

**'He is a man who is impossible to please,  
because he is never pleased with himself'**

– Goethe –

The perfectionist is a person who has to get everything just right – somebody who has excessively high standards. Most of us reach a stage in a task where putting in more effort will only bring very marginal gains. We recognise that this is the time to stop and focus on something more profitable. The perfectionist has difficulty letting things go, and varying standards according to time available and effort needed. Perfection is an unobtainable illusion guaranteed to make us feel like failures and make us vulnerable to depression.

Behind perfectionism lurk deep unrecognised fears and needs. The perfectionist is motivated by a fear of failure. In failing to reach a goal, he or she feels a failure as a person. The perfectionist is never satisfied by achievements,

needing to constantly strive for more and more. The perfectionist is also somebody who keeps emotions under tight control and has a fear of showing vulnerability or losing control. On the other hand, the person with a healthy pursuit of excellence is motivated by enthusiasm, generally feels OK about themselves, is not afraid of failing and can show vulnerability.

Consider three benefits of not being perfect or making a mistake:

- a** We learn from mistakes – we will not learn unless we make mistakes.
- b** Most people are more comfortable with 'imperfect', vulnerable people.
- c** If we fear making a mistake we often become paralysed into inaction, afraid to do anything.

■ **Exercise**

**1 List advantages and disadvantages:** Show that perfectionism does not in fact help you by listing the advantages and disadvantages of perfectionism in you.

ADVANTAGES	DISADVANTAGES
<p><i>Produce high quality work</i></p> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>	<p><i>Never satisfied so often feel tense.</i></p> <p><i>Difficulty varying work speed.</i></p> <p><i>Critical of self and others.</i></p> <p><i>Avoids risks and new things.</i></p> <hr/> <hr/>

**2 Deliberately limit time and lower standards:** Identify a task and set a time limit for it so that you cannot do the job perfectly. Instead of saying, 'I am going to write a letter or report', try saying, 'I'm going to write this in 15 minutes'. Instead of saying, 'I'm going to tidy the house', say, 'I have got half an hour to tidy the house, that means 5 minutes on each room'. Attempt a task at 80 per cent of your normal level.

**3 Disclose weakness:** Make a deliberate attempt to disclose to others your weaknesses or vulnerabilities. If you are nervous or inadequate in a situation say so. Treat this as a challenge. Dare to be average and admit it. Notice how others react. Do they seem more comfortable?

**4 Deliberately savour the moment:** Try to focus more on the process of doing something rather than the outcome. Stop and enjoy the moment rather than concentrating on the end result.