

Perfectionism: 10 Signs of Perfectionist Traits

When Good Enough Isn't Good Enough

By [Elizabeth Scott, PhD](#) Updated on June 17, 2024

Perfection is a double-edged sword—the driving force behind a [high achiever](#) or a personal liability. It's a matter of degree. Here are 10 signs of perfectionist traits to watch for when nothing is ever good enough for yourself or someone around you.

A [perfectionist](#) has "excessively high personal standards and overly critical self-evaluations."¹ They insist on perfection and accept nothing shy of flawlessness. This can manifest as criticism of self and others and in attempts to control situations and people.

All-or-Nothing Thinking

Perfectionists, like high achievers, set and work hard to [achieve lofty goals](#). Whereas a high achiever can be satisfied knowing they did their best and achieved a goal, a perfectionist will accept nothing less than perfection. "Almost perfect" is seen as a failure.

[How to Overcome All-or-Nothing Thinking](#)

Being Highly Critical

Someone with a perfectionist personality is more critical of themselves and others than a high achiever. High achievers take pride in their accomplishments and tend to be supportive of others, yet perfectionists often spot mistakes and imperfections.

A perfectionist focuses on imperfections and has trouble seeing anything else. They're more [judgmental](#) and hard on themselves and others [when "failure" does occur](#).

Feeling Pushed By Fear

High achievers are often *pulled* toward their goals by a desire to achieve them. They are also happy with any steps made in the right direction. Perfectionists, on the other hand, tend to be *pushed* by a fear of anything less than a perfectly met goal.

Having Unrealistic Standards

Another sign of being a perfectionist is [setting goals](#) that may not be reasonable. High achievers can set their goals high, enjoying the fun of going a

little further once these goals are reached.

Perfectionists often set their initial goals out of reach.

Because a perfectionist tends to have unrealistic standards, they often reject success because they feel that their actions are never good enough to rise to this level of achievement.²

[The Expectations vs. Reality Trap](#)

Focusing Only on Results

High achievers can enjoy the process of chasing a goal as much or more than the actual reaching of the goal itself. Conversely, perfectionists see the goal and nothing else. They're so concerned with hitting the goal and avoiding failure that they can't enjoy the process of growing and striving.

Feeling Depressed by Unmet Goals

Perfectionists are often less happy than high achievers.³ While high achievers are able to bounce back fairly easily from disappointment, perfectionists tend to beat themselves up and wallow in negative feelings when their high expectations go unmet. They struggle to move on when things don't work out the way they had hoped.

In addition to having less happiness, people with a perfectionist personality also tend to have higher levels of anxiety and lower levels of [psychological well-being](#).⁴

Fear of Failure

Perfectionists have a greater [fear of failure](#) than high achievers. Because they place so much stock in results and become disappointed by anything less than perfection, failure becomes a scary prospect. And since anything less than perfection is seen as a failure, it makes it difficult to get started on anything new.

[Healthy Ways to Cope With Failure](#)

Procrastination

It seems paradoxical that perfectionists would be prone to [procrastination](#) since this personality trait can be detrimental to productivity. But research has found that a perfectionist person who isn't able to adjust to their situation or environment—called

maladaptive perfectionism—is often more prone to procrastinate.⁵

The reason for this is because, fearing failure as they do, perfectionists will sometimes worry so much about doing something imperfectly that they become immobilized and fail to do anything at all. This procrastination can then lead to greater feelings of failure, further perpetuating a vicious and paralyzing cycle.

Defensiveness

Because a less-than-perfect performance is so painful and scary to perfectionists, they will often [respond defensively](#) to constructive criticism. High achievers, on the other hand, can see criticism as valuable information that will help improve their future performance.

Low Self-Esteem

High achievers tend to have equally high levels of self-esteem. This isn't the case with perfectionists. Although striving for perfectionism is associated with higher self-esteem, when someone with a perfectionist personality evaluates themselves critically, this contributes to [low self-esteem](#) instead.⁶

Perfectionists can also be lonely or isolated due to their critical nature and rigidity pushing others away. This can lead to even lower self-esteem, ultimately having a serious impact on the person's self-image and overall life satisfaction while also impacting their relationships.

