Chapter 2: What Perfection Is

In society today, perfectionism often gets a bad rap. It's seen as a negative character trait that needs to be overcome. For example, when I recently googled the term *perfectionism*, the first page of results included the following headlines: "Is Perfectionism a Mental Problem?," "Perfectionism: Symptoms, Treatment, and Prevention," Counseling Center: Perfectionism," "Perfectionism Self-Help Resources," "The Dangerous Downsides of Perfectionism," and "Perfectionism Is a Mental Health Risk." These headlines suggest that perfectionism is a trait to overcome or to avoid if you're lucky enough to not already be a perfectionist. But is this perspective correct? Is perfectionism a characteristic that needs to be rooted out in order for a person to be mentally healthy and happy? We'll explore the answer to that question in this chapter.

Definition of *Perfectionism*

Various researchers, thought leaders, and organizations have defined *perfectionism*. Ozbilir, Day, and Catano define the term simply as "the setting of high standards."[1] Sederlund, Burns, and Rogers provided a more-detailed definition, characterizing perfection as "setting exceptionally high standards of performance and unrealistic goals, accompanied by overly critical self-evaluations and concerns over making mistakes."[2] According to Stoeber, perfectionism is "a multidimensional personality disposition characterized by a striving for flawlessness and setting exceedingly high standards of performance accompanied by overly critical evaluations of one's behavior." Perhaps the most damning definition comes from Brené Brown: "Perfectionism is not the same thing as striving to be your best. Perfectionism is the belief that if we live perfect, look perfect, and act perfect, we

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[1] Timur Ozbilir, Arla Day, and Victor M. Catano, "Perfectionism at Work: An Investigation of Adaptive and Maladaptive Perfectionism in the Workplace among Canadian and Turkish Employees," *Applied Psychology: An International Review* 64, no. 1 (2015): 252–280. https://doi.org/10.1111/apps.12032.

[2] Allison P. Sederlund, Lawrence R. Burns, and William Rogers, "Multidimensional Models of Perfectionism and Procrastination: Seeking Determinants of Both," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 17, no. 14 (2020), https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph17145099.

can minimize or avoid the pain of blame, judgment and shame. It's a shield. It's a 20-ton shield that we lug around thinking it will protect us when, in fact, it's the thing that's really preventing us from flight."[3]

As this sampling of definitions indicates, formal definitions of *perfectionism* vary. Additionally, many of the definitions include negative connotations. Two researchers on perfectionism argue that the majority of academic definitions of *perfectionism* were negative until the twenty-first century, when various researchers found that perfectionism can have positive aspects.[4] Many twenty-first-century researchers agree that there are two distinct types of perfectionism: one type is often called *perfectionist strivings* or *maladaptive perfectionism*, and the other is often called *perfectionist concerns* or *maladaptive perfectionism.*[5] These researchers consider the former type of perfectionism to be positive and consider the latter type to be negative.[6] I prefer to use the terms *constructive perfectionism* and *destructive perfectionism* because I think these terms more clearly describe these two types of perfectionism.

In the following sections, I'll explain each type of perfectionism. Before I start, I want to note two things: First, the descriptions I provide regarding constructive perfectionism will be more meaningful when viewing them in contrast to destructive perfectionism. For that reason, following the section on destructive perfectionism, you'll find a table that summarizes the main differences

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[3] Brené Brown, *The Gifts of Imperfection: Let Go of Who You Think You're Supposed to Be and Embrace Who You Are*, p. 56

[4] Tingting Fang and Fan Liu, "A Review on Perfectionism," *Open Journal of Social Sciences* 10, no. 1 (2022): 355–364, https://doi.org/10.4236/jss.2022.101027.

