Session 1:

Session 1 begins with an overview of what is perfectionism? You should define perfectionism both as high standards and concern over mistakes (which may lead to evaluation). Concern over mistakes is not discussed in the perfectionism module materials, so make sure and integrate it into the discussion.

Begin by eliciting thoughts from group members on: what is perfectionism? When am I a perfectionist? Try to point out the paradox of perfectionism, which is that there is a difference between trying to be perfect (which can lead to depression, anxiety, worsening of an eating disorder) and striving for excellence.

Session 1 outline:

1. Complete and Collect assessments

2. Discussion of what is perfectionism

3. Define perfectionism: Both high standards AND Concern over mistakes

4. Complete Am I a perfectionist quiz and discuss

5. The good and bad parts of being perfectionist (do on board)

6. Complete When am I a perfectionist and discuss

7. Hand out What is perfectionism handout.

8. Homework: Complete perfectionistic behaviors worksheet

Perfectionism in Perspective

Module 1

What is Perfectionism?

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Introduction

Perfectionism is often mistaken for 'being perfect' or 'doing something perfectly'. Many people assume that it must be a good thing. Other people think of being a perfectionist as being something negative and embarrassing. So is it a good or a bad thing?

Perfectionism involves putting pressure on ourselves to meet high standards which then powerfully influences the way we think about ourselves. Researchers have shown that parts of perfectionism are helpful, and parts are unhelpful. We're here to help you identify and work on the unhelpful parts, so that you get satisfaction from your achievements and lead a more fulfilling life. This will involve setting appropriate goals and standards for yourself, making it more likely you'll achieve your goals and experience a sense of fulfilment, rather than feeling frustrated and blaming yourself all the time for not getting things 'perfect'. The modules in this Information Pack are to help you put your *perfectionism in perspective*.

There is a big difference between the healthy and helpful pursuit of excellence and the unhealthy and unhelpful striving for perfection.

In this module we will define perfectionism, identifying both the helpful and the unhelpful aspects of being a perfectionist, and identifying in what ways you might be a perfectionist. And one last thing before we get started: don't try to complete the modules in this Information Pack 'perfectly'!

What is Perfectionism?

Perfectionism is not necessarily about being 'perfect'. Ask yourself this question…is it ever really possible to be 100% 'perfect'? So, if it's not about being 'perfect', then what do we mean when we say someone is a perfectionist?

Researchers in the field may not be able to agree on the *perfect* definition, but we will be using the following definition of perfectionism, which has three key parts:

1. **The relentless striving for extremely high standards** (for yourself and/or others) that are personally demanding, in the context of the individual. (Typically, to an outsider the standards are considered to be unreasonable given the circumstances.) We will be referring to this throughout this Information Pack as 'unrelenting standards'.

2. **Judging your self-worth based largely on your ability to strive for and achieve such unrelenting standards.**

3. **Experiencing negative consequences of setting such demanding standards, yet continuing to go for them despite the huge cost to you.**

We would agree that it is generally a good idea to have high standards. Having goals helps you achieve things in life. BUT when these goals are either unachievable or only achievable at great cost, it makes it very difficult to feel good about yourself. This is when perfectionism can be problematic.

To help make sense of all this, let's describe two perfectionists. We will be following their stories throughout these modules, so stay tuned!

Peter, 46, has owned a car repair shop for the last year. He works very hard at his job, takes great pride in the work he does, and receives good feedback from his customers. When Peter is servicing a car he works through a list of tasks and, after completing each task, he checks it over three times to make sure he has done it properly. He also asks his mechanic to check his work so that he can be sure it has been done properly. His mechanic has questioned the need for further checking, and has pointed out that other repair shops work much faster. But checking through like this reassures Peter that he has done a good job and that his customers will be happy. His motto is: "A good job is worth spending time over." Peter's approach to his work is very time-consuming. This means he can only book in a few cars each day and he has had to turn customers away. He is, in fact, so busy that he has not had time to sort out his paperwork since he opened the business. He has been afraid to start, as he knew there was so much to catch up on. Recently Peter had to bring in an accountant, and last week the accountant told him that the business owed money and he needed to get more customers.

