

HOW TO OVERCOME PERFECTIONISM

by Celestine Chua

www.personalexcellence.co



Perfectionism

Table of Contents

1. 11 Signs You Are a Perfectionist

2. 6 Hidden Downsides of Perfectionism

3. How to Overcome Perfectionism: Your Complete Guide

4. ABOUT

11 Signs You Are a Perfectionist

This is part 1 of my 3-part series on perfectionism and how to make the best out of it



Are you a perfectionist? Do you often seek to achieve a perfect standard in your work? Do you feel a need to perfect every single thing you do, even at the expense of your health and well-being?

A **perfectionist** is a person who refuses to accept any standard

short of perfection. In psychology, perfectionism is a personality trait characterized by " **a person's striving for flawlessness and setting excessively high performance standards**, accompanied by **overly critical self-evaluations and concerns regarding others' evaluations.**"^[1] To a perfectionist, anything that's less than perfect is unacceptable.

Are You a Perfectionist?

To help you assess your level of perfectionism, here are 11 signs of a perfectionist I've identified:

- 1) There is **no room for mistakes**. Whenever you see an error, you're the first to jump on it and correct it.
- 2) You have a **very specific manner in which things should be done**. Many times, people don't get you because you're so specific about how things get done. As long as something is out of place or doesn't conform to your approach, it'll *not* be acceptable. Because of that, you often find it very hard to find the right people to work with; some may find it hard to work with you altogether.
- 3) You have an **all-or-nothing approach**. It's either you do everything well, or you don't do it at all. Everything in between is a no-go.
- 4) It's **all about the end result**. You don't care what happens in between or what it takes to achieve the goal. You just want to ensure that the end result is attained; otherwise you'd feel annoyed, devastated.

- 5) You are **extremely hard on yourself**. Whenever something goes wrong, you become really hard on yourself. It doesn't matter if it's due to your fault or just one small thing -- you're always quick to beat yourself up and feel extremely bad about a mistake for a long, long while.
- 6) You **become depressed when you don't achieve your goals**. You often mull over outcomes that don't turn out as envisioned. You keep wondering "What if?" Most importantly, you feel that everything must be your fault if you don't achieve that perfect, desired standard (see #5).
- 7) You have **extremely high standards**. Whatever you set your mind to do, you will have high targets. Sometimes, these targets stress you endlessly. You may end up breaking a neck just to reach them. At one point, you become held back by these standards as you procrastinate and stop working on your goals out of fear that you can't reach them.
- 8) **Success is never enough**. Whatever you do, there's always a greater height to aim for. Even when you achieve X, you want 2X. Even when you achieve 2X, you want 5X. Beyond this desire for betterment, many times you're just not happy if you don't go for a higher, bigger goal. You are rarely content with status quo and you keep wanting to see more and better things.
- 9) You **procrastinate just to do something at the "right" moment**. You are constantly waiting for the "right" moment to work on your goals. You only want to start **when you are "ready"** so as to deliver your best quality of work. However, this state of "readiness" never seems to come sometimes. Sometimes, it *never* comes as you perpetually wait just to get something done.

- 10) You **constantly spot mistakes when others don't see any**. While this can simply mean that you're just very detail-oriented, perfectionists often spot mistakes, issues, from a mile away. Sometimes these mistakes are real. Sometimes they seem self-imagined.
- 11) You often **spend copious amounts of time just to perfect something**. Perfection is the end goal. It's not uncommon for you to sacrifice your sleep, personal time, and well-being, just to bring your work to the highest level. To you, it is all part of achieving your goal.

Can you relate with any of the traits above? Out of the 11 traits above, how many apply to you?

My Experience with Perfectionism

I used to be a highly neurotic perfectionist. In fact, there was a time when all 11 traits fit me to a tee! I'm still a heavy perfectionist today, though I've learned to dial down the negative parts of my perfectionism. You'll learn more about them in part 2.

A big part of my perfectionism is because I'm passionate about giving my best to everything I do. I think when we set ourselves to do something, we should do our best without compromising or giving excuses.

A second reason is how I was brought up. I was raised in a culture where success is extolled, and failure, punished. People are celebrated for being the best and you are shamed upon if you are mediocre. Not only that, back in my primary school, we were taught to follow idiosyncratic guidelines like only being allowed to wear plain, single-colored watches that were black, grey, white, or

blue; or that girls should not have any strand of hair that touched or covered any part of the face. Hair bands or hair ties, if used, should be single-colored as well and only one of the same four colors (black, grey, white, or blue) was allowed. These "rules" were questionable in terms of how they helped us become better human beings. Non-conformance would result in you being **shamed, scolded in front of a crowd, or for guys, being caned.**

This combined with a very high innate sensitivity made me super meticulous about every single thing I do. This meticulousness extends beyond my studies to every area in life.

For example, back when I was **making websites as a teen**, I was relentless in perfecting every single aspect of my sites. I was constantly editing my graphics and vetting my HTML code just so everything was "perfect." I would spend hours ensuring that my sites looked great at every resolution and browser while constantly making tiny tweaks like one-pixel changes or things I changed my mind about. I was always very particular about how everything looked and the content I was putting out there, even though I wasn't paid for this work.

When I was **an avid gamer as a child**, I was always perfecting my performance in each game I played. As little kids, my brother would criticize me when I executed moves wrongly or if I made mistakes that resulted in the game character's death. Hence, I learned to be very precise in how I executed each move and in achieving 100% perfection. I fondly remember how I broke all top scores in *Crazy Taxi* (a racing game) and completed every bonus challenge (there were a lot, and some of them were insanely difficult). I played and replayed King of Fighters 95 for weeks upon weeks, perfected my moves for my favorite characters and attacking

strategies depending on the opponent, and won it many times on the hardest difficulty. In total, I've completed at least 100 games from RPG to action games to racing games throughout my childhood!

