THE UNIVERSITY of EDINBURGH
School of Social and
Political Science

STUDENT DEVELOPMENT OFFICE + SKILLS + EMPLOYABILITY

WELLBEING HUB

MANAGING PERFECTIONISM WITH SELF-COMPASSION

SESSION DESCRIPTION

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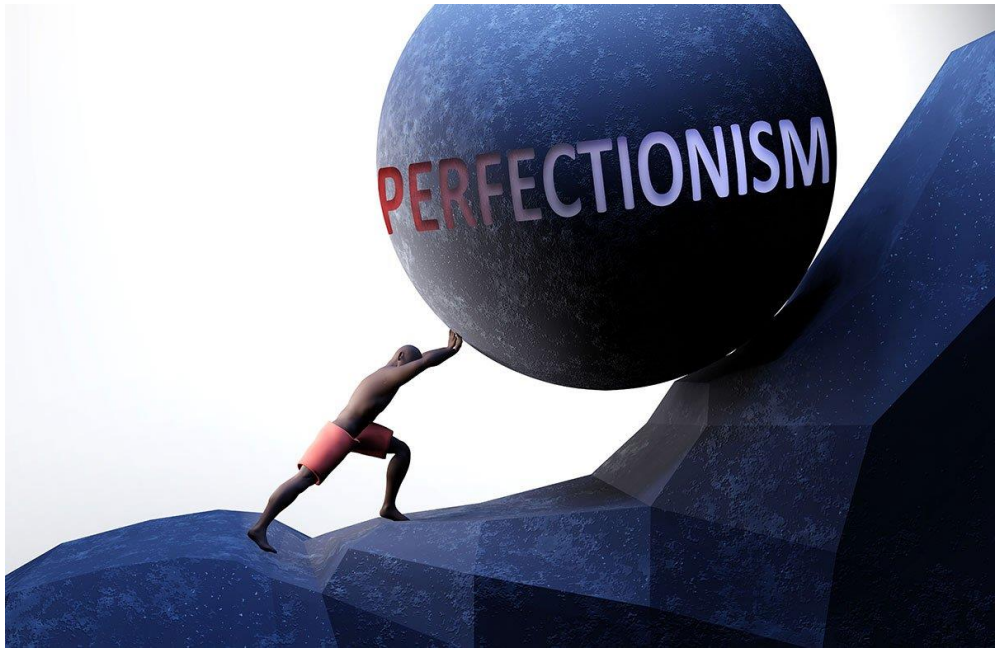
WORKSHOP OBJECTIVES

1. What is Perfectionism and where does it originate?
2. Behaviours and thinking styles that facilitate Perfectionism
3. Benefits and Costs of Perfectionism
4. What is Self-Compassion?
5. Enabling a compassionate inner voice to challenge Perfectionism

WHAT IS PERFECTIONISM?

Perfectionism turns life into a never-ending assessment of accomplishments or appearance.

- When healthy, it can motivate you to persevere and succeed.
- When unhealthy, it sets you up for consistent failure and unhappiness.



WHERE DOES PERFECTIONISM COME FROM

The root of perfectionism is believing your self-worth is based on your achievements

Perfectionism is often present when some combination of these factors exist:

- Rigid, high parental expectations
- Highly critical, shaming, or abusive parents
- Excessive praise for your achievements
- Low self-esteem or feeling inadequate
- Believing your self-worth is determined by your achievements
- Black-and-white thinking
- Efforts to feel in control
- Cultural expectations