Polly, 19, is a member of the State basketball team. Basketball takes up a large part of Polly's life though she balances this with her university studies. Polly is very passionate about basketball and takes it very seriously. She trains daily and maintains a strict diet to keep herself fit and healthy, and doubles her training in the days leading up to a game, when other team members continue to socialise. Even when Polly's team wins she tends to be self-critical, thinking of the goals she failed to score, and she makes a vow to score more goals the next game. When her team loses, she becomes very frustrated and will often criticise other team members as well as criticising her own performance, including her weight and fitness. After a loss, she doubles her training regimen in the following week and maintains an even stricter diet, cutting out all fats. Recently Polly has lost confidence in her team-mates and has taken on total responsibility for scoring goals. Her coach pulled her aside recently and told her to change her attitude or she would be dropped from the team.

What's Good About Being a Perfectionist?

Many people think of perfectionism as something positive and often visualise a high achiever. This is because they usually think of it as pursuing excellence or having high standards. That's right - when people pursue excellence or set high standards, they put in a lot of effort and challenge themselves. In this way they learn new skills and tend to achieve good results. We understand that people have good reasons for being perfectionists, and here are some of the reasons they give:

I like to do things well
I get pleasure out of achieving what others can't do
It makes me feel special
I like to go to bed leaving no tasks undone
I get satisfaction knowing I've tried my hardest
I like being top of the class
I like being efficient
I like being organised
I like being prepared for every event
I never lose anything because I'm so well organised

What positive qualities do YOU associate with perfectionism? What are some of the advantages of setting such high standards? How might being a perfectionist be helpful to you? Think about it for a moment and jot down some thoughts.

_____

_____

_____

_____

What's So Bad About Being a Perfectionist?

As we've pointed out, we believe that having high standards and goals helps us achieve things in life. But sometimes these standards get in the way of our happiness. Let's look at Peter and Polly again. Are Peter's and Polly's high standards healthy and helpful?

> *Peter only thinks he has done a good job with a car if he completes his checklist, checks over each task on the checklist three times, and then he asks a co-worker to check his work.*
>
> *Polly always expects her basketball team to win, and when they don't she ends up criticising herself and other team members. She endures stricter practice and diet regimens the following week and her place on the team is at risk.*

Sometimes the drive to do well can actually *impair* performance. What a strange idea - that having high standards and working very hard to maintain these standards can actually make things worse… This is the **paradox of perfectionism!**

Now, let's make sure we are clear. Without any standards people generally achieve less, so having standards is not a bad thing. But remember:

There is a big difference between the healthy and helpful pursuit of excellence and the unhealthy and unhelpful striving for perfection.

So what do we think is unhelpful and unhealthy about perfectionism? Let's go back to our definition on Page 2. The first part refers to the relentless striving for self-imposed personally demanding standards. The words used here already give you a hint of why perfectionism might be unhealthy. If you have set extremely high standards for yourself and you keep pushing yourself towards reaching them, what kind of pressure are you putting on yourself? It is likely that you would be constantly feeling on edge, tense, and stressed out. What's more, being a perfectionist is not just about doing your best but doing *even* better than before, and often pursuing a higher level of performance than you can reach, which leaves you feeling that even your best efforts aren't enough. This excessive drive to excel is self-defeating as it leaves you little chance of meeting your goals and feeling good about yourself.

The second part of the definition refers to judging your self-worth based on your ability to achieve. It is like 'putting all your eggs in one basket'. This makes you particularly vulnerable, as not reaching the standards you set for yourself (which may be unachievable) results in you feeling like a failure. If achievement wasn't so important to how you judge yourself, then maybe not reaching that high standard wouldn't be so bad, and making a mistake or slipping up occasionally – which everyone does - would be acceptable.

