (e.g., "*My house must be tidy at all times*").
- ◊ All-or-nothing (e.g., "*There is a right and a wrong way to do things*").
- ◊ Constant checking (e.g., "*I must weigh myself several times a day to make sure I'm not gaining weight*").
- ◊ Control (e.g., "*I must be prepared for anything*").

Such unhelpful rules often form the basis for the unrealistically high standards that perfectionists set for themselves.

Identifying Unhelpful Rules & Assumptions

To identify the unhelpful rules and assumptions that underlie your unrealistically high standards, ask yourself:

- ◊ *What do I expect of myself at work or school?*
- ◊ *What standards do I expect myself to meet?*
- ◊ *What do I expect of myself in my various roles – child, friend, partner, parent, staff member/supervisor?*
- ◊ *What might happen if I relax my standards?*
- ◊ *What do I criticise in other people? What standards do I expect them to live up to?*

Adjusting The Rules

Generating a more helpful rule or assumption involves thinking of another way to see yourself and the world that is balanced, flexible to different circumstances, and realistic given the real state of affairs. When thinking of how to put the new rule or assumption into practice, work out how you would act in everyday life if you already believed the new helpful rule or assumption, and then making a point of acting that way. Often when we act as if something were true, we actually start to take it on board and believe it.

To challenge your unhelpful rules and assumptions about your perfectionism, there are six steps to take:

1. Identify your unhelpful rule or assumption
2. Work out where it comes from or how it developed
3. Question whether your rule is realistic or reasonable or achievable
4. Recognise the negative consequences of having and keeping this rule
5. Develop a more helpful rule or assumption
6. Plan how you would need to act in every day life to put this new helpful rule or assumption into practice

Remember, practice is very important for challenging your perfectionism. We urge you to practice, and remind you that you don't have to achieve change 'perfectly' or even quickly.

For more detailed information regarding Adjusting Unhelpful Rules and Assumptions see Perfectionism in Perspective Module 7.

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