In project groups in school, I often had to take over project work due to teammates lapsing on their deliverables or to improve the overall standard of our project. Even though it was at the expense of my time and sleep, even though I would often end up putting in a lot more work than some teammates, the end result was worth it as we would get the best grade.

Even with my daily work at Personal Excellence, I'm very meticulous about every content I create, everything I put out. For example, with each PE course, I spend many many months creating, editing, and then refining my course materials before putting them out there. Every time I conduct a live course, I would spend another few months improving and upgrading the course based on the participants' feedback for that run. Every article, podcast, and video is always thoroughly thought through before it gets published. Even then, I'm always tweaking and improving my content every few months. Perhaps this is why many readers appreciate my material and share it on other sites; teachers and professors alike use my material as part of their course curriculum.

Being a perfectionist has helped me achieve very precise standards and become an overachiever in many ways. It has helped me **do well in college**, perform well in my corporate job, and is probably the reason I excel in many personal goals and projects.

However, as I grew older, I realized that (neurotic) perfectionism has some serious downsides as I'll share in the next part.

Proceed to part 2 of the series: **6 Hidden Downsides of**

Perfectionism

Get the manifesto version of this article: [\[Manifesto\] 11 Signs That You Are a Perfectionist](#)

Images: [Textured background](#); Perfectionism image by [Personal Excellence](#)

6 Hidden Downsides of Perfectionism

This is part 2 of my 3-part series on perfectionism and how to make the best out of it

“Perfectionists are their own devils.” ~ Jack Kirby

“Perfectionists vary in their behaviors: some strive to conceal their imperfections; others attempt to project an image of perfection.” ~ Flett, York University

On the surface, being a perfectionist seems perfect. Not only do you have a keen eye for details, you are always ready to push yourself to achieve that next big thing, that goal that nobody has achieved before. You are always exceeding expectations with the work you do, and the quality of your output is second to none.

Yet, being a perfectionist has its downsides. These downsides are not apparent until you take a step back to think about your perfectionism and how it has been serving you.

Issue #1: Procrastination



(Image: [Ralf Appelt](#))

While this may seem ironic, procrastination is a recurring issue for some perfectionists. I've found that it seems to affect some more than others — for example, my pain point as a perfectionist isn't really procrastination, but something else as you'll know later in the article — but it is a big issue for some. I've worked with clients who are chronic perfectionists, and some would heavily procrastinate on their own goals, even though these are goals they feel passionately about.

Why is that so? Firstly, **a perfectionist tends to conjure up an immaculate vision of how things should be.** So when it's time to get to work, they become extremely detail oriented, start to obsess

about every single thing, get weighed down by every problem, and get caught up by the need to create everything perfectly. Over time, the "pain" of such intricate attention becomes too painful, and this subsequently leads to procrastination — putting off a task to get some relief, but is in actual fact pushing away the pain that they create with each task.

Secondly, **perfectionists are specific about having the perfect conditions before they get to work.** First they need to have enough time, then they need to have ABC in place, and then they need XYZ in place, and then they'll feel that they're ready to start. As long as any one item isn't there, they won't feel like starting. They'd just put things off again and again, just to wait for that "perfect" moment to do things in the "perfect" way.

Of course, at the end of the day the perfectionist is **only fooling themselves**. That's because when you put off something in the name of perfectionism, you wind up getting nothing done. That's worse than if you had simply tried -- even if the output is lousy, at least it's something to build on. Perfectionism that leads to procrastination thus becomes a trap where someone puts off their goals in the name of "perfection."

Issue #2: Skewed view of reality (Pushing past diminishing returns)



(Image: [r0b0tsrfun](#))

Recently, I realized that I have very low latent inhibition. That means I'm very sensitive to surrounding stimuli, which means I tend to pick up sounds, visuals, words, feelings, behaviors, etc. very readily, more so than the regular person.

Now, that's terrific as it means being able to pick up details readily. I'm able to spot mistakes and gaps quickly just by seeing things, and thereafter correct them. But the crazy part about this is that as a perfectionist, I never know when to stop. I never know when to stop tweaking things, to stop improving on things, and basically to close the lid on a project.

An example is my **podcasts** and course video recordings. I personally record these sessions, edit them, and then publish them. While everyone hears the final version of the files, what they don't know is the amount of work that goes behind editing each file. Many times I would record and re-record a segment because I feel it doesn't deliver my point as clearly. On average, I can re-record a segment 5–7 times, sometimes more. Many times I can record and re-record an entire course section or podcast episode because I feel it can be better. And the endless hours, days, I spend editing each audio, removing "clicks" and slight pauses, adding pauses for effect, removing digressions, and removing small fumbles? It's insane.

Now, the thing is that such editing is important, and is in fact the crucial difference between unpolished work and great output. Yet, it's easy to have a skewed view of what's good or not good enough as a perfectionist.

