

# 23

Chapter

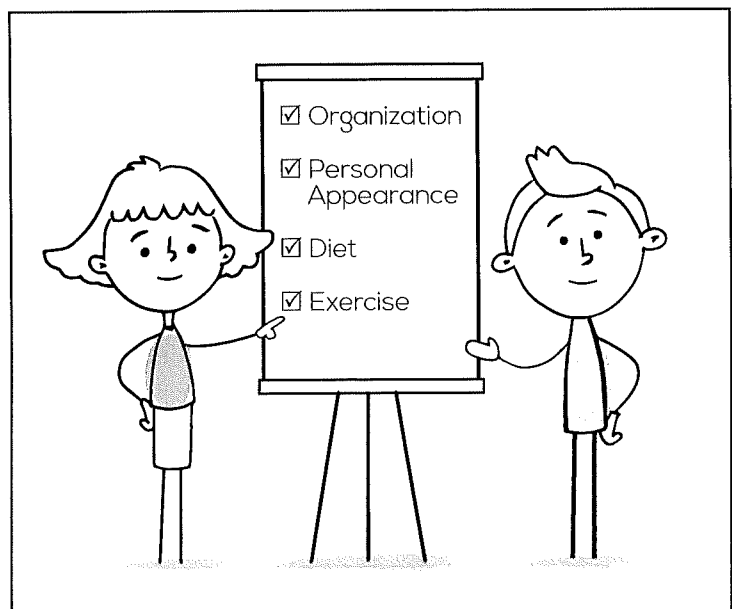
# Perfectionism

If you are only perfectionistic in one or two areas of your life, you may not think of yourself as perfectionistic. Having a desire to be a great parent, having a solid work ethic, or having the desire to be the best athlete or musician you can be are all healthy, within reason. But standards that are too high, even in one area of life, can cause anxiety, frustration, disappointment, and a lack of balance that often leads to depression. It can also strain relationships when you judge others who do not embrace your excessively high standards. Areas in which people commonly have unrealistic standards include work in general, neatness, organization, writing, personal appearance, and diet and exercise. **If you believe your very high standards in any area of your life are causing anxiety, anger, frustration, or depression, this chapter can be helpful.**

One mistake that many people make is that all of their priorities are school or work. Do you sometimes think that you'll read a book, go shopping, see a movie, go out with your friends, or have a night with just your spouse as soon as you catch up on your work? Only, that rarely happens? Do you feel guilty, anxious, or both when you aren't productive, so you rarely stop to enjoy living? Even when you do engage in social events that aren't productive, are they usually work, charitable, or family obligations?

When you rarely do things that are fun and relaxing, depression or dysthymia are inevitable. The best way to overcome this is to think about the things you would love to do, that you used to like to do, or that you don't do nearly as much as you'd like to do. Carve out some time weekly to do these things regardless of what comes up.

When part of why you engage in perfectionistic behaviors is to avoid feeling anxious, guilty, or self-conscious, you are strengthening your habit with negative reinforcement. The more you do this, the more guilty and anxious you feel when you consider taking time for leisurely activities or otherwise loosening your standards. If you want to find more balance in your life, it is necessary for you to engage in activities such as socializing, reading, or watching TV, and let yourself feel uncomfortable. The more you do this, the less anxious and guilty you will feel and the more you will begin to enjoy these activities. If you are so accustomed to working excessively that you don't even know what you like, explore lists of hobbies online to see whether something appeals to you and think about what you liked to do before adult obligations presented themselves.



# Evaluating and Changing Your Perfectionism

How does your perfectionism make your life less perfect?

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What are the advantages of your perfectionism?

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Are there areas of perfectionism you think are working well for you?

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In what area, or areas, of your life is your perfectionism causing problems?

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What are the disadvantages of your perfectionism in these areas?

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What are the things you'd have more time to do if you lived a more balanced life?

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Describe how a balanced life would affect your depression and anxiety.

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Is perfectionism causing problems with your mental health? Are you unhappy? Stressed? Losing sleep? Irritable? Do you have difficulty concentrating? Elaborate.

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How is it affecting your health?

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How often do you abuse substances to deal with your stress around perfectionism?

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How is it affecting your relationships at home and work?