[5] See, for example, Alessandra De Maria, Luca Mallia, Caterina Lombardo, Mariacarolina Vaca, and Arnaldo Zelli, "The Personal and Interpersonal Components of Perfectionism: The Italian Validation of 'Multidimensional Inventory of Perfectionism in Sport,'" *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 18, no. 5 (2021), https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18052657; Meltem Yildiz, Hazel Duru, and Jale Eldeleklioğlu, "Relationship Between Parenting Styles and Multidimensional Perfectionism: A Meta-Analysis Study," *Educational Sciences: Theory and Practice* 20, no. 4 (2020): 16–35, https://doi.org/10.12738/jestp.2020.4.002; Caiyun Wei and Lanzia Zhang, "Mechanisms of Knowledge Workers' Adaptive Perfectionism on Taking Charge," *Chinese Management Studies* 17, no. 3 (2022): 620–636; Honglei Gu, Chang Hu, and Lizhao Wang, "Maladaptive Perfectionism and Adolescent NSSI: A Moderated Mediation Model of Psychological Distress and Mindfulness," *Journal of Clinical Psychology* 78, no. 6 (2022): 1137–1150, https://doi.org/10.1002/jclp.23304.

[6] De Maria, Mallia, Lombardo, Vaca, and Zelli, "The Personal and Interpersonal Components of Perfectionism."

between the two types of perfectionism. Now, with this note out of the way, let's learn about constructive perfectionism. Second, a perfectionist might have some traits of constructive perfectionism and some traits of destructive perfectionism. The traits of one type might be predominant, causing a perfectionist to identify more as a constructive perfectionist or a destructive perfectionist. But it's important to consider whether the perfectionist possesses any of the traits of the other type of perfectionist. Doing so will become important when reading the chapters on how to maximize the benefits of perfectionism and avoid the negative aspects of perfectionism. And now, let's take a look at each type of perfectionism.

Constructive Perfectionism

Constructive perfectionism involves aiming for perfection by setting high but reasonable standards for performance.[7] Constructive perfectionists are strongly motivated to achieve their performance standards and other goals.[8] It is important to note that the motivation is internally driven rather than externally driven, and this internal motivation results in more engagement, higher performance, and more success.[9] When they do achieve their standards and goals, constructive perfectionists feel satisfaction in their achievement.[10]

While working toward these standards and goals, constructive perfectionists assess their performance and are able to exercise some flexibility by modifying their standards and goals if they turn out to be unrealistic.[11] These individuals are also better able to control anxiety regarding

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[7] De Maria, Mallia, Lombardo, Vaca, and Zelli, "The Personal and Interpersonal Components of Perfectionism."
[8] Tamar Kamushadze, Khatuna Martskvishvili, Maia Mestvirishvili, and Mariami Odilavadze, "Does Perfectionism Lead to Well-Being? The Role of Flow and Personality Traits," *Europe's Journal of Psychology* 17, no. 2 (2021): 43–57, https://doi.org/10.5964/ejop.1987; Anna Carmella G. Ocampo, Lu Wang, Kohyar Kiazad, Simon Lloyd D. Restubog, and Neal M. Ashkanasy, "The Relentless Pursuit of Perfectionism: A Review of Perfectionism in the Workplace and an Agenda for Future Research," *Journal of Organizational Behavior* 41, no. 2 (2020), 144–168, https://doi.org/10.1002/job.2400.
[9] Sederlund, Burns, and Rogers, "Multidimensional Models of Perfectionism and Procrastination."
[10] Ocampo, Wang, Kiazad, Restubog, and Ashkanasy, "The Relentless Pursuit of Perfectionism."
[11] Ocampo, Wang, Kiazad, Restubog, and Ashkanasy, "The Relentless Pursuit of Perfectionism."

achieving their goals because constructive perfectionists possess traits such as motivation and conscientiousness.[12] They may also be able to avoid anxiety and other negative feelings because they consider pressure to be a motivating challenge and feel satisfaction from high performance even if it requires considerable effort. They are able to develop productive coping strategies and to focus more on the pursuit of high achievement rather than on the fear of their performance being evaluated.[13] Additionally, these individuals have higher self-efficacy (e.g., belief that they can accomplish their goals), and research indicates that individuals with higher self-efficacy tend to perform better than they expect.[14]

Destructive Perfectionism

Destructive perfectionism is the reason that so many people view perfectionism negatively. So, let's examine what this type of perfectionism involves.

