

# Perfectionism

*'There is a crack in everything  
That's how the light gets in.'*

Leonard Cohen, *Selected Poems, 1956–1968*

Universities encourage students to strive hard for success, challenge themselves and set ambitious goals. It is important to reflect on the distinction between setting high standards and requiring your academic work to be 'perfect'.

Perfectionism is different from healthy striving. It means measuring your self-worth in terms of your productivity and accomplishment; it means believing that you must perform brilliantly at all costs. It means not allowing yourself to be a fully-rounded, fallible human being.

Perfectionism can be seen as healthy because it motivates you to do your best. However, perfectionist thoughts and behaviours can be highly disruptive. If the idea of producing work that isn't your absolute 'best' feels unbearable, and if anything less than top marks feels like a

failure, you may find yourself getting anxious and exhausted because your standards are impossible to achieve.

Perfectionism can lead to excessive planning and preparation, procrastination, and even the non-submission of work if you judge that the work you've produced isn't perfect. If the fear of getting a disappointing mark leads to you not submitting, perfectionism can result in you not passing at all!

Overcoming perfectionism means finding a healthy way to do your best. Here are some ideas to help you find a more balanced approach to your work.

Perfectionism can be a coping mechanism to help deal with feelings of vulnerability. Talk through your perfectionism with someone you trust and consider how your approach to work has developed. This will help you move towards consciously choosing the way you work rather than doing it the way you have done it before.

Remind yourself that it is unrealistic to expect you and your work to be perfect on every occasion. Everything and everyone is flawed – take comfort in this.

Familiarise yourself with module learning outcomes. Notice that you are not expected to finish each module as an expert in the field but with improved knowledge.

Remember that learning is about not knowing, struggling with ideas and feeling confused, until new understanding emerges. Natural curiosity and a spirit of enquiry is a route to excellence as much as punishing standards.

Acknowledge your feelings. If you feel stressed and anxious when working on an assignment, ask yourself whether you've set up impossible expectations.

Notice self-critical, unkind thoughts. If you are habitually critical about your performance, make sure you acknowledge the positive aspects too.

Mistakes and setbacks are valuable learning opportunities. Growth is achieved by learning from mistakes.

Welcome constructive criticism. Reacting

defensively when you receive criticism prevents you from hearing useful feedback.

Don't just focus on outcomes such as assessment marks or degree classification. Remember – you are not your results and a degree classification is not a judgement of your merit as a person. Notice if you measure your self-worth by your grades and try to ensure you have a range of ways to acknowledge your value as a person.

Notice the process of working. Reflect on what you enjoy, learn, and experience along the way.

Learn to identify your perfectionist thoughts and to label them as such. Sometimes 'good enough' is good enough!

## Sources

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