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Do you find yourself getting angry or irritated with people who don't meet your standards? If yes, write how it is affecting them and, consequently, you.

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Do you spend 50% more time, for example, making something only about 5% better? Describe.

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If so, do you think that 5% makes a difference a week later?

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What would your life be like if you lowered your standards by 20%? 30%? More? Close your eyes and visualize what this would be like and write your answer here.

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What are you afraid you would lose if you lowered your standards?

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How likely is it that your fears will occur?

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How likely is it that the benefits of lowering your standards will outweigh the risks?

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If you do want to lower your standards, how far do you want to go? 20%? 30%? 50%?

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How will you do it? Write a plan to reduce your standards by the percentage you chose as your answer to the previous question.

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How do you think you acquired these high standards? (Usually they are learned from one or both parents, a competitive school, teachers, or coaches, but sometimes siblings and friends can play a role.)

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What would you say to the person (or people) you named in your previous answer now if you could do so without consequences? Consider writing a letter you don't send, telling them in person, or pretending they are in an empty chair and telling them how you feel.

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Consider creating a successful life rather than aiming to be a success. Pam Houston (2000) put it beautifully as she redefined success in her memoir:

*My first notion of success, came from my parents and involved country clubs, clothing, and cars. As I became an adult I replaced that list with a list of my own, no less arbitrary: a Ph.D., a book of short stories, a place on a best-seller list, a film. But now I am coming to the understanding that success has less to do with the accumulation of things and more to do with an accumulation of moments, and that creating a successful life might be as simple as determining which moments are the most valuable, and seeing how many of those I can string together in a line.*

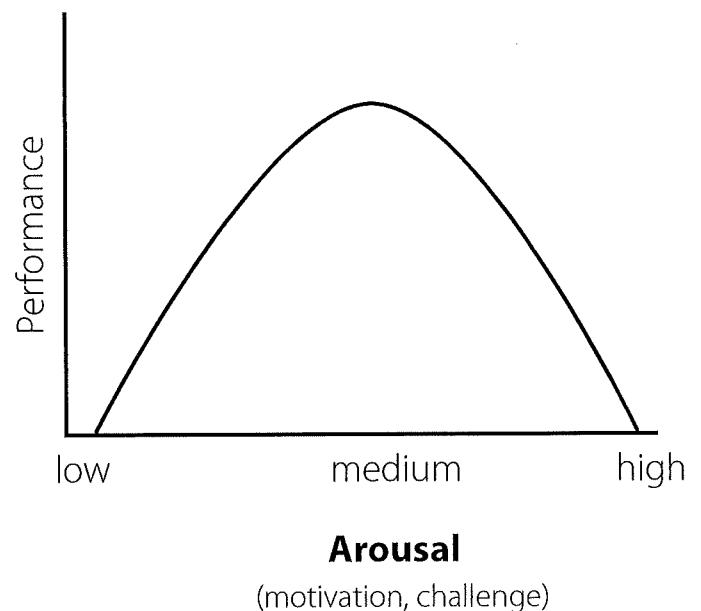
Consider the case of Bob Jones and Bob Smith. Jones is the CEO of a medium-sized company. He makes a seven-figure income and lives in a mansion with his wife and two kids, but he doesn't get to spend much time with them because he works a minimum of 70 hours a week. His job is a means to an income; he doesn't usually enjoy it. He loves to play golf but rarely gets to play, and when he does, it's usually with business associates.

Smith is in sanitation. Essentially, he's a garbage collector who makes a meager income and lives in a small three-bedroom apartment with his wife and two kids. He only works 40 hours a week, so he gets a lot of quality time with them. He loves his job because it's active, he likes being outdoors, and the guys he works with are a lot of fun. He loves to bowl and gets to do so at least once a week with friends.

Certainly, by traditional standards, Bob Jones is much more successful. But who enjoys life more? Whose life would you rather lead? Who will have the fewest regrets on his death bed? Whose *life* is more successful?