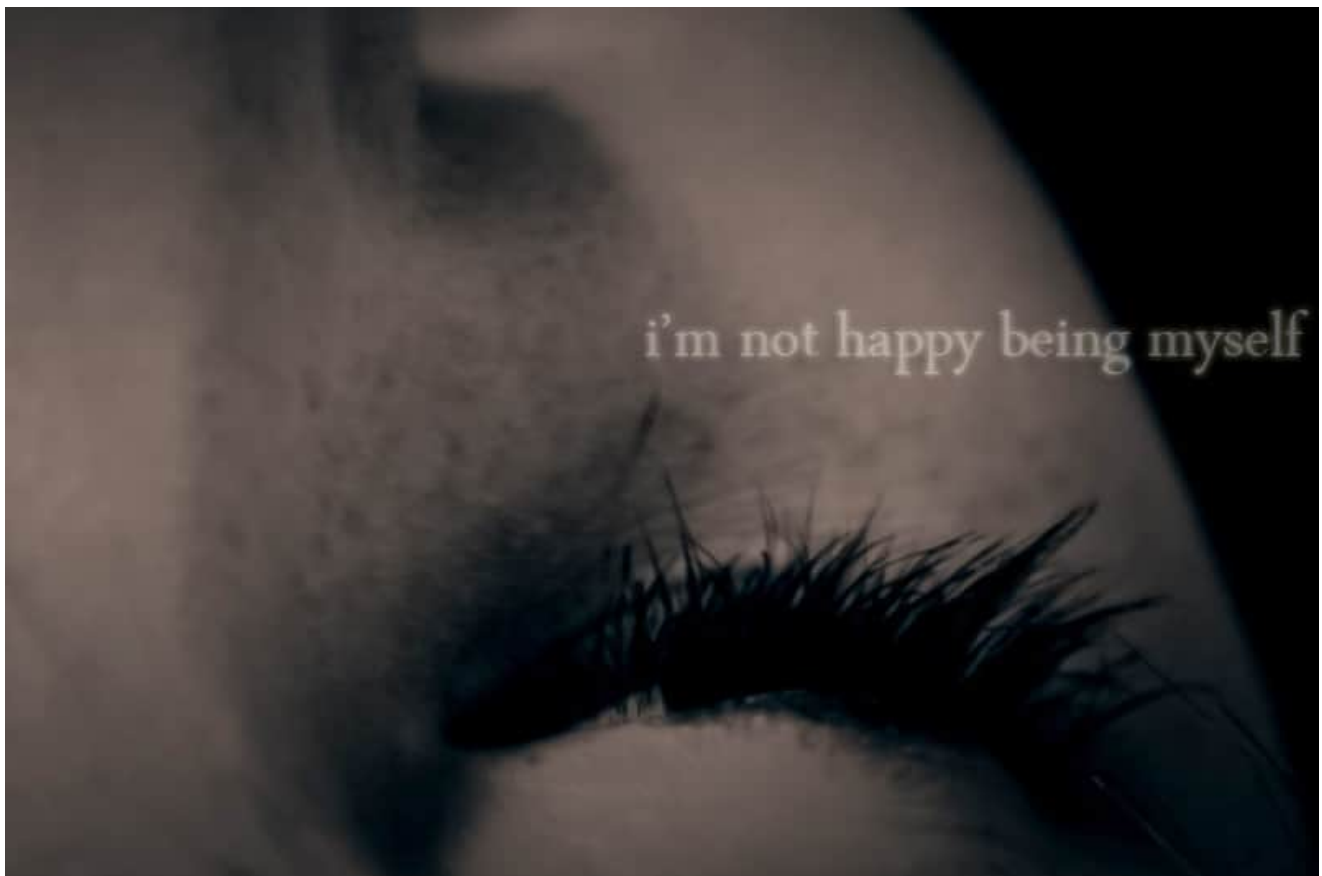
For example, I've been listening to some very popular and top-rated podcasts lately as a way to get benchmarks and ideas for **my show**. I realized, much to my surprise, that the very "errors" that I spend *hours*, even *days*, editing in my recordings are littered everywhere in said podcasts! Mouth clicks, fumbles, saliva sounds, occasional explosives, and even digressions by the host. *More importantly*, the presence of these errors *did not prevent me from getting value from the episodes*. I'm still able to benefit immensely despite these "errors," which, if you think about it, are no different than what you'd hear in a conversation. While I had thought that these were make-or-break issues that would severely affect the quality of a recording, they don't — as long as not occurring in excess.

What does it mean? As a perfectionist, it's common to have a very

precise, extreme view of how every piece of work should look. This view is probably based on sound grounds, such as high personal standards and experience.

Yet, this view may sometimes be skewed, in that while a perfectionist may think that a piece of work must satisfy A, B, C, D, and E criteria in order to be considered awesome, perhaps that isn't the case. Maybe **the quality of the work is based on factors A and B**, more so than C, D, and E. But in trying to perfect every single thing, sometimes we may miss this big picture. Sometimes, we may also exhaust ourselves emotionally and expend a large amount of time just to achieve that final perfect image. But to what end?

Issue #3: Deep-seated unhappiness



(Image: Mariela BM)

I can't speak for all perfectionists, but between myself and the perfectionists I have worked with in coaching, I've found that many of us go through internal struggles, perhaps more so than the usual person, due to our perfectionism.

For myself, I often struggle with my perfectionism where I (a) beat myself up for things that I did wrongly or are not up to my satisfaction, and (b) blame myself for not getting as much as I want done. Many times I tell Ken, "I hate myself" or "I'm a lousy person" as I see so many things that I wish to do, but haven't completed yet. Many times, I fault myself for others' issues, even though it's not my fault at all. My mission is to help others grow, and in cases where I see that people aren't moving forward, even if it may have nothing to do with me, even if I have already tried my best, I would still fault myself for it.

Working with perfectionists in my courses, I've seen how their perfectionism creates great struggle and **unhappiness** for themselves too. They struggle with their to-do's, yet they refuse to ask for help. They set sky-high expectations for their work, yet they procrastinate with their tasks. They want to achieve perfection and precision in everything, yet this precision creates great unhappiness for themselves.

In the end, they build this wall of pain, this cave of misery, that they grief and suffer in each day.

We can see this struggle happening for very accomplished perfectionists as well. Lady Gaga, famed pop singer, admits to experiencing bouts of unhappiness with her work, due to her perfectionist tendencies. She says, "I am perpetually unhappy with what I create. Even though I might tell you that [my song] 'Edge Of

Glory' is a pop masterpiece, when it's all said and finished there will be things I dread, and every time I listen to it I'll hear them."