Are You a Perfectionist? Take the Quiz

Our fast and free perfectionist quiz can help you determine if your behavior suggests that you are a perfectionist:

Causes of Perfectionism

Many factors can affect a person's chances of having a perfectionist personality. Some of the main causes of perfectionism include:

- A fear of judgment or disapproval from others
- Early childhood experiences, such as having parents with unrealistically high expectations

- Having a mental health condition associated with perfectionist tendencies, such as [obsessive-compulsive disorder](#) (OCD)⁷
- Poor self-esteem
- Feelings of inadequacy
- A need for control
- Tying self-worth to achievements

Societal and cultural expectations can also play a role in perfectionism.

Pitfalls of Perfectionism

Being a perfectionist is challenging because it's difficult to be perfect, or even of reaching a personal best. Another problem with perfectionism—and the reason you'll want to know if you possess perfectionistic traits—is that perfectionists actually tend to achieve *less* and stress *more* than high achievers.

Unhealthy perfectionism is characterized by an excessive focus on control. Perfectionists can become extremely picky and preoccupied with making sure everything is flawless, which can lead to attempts to control situations or people. This can take a toll on interpersonal relationships.

It can also contribute to higher levels of stress. The stress caused by perfectionism can then lead to feelings of anxiety and has been linked to a variety of negative outcomes, including low self-esteem, [eating disorders](#), sleep disturbances, and psychological distress.⁸

Recap

Unhealthy perfectionism can make it difficult to achieve your goals. It can also lead to worry, stress, anxiety, and depression, among other negative outcomes.

How to Overcome Perfectionism

If you are a perfectionist and want to reduce some of its negative impacts on your life, there are a few things you can do. Strategies that can help you overcome perfectionism include:

- Creating an environment where you feel accepted⁹

- Engaging in [positive self-talk](#)
- Not comparing yourself to others
- Practicing [mindfulness](#) to help you learn how to focus on the present without worrying as much about the past or future
- Using techniques from [cognitive behavioral therapy](#) (CBT), such as challenging negative thoughts

Healthy perfectionism can drive people to perform their best, but unhealthy perfectionism can lead to stress, anxiety, low self-esteem, and other issues that can affect their quality of life. Perfectionists are often critical, driven by fear, have unrealistic expectations, fear failure, and are defensive when they face any criticism.

If you see some of these perfectionist traits in yourself, don't despair. Recognizing that a change may be needed is a very important first step. Once you recognize how these tendencies might be affecting you negatively, you can begin working toward taking a healthier approach that will still allow you to achieve your goals with less stress and negativity.

[Psychological Flexibility](#)

Frequently Asked Questions

- How might perfectionism lead to anxiety?

Perfectionists often struggle with feelings of inadequacy and worry that they will fail to live up to their own expectations. This constant worry can contribute to feelings of anxiety, particularly when perfectionism tends to focus on being self-critical.¹⁰

Learn More: [How Perfectionism Can Impact Panic and Anxiety](#)

- How can I help a perfectionist child?

There are a number of strategies that can help a child who exhibits unhealthy perfectionism. Parents and other adults should have reasonable expectations¹¹ and focus on praising their child's efforts rather than outcomes.

It is also important to model healthy, positive self-talk that shows how you can be kind and

compassionate to yourself, even when you make mistakes.¹²

- Is perfectionism a mental illness?

Perfectionism is a personality trait versus being a mental health disorder. That said, people with certain mental illnesses may have perfectionist tendencies. One example of this is individuals with obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD).⁷

Learn More: [What is Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder \(OCD\)?](#)

- Is being a perfectionist a good thing?

Perfectionism isn't all bad as people with this tendency often have a different way of assessing situations, which is tied to greater well-being.¹³ However, if your perfectionist tendencies are negatively impacting your life, this personality trait may not be a good thing for you.

- What are the three types of perfectionism?

The three types of perfectionism are:¹⁴

- **Socially prescribed perfectionism:** Involves high standards and social pressure to succeed. This type contributes to poor self-confidence and feelings of anxiety.
- **Other-oriented perfectionism:** Involves having high expectations of other people. This type can contribute to conflict and relationship problems.
- **Self-oriented perfectionism:** A more adaptive form of perfectionism characterized by high motivation, resourcefulness, and positive emotions.
- Are perfectionists narcissistic?

Narcissism and perfectionism can sometimes occur together, although this is not always the case. Some research suggests that narcissists may be more prone to perfectionism. One study found that narcissistic perfectionism is associated with more social negativity, including higher levels of conflict, anger, and hostility.¹⁵