Destructive perfectionists set high standards for performance and rigorous goals, just as constructive perfectionists do. However, whereas constructive perfectionists' standards and goals are realistically achievable, the standards and goals that destructive perfectionists establish are so rigorous that they are unrealistic.[15] In part because the standards and goals seem or are impossible to achieve, destructive perfectionists feel anxiety about their performance and fear that they will make mistakes, not be able to attain their standards of performance, and not be able to achieve their goals.[16]

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[12] Sederlund, Burns, and Rogers, "Multidimensional Models of Perfectionism and Procrastination."
[13] Kamushadze, Martskvishvili, Mestvirishvili, and Odilavadze, "Does Perfectionism Lead to Well-Being?"
[14] Sederlund, Burns, and Rogers, "Multidimensional Models of Perfectionism and Procrastination."
[15] Ocampo, Wang, Kiazad, Restubog, and Ashkanasy, "The Relentless Pursuit of Perfectionism."
[16] Kamushadze, Martskvishvili, Mestvirishvili, and Odilavadze, "Does Perfectionism Lead to Well-Being?"; De Maria, Mallia, Lombardo, Vaca, and Zelli, "The Personal and Interpersonal Components of Perfectionism."

Destructive perfectionists also tend to be overly critical about their performance, even if they do achieve high standards.[17] If they don't achieve their performance standards, they deem themselves not good enough.[18] Just as destructive perfectionists judge their performance critically, they also fear that their performance will be judged harshly by other people.[19] Because of the self-criticism and presumed external criticism, destructive perfectionists are hesitant to actually take steps to work toward their goals. When destructive perfectionists do engage in goal-related activities, these individuals are unlikely to be fully engaged.[20] Rather than being immersed in the activity, they will hyperfocus on monitoring their performance. At the same time, they struggle to adjust their performance expectations, even if the results of the monitoring would suggest that modifying the performance standards would be appropriate.[21]

Even when achieving high standards, destructive perfectionists tend to focus on any mistakes made rather than on the achievements accomplished. Consequently, it's difficult for destructive perfectionists to feel satisfaction and pleasure regarding their performance.[22] Another characteristic of destructive perfectionists is that they tend to ruminate about the past—particularly their "failings" in the past. It's hard for these perfectionists to set aside negative thoughts about past performance, and these negative thoughts can lead perfectionists to catastrophize about performance in the future.[23]

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[17] De Maria, Mallia, Lombardo, Vaca, and Zelli, "The Personal and Interpersonal Components of Perfectionism."
[18] Sara J. Egan, Tracey D. Wade, Roz Shafran, and Martin M. Antony, *Cognitive-Behavioral Treatment of Perfectionism* (New York: Guilford Press, 2014).
[19] De Maria, Mallia, Lombardo, Vaca, and Zelli, "The Personal and Interpersonal Components of Perfectionism."
[20] Kamushadze, Martskvishvili, Mestvirishvili, and Odilavadze, "Does Perfectionism Lead to Well-Being?"
[21] Peter J. Bieling, Anne L. Israeli, and Martin M. Antony, "Is Perfectionism Good, Bad, or Both? Examining Models of the Perfectionism Construct," *Personality and Individual Differences* 36, no. 6 (2004): 1373–1385, https://doi.org/10.1016/S0191-8869(03)00235-6.
[22] Ocampo, Wang, Kiazad, Restubog, and Ashkanasy, "The Relentless Pursuit of Perfectionism."
[23] Sederlund, Burns, and Rogers, "Multidimensional Models of Perfectionism and Procrastination."

