

Fact Sheet – Perfectionism

Perfectionism is habitually having thoughts and behaviours aimed towards achieving unrealistically high (and thus self-defeating) goals. Perfectionism is often referred to as a positive trait, but it is actually a negative because it robs a person of the satisfaction they are entitled to feel in their achievements – instead they look at how they could have done better, or dwell upon how it was less than perfect. If perfectionism reaches an intolerable extreme, a person may even put off starting an assignment because they fear it will not be good enough, or put off finishing an assignment because they think if they spend just that bit more time they can get it just right (even though they lose marks each day it is late).

How do I know if I am a perfectionist? Well the fact you got into this course may be a sign (just joking – it means you are highly motivated to achieve, not necessarily that you are a perfectionist!).

Here are some signs of perfectionism:

- You feel that you must be at the top, or why bother doing it
- You are obsessed with getting it right, and will spend hours on little unimportant things
- You never feel you do enough and continuously push yourself to do more
- Relaxing makes you feel guilty
- You thrive on the approval of others, because you can never approve of yourself
- You have trouble handling criticism, with ‘all or nothing’ responses like ‘if it’s not good enough for them I just won’t do it then’
- You are overly critical of others – nobody can ever get it really right

What can I do about it? Here are some tips and strategies:

- Cut yourself some slack – try being happy with 80% effort and output
- Draw strict boundaries, and stay within them – for example, setting a deadline for when you will stop editing an assignment, and then when that time is over, actually printing and submitting it
- Force yourself to have some balance – even if you feel you should be doing more study, drag yourself out for a walk, swim, gym, friend or movie
- Discuss your goals with a friend or counsellor, to get their view on how reasonable and realistic you are being
- Keep a big picture perspective on things. It’s good to apply a ten year rule – will I still be thinking about this in ten years’ time if I do it less than perfectly? Does it really matter?
- Be kind to yourself – congratulate and reward yourself for your outputs and your marks, regardless of whether they meet your expectations.