### **AFRAID OF LOSING YOUR EDGE?**

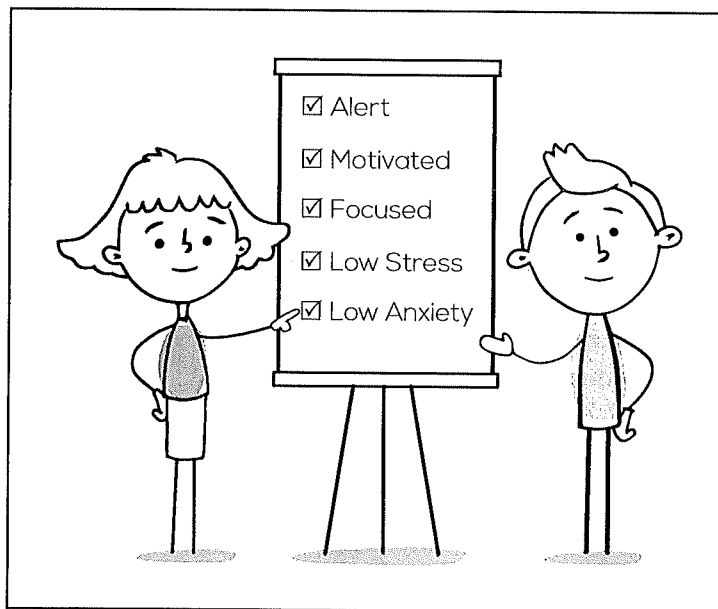
If you feel you can't relax because you are afraid you will lose your edge, you may believe that the higher your stress, the higher your productivity. This is a myth. The Yerkes–Dodson law (Yerkes & Dodson, 1908) proved that the relationship between arousal (often experienced as stress and anxiety) and productivity yields a bell-shaped curve such that a moderate level of arousal yields the greatest level of performance or productivity. In other words, increasing your arousal level (energy/alertness) improves your performance up to a point. After this moderate point, higher levels of arousal result in declining performance (see Figure below). The Yerkes–Dodson law proved that, regardless of what the activity is, if someone is too relaxed or unmotivated, performance will suffer. However, performance suffers every bit as much when someone is overly stressed. Think about when you are really stressed. Your thoughts are racing or jumbled, and you may find it difficult to concentrate. You may make mistakes, become forgetful, or spend too much time attempting to make something perfect with little return. You could freeze and draw a blank in conversation or thought. You might become irritable and difficult to be around such that working with others becomes counterproductive. People may be less likely to help and support you.



If your perfectionism and work drive cause anxiety, you will find that by systematically reducing it, you will enjoy a corresponding increase in productivity, rather than the decrease you may fear. Perhaps you have already experienced this by following the premises in this workbook. If you've been afraid to use them, maybe you will begin to experiment with them to see whether they help your productivity or, at least, don't reduce it.

It is helpful to think about how you feel when you are "on a roll." When you are most productive and efficient, you are at a moderate level of arousal. You are alert, motivated, and focused, but not stressed and anxious. If you consider only the aspect of productivity, your goal is to be moderately motivated and challenged rather than highly stressed and anxious. However, because most of us work several hours per day, it's helpful to be to the left of that curve to conserve energy. Being in the moment and keeping your muscles relatively relaxed will help you to be at the optimal level for productivity. In fact, when you *are* most productive, you are likely in the moment and not very tense.

Hopefully, you are now motivated to reduce your perfectionistic standards. Begin to make leisure time a priority. By resisting the urge to take extra time to perfect things in favor of being good enough and by living at a moderate level of arousal, you will save time for more balance to help you lead a successful *life*.



# Improve Balance

To help keep you on track, complete the following self-monitoring form daily. The goal is to increase awareness to improve balance, so do not worry about being accurate, estimates are preferable. The last column is an optional space to write in a personal goal.

Date	Hours Spent Working at My Job	Hours Spent Doing Chores and Errands	Hours Spent on Leisure Activities*	# Times I "Gave In" to My Perfectionism	# Times I Resisted the Urge to Engage in My Perfectionism**	Personal Goal

\* If gardening is a hobby you truly enjoy, place the time under leisure activities. If you are in doubt about whether you should record, say, yard-work or decorating the house under work or leisure, count it as half and half. For example, if you spend two hours doing yard-work and you would rather be doing yard-work than other chores and enjoy it, but not as much as reading a book, place one hour under leisure activities and one hour under chores and errands.

\*\* Give yourself credit for compromises, even if small.