Her obsession with achieving perfection also gives her anxiety as **she's constantly worried that her shows won't go well**. She says, "I'm very bossy. I don't move on. I vomit in the bathroom before every show. I can scream my head off if I see one light fixture out. I'm very detailed — every minute of the show has got to be perfect."

Akon, a record producer who has worked with pop legend and known perfectionist Michael Jackson before, says that MJ was never satisfied due to his perfectionism. Akon says **in an MTV interview**, "He was never satisfied. Like, we might have passed up ideas that I know for a fact were smashes. He'd be like, 'Nah, nah — we got to come up with something better.' [But] we can never do better 'cause his expectation was so high. It was almost to a point where we would have to get a record and I would believe in it and just put it out, 'cause it would never come out 'cause he always believed we could do better."



Michael Jackson revealed in a 1993 interview with Oprah Winfrey that he was a perfectionist and was never pleased with any of his work. It is suspected that his extreme perfectionism might have contributed to his depression. He died in 2009 from over-medication that led to a cardiac arrest.

Of course, the emotional hurdles of a perfectionist varies from person to person. Some experience recurring feelings of dissatisfaction, while some are perpetually crippled by the regret of seemingly small things. The point is that while being a perfectionist may seem glorifying, a perfectionist suffers from deep pain, guilt, and immense self-expectations. Without keeping this in check, perfectionists can become depressed. Some can be clinically depressed. In extreme cases, extreme perfectionism combined with low self-worth and a firm refusal to seek help may lead to suicide or actions that lead to their slow death (see next point).

Issue #4: Disregard for your health

 Guy working on a laptop

(Image: [markdrasutis](#))

Many perfectionists are obsessed with achieving a certain standard, to the point where **they pay little regard to their health**.

I used to be just like this, though I'm working on it. I used to, in the quest of perfecting my work, work till 6–7am in the morning, sometimes later. Often times it's not that I don't care about my health, but that I find **my mission** and deadlines more important than 1–2 days of early sleep. So for example, if I had a live course on Saturday, I'd work till wee hours through the week as I fine-tuned my materials. Then, I'd work till wee hours through the weekend as I perfected my recordings and sent them to my participants.

But this is obviously not sustainable. With my endless workload,

I'd wind up sleeping late for pretty much all days of the year. While I did this with no health ramifications in my teens and 20s (I'm 31 as of this writing), I don't think this will persist if I continue my reckless, health-depriving behavior.

With perfectionists in general, there have been studies that point to poorer health among them:

- In a 2010 study by the University of Coimbra (Portugal), it was found that socially prescribed perfectionists had more difficulty falling and staying asleep than other students. One reason is because they're worried about failing and being labeled as failures. Insufficient sleep is known to raise the risk of diabetes, some cancers, heart attacks, stroke, and [early Alzheimer's](#).
[[Source](#)]
- In a study of 383 people from Sweden, it was found that perfectionism correlated with the degree of sleep problem. In a second study of 70 patients with persistent insomnia from a sleep disorders clinic, it was found that these patients have significantly higher scores than normal on perfectionism. It is hypothesized that perfectionism may serve as a predisposing factor for the development of persistent insomnia. [[Source](#)]
- In a study of 100 heart attack patients, perfectionists were found to recover more slowly and at higher risk of further cardiac problems. 3 factors were identified that slowed down their recovery: (1) stress from the pressure that the perfectionists put on themselves; (2) chronic negative emotions from never feeling joy in their achievements; and (3) lack of social support.

- This is backed up by a Dutch study published in the journal *Circulation* in 2010, involving more than 6,000 heart disease patients. Perfectionists with a negative outlook were 3X more likely to experience more heart problems than those with positive personalities.
- A 2007 research from the University of Auckland suggests that perfectionists are more prone to developing irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) after a bout of food poisoning. The researchers followed up with 620 people who had an acute episode of food poisoning and found those who developed IBS were more likely to have perfectionist tendencies, such as carrying on regardless until they were forced to rest. [Source]

(More on the negative effects of perfectionism on physical health [here](#).)

Does that mean that a perfectionist will automatically have bad health? Not really. What it means is that the way perfectionists often disregard their health in the name of work and perfection results in the deterioration of their health. Their constant worrying about achieving a certain standard also serves as a bedrock for conditions like [insomnia](#), [heart diseases](#), and [headaches](#). Incidentally, some perfectionists turn to [compulsive eating](#) or drinking to quell their unhappiness [Source #1, Source #2]. In the end, a perfectionist, through years of self-neglect, causes their good health to crumble away.

Issue #5: Difficulty in letting go



(Image: Benjamin Chan)

Perfectionists have difficulty letting go. Letting go in terms of control of their work; mistakes that they made; and imperfections.

This is why if you're a perfectionist, you probably have experienced the following:

- You are **afraid of delegating**, because you're worried that people would mess up your work.
- You **can't stop thinking about work**, because you are afraid everything will crash when you do.
- Even after you delegate, you **keep worrying** about what's going to happen. You micro-manage, even when your staff is doing fine.

- You spend a lot of time **correcting tiny mistakes** that don't make a difference.
- You keep **thinking about past "failures"** even though they have long passed.

This refusal to let go causes you to **carry the weight of the world on your shoulders**, as you carry on more responsibilities in your life. In the end, you feel extremely weighed down by every little thing, even though you have no reason to feel this way.

Issue #6: Compromised relationships



(Image: Tom)

Last but not least, perfectionism can often lead to compromised relationships.

Why? As a perfectionist, you often prioritize the perfection of your

work above all things, including relationships. This means less quality time with people you love. When the going gets tough, you would rather devote all your time to perfect your work, hence leaving your relationships in the back burner.

