

## Perfectionism Primer

**Duration:** 1-5 minutes

**Frequency:** As Needed

**Level of Difficulty:** Moderate

**Instructions:** Perfectionism can mean different things to people. For some, it involves concern over mistakes, doubts about actions, personal standards, and the need to be organized. For others, it is related to parental expectations and criticism. Some of the most common factors involved in perfectionism are listed here (Stairs et. al, 2012). See if you recognize any of them in your own life.

- Order:** You need everything in your environment to be neat, tidy, and clean. Everything must be in its place.
- Details and Checking:** You have a tendency to be overly thorough in your work, focusing excessively on the details and checking and re-checking your work to ensure you haven't made any mistakes.
- Perfectionism Toward Others:** You expect everyone to perform to your high standards and get frustrated or annoyed when people inevitably fail to live up to your expectations.
- High Standards:** You set a high bar for yourself and push yourself to attain these standards, even if these standards are unreasonable.
- Black-and-White Thinking:** You believe everything is either a success or complete failure. If something cannot be done perfectly, it is not worth trying at all.
- Perceived Pressure:** You think others have high expectations of you and that they expect you to be perfect (regardless of whether this is true). You fear they will be critical of your performance if you don't do everything perfectly.
- Dissatisfaction:** You have a tendency to feel like you're never "good enough." It's hard to meet the standards you set for yourself, so you're constantly dissatisfied and feel like something is not "right."
- Reactivity to Mistakes:** You tend to experience negative emotions in response to real or perceived mistakes.

After reading through the list, reflect on any insights or observations that came up for you:

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Now, see if you can take a step in reversing some of your perfectionism by paying attention to the language you are using. In therapy lingo, we often refer to the concept of *mustabatory language*. (No, that is not an innuendo in there!) The idea is we often talk in “musts,” “shoulds,” and “have tos”—and this language reflects our perfectionistic demands. In addition, words like “always” and “never” can be a tip-off that you might have a tendency toward black-and-white thinking and perfectionistic tendencies. Over the course of the next week, see if you can try this one simple experiment. Nix these trouble words from your vocabulary and replace them with something more compassionate and understanding. Here are some examples:

- **Old Language:** I *have* to be on time to this movie or I’ll miss the previews.
- **Reframe:** I’d love to make it to the movies on time as previews are my favorite part. But if it doesn’t happen, it won’t be the end of the world.
- **Old Language:** I *must* get the promotion and raise no matter what.
- **Reframe:** In an ideal world I’d get the raise. If it doesn’t happen this time, I’ll be disappointed, but maybe it’ll happen the next time.

Record some of your examples from the past week:

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