



Progress over perfection

Letting go of perfectionism

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Flinders University Institute for Mental Health & Wellbeing

Ways to let go of unhelpful perfectionism?

Many people struggle with perfectionism, but it can be hard to know when high standards become unhelpful.

In **Part 1 – Learn**, you'll learn about the downsides of perfectionism and think about whether your high standards are really helping you.

In **Part 2 – Do**, you'll learn practical steps you can take right now to loosen perfectionistic patterns and support your wellbeing.

Then, **we will ask for your advice** on how to share this information with other people who have an eating disorder.

All the stories in this chapter are based on the experiences of real people who have struggled with eating disorders.

Help us help others!

People tell us the ideas in this chapter are interesting and helpful. But we need your help to learn how to best support people with eating disorders. By sharing your experiences and advice, we can help others who might be experiencing similar challenges with perfectionism.



We know that **you are the expert** in your life and have valuable insight into what it's like to be a person with an eating disorder.

Please complete this exercise thoughtfully and share your feedback at the end to help us learn the best way to present this information to others like you.

Tell us what worked well for you and what didn't, so we can improve and make a real difference **together**.

Focus on
progress,
not
perfection



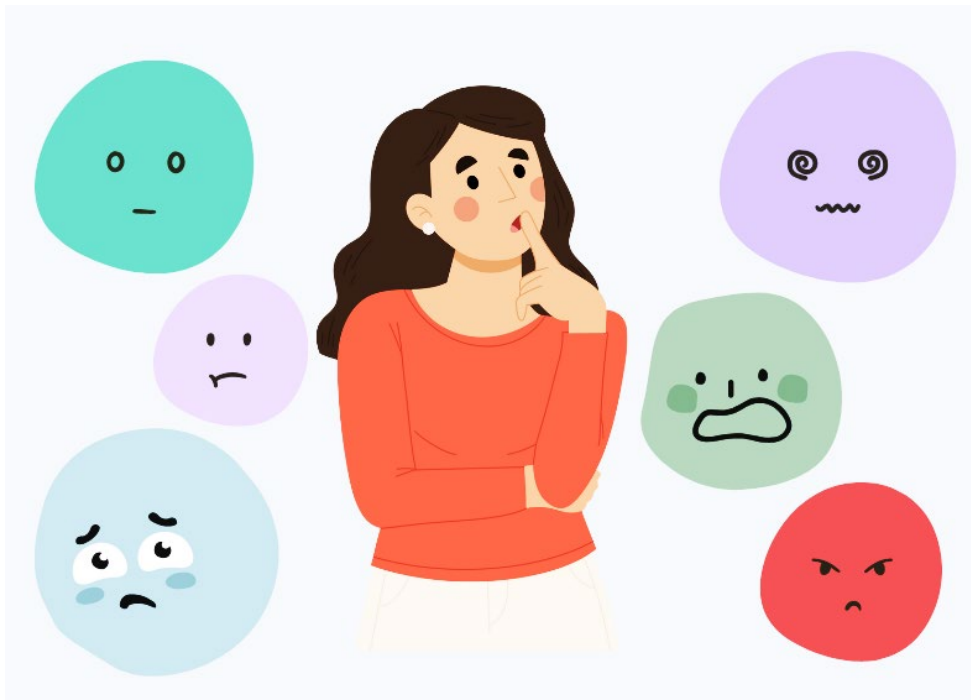
Part 1 – Learn!

Have you ever felt like no matter how hard you try, it's never good enough?

Do you avoid doing things because you're scared that they won't be perfect?

Do you dismiss your achievements and think you should aim even higher?

These are common signs of **perfectionism**—linking your worth to meeting impossible standards—which can lead to stress, anxiety, disordered eating, depression, procrastination and burnout.



Do I have perfectionism?

To help you determine whether you have perfectionism that might be a problem, it is useful to ask yourself the following questions.

Question	YES	NO
Have you pushed yourself really hard to meet your goals?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Have you been told that your standards are too high?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Have you felt a failure as a person because you have not succeeded in meeting your goals?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Have you been afraid that you might not reach your standards?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Have you raised your standards because you thought they were too easy?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Have you judged yourself on the basis of your ability to achieve high standards?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Have you repeatedly checked how well you are doing at meeting your standards (for example, by comparing your performance with that of others)?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Do you think that other people would have thought of you as a "perfectionist"?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Kept trying to meet your standards, even if this has meant that you have missed out on things?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Avoided any tests of your performance (at meeting your goals) in case you failed?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Now, add the number of "YES" responses together.

If you have four or more YES responses:

Your score suggests you might struggle with high perfectionism. This module can give you ideas to help, and you might also consider talking to a GP or mental health professional for extra support.