Some perfectionists bring their work struggles into their relationships, lashing out at their loved ones when things are not going well. Because perfectionists associate themselves so personally with their performance, their friends and family get negatively affected when work isn't going well for the perfectionist, which is — let's face it — almost all the time due to their impossibly high standards.

Some perfectionists may even impose their standards of perfection *on their loved ones*, where they expect their spouse or family member to uphold similar standards as them. An example would be a mom expecting her child to score 100 marks in their tests all the time, or a wife/husband blaming their partner for not doing housework in a particular way, as per their vision.

Clearly, such pressure only weighs down on your relationships. In the end, not only does perfectionism hollow you out, you also drain your own relationships and push your loved ones away.

How About You?

Can you relate to any of the above? Which downside do you experience as a perfectionist?

Yet, despite these downsides, it is possible to make the best out of perfectionism and manage it such that it doesn't compromise on your health or your life. Proceed to part 3 on the next page.

How to Overcome Perfectionism: Your Complete Guide

This is the last part of my 3-part series on perfectionism and how to make the best out of it

So far, I've shared the **11 signs of perfectionism**. I've also shared **6 hidden downsides of perfectionism**, including procrastination, having a skewed view of reality, experiencing deep inner unhappiness, compromising your health, and compromising your relationships.

As a neurotic perfectionist, I have experienced the debilitating effects of perfectionism. Instead of helping you be a better person, perfectionism can turn into a compulsive disorder, in turn ruining your life and your soul.

If you are struggling with perfectionism, I've created this guide to help you. I share the 8 important steps I took to deal with my perfectionism and to help my clients work through theirs. At 3,300 words long, it's not meant to be read in one go but to be read and implemented over time. Be sure to bookmark and share it with your friends and family. Enjoy! :)

1. Be a healthy perfectionist, not a neurotic one



Perfectionism can be a healthy trait. The problem comes when it's taken to the extreme.

Many of the issues I shared in parts 1 and 2 are the result of **neurotic perfectionism**, which is the extreme, maladaptive form of perfectionism. Neurotic perfectionists let their achievements define who they are and often experience deep unhappiness over their goals. They aim for high standards at the expense of everything, from their relationships to their health. Unfortunately, this is also the kind of perfectionism glorified in media, where an unhealthy attachment to things and a neurotic focus on results are made to seem like they are normal.

On the other hand, there is **healthy perfectionism**. Unlike neurotic

perfectionists, healthy perfectionists are positively motivated by high standards and use that to spur them forward. They are committed to their goals but do not let failures weigh them down nor define them.

By learning the difference between these 2 types of perfectionism, you can learn to recognize when you're bordering into the "neurotic" zone and moderate your behavior accordingly. I've created a list of differentiating behaviors between healthy and neurotic perfectionism, broken into 7 categories (click the image below for larger version):

	<u>Healthy Perfectionism</u>	<u>Neurotic Perfectionism</u>
1. Relationship with goals	You feel positively motivated by your goals. There's a sense of excitement, joy as you work on them.	You often feel weighed down by your goals. There's a sense of fear that you may not succeed or do as well as you like.
2. Bias for action	You focus on taking action, while improving as you go along	You constantly procrastinate, in anticipation of that "perfect" moment to do something
3. Personal Satisfaction	You celebrate every small victory and give yourself credit where credit is due	You feel constant dissatisfaction with what you've created or achieved, always feeling that nothing is ever "enough"
4. Macro vs. Micro	You recognize the big picture and do what is necessary to achieve the best outcome, never getting caught up with little details	You obsess about correcting tiny mistakes (that have no impact on the big picture), often at the expense of other priorities
5. Work vs. Self	You have a healthy focus on personal health, relationships, and rest	You constantly neglect your personal health, relationships, and rest time for work
6. Attitude toward failures	When failures happen, you focus on learning from them. You understand failure is part and parcel of success.	You hate failure. You beat yourself up over every failure, even small mistakes.
7. Attitude toward the past mistakes	You use past mistakes as positive learning points to be better	You feel regret over things that are long past

© Celestine Chua, *Learn to overcome perfectionism*: <http://personalexcellence.co/blog/perfectionism/>

Make a printout of this table and use it as a self-checking tool to keep your perfectionistic tendencies in check. Use the behaviors under "Healthy Perfectionism" as your benchmark. Through practice, you can become more balanced in your approach! :)

2. Remove the all-or-nothing mindset



The "all-or-nothing" mindset is a big problem among perfectionists in general. Perfectionists tend to think in terms of very strict dichotomies. For example, "Black" or "White." "All" or "Nothing." "Success" or "Failure." "Complete everything" or "Don't do it at all."

Yet, such thinking is self-defeating and at best, unreal. In the real world, **no one achieves success smoothly without failure.** No athlete wins a tournament without struggling with their training. **No entrepreneur succeeds without having failed in some form or manner first.** And no one produces great work **without first struggling with their tools** and producing some kind of lousy work. In reality, everything happens in progression, not in an all-or-nothing manner.

Silicon Valley, home to thousands of tech companies including top

corporations like Facebook, Apple, and Google, is known to strongly encourage failure. Entrepreneurs are often giving talks sharing about their own failures. People there live by the mantra “Fail fast, fail often.” They even have a annual conference called FailCon to encourage people to embrace failure. That's because they recognize that failure is the path of success, and by failing quickly, it is the surest way to learn what works / doesn't work and grow.

Hence, get rid of that all-or-nothing mindset. **When you think all-or-nothing, what you really get is nothing-and-nothing.** Allow yourself to do things incompletely, imperfectly, and imprecisely. That's how you can then progress to the state of completion and precision. Focus on maximizing progress every step of the way, including through experimentation and failure, as that is the surest way to guarantee your fastest success.

