

Managing perfectionism – a guide for legal practitioners

What is perfectionism?

Perfectionism is a trait that is admirable and helpful at times. However, perfectionism can also be detrimental to your work and your psychological functioning.

Perfectionism involves:

1. Relentless striving for extremely high standards – for self and others.
2. Basing your self-worth largely on achieving such demanding standards.
3. Experiencing negative consequences as a result of pursuing these unrelenting standards, yet continuing to strive towards them.

The underlying cause of perfectionism is a fear of making a mistake or not being good enough rather than a desire to produce a good outcome.

Perfectionism in the legal profession

Perfectionism is commonly reported as being prevalent in the legal profession. There are multiple factors contributing to high levels of perfectionism in the profession, including:

- the legal profession attracts high achievers, and only the best gain entry
- success in the legal profession requires constantly achieving high standards of excellence and maintaining an image of pronounced competence
- legal work demands the ability to pay meticulous attention to detail
- mistakes can potentially result in very costly or serious consequences.

While perfectionism is a trait that can assist in achieving professional success, being too perfectionistic can be detrimental to effective work performance. Among perfectionists, there is the belief that every detail of a task must be done 'perfectly' or else failure will follow.

- Perfectionism can induce stress, anxiety, depression and compromised psychological health reducing your ability to cope with work pressures.
- Excessive thoroughness can lead to time-wasting behaviours like constantly checking and re-checking your work.
- Fear of failure can result in an obsessive dedication to work, indecision, and procrastination.
- The need to be in total control creates an inability to delegate and trust others to get the job done.
- Extreme pursuit of perfectionism can lead to careless mistakes due to brain overload.

As ultimate perfection can never realistically be achieved, striving towards perfection can cause chronic discontent and dissatisfaction, stress and anxiety. Managing perfectionism can prevent burnout and restore professional enjoyment in your legal career.

Checklist: Am I overly perfectionistic?

Perfectionism manifests in a variety of physical, psychological and behavioural symptoms. If you answer yes to one or more of the questions below, you may have a tendency towards perfectionism.

- Do you constantly check and re-check your work in case you've overlooked a mistake?
- Do you regularly have thoughts like 'I have to do this perfectly' or 'I must get this right'?
- Does worrying about making mistakes and your shortcomings prevent you from starting or completing tasks?
- Is it difficult to let go of past mistakes rather than accepting you are human?
- Do you spending excessive time fine tuning work tasks?
- Do you frequently compare yourself to others in a negative light?
- Do you focus on your faults rather than achievements?
- Are you highly critical of yourself and others?
- Do you find yourself criticising and finding faults in others' work?
- Do you feel you constantly need to be in control of all aspects of work and tasks?
- Is it difficult for you to delegate tasks or trust others to get the job done?
- Are you able to enjoy your successes and think positively about the future?
- Do you have difficulty accepting constructive criticism or feedback?
- Do you have difficulty adapting to changing circumstances?
- Do you feel self-conscious of making mistakes or looking weak in front of others?
- Are you competitive and constantly striving to do better than others?
- Are you reluctant to ask for assistance?

Strategies for managing perfectionism

Perfectionism can be difficult to manage initially, given that such habits have been practised so often that they have become entrenched and automatic. Employing the following strategies may help you become aware of and manage your perfectionistic behaviours.

1. Become aware of your perfectionism

- Complete the checklist overleaf and reflect on your behaviour and work performance to identify any perfectionistic behaviours.
- Develop a habit of monitoring how you are going and whether perfectionism is a help or hindrance.

2. Practise self-acceptance

- Accept the fact that no-one is perfect. Everyone, including you, has failures, weaknesses, and imperfections.
- Realise you are not superhuman and that sometimes external factors compromise performance.
- Accept yourself as you are rather than believing you will never be good enough.
- Understand that being 'less than perfect' is not equivalent to being incompetent, and that by letting go of the hold that perfectionism has on you, you will still remain a capable, accomplished individual.

3. Challenge perfectionistic behaviours

If you engage in unhelpful perfectionistic behaviours such as spending an unnecessary amount of time on a task, excessive thoroughness, excessive checking and organising, procrastinating or avoidance, challenge these behaviours through realistic goal setting or behavioural experimentation.

- **Realistic goal setting** involves setting a goal in relation to modifying a perfectionistic behaviour. For example, you may give yourself a set amount of time to complete a task or decide that you will only proof-read documents once.
- **Conducting behavioural experiments** allows you to test the accuracy of your beliefs. For example, if you hold a belief that delegating tasks means that they will not be completed correctly, conduct an experiment where you challenge this belief. Delegate a task, providing clear instructions and see what happens. Evaluate the outcome of the experiment and develop a balanced belief. For example, 'the task was completed effectively and I was able to focus my time on other aspects of my role which made me more efficient.'

You are likely to experience some anxiety when challenging your perfectionistic behaviours. With persistence, you will adapt and the anxiety will subside. Take one step at a time, acknowledge your achievements and remember when you begin to challenge your perfectionistic behaviours you will be able to engage in more helpful, less stressful behaviours.

4. Challenge perfectionistic thinking

Challenge perfectionistic thoughts by asking yourself some of the following questions:

- Will I *actually* fail? What is the likelihood that this will happen? What is the evidence to support this?
- What are some times where I have not fully achieved my perfectionistic standards and everything worked out fine?
- What are alternative ways of viewing the situation?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages of thinking this way?
- What are the realistic consequences of doing a 'good enough' job?
- What will be the worse-case scenario?
- How might someone else, who is not a perfectionist, view this situation?
- How helpful is it for me to think this way? Is this way of thinking holding me back in some way or making me feel unnecessarily stressed?
- If I were not being perfectionistic, how would I view/handle the situation?
- Am I jumping to conclusions? Making the situation worse than it actually is? Engaging in black and white thinking?

Remember that it is possible to be happy, healthy and successful without being a perfectionist.



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