The third part of the definition refers to the enormous cost of being a perfectionist. Pursuing these personally demanding standards can have a significant impact on your wellbeing, and can lead to social isolation, frustration, worry, depression, eating disorders, relationship difficulties, obsessive-compulsive symptoms, repeated checking of work, excessive time taken to complete tasks, insomnia, procrastination, poor health and a persistent sense of failure.

When you put all these parts of perfectionism together, they become an unhealthy combination. Perfectionism has its problems! Here are some of the negatives that perfectionists give:

I have no free time
No achievement is ever enough
I blame myself if things aren't done just right
I can't stand it when other people don't do things my way
I don't trust others to do as good a job as I do so I end up doing it all
I have to go over my work many times until it's acceptable to me
I have to do more and more in order to feel accepted by others
I'm so afraid of failing that I never get started

What negative qualities do YOU associate with perfectionism? What are some of the disadvantages of setting such unrelenting standards? How might being a perfectionist be unhelpful to you? Think about it for a moment and jot down some thoughts.

_____

_____

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Am I a Perfectionist?

Let's find out if perfectionism is an issue for you. Here are a few statements for you to consider:

	True	Somewhat True	Somewhat False	False
Nothing good comes from making mistakes				
I must do things right the first time				
I must do everything well, not just the things I know I'm good at				
If I can't do something perfectly then there is no point even trying				
I rarely give myself credit when I do well because there's always something more I could do				
Sometimes I am so concerned about getting one task done perfectly that I don't have time to complete the rest of my work				

If you have answered most of the above questions with True or Somewhat True, then perfectionism might be something you want to work on. If you haven't answered True or Somewhat True, you may still want to stay with us as you might learn some skills that could be useful in the future.

When Am I a Perfectionist?

Being a perfectionist doesn't necessarily mean you have unrelenting high standards in *every* area of your life, although this may be the case for some people. It is possible to be a perfectionist in one area of your life (e.g., at work) but not in another area of your life (e.g., grooming).

> *Peter doesn't mind when he gets to work and realises his t-shirt is inside-out, but he does mind when he realises his tools are out of place at the garage.*
>
> *Polly doesn't mind so much when her studies don't go very well, but when training doesn't go well she ends up having a terrible day.*

Let's have a look at the activities in your life where you tend to be perfectionistic. Tick any box below if you notice that you set particularly high standards for yourself in that area of your life and feel upset if you don't meet those standards.

- ❑ Work
- ❑ Study
- ❑ Housework/cleaning
- ❑ Close relationships (e.g., partner, family, friends)
- ❑ Organising and ordering things
- ❑ Eating/weight/shape
- ❑ Grooming/personal hygiene
- ❑ Sport
- ❑ Health/Fitness
- ❑ Other

You have now identified some areas of your life in which perfectionism may be a problem. Identify the one that causes you the most grief, distress, negative consequences and problems in your life, and write it in the box below. (For example, Peter would choose "Work" and Polly would choose "Health/Fitness".)

Area where perfectionism is most problematic for me: _____

What problems result from my perfectionism in this area? _____

_____

_____

_____

How Am I a Perfectionist?

Now let's consider how perfectionism affects the way you behave. For example, Peter repeatedly checked his work and Polly had difficulty delegating tasks to her team mates. In this section we identify your **Perfectionism Behaviours**. Overleaf are some examples of common types of perfectionism behaviours. Tick the ones that seem relevant to you.