3. Avoid the perfectionist's mind trap (aka Go for the 80/20)

The perfectionist's mind is an elaborate labyrinth. It's capable of absorbing large amounts of information, analyzing details, and setting elaborate requisites for every task.

Yet, you need to be careful of the **perfectionist's mind trap**, a term I use to refer to a **perfectionist's ability to trap themselves with an endless focus on unimportant information and requisites.** Because a perfectionist is detail-oriented and capable of absorbing high levels of information, they are also their weakest link when it comes to taking action. To them, *everything* is important and *everything* must be done. In the end, they get overwhelmed. Some perfectionists **procrastinate**; some get stuck in **analysis**

paralysis mode. Some give up, while some spend an excruciating amount of time just to get simple things done.



Are you suffering from the perfectionist's mind trap?

For example, a neurotic trainer may feel that he needs to color-code his slides and get premium folders with embossed logos for his trainees' handouts, but maybe what his trainees really care about is his content and whether he can help them solve their problems. The extreme dieter may feel that she needs to **fast** repeatedly every time she falls off the wagon to succeed in her weight loss, but maybe it's more important that she eats healthily and eats within her energy needs more often than not.

I shared my mind trap in **part 2** regarding audio editing, where I used to worry over the removal of every little "click," slight pause, saliva sound, and so on in **my podcast episodes**. Yet, listening to

other podcasts, and top-rated ones at that, made me realize that having such sounds is entirely okay as long as they are not in excess. They make the listening experience more personal. Perfect removal of these things wouldn't dramatically change the utility of my material as much as giving my best quality tips will.

To you, perhaps you have an extremely high standard for every piece of work you create. However, you may struggle with this high standard very often, to the point that it drains you from getting more done. If so, I have these questions for you:

1. What are you trying to achieve here?
2. Who are people who have achieved this goal or are doing it extremely well now? What did they do to succeed?
3. Taking into account your answers to Q2, the details you have been obsessed about — are these essential to the success of your goal? If not, is it time to set them aside (or to reduce your focus on them)? **Focus on the 80/20**, the crucial few factors that bring the most impact to your goal. Beware of **diminishing returns** that come from trying to push and perfect every little thing, especially factors that ultimately do not affect what you're trying to achieve.

Read:

- [The 80/20 Principle](#) (3-part series)
- [Law of Diminishing Returns](#)

4. Learn to respect and love yourself



As a perfectionist, I can understand the negative self-talk and self-neglect that happens, especially when the going gets tough. It's easy to berate yourself when things don't go to plan. It's easy to sacrifice your well-being because you prize your work. It's also easy to blame yourself for others' issues, mistakes.

However, this usually happens because **you're not putting yourself at a high enough regard**. For me, I say things like "I hate myself" or "I'm a lousy person" when I'm not happy with how things are going. But that's because I allow my goals and others' issues to take precedence over my self-identity and self-love. I sacrifice my own sleep and rest in order to complete my work and meet deadlines. But that's because I'm not putting my health at a high regard, relative to **my mission**.

Does it mean that we should discard everyone's needs and only value ourselves? No, of course not. What I'm saying is that we need to learn to **respect ourselves and our needs**, while valuing others' needs. We need to learn to **love ourselves and our flaws**, just as we love others without precondition. And we should certainly continue to dedicate ourselves to our craft, **but without compromising our well-being**.

Here are some directives for you:

- 1) *Switch your negative self-talk*. The next time you berate yourself, switch to positive self-talk. Instead of "I hate myself," switch to, "I treasure myself." Instead of "I'm a lousy person," switch to, "I'm a good human being who is trying his/her best." Instead of "I'm not good enough," switch to, "I have my own unique talents and I'm improving every second."
- 2) *Stop self-blame*. I know it's easy to beat yourself up when things don't go your way. But recognize that you have done your best. You did what you could within the circumstance. Instead of blaming yourself, give yourself credit for what you've been doing. Love and appreciate yourself.
- 3) *Think of 3 things you are doing right*. A neurotic perfectionist tends to focus on lack and the things that they aren't doing well. Turn that around by focusing on the things you are doing well. What are 3 things you have done right, in this goal, or in your life? Focus on them and repeat this question whenever you have negative self-talk. When done often, you'll begin to recognize your own strengths naturally.

- 4) *Make health a priority.* No one can stop you from sacrificing rest in the name of work, but you got to ask yourself if this is what you want for the next 40 years. Our health is the cumulative result of how we've cared for our body through our life, not what we did in the past month. This means that constant lack of rest and self-care today will put your health in a severe state of decline 10, 20 years from now. Is this what you want? How about you start your self-care now?

For those of you with [Be a Better Me in 30 Days Program](#), check out Day 16's task on Appreciate Yourself.

5. Use your ideals as guides, not absolutes

Perfectionists tend to get very attached to their goals. Didn't achieve a particular target? *That means I've failed*, they think. Didn't accomplish a goal in a certain time frame? *That means I'm worthless *****, they think. **They take their goals as a representation of their worth** and beat themselves up when things don't go their way. Some decide that their goals aren't for them and write off goal setting altogether; some fall into depression.

But is that true? That when you don't achieve your goals (in a ready fashion), that you are lousy and worthless? No, of course not. Just because you don't achieve your goals in a particular time frame doesn't mean you have failed -- it just means that you didn't achieve your targets in that particular time frame. Perhaps there were things that cropped up. Perhaps your approach was wrong. Perhaps the goal you're going for isn't compatible and you need to set a more compatible goal.

Realize that **your goals are meant as guides, not absolutes.**

"Guide" meaning that your goal is intended to guide you in your path of betterment. "Not an absolute" meaning your goal isn't some hard, unbendable target, where not achieving it means that you are a deficient person (which is rubbish by the way). You are more than your goals and achievements. You are here to make a huge dent in the universe.

