

# Perfectionism and mindset

## Perfectionism

Being perfect sounds like a good thing, but **perfectionism gets seriously in the way of learning.**

Rates of perfectionism are higher at Nossal than in other schools.

Here **are ten characteristics of a perfectionist.** A perfectionist:

- is highly conscious and hyper-critical of mistakes and has a sharp eye for details
- aims to be the best at everything they do, even if it's something that doesn't interest them
- spends a lot of time up to the last moment, and will sacrifice their well-being (sleep, eating), rather than let something be less than it can be
- has absolute ideals: things tend to be black and white, no grey
- is their own harshest critic, beating themselves up over the smallest thing they get wrong
- mulls over things that don't turn out as hoped and wonders whether they could have done anything to prevent that
- is defensive about criticism and fears failure because both suggest imperfection
- has only the goal in mind and process doesn't matter if they can't achieve the goal
- has an all-or-nothing approach: if they can't achieve the standard they want, they'll abandon the task rather than spend time on something they can't achieve
- is very conscious of any situation which might give others the idea they're not perfect.



## Why perfectionists want to be perfect

Perfectionists usually have one or more of three fine motivations. They want to be a better person, be the best they can be, and do right by others.

**Being a better person often gets tangled up in social expectations.** Sometimes family, friends and teachers set benchmarks that equate failing at something with being worthless.

For some people perfectionism grows out of **insecurity about their own worth.** So they **need to constantly prove themselves** through actions and accomplishments, a great need to impress and do the right thing by others.

# NOSSAL WELLBEING NOTES

Sometimes perfectionism is the result of a person's **insatiable thirst and desire for growth**, to be the best they can be. This desire can be so strong that to fall anywhere short is to fail to live up to one's potential, which defeats their purpose in life. (Hello, unhappiness.)

**Perfectionists beware: it's easy for perfectionism to become self-sabotage.**

## The perfection trap

Imagine a perfection continuum. It's entirely subjective. Let's say that an apathetic slob who cares about nothing is at minus five and the full-on perfectionist is at plus five.

Someone with an abundance of the above characteristics, strongly exhibited, might be anywhere from plus three to plus five on our imaginary continuum. That person's **perfectionism is likely to be a limiting factor in their life**. Here are six reasons why.



### 1. Lower productivity

**Perfectionists produce less, investing up to 80 per cent of their efforts achieving 20 per cent of the task, fussing over minute details.**

Effective students spread their effort on a task evenly in pursuit of the best outcome.

Meticulousness can turn a perfectionist into a workaholic as well, sacrificing rest and social life for work. The Law of Diminishing Returns says the lack of work-life balance makes the perfectionist even less efficient.

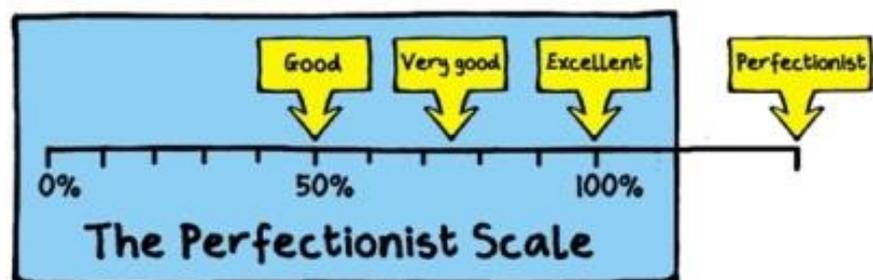
### 2. Procrastination

**Perfectionism is the partner of procrastination.**

Perfectionists often delay doing things, not starting until they find

the best way to do them and the right time and context. Sometimes that never happens.

Thus **the perfectionist over-complicates the task, makes it seem bigger than it really is**, or develops unreal expectations about the result then avoids it altogether because the perceived result is impossible to achieve.



### 3. Myopia

**Caught up in the details, the perfectionist can't see the bigger picture**, too busy pruning a tree to see that the entire ecosystem is under threat. The perfectionist is often a left-brained micro-manager missing the right brain's vision and imagination.

# NOSSAL WELLBEING NOTES

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The **end result is one point in a journey**. Learning happens on the journey, not at the destination.

## ***4. Stagnation of growth and learning***

The perfectionist tends to be stuck doing things in a certain way they've identified as the best, avoiding other options. This **limits opportunities to grow** as embracing difference and mistakes is a key to growth and learning. (Read on about Mindset.)

## ***5. Poorer health and mental wellbeing***

Perfectionists tend to overwork, bear the burden of responsibility for things that go wrong, and over-react when things don't turn out as expected.

Perfectionists obsess over 'flaws', or dissociate from them. They downplay their successes. Research shows they are prone to unhappiness, stress, anxiety, guilt and depression.

## ***6. Compromised relationships***

Perfectionists sometimes alienate people who are put off by a perfectionist's inflexibility and the guarded perfectionist can be hard to connect with.

Sometimes a perfectionist's unrealistic ideals make them being dissatisfied with others and cut them off.



## **Overcoming perfectionism**

### ***Be aware of your motivations for perfection***

Perfectionists need to remember the reasons they want to be perfect and ask if their actions really serve their motivations for perfection. They might ask:

*"Is my obsession with trivial details helping me get the best results? Could I spend that time in a more meaningful way that would get me better results?"*

### ***Recognise that ideals are directions, not absolutes***

**Ideals are not the problem; people's attachment to them is the problem.** Ideals drive people in their growth; they guide, inspire, and bring out the best in a person. But if being too attached makes someone feel bad, they need to review the attachment.