PERFECTIONISM BEHAVIOURS

Decision making ❑ Not being able to decide what to wear to work each morning ❑ Being unsure what colour shirt to buy so buying one in every colour ❑ Finding it so difficult to choose what restaurant to go to that it becomes too late to eat out	Overcompensating ❑ Giving directions to your house in excruciating detail, then sending an email repeating the information ❑ Always making sure you arrive at least 30 minutes early to appointments ❑ Washing the kitchen three times, with antiseptic cleaner, before preparing a meal
Reassurance Seeking ❑ Asking others to check your work in order to ensure the result is acceptable ❑ Needing everyone to compliment your meal when you do the cooking	Correcting ❑ Replacing an item of clothes if there is a tiny hole on an inside seam (even if it's invisible from the outside) ❑ Folding and refolding laundry if you can see the edges aren't exactly even
Excessive Organising and List Making ❑ Repeatedly writing and re-writing lists e.g. the tasks you want to get done in the day ❑ Having to have your office completely tidy and organised before being able to work	Checking ❑ Repeatedly looking in the mirror for facial blemishes ❑ Looking over work, searching for errors ❑ Frequently checking your watch to make sure you know what time it is
Giving Up Too Soon ❑ Not looking for a house to buy because you are sure you won't find one which meets all your needs ❑ Taking up flamenco but giving up after two lessons because you can't keep up with the teacher (even though nobody can) ❑ Quitting your job because you made a mistake and you fear being fired	Hoarding ❑ Cutting out recipes from the newspaper and filing them in case you ever want to make a particular dish ❑ Keeping your bank statements for 20 years just in case you might need them ❑ Keeping piles of old magazines in case you might want to reread an article one day
Procrastination ❑ Putting off starting an assignment for fear that it won't ever be done well enough ❑ Delaying starting a healthy eating plan until the time feels 'right', with no birthday dinners, Christmas, holidays, or celebrations in the near future	Failure to Delegate ❑ Staying late to do the photocopying because you don't trust the secretary to put the documents in the right order ❑ Not letting others clean the house because you're afraid the tasks won't be done properly
Not Knowing When to Stop ❑ Creating a list of first aid items to take on a trip and ending up with a whole suitcase of 'necessities' ❑ Arguing a point over and over, long after others have lost interest	Slowness ❑ Reading the newspaper very slowly to make sure you don't miss any important news ❑ Speaking slowly to ensure you say the right thing
Attempts to Change Other People ❑ Correcting people when they mispronounce words ❑ Commenting when you feel people are being 'politically incorrect' and guiding them to behaviour you think is more acceptable	Avoidance ❑ Not putting in applications for jobs for fear that you will never get them ❑ Never weighing yourself because you believe that any weight gain will ruin your day ❑ Not asking for a pay raise for fear of being denied
Other ❑	

It is important to become aware of perfectionism behaviours because they can affect your mood, your relationships, and the way you see yourself. So next time you notice yourself doing one of the above activities, ask yourself "Am I doing this because of my unrelenting high standards?" If the answer is "Yes" then keep reading! In Module 5, we will be discussing practical strategies to reduce perfectionism behaviours.

What Next?

If you've made it this far, then it is likely that you are thinking that perfectionism might be a problem for you. If you are open to the idea of setting more flexible and achievable standards we encourage you to take this journey through all our modules. Our aim is that you will come away with an ability to set balanced and healthy standards for yourself and that perfectionism will have less of a negative impact on your life. You might find that it gets a little tough at times, but we encourage you to stay with it and keep working towards your goal of being less perfectionistic.

How to use these modules

We believe that these Information Packs could be beneficial to anyone who would like to address difficulties they are having with setting unrelenting high standards for themselves. When using self-help material some people might want to skip sections or complete sections in a different order. *The modules in this Information Pack have been designed to be completed in the order they appear.* They will be most helpful to you if you work through them in sequence, finishing each module before moving on to the next one in the series. By doing this, you will maximise the benefits you might receive from working through this Information Pack.