What this means is, **continue to set big goals**. Let your heart run wild with your biggest goals and dreams, and let them guide you. Whether you've achieved a particular goal yet is not as important as the fact that you're progressing toward it.

Remember, your real goal in life is to grow and work on being your best self. Your goals are simply guides to help you do so.

More here:

- [What is the Message of Your Goal? \[PEP003\]](#)
- [When Goals Stop Working](#)
- [How to Be The Most Confident Person In The World](#)

6. Value your relationships



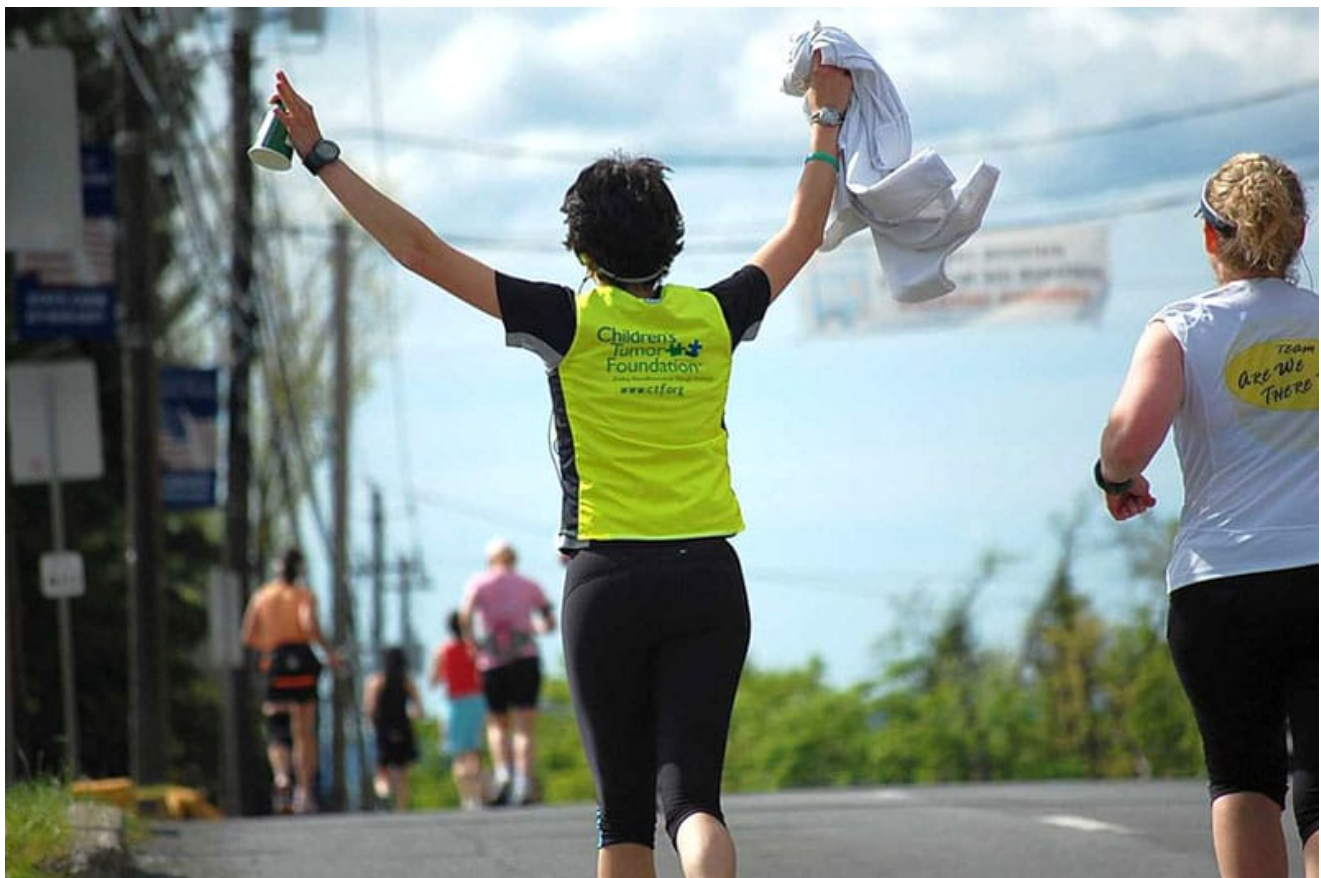
As I grow older, I've learned to value relationships more. I used to prioritize work over my personal life, which includes my relationships as well. I always thought that I should always put my 100% energy into work (leaving little space for myself and others), and a big part of this stemmed from growing up in a country where the national rhetoric prizes work and achievements over personal needs and leisure; where **the people work the longest hours in the world** (2,402 hours per year in Singapore, compared to 1,654–1,790 in the U.S., Britain, and Canada).

But this is a poor message in retrospect. It's important to be dedicated to your craft, but life doesn't revolve around just your work. You have your family. You have your relationships. You have the people you love. For some of you, your motivation (or part of

your motivation) to do well at work is likely driven by your loved ones. According to Bronnie Ware, a palliative nurse, **one of the top 5 regrets of the dying** is "I wish I hadn't worked so hard," and this was a regret stated by all men she nursed (this was before females started to become breadwinners as well).

Allocate time for your relationships. Set aside some time for your loved ones each day. 30 minutes, an hour, 2 hours; whatever you can set aside for now. Show them care and concern. Give them a hug, a kiss, each time you see them. Ask them how they are doing and get involved in their days. Very importantly, remember to treat them as individuals, without prejudice or expectations that may surface from a perfectionist mind.

