



CREATING HEALTHY ACADEMIC HABITS

WEBINAR 6 – COMBATING PERFECTIONISM

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HABITS THAT WE'LL COVER IN THIS WEBINAR SERIES:

- Time Management
- Goal Setting
- Self Care
- Mindfulness
- Stress Reduction
- Combating Perfectionism (This week!)
- Building Positive Self Talk

ARE YOU A PERFECTIONIST?

- Many people have traits of perfectionists and are even proud of them, but there are important differences between perfectionists and high achievers and being a high achiever is far better for your health and happiness.
- If you have perfectionistic tendencies, it's vital to find strategies to get past them and move toward being a non-perfectionistic high achiever.
- Perfectionism can rob you of your peace of mind, enjoyment of life, and self-esteem. Though it's a process that may take a little time and practice, shedding the burden of perfectionism can greatly decrease the level of stress you feel on a daily basis (especially as you navigate graduate school!).

PERFECTIONISTS VS HIGH ACHIEVERS

- Perfectionism differs from high achievement in one important way: where your focus lies. If you are striving for excellence, you can be happy about your achievements and learn from your mistakes.
- Perfectionism is different in that the focus is less forgiving; perfectionists beat themselves up for anything that appears to be lacking, and this robs them of the satisfaction and pride that comes from all of the things that they do well.
- One of the most significant problems that perfectionists face is the fear that if they stop shooting for perfection, they will become low achievers and their goals will go by the wayside. Let this reassure you: Letting go of perfectionist attitudes can actually help you to excel more!
- Perfectionists actually achieve less than those with healthier attitudes, because their focus on perfection robs them of motivation and can bring on procrastination and other self-defeating behaviors.

MORE ON PERFECTIONISM

- Perfectionism is a harsh and brutal way to live life. To be human is to have flaws. However, perfectionists have a hard time accepting their shortcomings. To compensate, they raise their bar of expectations to unattainable and unsustainable levels. They push themselves to the extreme and expect to score 100 on tasks they deem important. Ironically, having such a narrow definition of success sets them up for their greatest fear, which is failure.
- Perfectionists are not merely disappointed when they fail to achieve a particular goal. They may experience shame because they define themselves as a complete failure.
- This “all or nothing” thinking is associated with a host of emotional difficulties like burn out, depression and anxiety.

MALADAPTIVE BEHAVIORS ROOTED IN PERFECTIONISM

- Procrastinating
- Avoidance
- Excessive checking
- Reassurance seeking
- Overcompensating
- Repeating and correcting
- Excessive organizing and list-making
- Difficulty making decisions
- Giving up too soon
- Not knowing when to stop
- Correcting
- Failure to delegate

HABIT 1: MAKE A COST-BENEFIT ANALYSIS

- Take a closer look at your perfectionistic traits. You may think you're more effective because of them (although according to research, this probably isn't true), but at what cost?
- Perfectionism has many negative consequences, and you may be experiencing several of them right now.
- Make a list of all the ways perfectionism is hurting you (and those around you), and you'll be more motivated to shed these tendencies.

HABIT 2: BECOME AWARE OF YOUR TENDENCIES

- You may not realize how pervasive perfectionism can be. By becoming more aware of your patterns, you're in a better position to alter them.
- If you're able, it's a great idea to record your perfectionistic thoughts as they pop into your head. If it's impractical for you to jot thoughts down as they come, it's a great idea to go over your day each night and remember the times when you felt you'd failed, or hadn't done well enough, and write down what you thought at the time.
- This will help you become more aware of perfectionistic thoughts as they come to you in the future. (You can even journal about your feelings and about these thoughts, but don't feel you've 'failed' if you don't have time to do this step!)

HABIT 3: STRIVE FOR “GOOD ENOUGH”

- Consider grades: Getting an A+ on everything may not be feasible.
- Obviously, setting high standards and striving to do our best can be a positive thing.
- So simply “getting a C” is not as simple as, well, simply getting a C. However, letting ourselves off the hook once in awhile can contribute to overall sense of wellbeing, productivity, and time management (imagine how much extra time you’d have if you allowed yourself to stop working on your assignment after an hour of “good enough” vs. three hours of “perfect”).

HABIT 4: FOCUS ON THE POSITIVE

- If you're struggling with perfectionism, you probably have honed the skill of spotting mistakes in even the best works of others and of yourself. You may just naturally look for it, and notice it above all other things.
- While this habit may be difficult to just stop, you can soften your tendency to notice the bad by making a conscious effort to notice all that is good with your work and the achievements of others.
- If you notice something you don't like about yourself or your work, for example, look for five other qualities that you *do* like. This will balance out your critical focus and become a positive new habit.

HABIT 5: SHIFT YOUR PERSPECTIVE

- It can be helpful to think about certain tasks as works in progress, rather than an end goal, which allows for more flexibility.
- Practice “refining towards excellence” rather than “fixating on perfection” and, in doing so, seeing trial and error as fundamental components of constant improvement.
- Note that “often time, it’s important and healthy to simply say that something you have done is ‘sufficient,’ ‘acceptable,’ ‘satisfactory,’ or ‘a step in the right direction,’ and move on without ruminating over imperfections.”