Areas in Which Perfectionism Might Be Manifest

Did any of the constructive or destructive perfectionist characteristics resonate with you? Do you see them in yourself or someone you know? Some of you are likely nodding your head vigorously and thinking, Spot on! Others of you might be less sure, perhaps because the characteristics are evident in some aspects of your (or someone else's) life but not in all aspects. Actually, it's not uncommon for a person's perfectionist tendencies to be concentrated in just one or a few areas of life and to be much less pronounced in other areas of life.[24] For example, someone might have strong perfectionist leanings when it comes to work and sports but might not see perfectionist qualities at play in home life. Overall, people most frequently experience perfectionist tendencies in terms of their jobs. Following jobs, the most common domains are academic study and physical hygiene.[25]

Perfectionist traits might also become more pronounced when a person experiences ambiguity in a specific part of life. Ambiguity makes it difficult for a perfectionist to know how to perform perfectly,[26] so the ambiguity could lead a perfectionist to feel more anxiety and to engage in some of the other traits I described in the two previous sections.

Research also indicates that certain groups of people are more prone to be perfectionists. One prominent example is athletes: they are more likely to be perfectionists than are nonathletes.[27] Within this group, male athletes in particular are likely to be perfectionists.[28] Further, athletes generally have higher levels of perfectionist traits when engaging in sports-related activities than

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[24] Egan, Wade, Shafran, and Antony, *Cognitive-Behavioral Treatment of Perfectionism*.
[25] Joachim Stoeber and Franziska S. Stoeber, "Domains of Perfectionism: Prevalence and Relationships with Perfectionism, Gender, Age, and Satisfaction with Life," *Personality and Individual Differences* 46, no. 4 (2009): 530–535, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2008.12.006.
[26] Ocampo, Wang, Kiazad, Restubog, and Ashkanasy, "The Relentless Pursuit of Perfectionism."
[27] De Maria, Mallia, Lombardo, Vaca, and Zelli, "The Personal and Interpersonal Components of Perfectionism."
[28] Ana Butković, Nikolina Vukojević, and Sara Carević, "Music Performance Anxiety and Perfectionism in Croatian Musicians," *Psychology of Music* 50, no. 1 (2021): 100–110, https://doi.org/10.1177/0305735620978692.

when engaging in other aspects of life.[29] Athletes can demonstrate constructive and destructive perfectionist traits, and the traits in one category might be more pronounced.

In addition to athletes, musicians tend to be perfectionists, and their perfectionism can contribute to their experiencing performance-related anxiety.[30] Further, some research indicates that Asian American college students are more prone to be perfectionists than are African American and Caucasian college students.[31] Another group containing a majority of perfectionists is gifted students.[32] Perfectionism is also common among doctors.[33]

Perfectionism is correlated in various ways with age. For instance, adolescents are more likely to experience characteristics of constructive perfectionism, whereas middle-aged adults are more likely to experience characteristics of destructive perfectionism. However, the negative emotions that are characteristic of destructive perfectionism are lower among adults age sixty and older than among adults age eighteen to thirty-five.[34] So, it seems that aspects of destructive perfectionism tend to increase during the early decades of adulthood but then decrease in later adulthood.

Further, perfectionism correlates with religiosity. Specifically, individuals who have an intrinsic religious orientation, meaning they are religious because of their belief in religious principles, are prone to have constructive perfectionist characteristics. In contrast, individuals who

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[29] De Maria, Mallia, Lombardo, Vaca, and Zelli, "The Personal and Interpersonal Components of Perfectionism."
[30] Butković, Vukojević, and Carević, "Music Performance Anxiety and Perfectionism in Croatian Musicians"; Frank M. Diaz, "Relationships among Meditation, Perfectionism, Mindfulness, and Performance Anxiety among Collegiate Music Students," *Journal of Research in Music Education* 66, no. 2 (2018): 150–167, https://doi.org/10.1177/0022429418765447.
[31] Jennifer R. Castro and Kenneth G. Rice, "Perfectionism and Ethnicity: Implications for Depressive Symptoms and Self-Reported Academic Achievement," *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology* 9, no. 1 (2003): 64–78, https://doi.org/10.1037/1099-9809.9.1.64.
[32] Michael C. Grugan, Andrew P. Hill, Daniel J. Madigan, Tracy C. Donachie, Luke F. Olsson, and Mariaane E. Etherson, "Perfectionism in Academically Gifted Students: A Systematic Review," *Educational Psychology Review* 33, no. 4 (2021): 1631–1673, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10648-021-09597-7.
[33] Mike Peters and Jenny King, "Perfectionism in Doctors," *British Medical Journal* 344, no. 7858 (2012): 10, http://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.e1674.
[34] Anthony Robinson, Ross Divers, Emma Moscardini, and Matthew Calamia, "Perfectionism, Conscientiousness, and Neuroticism: Does Age Matter?" *Personality and Individual Differences* 172, no. (2021): 110563.