7. Celebrate every progress, victory, and failure



I find that perfectionists tend to focus on lack while having very

harsh expectations of themselves. They never rest until they have finished what they are doing. They are rarely satisfied with what they do. They are always looking for mistakes, issues to correct. And they don't celebrate much, even when they have done a good job — instead taking that as a given.

Lady Gaga, a perfectionist, once said that she's perpetually unhappy with what she creates — something I mentioned in [part 2](#). John Lennon from Beatles, one of the world's most famous rock bands, mentioned in an interview that he is "dissatisfied with every record the Beatles ever [bleep]ing made." He said, "There ain't one of them I wouldn't remake... including all the Beatles records and all my individual ones." Michael Jackson once said, "I'm never pleased with anything, I'm a *perfectionist*, it's part of who I am." I myself am guilty of self-deprivation and self-blame while always expecting very high performance levels.

I suppose it's one way to live, to feel constant dissatisfaction with your work and unhappiness with it. It helps you focus on pushing new grounds with your craft and improve on your gaps. **However, may I suggest a different approach? Which is to celebrate everything you have done, including your progress, victories, *mistakes* and *failures*.** That's right — your *mistakes* and *failures* as well. This means if you've "only" made a 1% progress in your task, *celebrate that*. If you run into a roadblock, *celebrate the discovery of this [blind spot](#)* that you didn't know of before. If you made some bad mistakes, acknowledge them, and then fix them accordingly. *Be grateful* for this experience to learn and improve. Needless to say, celebrate all your victories and give yourself a HUGE pat on the back for a job well done.

The interesting thing is that you may find that doing so doesn't

necessarily make you any lax with your work. If anything, **it encourages you to strive for better**. It acknowledges your strengths and abilities, and helps you harness them better. It also makes life a lot more fun, joyful, and enjoyable. Because as opposed to a constant focus on lack, you now acknowledge what you do have. And such an abundance mentality goes a long way in building a positive well-being, self-love, and emotional happiness.

Read: [Stop Shaming, Start Praising: What I Learned From Growing Up in a Shaming Culture](#)

For those of you with [Live a Better Life in 30 Days Program](#), check out Day 13: Reflection Day and Day 14: A Day of Gratitude.

8. Delegate and Let Go

Finally, learn to delegate and let go.

As a perfectionist, you may find it tough to work with people. Being a superpower worker, you may feel that it's easier and faster for you to do everything yourself, as opposed to relying on someone else. Not only that, you're able to do everything in exactly the way you envision, vs. having to rely instructions to others and having to deal with errors and communication breakdowns in between.

However, I've found that it's not possible to do everything alone, not especially if you wish to **scale up your level of production *and* maintain the same high quality of work**, not especially if you wish to excel in your work without neglecting your health and relationships. You can handle everything and work yourself to death, with no time for yourself and others. Is this what you want though?

You don't have to do things alone. **Find the right people who *get you***, train them, and iterate as you go along the way. While it's hard to find the right people, that doesn't mean that you give up, because there *is* great talent out there — you just need to separate the chaff from the wheat. Even if you are working with people whom you can't choose -- such as bosses and colleagues — it's about learning to develop a rapport with them and finding a common way to work together.

This means

- 1) Identify the areas you need assistance in.
- 2) Get people to help you in these areas. It may be **hiring staff or contractors** if you run your own business, getting committed partners on board, engaging your co-workers/boss if you are working in a company, or even engaging a coach if it's a new skill you wish to learn quickly.
- 3) Share expectations and build a common understanding with them, so that there is no confusion.
- 4) Know that gaps are normal. After years of working with people, I've learned that there is always a warm-up period when it comes to working with someone on a new task, and *it's normal*. Just as it takes time for you to learn something new, it takes time for others to get things "right" the first time. Here, it's about active communication as you work together to close the gap.
- 5) Finally, allow yourself to let go. Not everyone will be able to do things exactly as you expect, and you shouldn't expect that they do so, especially when it comes to creative, high-level work. Even if there are objective errors, give your co-workers/staff the guidance to learn from their errors (vs. correcting everything yourself), such that they know what to do next time. By letting go

- of very specific expectations and letting people do their thing — but within clear guidelines of course — you allow them to learn, grow, and subsequently deliver their best work to you. :)

Get the manifesto version of this article: [\[Manifesto\] How to Overcome Perfectionism](#)

*This is the **last part** of my **3-part series** on perfectionism and how to make the best out of it.*

- **Part 1:** *11 Signs You Are a Perfectionist*
- **Part 2:** *6 Hidden Downsides of Perfectionism*
- **Part 3:** *How To Overcome Perfectionism: Your Complete Guide*

Images: White flower, Healthy Perfectionism vs. Neurotic Perfectionism, Balance scale, Trap, Candles, Silhouette of a couple during sunrise, Victory

ABOUT

Hi, I'm Celestine Chua, the founder of [PersonalExcellence.co](https://personalexcellence.co), one of the top personal development blogs in the world with readers from over 200 countries.

The central goal of my work is to help you achieve your highest potential and live your best life. If you like this ebook, you will love my free material at [PersonalExcellence.co](https://personalexcellence.co). Some articles you will find there are:

- [101 Ways to Live Your Best Life](#)
- [101 Ways To Be a Better Person](#)
- [8 Tips to Deal With Critical People](#)
- [How to Discover Your Life Purpose \(series\)](#)
- [How to Improve Relationship with Your Parents \(series\)](#)
- [How to Find Your Soulmate \(series\)](#)
- [How to Let Go of Anger \(series\)](#)
- [How to Deal with Disappointment \(series\)](#)
- [How to Stop Procrastination \(series\)](#)



Sign up for my [free newsletter](#) for free weekly tips to live your best life. I look forward to connecting with you at the blog!