### ***Respect and love yourself***

**Some people beat themselves up** over things they believe could have been better. They need to ask:

*"Did I do my best in the circumstances at the time? Do I really deserve this self-abuse? Am I treating myself with the respect I deserve?"*

# NOSSAL WELLBEING NOTES

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## ***Focus on the big picture***

Perfectionists need to **see the forest not the trees**. Time management techniques can help identify necessary and unnecessary tasks. When a task takes too much time, the person needs to ask:

*“Does this matter in the bigger scheme of things?”*

## ***Focus on what can be done***

**Mistakes made in the past are past.** Obsessing over them changes nothing and takes time away from more productive things. Learn from mistakes, let them go, and move on.

## ***Delegate and let go***

**Perfectionists rarely have faith in other people’s abilities.** So they won’t delegate tasks to others. If someone doesn’t seem to be getting something right, it’s better to teach and help them, not take over entirely. Teach a man how to fish and there are more fish for everyone.

## ***Enjoy the entire process***

The perfectionist needs to understand that the process, the **‘getting there’, is the longest part of achieving something.**

Learning happens on the journey. The journey *is* the achievement: enjoy it. The perfectionist needs to ask:

*“If I’m not enjoying the process, why am I doing it?” (In other words, “Am I here to enjoy learning something or just to get an A?”)*



**The Perfectionist's Guide to Results**

## ***Celebrate victories and progress made***

**The perfectionist needs to be able to accept praise, and give it,** if they or someone else has done the best they can, regardless of the outcome. Give credit where it’s due—for effort.

# Mindset

In *Mindset: how can you fulfil your potential*, Carol Dweck talks about fixed and growth mindsets. A person’s mindset is a set of beliefs or way of thinking that determines their behaviour, outlook on life and mental attitude.

To monstrously oversimplify her thesis, **people with growth mindsets aren’t afraid to make mistakes, to get things wrong.** In fact, some embrace mistakes, understanding that this is the way to learning. Their minds are open for growth. They have a passion for learning.

*“I feel smart when it’s really hard, and I have to try really hard, and then I can do something I couldn’t do before.”*

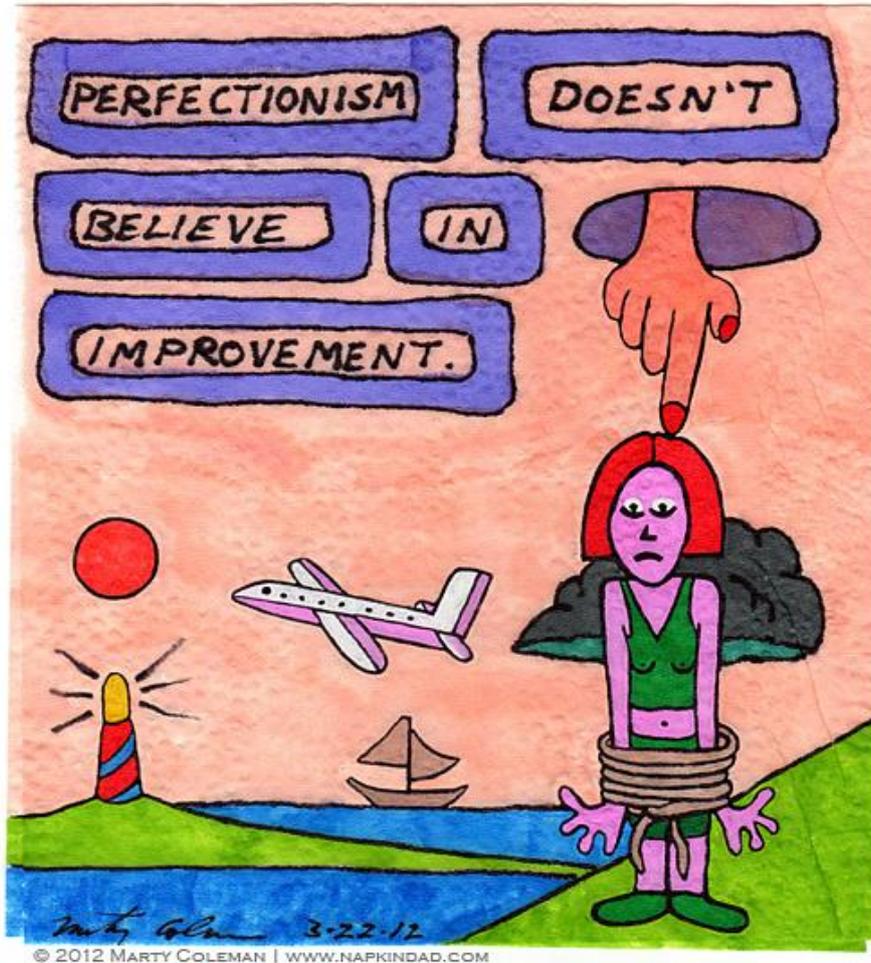
## NOSSAL WELLBEING NOTES

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The person with a fixed mindset will come back to what they know, what they can already achieve, but go no further for fear of failure. Their passion is achievement, not learning.

*"I feel smart when something is easy for me, but other people can't do it."*

Perfectionists tend to have fixed mindsets.



### Last word

Please don't take these notes on perfectionism as a condemnation of any person with perfectionist tendencies. There is a place for perfectionists and their motives are pure.

**Who would you rather have flying the aeroplane: a perfectionist or someone who thinks mediocrity is OK?**

The fact is that the vast majority of us don't fly planes, and perfectionism is best left to the very few who can cope with it. If you're a perfectionist, give yourself a pat on the back.

Then sit down and ask if perfectionism is limiting your learning.

