The Perfectionism Trap

STANDARDS & SELF-CRITICISM

Recognise when high standards help you, and when they begin to hold you back

High standards can be a real strength. They tend to become a trap when your sense of worth rides on meeting them, when mistakes feel dangerous, and when the finish line keeps moving. This worksheet explores how fear of mistakes, procrastination, overworking and self-criticism can feed one another, and how to step out of the loop.

01 The perfectionism wheel

one common pattern; yours may look different

THE WHEEL

running hard, going nowhere



the harder you run, the faster it turns

THE WAY OFF

Stepping off the wheel

you can step off at any station

1. **Start before it feels ready**
   a rough first version can break the delay at 2
2. **Decide what enough is**
   set the standard and a time limit before you begin
3. **Loosen the hub**
   your worth is more than any one result

Treat a mistake as information, not a verdict on you.

02 Striving or trapped?

the same high bar can feel very different

HIGH STANDARDS THAT HELP

Reaching for excellence

- ○ Goals are high but can flex when circumstances change
- ○ A mistake is information about what to adjust
- ○ Effort can end in a sense of satisfaction
- ○ Your worth doesn't hang on the result

Often called perfectionistic strivings (Stoeber & Otto, 2006)

PERFECTIONISM THAT TRAPS

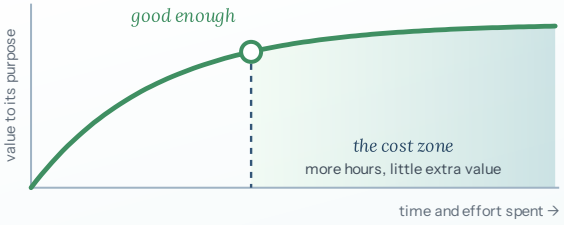
Fearing falling short

- ○ Anything less than perfect feels like failure
- ○ A mistake feels like proof of not being good enough
- ○ Success brings relief rather than satisfaction, then a higher bar
- ○ Starting, finishing or resting can all feel risky

Often called perfectionistic concerns (Stoeber & Otto, 2006)

03 When refining stops paying

most work has a point of enough



The value curve flattens; the cost keeps climbing

Early effort usually adds a lot. Past a certain point, extra polishing adds little that anyone, including you, would notice, while the cost in time, sleep, relationships and other tasks keeps growing. Perfectionism can make that point hard to see, because "not perfect yet" feels the same as "not finished".

Ask: what does this piece of work actually need to do?

WHAT THE RESEARCH SUGGESTS

Perfectionism is often described in two dimensions. Perfectionistic concerns are linked with more procrastination, and strivings with somewhat less (Sirois et al., 2017). Both dimensions are associated with psychological distress, concerns more strongly (Limburg et al., 2017). Cognitive-behavioural accounts suggest the trap is kept going when self-worth depends heavily on meeting demanding standards (Shafran et al., 2002). Most findings are correlational, and whether strivings are truly "healthy" is still debated.

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04 Mapping one task

choose something you're delaying or over-polishing

The task:

THE STANDARD

1 What standard am I trying to meet?

2 What do I believe would happen if I fell short?

THE MEANING

3 What does making a mistake mean to me?

- ○ I'm not good enough
- ○ others will think less of me
- ○ I'll lose control
- ○ it's information
- ○ something else

THE AVOIDING

4 Am I avoiding starting because I fear getting it wrong?

- ○ yes
- ○ a little
- ○ no
- ○ not sure

THE OVER-REFINING

5 Am I spending more time refining this than its purpose requires?

Time it needs _____ Time I'm spending _____

THE COST

6 What is the actual cost of trying to get this right?

- ○ time
- ○ sleep
- ○ relationships
- ○ health
- ○ enjoyment
- ○ other tasks

THE POINT OF ENOUGH

7 What would a sufficiently good outcome look like?

good enough for its purpose, its audience and its deadline

05 A small experiment

8 · testing the assumption, not proving yourself

What small experiment could help me test my assumptions? *e.g. send it at 80%, set a time limit*	What I predict will happen *and how sure I am, 0–100%*	What actually happened *facts first, then feelings*	What I learned *about the standard, or the fear*

06 Looking back

what am I noticing?

What I'm noticing about my standards, and where they help or hold me back

One thing I want to remember

a phrase, a permission, or a small next step

SOURCES

Limburg, K., Watson, H. J., Hagger, M. S., & Egan, S. J. (2017). The relationship between perfectionism and psychopathology: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Clinical Psychology, 73*(10), 1301–1326.

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Stoeber, J., & Otto, K. (2006). Positive conceptions of perfectionism: Approaches, evidence, challenges. *Personality and Social Psychology Review, 10*(4), 295–319.

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