HABIT 6: ALTER YOUR SELF TALK

- Those who wrestle with perfectionism tend to have a critical voice in their head telling them their work isn't good enough, they're not trying hard enough, and *they're* not good enough.
- If you're going to overcome perfectionism, you need to work on changing this little voice!
- Negative self-talk can perpetuate unhealthy behaviors and wreak havoc on your self-esteem; by altering your self-talk, you can go a long way toward enjoying life more and gaining an increased appreciation for yourself and your work.

HABIT 7: LEARN TO PRIORITIZE

- Naturally, some tasks are more pertinent to excel at than others - especially those that are directly related to your overall goals or purpose in life.
- It makes sense to over-prepare for your final dissertation defense, which likely represents years of research, work, and far too many late nights.
- Give 100% on the tasks that are most important to you, and then reassure yourself that it's OK to put in less effort on the rest.
- Sometimes, the goal is just to complete the task – not to make it perfect.

HABIT 8: TAKE BABY STEPS

- Perfectionists tend to set goals of unreasonable excellence with no learning curve. These goals tend to be unrealistic and cause problems by being so rigidly demanding and leaving little room for error.
- Instead, you can reduce a lot of stress by changing your goals. You don't have to sacrifice the end result, but if you set bite-sized goals for yourself and reward yourself when you achieve them, you'll tend to be more forgiving with mistakes.
- For example, you may normally tackle the task of getting into better shape by working out five times a week. Unfortunately, if you're not used to working out regularly, you may get quite sore from such a quick change, and perhaps give up. But setting the goal to exercise once or twice the first week, and add an additional workout periodically until you've worked up to your goal, you will more likely reach your goal and enjoy many more 'successes' in the process.

HABIT 9: ENJOY THE PROCESS

- You may be used to focusing on results, and beating yourself up if your results are less than perfect.
- The previous suggestion (setting baby steps) can help you create more of an enjoyable process out of your striving.
- You can also enjoy the process of reaching a goal by getting involved with a group that is also trying to achieve the same goal you're after or journaling about how you *feel* and what you *learn* as you reach toward your goal. If you find you don't achieve perfection, you can then reflect back and see all that you've gained in just working toward a worthy goal, assessing and appreciating the gains you *did* make in the process.
- One important way to recover from perfectionism is to begin focusing more on the *process* of reaching toward a goal, rather than just focusing on the goal itself.

HABIT 10: LEARN TO HANDLE CRITICISM

- If you tend to look at criticism as an attack, reacting defensively, an attitude change can help.
- Constructive criticism can give you important clues on how to improve your performance, making your less-than-perfect performances into useful stepping stones that lead to excellence.
- If the criticism you're receiving is pointed or harsh, it's okay to remind others (and yourself) that mistakes are a great way to learn.

HABIT 11: REDEFINE FAILURE

- To avoid the pain of failure, perfectionists may avoid tasks that are too challenging. They may play it safe and work only on projects that are highly likely to be successfully completed. Paradoxically, this strategy stifles personal growth and prevents perfectionists from reaching their fullest potential. By playing it safe, they hold themselves back and fail to push themselves out of their comfort zone.
- Remember that failure is a universal human experience. It makes exceptions for no one. Even successful people fail.
- Thomas Edison, the driving force behind innovations such as the light bulb and motion picture cameras, once said, "I have not failed. I've just found 10,000 ways that won't work."
- The question is not whether you will experience setbacks, but how you respond to them. When you experience setbacks, talk to yourself with kindness and understanding through self-compassion. After all, failure is an opportunity for learning and growth.

REMINDER TO: UTILIZE CUNY SPH COUNSELING & WELLNESS SERVICES OR MENTAL HEALTH RESOURCES IN YOUR COMMUNITY

- **SPH Counseling & Wellness:**

- Free counseling support for students living in NY state. We can offer referrals for students out of state.
- <https://sph.cuny.edu/students/student-services/student-wellness/counseling-and-wellness-services/>

- **Mental Health Resources:**

- For free 24/7 support or referrals there is CUNY Crisis, NYC WELL or the national 988 mental health hotline (info below)
 - **Crisis Text Line:** Text **CUNY** to 741741 for crisis counseling
 - NYC WELL: Text WELL to 65173; Chat: <https://nycwell.cityofnewyork.us/en/>; Call 1-888-NYC-WELL (1-888-692-9355)
 - 988: Text to 988; Chat: <https://988lifeline.org/chat/>; Call 988
- For outside providers:
 - Search providers through your health insurance website
 - Psychology Today: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/>
 - Open Path Collective: <https://openpathcollective.org/>
 - Telehealth clinics: Mindful Care <https://www.mindful.care> and Lifestance Health <https://lifestance.com/>

REMINDER TO: PRACTICE POSITIVE AFFIRMATIONS 😊

- *“I set goals for myself and I can reach them”*
- *“I will show kindness to others”*
- *“I am special and unique”*
- *“I can do anything I set my mind to”*
- *“I am strong and capable”*
- *“I can handle any challenge life throws at me”*
- *“My mistakes are part of the learning process”*