The following modules make up this Information Pack:

Module 2	Understanding perfectionism
Module 3	What keeps perfectionism going?
Module 4	Changing perfectionism
Module 5	Reducing my perfectionism behaviours
Module 6	Challenging my perfectionistic thinking
Module 7	Adjusting unhelpful rules and assumptions
Module 8	Re-evaluating the importance of achieving
Module 9	Putting it all together

Module Summary

- Perfectionism is not about 'being perfect'
- Perfectionism involves a relentless pursuit of personally demanding standards and basing your self-worth on this pursuit, which results in a huge cost to your well-being
- Problematic perfectionism can be distinguished from high standards, by the negative impact it has on your life (e.g., relationships, work, self-esteem)
- Perfectionism can be present in one or several different areas of your life
- There are several 'perfectionism behaviours' that are common to perfectionists
- It is useful to identify areas in your life where perfectionism might be a problem for you

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 2 (Understanding Perfectionism) you will learn about rules for living and how you might have developed perfectionism.

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**

What is Perfectionism?

Perfectionism Defined

Perfectionism is not necessarily about being 'perfect'. Ask yourself this question… Is it ever really possible to be 100% 'perfect'? So, if it's not about being 'perfect', then what do we mean when talk about perfectionism?

Although there's no *perfect* definition, we understand perfectionism to involve:
1.The relentless striving for extremely high standards (for yourself and/or others) that are personally demanding, in the context of the individual. (Typically, to an outsider the standards are considered to be unreasonable given the circumstances.)
2. Judging your self-worth based largely on your ability to strive for and achieve such unrelenting standards.
3. Experiencing negative consequences of setting such demanding standards, yet continuing to go for them despite the huge cost to you.

The Paradox of Perfectionism

Many people think of perfectionism as something positive. It is often seen as the pursuit of excellence, setting high standards, and working hard to challenge one's self. People often have good reasons for being perfectionists. They may say that it allows them to be efficient, organised, or prepared for anything.

Although having high standards and goals may help us achieve things in life, sometimes these standards get in the way of our happiness and can actually *impair* performance. This is the **paradox of perfectionism**!

The excessive drive to achieve ever-higher levels of performance is self-defeating as it leaves you little chance of meeting your goals and feeling good about yourself. This kind of pressure is likely to cause you to feel constantly on edge, tense, and stressed out.

Perfectionism can also make your self worth particularly vulnerable as not reaching the (possibly unachievable) standards you set for yourself may result in you feeling like a failure.

Pursuing these personally demanding standards can have a significant impact on your wellbeing, and can lead to frustration, worry, social isolation, depression and a persistent sense of failure.

When am I a Perfectionist?

Being a perfectionist doesn't necessarily mean you have unrelenting high standards in *every* area area of your life. It is possible to be a perfectionist in one area of your life (e.g., work), but not another (e.g., grooming).

Areas of life in which your perfectionism may flare up include:

- ◊ Work,
- ◊ Study,
- ◊ Housework/cleaning,
- ◊ Close relationships,
- ◊ Eating/weight/shape,
- ◊ Grooming/personal hygiene,
- ◊ Sport,
- ◊ Health & fitness.

How am I a perfectionist?

Some common types of perfectionistic behaviours include:

- ◊ Struggling to make decisions in a timely manner (e.g., not being able to decide what to wear to work each morning).
- ◊ Reassurance seeking. (E.g., asking others to check your work to ensure it is acceptable).
- ◊ Excessive organising and list making. (E.g, repeatedly writing and re-writing lists of the tasks you want to get done in the day).
- ◊ Giving up easily. (E.g., giving up flamenco after two lessons because you can't keep up with the teacher (even though nobody can)).
- ◊ Procrastinating. (E.g., putting off starting an assignment for fear that it won't be good enough).
- ◊ Not knowing when to stop. (E.g., arguing a point over and over, long after others have lost interest).
- ◊ Checking. (E.g., repeatedly looking in the mirror for facial blemishes).
- ◊ Hoarding. (E.g., keeping your bank statements for 20 years just in case you might need them).
- ◊ Slowness. (E.g., speaking slowly to ensure you say the right thing).
- ◊ Avoiding situations in which you may 'fail'. (E.g., not applying for jobs for fear that you will not get them).

For more detailed information regarding What is Perfectionism, see Perfectionism in Perspective Module 1.

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