



Perfectionism: Myths vs. Reality

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Perfectionism is a personality trait that involves setting unrealistically high standards, and then becoming overly critical when those standards are not met. It often arises from a fear of disapproval, failure, or inadequacy. People with perfectionism focus on results rather than effort. If their performance is less than perfect, they judge it as a failure. They don't give themselves credit for achieving part of their goal, or for the progress they've made over time. Here are some common myths that cause many people to get stuck in perfectionistic thinking:

Myth #1: Perfectionism is a good thing.

Reality: Perfectionism can be good or bad. The healthy kind (*adaptive* perfectionism) involves using your high standards to help you achieve success. When they don't succeed, adaptive perfectionists don't see themselves as a failure; they just try to figure out what went wrong or revise their goals to be more realistic. The unhealthy kind (*maladaptive* perfectionism) involves excessive concern about mistakes and harsh self-criticism. When maladaptive perfectionists don't succeed, they see themselves as failures and keep trying to pursue the same unrealistic goals over and over.

Myth #2: Perfectionists are great workers.

Reality: Perfectionists often struggle with procrastination because they put off doing tasks to avoid possible failure. When they do engage with the task, they may work slowly to ensure accuracy, or spend excessive time checking and rechecking their work. This can significantly affect their productivity and efficiency, as well as their ability to meet deadlines.

Myth #3: Perfectionism helps you feel better about yourself.

Reality: Adaptive perfectionists are able to take pleasure in a job well done, but maladaptive perfectionists constantly worry that it wasn't good enough or that the next task will be the one that leads to failure. Maladaptive perfectionism can lead to depression, anxiety, disordered eating, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and substance abuse. In extreme cases, it can even result in suicidal thoughts.

Myth #4: Perfectionism makes you more likeable.

Reality: Perfectionists believe that they must be perfect in order to be loved and respected by others. They may try to hide their doubts and mistakes, and are reluctant to share any information that makes them appear vulnerable or uncertain. In addition, some perfectionists expect perfection not only of themselves, but also of the people around them. This can make it hard for them to develop close relationships.

Myth #5: Perfectionism is permanent.

Reality: Overcoming perfectionism is possible. Through self-compassion and cognitive-behavioral therapy, you can learn to decrease maladaptive perfectionism. Therapy can help you learn new ways of thinking about yourself, set standards or goals that are more achievable, and challenge unhealthy thinking patterns such as “all-or-nothing” thinking.

Talk to someone who can help! To find a licensed psychologist near you, use PPA's Psychologist Locator at <https://www.papsy.org/locator>. For information on other mental health topics, go to <https://www.papsy.org>, then “Resources” and then “Public Resources”. PPA offers these articles for informational purposes only; they are not a substitute for professional diagnosis and treatment.