

perfectionistic thinking



Perfectionists tend to determine their self worth based on their ability to achieve unrealistically high standards. As a consequence, they may focus on information in their environment that they interpret as evidence that they are not achieving, and criticise themselves harshly when they fail to meet their standards. Such patterns of thinking serve to maintain the importance of attaining extremely high standards.

Biased Information Processing

The way we make sense of what goes on around us plays a big part in maintaining perfectionism. Since there is so much happening in our environment at any one time, our brains choose what we pay attention to and how we make sense of things. We tend to **pay attention** to and **interpret** things according to what we expect.

Since achieving extremely high standards provides the basis for a perfectionist's self worth, they tend to pay careful **attention** to any evidence that they take to mean that they are not achieving. For example, if a perfectionist believes "I must never make mistakes", they will probably quickly pick up errors in their work that other people may not notice.

Perfectionists also have a tendency to **interpret** information in a way that demonstrates that they are not achieving. They often have an extreme view of what success and failure is, with no middle ground. For example, they may say "missing out on an A for this assignment means that I might as well have failed".

Self Criticism & Unhelpful Thinking

Perfectionists tend to be extremely self-critical, especially if they are unable to meet their high standards. They might say to themselves: "I am such an idiot" or "I should have done better". This self-criticism can cause people to feel a range of negative emotions including anger, anxiety, depression and guilt.

Often these negative thoughts reflect an **unhelpful style of thinking** such as:

- ◇ Black & white thinking: seeing only extremes - no shades of gray;
- ◇ Shoulding & Musting: putting unreasonable demands on self and others;
- ◇ Catastrophising: blowing things out of proportion;
- ◇ Jumping to conclusions: assuming that we know what others are thinking, or can predict the future.

How Biased Information Processing and Unhelpful Thinking maintain Perfectionism

When people repeatedly focus on information in their environment that is consistent with their beliefs and ignore information that does not fit with their beliefs, it can appear as if their beliefs are well supported. Likewise a person may perceive that there is a lot of support for their beliefs if they repeatedly interpret information in a way that is consistent with their beliefs.



When perfectionists pay attention only to evidence that they are not achieving, or interpret neutral information as showing that they are not achieving, they tend to feel bad about themselves. For the perfectionist, this then underlines the importance of striving to achieve, thereby keeping their perfectionism going.

Perfectionists' repeated criticism of themselves not only causes them to feel uncomfortable emotions, it also emphasizes the importance of achieving their unrealistically high standards. The negative thinking styles that they rely on cause them to place unreasonable pressures on themselves, see only the extremes and not accurately perceive situations. Such negative thinking styles underlie perfectionists' unreasonable standards and harsh self criticism.

Reducing Unhelpful Thinking*

One way to check out the accuracy of perfectionistic thoughts and find more helpful and balanced ways of thinking is to use a thought diary.

Thought Diaries



Thought diaries are designed to help you become aware of your negative thoughts and notice how these thoughts affect how you feel and behave. Thought diaries can also help you investigate the accuracy and helpfulness of your negative thoughts and develop new more balanced thoughts.

*For detailed information regarding the use of these techniques see Perfectionism in Perspective Module 6.