

# HOW PERFECTIONISM FAILS US

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## EVERYONE'S FAVORITE FLAW

**Perfectionism** is a broad term that describes a person's concern with striving for a level of flawlessness that is usually unattainable and unrealistic. There can be some positive, motivating aspects to perfectionism, but it is often accompanied by **very harsh self-evaluations** and a concern with the critical evaluations of others.



Despite its strong association with depression, anxiety, eating disorders, low self-esteem, and other psychological difficulties, perfectionism is highly celebrated in our culture. When asked to reveal our greatest weakness during a job interview, how many of us would be prepared to mention our relentless perfectionism so we can fold in examples of our strong work ethic and meticulous attention to detail? Even if it isn't true, we know the "ideal employee" supposedly displays these characteristics.

## BENEATH THE SURFACE

At first glance, perfectionism presents as being driven by an admirable desire to consistently accomplish one's goals. But underneath this need to "be the best" lies a **deep fear of failure and rejection**, accompanied by harsh criticism of oneself. As researcher Dr. Andrew Hill explains,

*"Perfectionism isn't a behavior. It's a way of thinking about yourself."*



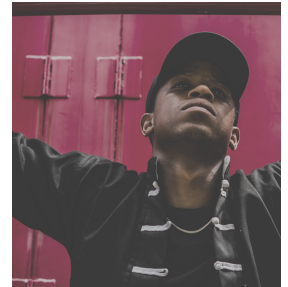
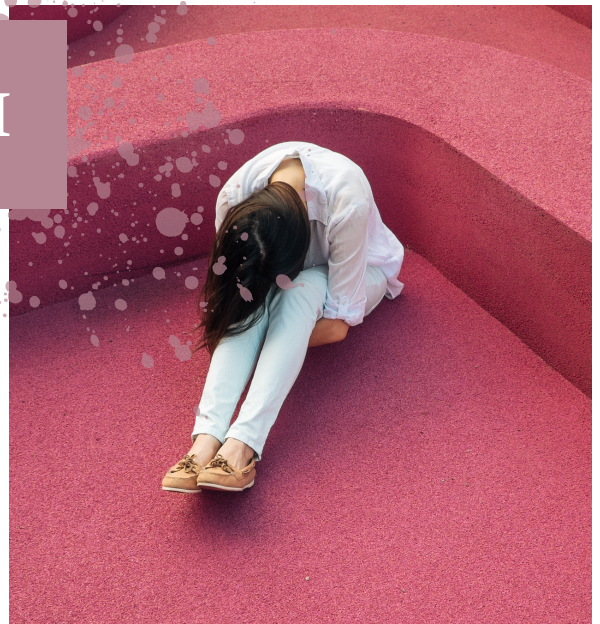


## 3 FLAVORS OF PERFECTIONISM

Perfectionism can be broken down into three basic types. **Self-oriented perfectionism** comes from high personal standards and is intrinsically motivated. "I desire to be perfect."

**Other-oriented perfectionism** demands perfection from other people and can be very critical of those who fall short. "I expect nothing less than perfection from others."

**Socially prescribed perfectionism** is regarded as the most problematic, pervasive type of perfectionism and has a high correlation with compromised mental health. This type of perfectionist feels an unrelenting pressure to meet the expectations of other people. "Others demand perfection from me."



## "PERFECT" STUDENTS

A recent study of 40,000 college students suggests that the majority of young people are actually experiencing increased rates of **all three types of perfectionism** (called "multi-dimensional perfectionism"), driven by the increasingly high standards of our current society. Not only are we judging ourselves by these impossible standards, but we harshly judge others for falling short as well.

The study also linked this increase in perfectionism with the growing numbers of people in their 20's and 30's who are experiencing mental health problems like anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation, anorexia, and bulimia. Past studies have focused on the immediate family and parental upbringing as the root of perfectionism, but new research suggests that **wider cultural changes** are also heavily influencing perfectionism as we internalize messages from our social environment.

## PERFECTLY BURNED OUT?

Give it your all. Work harder, do better. Go above and beyond. Your only limit is you! Give 110%. Never give up. Failure is not an option!

We're constantly bombarded with motivational stock phrases encouraging us to passionately throw ourselves into everything we do. It's a nice idea in theory, but in practice, "giving your all" to everything all the time is **unsustainable** and unnecessary. One controversial suggestion is this: Instead of giving 100% to every effort, try giving 80%. Striving for 80% "always puts you in the higher tiers of anything in life; it's not perfect, but it's still rather outstanding."



## SELF-COMPASSION

*"Where perfectionism exists, shame is always lurking." -Brené Brown*

Perfectionism is a harsh critic and can lead to a lot of self-blame and negative self-talk. To overcome it, it helps to learn strategies that allow us to acknowledge and embrace our vulnerabilities. Self-compassion is one such strategy.

According to researcher Dr. Kristin Neff, self-compassion has three components: mindfulness, self-kindness, and common humanity. **Mindfulness** is the practice of taking a balanced view of difficult emotions so that our feelings are neither exaggerated nor suppressed. **Self-kindness** refers to being warm and understanding toward ourselves when we fail or suffer. **Common humanity** is the recognition that feelings of personal inadequacy are part of the shared human experience, rather than something we suffer alone.

To practice self-compassion, try using your internal voice to apply these principles to yourself when you are struggling.

Think of yourself as a dear friend and talk to yourself from that voice.



## WELLNESS STAFF PERSPECTIVE

The counseling staff at the Wellness Center have both professional and personal experience with perfectionism. [Danielle Wagner](#) understands that letting go of the pressure to be perfect can be difficult if we feel society values us for it:

*"Perfectionism can be a natural result of being graded your whole life. It's important to remember that you are more than your transcript. Your strength and resilience reside in your full identity, not just your identity as a student."*

[Lauren Finnegan](#) also sees the struggles students face when they feel overwhelming pressure to be the best at everything:

*"Grades and GPA may seem like the most important thing right now, but in many cases, post-college jobs and opportunities are more interested in the experiences you've had, rather than if you were able to maintain a 4.0."*

As a Wellness staff member and doctoral student herself, [Keyoni Rogers](#) wants Ursinus students to remember:

*"If you wait for your life to be perfect, you'll be waiting forever. Find peace in the beauty of your greatest imperfections."*

## MORE RESOURCES

Check out these videos for a different perspective on approaching perfectionism and making mistakes:

[How to get better at the things you care about](#)

[Our obsession with perfection is getting worse](#)

[Embrace the near win](#)

[Perfectionism holds us back. Here's why](#)

