

How Much of a Perfectionist are You?

Assessing Your Perfectionism

The following questions will help you identify how much of a perfectionist you are, and to what extent you exhibit traits of the three types of perfectionism: **self orientated, other orientated, socially prescribed**. Be brutally honest with yourself!

EXERCISE

Read each statement and then decide which number on the scale of 1 – 5 most reflects your opinion:

1 = Never true 2= Rarely true 3= Sometimes true 4= Often true 5= Always true

SECTION A: Self-orientated Perfectionism	
1. I find myself obsessing about the finer details of a task	
2. I find myself checking and rechecking work before considering it finished	
3. I get really upset when I feel criticised	
4. I felt that I could never meet my parents' expectations	
5. I can't stand it if my house/office is not organised meticulously	
6. I avoid trying things I might not be good at	
7. If I don't do well all the time people won't respect me	
8. I find it difficult to make decisions	
9. When I have made a decision I often doubt my choice	
10. I feel devastated if I make a mistake	
11. I worry more than most people	
12. When I have an appraisal at work I focus on the negative comments and ignore the positives	
13. My family or social life is negatively affected by the amount of time and effort I put into my work	
14. I feel it would be really awful if I missed a deadline	
15. I feel as if my perfectionism is holding me back in life	
Total for section A	

SECTION B: Other-orientated Perfectionism	
16. I have been called critical or picky	
17. I get irritated when others don't get things right	
18. I have been told I am too judgemental, often thinking the worst of others	
19. People often seem on edge when I'm around	
20. I have been told I am controlling	
21. I am wary of being influenced, manipulated or controlled by others	
22. I think people who care for each other should not fight or argue	
23. I am suspicious of being duped by others	
24. People think I'm too fussy	
25. People have to earn my trust	
26. I find it difficult to delegate or get help in - they are unlikely to do a good a job	
27. I feel I have to do everything myself because no-one else can do things properly	
28. I become upset when others don't meet my standards	
29. I am sometimes pre-occupied with others' shortcomings	
30. I can't stand being interrupted	
Total for section B	
SECTION C: Socially-prescribed Perfectionism	
31. I worry about what people will think of me	
32. I want to be thought of as a nice person	
33. I am careful about how I phrase things so people will like me	
34. I find it very difficult to say 'no'	
35. I feel guilty if I take time for myself	
36. Asking for what I want is hard for me	
37. I avoid any situation which could be confrontational	
38. It is hard for me to complain about a poor product or service	
39. I feel anxious if I think someone might think badly of me	

40. If I have to speak in public I feel extremely anxious	
41. I avoid going out in public without being well dressed	
42. I feel nervous when meeting new people	
43. I avoid social situations because I feel intensely uncomfortable	
44. I feel inferior to people more successful, more attractive etc	
45. People will look down on me if I look foolish or make a mistake	
Total for section C	

Your score

Now take your score for each section – A, B, C, to see where your tendencies lie with regard to the 3 types: self-orientated perfectionism; other-orientated perfectionism; socially prescribed perfectionism:

15-26 Little or no tendency

27-38 Mild - moderate tendency

39-50 Moderate - strong tendency

51-62 Strong - very strong tendency

63-75 Very strong tendency

So, having done that for each of the 3 sections, you should now have a better idea of your own personal make-up when it comes to the issue of perfectionism. Are your scores especially high in one area? Do any of those results surprise you in any way?

Now look again at the questionnaire and identify those questions where you scored yourself 4 or 5. For each of those ask yourself a second question: Does this characteristic cause difficulties in my relationships, work or leisure activities or does it interfere to with my ability to enjoy life in generally? If you say ‘yes’ to this for even a one or two questions you will benefit from learning how to change.

So now you’re in a position to decide which areas you want to focus on. What changes do you want to make? Of course changing habitual ways of thinking and behaving will involve some effort and perhaps a little discomfort but change *is* possible and it will be worth it! This could be the point at which you make the decision to create for yourself a more fulfilling, more relaxed and generally happier life.

The Different Types of Perfectionism

General Personality Traits of the Perfectionist

Perfectionistic personality traits can cause a wide range of difficulties. Typically those would include difficulty making decisions, dotting i's crossing t's (checking and rechecking), over-analysing, ruminating, being too picky about potential partners – all common to what psychiatrists refer to as 'obsessive' – but only a very small proportion of people with this tendency would go on to develop obsessive compulsive disorder, a clinical condition for which one would normally seek therapeutic help.

Even though here we are talking about a personality trait, you might still benefit from some talking therapy or life coaching to help you work through the process of overcoming what can be a crippling habit. For many it's about self-esteem –feeling inferior to others, seeing them as more intelligent, attractive or successful than you. Some have 'emotional' perfectionism – ashamed of being vulnerable, depressed, anxious or embarrassed.