have an extrinsic religious orientation, meaning they are religious for social or other nonreligious reasons, are prone to have destructive perfectionist characteristics.[35]

Perhaps surprisingly to some people, perfectionism isn't correlated with a specific gender.[36] (Anecdotally, it seems that some people believe that females are more likely to be perfectionists.) However, there are gender differences in terms of the areas in which perfectionism is manifest (for example, as mentioned previously, males are more likely to manifest perfectionism in sports; women are more likely to manifest perfectionist tendencies when it comes to housework).[37]

Conclusion

In the previous section, I provided a number of examples of groups whose members tend to have perfectionist tendencies. It's important to note that I haven't identified every group that has perfectionist leanings. Additionally, many people that aren't in these groups or other groups with high perfectionist numbers are nevertheless perfectionists—at least in some areas of life. In like manner, many people who are in these groups *aren't* perfectionists. So, we shouldn't assume that we can identify perfectionists just by considering what groups they're members of.

What we should understand is that at least in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada, the percentage of college students who have perfectionistic characteristics has increased since at least 1989.[38] With the increase in the number of perfectionists, it's even more essential to learn about perfectionism, particularly the benefits of constructive perfectionism and the negative effects of destructive perfectionism, followed by how perfectionists can develop and amplify the

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[35] Patrick R. Steffen, "Perfectionism and Life Aspirations in Intrinsically and Extrinsically Religious Individuals," *Journal of Religion and Health* 53, no. 4 (2014): 945–958.

[36] Hala K. Hassan, Sabry M. Abd-El-Fattah, Mohamed K. Abd-El-Jaugoud, and Aly H. A. Badary, "Perfectionism and performance expectations at university: Does gender still matter?" *European Journal of Education and Psychology* 5, no. 2 (2012): 133–147; Butković, Vukojević, and Carević, "Music Performance Anxiety and Perfectionism in Croatian Musicians."

[37] Stoeber and Stoeber, "Domains of Perfectionism.

[38] Thomas Curran and Andrew P. Hill, "Perfectionism Is Increasing over Time: A Meta-Analysis of Birth Cohort Differences from 1989 to 2016." *Psychological Bulletin* 145, no. 4 (2019): 410–429.

aspects of constructive perfectionism and how to minimize or even defeat the aspects of destructive perfectionism. The topics are the focus of the rest of this book.

Key Takeaways

- Various definitions of *perfectionism* have been proposed. The essential component of these definitions is that perfectionism involves setting very high standards and lofty goals.
- The approach a person takes to achieve the standards and goals and how the person views his or her performance determine whether the perfectionistic attributes are constructive or destructive. A person can have both constructive and destructive perfectionist attributes, but one type of perfectionism typically dominates.
- Constructive perfectionism motivates people to work hard to achieve standards and goals and allows for flexibility in modifying standards and goals when appropriate. It involves enjoying the pursuit of standards and goals and to satisfaction regarding achievements.
- Destructive perfectionism causes anxiety about the ability to achieve standards and goals. Often, the standards and goals are impossible to attain, and destructive perfectionists are overly critical of their performance. They derive little, if any, satisfaction from their efforts and accomplishments.
- People might display perfectionist tendencies in only specific areas of life (e.g., athletics and/or academics).
- Some groups of people are more prone to be perfectionists (e.g., musicians and doctors).