SETTING UNREALISTIC EXPECTATIONS



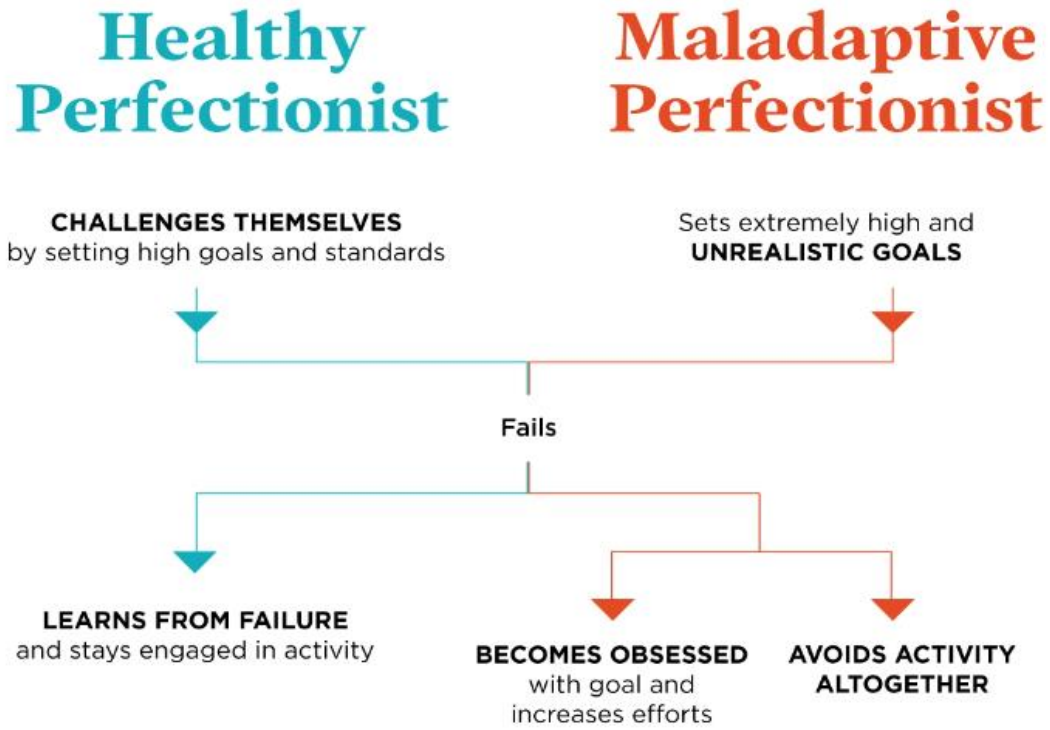
- Perfectionism is encouraged in some families. Sometimes parents knowingly or unknowingly establish perfection as the standard.
- Children are at the mercy of adults when it comes to building their self-worth.
- Perfectionism can also be learned by children growing up around highly successful, perfectionist carers who model this way of thinking and acting.
- Perfectionism is encouraged when children are praised excessively for their achievements rather than their efforts or progress.

TYPES OF PERFECTIONISM

- **Self-oriented perfectionism** is imposing an unrealistic desire to be perfect on oneself. This can either be adaptive (healthy) or maladaptive (unhealthy).
- **Other-oriented perfectionism** means imposing unrealistic standards of perfection on others.
- **Socially-prescribed perfectionism** involves perceiving unrealistic expectations of perfection *from* others.

ARE THERE ANY BENEFITS?

- High expectations can yield large successes
- Praise feels good
- Adaptive perfectionists desire growth, enjoy being challenged, and problem-solve well



COSTS OF PERFECTIONISM

- High probability of failure
- Behaviours like procrastination, a tendency to avoid challenges, rigid all-or-nothing thinking, toxic comparisons, and a lack of creativity.
- Driven by fear of failure, feelings of unworthiness, low self-esteem, and adverse childhood experiences.
- It is frequently accompanied by depression, anxiety, obsessive-compulsive disorder, eating disorders, and even suicidal impulses.

CHALLENGING THE CRITIC



Perfectionism is an extreme, so finding middle ground will lead to a more sustainable and healthy approach to life

- Setting more realistic expectations
- Radical acceptance of failure as a natural part of the human experience and learning
- Using a compassionate voice for self-talk

DEVELOPING YOUR COMPASSIONATE VOICE

This is the compliment to the critic. The compassionate voice is non-judgemental and based in facts/truths



EXERCISE

Scenario:

- You sit down to begin an assessment, but are not sure where to start or what to write. Your inner critic says the following:

  "You might as well not bother, nothing you write is any good and this time won't be any different"

FACT: Every time you write an assessment is different.

FACT: If you don't write anything, that will certainly be a failing grade. The outcome of writing and submitting something is unknown

FACT: If nothing you wrote was any good, you wouldn't be where you are now.

EXERCISE

What would be a compassionate alternative thought to challenge your critic?

EXERCISE

- I am feeling stressed about writing right now, so I might benefit from taking a quick break to relax and improve my mindset. I'll probably feel better if I do something that I like.

- I have all the resources I need to write this essay and have been successful in the past. Maybe I should have a quick skim over the material again and see if any concepts jump out at me as significant. This could be a good starting point.