Canadian psychologist Gordon Flett says that perfectionists reveal themselves in three distinct ways: first, a "self-promotion" style, that involves attempts to impress others by bragging or displaying one's perfection (this type is easy to spot because they often irritate other people); second, by avoiding situations in which they might display their imperfection (common even in young children); and third, a tendency to keep problems to themselves (including an inability to admit failure to others).

You can see how it might be difficult for the experts to agree on the theory and nature of perfectionism – it is a complex subject which overlaps with so many other aspects of our personality and behaviour. Whilst researchers over the past two decades have led to a better understanding of the problem, they have approached it from different angles, so we are left with many different perspectives on the subject. One way of assessing perfectionistic tendencies, the Multidimensional Perfectionism Subscales devised by Frost et al, looks at the following areas: concern over mistakes; doubts about actions; personal standards; parental expectations; parental criticism; and organisation.

Another measure, created by Flett and Hewitt, identified three main dimensions of perfectionism: self-orientated, other-orientated and socially prescribed perfectionism, broadly as follows:

2.1.1 Self-Orientated Perfectionism

We put pressure on ourselves to attain unrealistic and impossible standards. This is associated with self-criticism, intense self-scrutiny and the inability to accept any mistakes or failings in one's self. "I'm my own worst critic" you might hear them say. Sorotzkin (1985) describes a thinking style in which the individual feels compelled to achieve perfection in all areas of life as "the tyranny of 'shoulds' (more on that later). The problem is that low self-esteem and lack of self-belief can lead to the feeling that we will never achieve our goals in life, and that can produce a kind of immobilisation, where we lack energy and motivation to make things happen. So it's no surprise that this can lead to problems with depression.

"Does 'anal-retentive' have a hyphen?" *Alison Bechdel*

2.1.2 Other-Orientated Perfectionism

We expect *others* to meet unrealistically high standards – it's a way of externalising the pressure they feel. It is most likely to develop when children are brought up in families which are extremely evaluative, where the emphasis is on everyone striving for perfection. Even when these children have

been exposed to harsh or controlling parenting, they often maintain the somewhat narcissistic view of themselves that they are capable of achieving perfectionism. This type of perfectionist often displays inflexibility, anger and intolerance, which may lead to problematic relationships, both at home and at work. Their excessive demands and expectations of others lead them to sometimes be seen as blaming, arrogant or dominant – “the people that matter to me should never let me down” they might be heard to say. They may have trouble delegating because they worry the results will be less than perfect. “If you want a job doing well, do it yourself” will sound familiar to them.

The same internal critical voice we use on ourselves, and the same impossible high standards we have for ourselves can be projected onto others. For example they may become distracted by poor grammar or a mistake when reading an article or a book, and even decide on the basis of that, that the whole thing is ‘rubbish’!

Some parents not only have high expectations (i.e high levels of controlling behaviour), but they sometimes over-idealise the child, leading to a form of narcissistic perfectionism. These people will strive for perfection and also believe they can achieve it due to the overly positive evaluation by their parents. This type may also be associated with maternal restrictiveness, leading to a desire to control others in adult life. It has also been suggested that these exceedingly high expectations of others may be a way of compensating for being mistreated or disappointed. It seems there are several possible explanations for this type of perfectionism!

“When no-one around you seems to measure up, it’s time to check your yardstick” *Bill Lemley*

2.1.3 Socially Prescribed Perfectionism

We believe that others expect us to meet standards so high, that they are impossible for us to reach. So these high standards are thought to be imposed by others, whereas the self-orientated perfectionist’s high standards are self-imposed. This type is particularly potent because if we don’t meet those standards we feel there is a high risk of disapproval or rejection. We fear the social consequences of failure, looking foolish or being criticised by others. This type is associated with adjustment problems such as greater loneliness, shyness, fear of negative evaluation, and lower levels of self-esteem. It can lead to anger and resentment (at the person who is apparently imposing the standards), depression (if they are not met), and social anxiety (fear of being judged by others).

“Women are often so terrified of being imperfect. They don’t want to be laughed at. It holds them back. Young men are taught to take criticism in a kind of impersonal way.

Psychologists have documented that women believe that approval is like oxygen, which can make it too painful to be a risk-taker or leader because you’re too visible and the criticism hurts so much. So one of the things that women need in the next millennium is more inner strength” *Naomi Wolf*

In reality these categories often overlap. Any categorisation is an attempt to clarify and simplify the subject, but remember that human beings don’t fit into nice neat boxes and you may find yourself identifying with characteristics across all three categories.