

## CHARACTERISTICS AND TYPES

Perfectionism is not always readily apparent, but the problems associated with perfectionism are pervasive. Following are the criteria from Elizabeth Lombardo's *Psychology Today* article "9 Signs That You Might Be a Perfectionist":

- All-or-nothing thinking
- Taking extreme actions
- Distrusting others to do a task correctly, so one rarely delegates; if one delegates, it involves micromanaging the person/people
- Maintaining demanding standards for yourself and others
- Difficulty completing projects due to imperfections
- Fixating on errors
- Procrastinating or avoiding situations where you think you might not excel
- Using the word "should" a lot

The Frost Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale has six dimensions of perfectionism:

- Parental Expectations
- Parental Criticism
- Concern over Mistakes
- Doubts about Actions
- Personal Standards
- Organization

Not satisfied, Joachim Stober wrote in his article "The Frost Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale" that the scale is "More Perfect with Four Dimensions" as opposed to six:

- Parental Expectations and Criticism (combined)
- Concern over Mistakes and Doubts about Actions (combined)
- Personal Standards

- Organization

In both lists, I put the dimensions related to parenting first on the list due to the significant influence of parents. Perfectionism is driven most powerfully by attunement and attachment issues in childhood, which makes sense as parent influence is formative and profound.

Now we will look at the different types of perfectionism. First, there are culturally accepted terms:

- PERFECTONISTIC TENDENCIES is a common term for a personal characteristic that is usually quite helpful since there is a drive for high standards but not the rigidity or collateral damage associated with true perfectionism.
- TYPE A PERSONALITY is generally considered a valid “personality” and represents an organized, detailed, driven, hard-working individual who holds themselves and others to exacting standards and can be uptight, controlling and critical.

For some, perfectionism centers on two main types - adaptive and maladaptive:

- ADAPTIVE perfectionists “successfully” integrate this quality into their lives and benefit from its positive aspects with only minimal problems, which sounds like perfectionistic tendencies. However, this would make adaptive perfectionism out of sync with the all-or-nothing mentality that is the defining characteristic of a true perfectionist.
- MALADAPTIVE perfectionists disregard flexible qualities of an open mindset (e.g., embracing process, seeing mistakes as an integral part of learning, accepting help when needed) and focus solely on outcomes. Doing so puts excessive pressure on themselves and others, leading to regular disappointment, frustration, resentment, anger, failure, guilt and shame. On the surface, both have the same goal, but less-than-ideal outcomes are only problematic for the maladaptive version.

There are three formal types of perfectionism developed by the acknowledged specialists in the field - psychologist and University of British Columbia professor Paul

Hewitt and Gordon Flett, Director of the LaMarsh Centre for Child and Youth Research at York University:

- **SOCIALLY-PRESCRIBED PERFECTIONISM** is the belief that other people only value you if you are perfect. Socially-prescribed perfectionism is driven by the possible shame of disappointing others, which typically develops due to harsh parental expectations, demands or treatment. Being a “people pleaser” is synonymous with this form of perfectionism. As noted in Paula Davis’s blog article titled “5 Styles of Perfectionism,” these perfectionists “have a hard time finding positive ways of coping with stress and adversity...[and] tend to poke fun at his or her own expense and often utilizes a self-deprecating style of humor.”
- **OTHER-ORIENTED PERFECTIONISM** is expecting and insisting on perfection from others (e.g., partners, family, friends, colleagues, strangers). These perfectionists treat others as tools or vehicles to keep their own anxiety at bay instead of individuals worthy of respect, reciprocity and compassion. In Gail Cornwall’s article “Perfectionism Can Become a Vicious Cycle in Families,” Paul Hewitt noted their overall mindset is “[The problem] is not me; it’s you” because they believe “If only you had done things right, I would be happier, more successful.” Davis wrote they “tend to use aggressive humor to criticize others and show disapproval...and seek to dominate others.” In his article “How Other-Oriented Perfectionism Differs from Self-Oriented and Socially Prescribed Perfectionism,” Joachim Stoeber noted this type is “associated with anti-social and narcissistic personality characteristics.”
- **SELF-ORIENTED PERFECTIONISM** consists of exceedingly high personal standards. The need to succeed results in ongoing critical self-evaluation and self-recrimination when goals, even impossible ones, are not met. In his article “What Flavor of Perfectionist Are You? It Matters!”, Dr Timothy A Pychyl cited research by Jeffrey Kilbert, Jennifer Langhinrichsen-Rohling and Motoko Saito that noted, “self-oriented perfectionists are those who derive a sense of pleasure from their labors and efforts,

which in turn enhances their self-esteem and motivation to succeed and eventually helps them to develop a sense of control over their environment' (p. 154)." Their research found that "self-oriented perfectionists actually procrastinate less than non-perfectionists!"

These perfectionist types make sense as they mirror what I call the "social triad" that are the three primary ways people relate to people:

- Socially-Prescribed Perfectionism reflects "What others think about me"
- Other-Oriented Perfectionism reflects "What I think about others"
- Self-Oriented Perfectionism reflects "What I think about myself"

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