- I don't have to follow a rigid procedure when writing this essay. I think I'll focus on one of the points I'd like to make first and maybe more ideas will become clearer as I write.

EXERCISE

Scenario:

- You are getting dressed to head to an important meeting with a potential internship:

  "No matter what you wear, you'll still look disgusting and foolish."

FACT: The employer is not hiring you for your physique or your style

FACT: You have been in interview settings in the past and the outcome was okay

FACT: Human bodies come in all shapes and sizes with no ideal, only healthy norms that are averages of large samples.

EXERCISE

What would be a compassionate alternative thought to challenge your critic?

EXERCISE

- My body is not my identity. It is a part of me, but does not define me or my worth.
- I am following typical dress standards for this sector and will be presenting myself in a positive way to the employer.
- I am in the best shape that I can be and wearing the best clothes that are accessible to me now. I could look and dress differently under other circumstances.

DECRIMINALIZING FAILURE

Failure puts us back to square one

- By definition, failure means that we didn't achieve success. It forces us back to square one, more often than not.
- But after failing, we know that we can't approach the same task or goal in the same way. We wouldn't achieve the same result. So, the act of failure inevitably leads to thinking of new ways to overcome obstacles.



DECRIMINALIZING FAILURE

Failure forces us to examine what went wrong

- Reflection is an important part of failure. Without reflection, we wouldn't learn. It's important that after we fail, we take a moment to sit with it.
- What about the failure went well? What didn't go well? Where can we pinpoint what went wrong? It helps us to figure out how to course correct and do it better the next time.



DECRIMINALIZING FAILURE

Failure allows us to innovate

- As the phrase goes, we can't keep doing the same thing and expect the same results. Innovation is critical to learning. But in order to innovate, we need to know what went wrong.



LIMITING THE IMPACT OF FAILURE

How do we make failure less threatening to the ego?

- Observe other people's failures: when you set out to learn out to ski, it will probably help to watch YouTube videos about common mistakes, before you hit the slopes yourself

- Get some distance. If negative emotions are getting in the way of your understanding, they also suggest trying self-distancing techniques. This involves thinking of your personal experience from the outside perspective of a neutral third party, asking, "Why did Jeremy fail?" instead of "Why did I fail?"

MINDFULNESS FOR SETTING EXPECTATIONS

Mindfulness is all about being in the present. Take stock at this moment of your resources:

- Have you had enough sleep?
- Are you financially secure?
- How reliable is your support network?
- Is your physical/mental health good?

If you answered **no** to any of these questions, then you are currently operating below your optimum condition. Therefore your expectations for performance should be accordingly amended.

The outcome of this assessment of resources and ability to engage with the demands of life varies day-to-day. Your expectations should be seen as something fluid and changing to match.

SUMMARY

- Setting realistic and flexible expectations for yourself improves the outcomes of the tasks you approach
- Enabling a compassionate inner voice balances your critic resulting in better performance and improved wellbeing
- Amending your beliefs regarding failure and its role in human learning will improve your resilience and creativity
- Accepting yourself as an imperfect being creates more space for happiness and success

WELLBEING HUB

Questions?

THE UNIVERSITY WELLBEING SERVICE

What We Do

- **Promote** mental health and wellbeing for all students of the University
- **Provide proactive and reactive wellbeing support** for students who present with health and wellbeing challenges
- Focus on **prevention and early intervention,** as well as mental health promotion and mental health awareness (reducing stigma)
- **Liaise with specialist services** within and outside the University
- **Non-clinical, short to medium-term** input

Where We Are

- Wellbeing Advisors are based within the Schools
- The Service is based at Bristo Square, in the University Health Centre, 5th Floor



How You Can Access

- Reaching out to get support isn't always easy: you can reach out to us when you need it so we can help you build your support network
  - Online referral form available to anyone via the website: Student Wellbeing Service | The University of Edinburgh
  - Through your primary contact in the School

How we work:

- We support our students as a team, communicating with those services who are involved in your support network.
- We will agree on an action plan with you and support you to achieve your wellbeing goals
- If you are already working with a different wellbeing service (e.g. ResLife), we might not get involved

RESOURCES

- What Causes Perfectionism? (psychcentral.com)
- Perfectionism | Psychology Today United Kingdom
- Why Learning From Failure is Your Key to Success (betterup.com)