

It's OK If You're Not Perfect!

Objective

To deliberately do something considered socially inappropriate and tolerate the discomfort this action causes.

You Should Know

You might think the better you perform in school, the more successful you'll be in life. It's reasonable for you to have high standards and work hard to meet your goals. Unfortunately, disciplined behavior can cross the line to perfectionism if it interferes with social, emotional, or academic functioning. Striving to be perfect can actually stop you from reaching your goals.

Perfectionism is fueled by, and fuels, anxiety. You might struggle daily with worry, anxiety, and an intense fear of failure. Anxious thoughts support perfectionistic behaviors, and when your results fall short of expectations, you probably experience even greater anxiety. It can be a hard cycle to break.

Consider Heather. At a choral concert, 60 choir members walked up to the stage on a set of steps visible to the nearly 2,500 people on the expansive lawn at an outdoor venue. Heather, who has a fear of making a fool of herself in public, stumbled on one of the steps and fell—*splat*—bracing herself with her hands. People helped her up, and she took her place in the lineup, but she was mortified. She was sure everyone in the choir and everyone in the audience were laughing at her and thinking she was a “clumsy idiot.” She felt like she failed, and she had a difficult time focusing throughout the event because she was beating herself up. It's likely that Heather was the only one who even gave any thought to it after it happened, much less a critical thought. People probably felt empathy and hoped she was okay.

What if you were to experience yourself as imperfect by embarrassing yourself *on purpose*? You might feel anxious at the thought! This form of exposure therapy is called “constructive embarrassment.” The idea is to expose yourself to uncomfortable feelings and learn to tolerate them—to actually welcome the feeling of embarrassment or humiliation so you can get used to it and realize that nothing catastrophic will happen and you're human—just like everyone else!

What to Do

Check any of the following statements that apply to you:

- I'm dissatisfied with a standard that others view as acceptable.
- I often procrastinate until I'm sure of what to do and/or how to earn a high grade on an assignment.
- I'm afraid to answer questions in class for fear of being wrong.
- I'm afraid to take risks.
- I'm angry with myself, and say harsh things to myself, when I make a mistake.
- I avoid starting tasks because I'm afraid I won't do them "right" or "well."
- I get very upset when my grades are lower than I expect.
- I can't cope with mistakes.
- I feel like I've failed if I don't say and do things perfectly.
- I take criticism personally.
- I do my work or complete tests slowly to avoid mistakes.
- I focus on neatness and the appearance of my work.
- I start over repeatedly to "get it right."

Total checked statements: _____

If you checked five or more statements, you probably try very hard to be perfect, leading to worry and anxiety.

This exercise instructs you to plan a few "socially inappropriate" things to do in public. Below are some possible activities. Feel free to add your own situations to the list. On each line, rank each item on a scale from 1 to 10, where 1 = little to no anxiety, and 10 = extreme distress.

- As you're walking down the hall at school, stumble and fall on purpose.
- Go to a movie after it has already started and ask to climb over people.
- Turn in an essay that is not your best work.
- Make a phone call; then, say you have the wrong number and hang up.
- Spill your drink or drop a tray of food in the cafeteria.
- Dress casually for a formal event (or vice versa).

- ___ Talk to yourself out loud in class.
- ___ Face the wrong way in an elevator.
- ___ Hum softly during class.
- ___ Go to school and walk around with a speck of food on your face.
- ___ Wear mismatched socks or shoes.
- ___ Ask a question in class that you're worried might make you appear stupid.
- ___ Intentionally answer questions incorrectly on a test.
- ___ Skip instead of walk down the street.
- ___ Pause for 10 seconds while giving a presentation.
- ___ Order a messy meal when you are on a date.
- ___ Your own idea: _____
- ___ Your own idea: _____
- ___ Your own idea: _____

Now you'll practice doing the activities in public. Choose the activities you marked 1 or 2 first, then work up to trying a 5 or 6. You might want to invite a friend or group of friends to join you as you practice the skills. Then, record your reflections about the experience.

"Socially inappropriate" activities you will do:

Describe in detail your experience engaging in "socially inappropriate" activities.

What is the worst thing that happened doing any of these exercises? Did anyone make comments or look at you in a strange way?

What thoughts did you have after you completed this exercise? Do you feel less anxious about the possibility of being imperfect?

Practicing doing the things you fear most is considered to be the best way to overcome your perfectionism. Do you think you can continue this practice? Who can help support you in continuing to practice this kind of activity? Explain.

Reflections on This Exercise

How helpful was this exercise? _____

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What else can you do to make progress in this area?