If you have less than four YES responses:

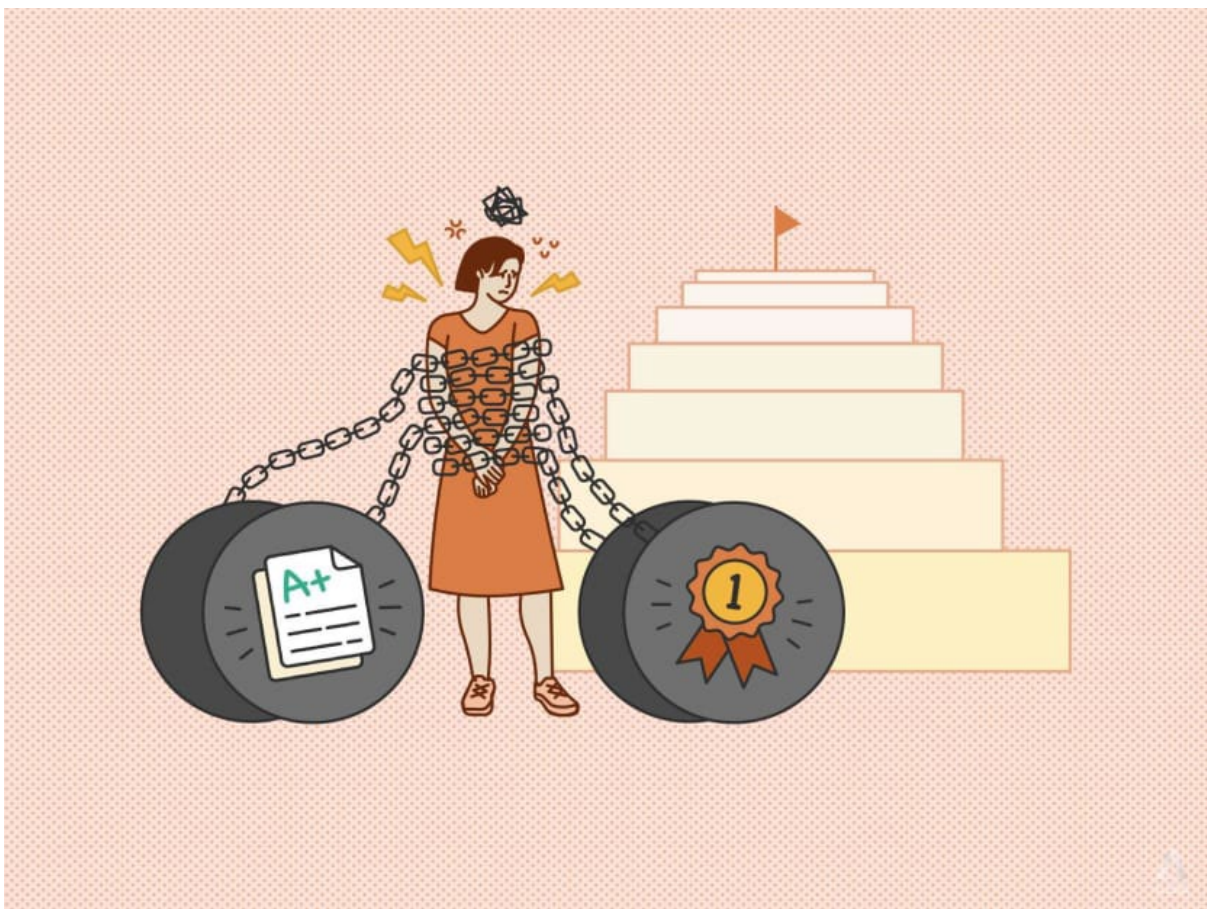
Your score might not be as high as others, but you're here because this topic feels relevant to you. If perfectionism is affecting your life in any way, this module offers tools and strategies that could still be helpful.

Let's take a closer look at perfectionism

Have you ever thought, "Perfectionism isn't so bad"? Maybe you enjoy aiming high, are naturally talented, or simply care about doing your best in everything you do.






Perfectionism might have helped you achieve a lot and make you feel good in a lot of situations. It's natural to want to keep those strengths since they've helped you succeed.

In Part 1, you'll learn about the downsides of perfectionism and think about whether your high standards are really helping you.



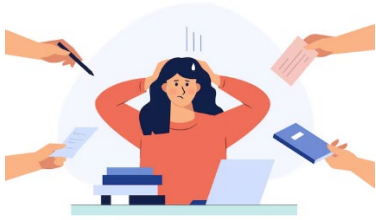



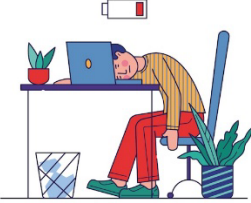
Let's look at how perfectionism has worked for you!

What are the positives or things you like about your perfectionism?

	Work/Study:	<input type="checkbox"/> Good grades or performance reports <input type="checkbox"/> Help me make money <input type="checkbox"/> Promotions at work <input type="checkbox"/> Praise from teachers, coaches or bosses <input type="checkbox"/> Other:
	Social:	<input type="checkbox"/> Avoid social contact so more time can be spent working on meaningful tasks <input type="checkbox"/> Praise and admiration from peers <input type="checkbox"/> Other:
	Cognitive:	<input type="checkbox"/> Keeps me motivated <input type="checkbox"/> Gets me into a competitive mindset <input type="checkbox"/> Helps me focus <input type="checkbox"/> Other:
	Physical:	<input type="checkbox"/> Keeps me in good shape from excessive physical training or dietary restrictions <input type="checkbox"/> Helps me look good (e.g., skilled at applying make-up, wearing fashionable clothes etc.) <input type="checkbox"/> Other:
	Organization	<input type="checkbox"/> Keep copious “to do” lists <input type="checkbox"/> Keep many organization files, excel sheets, colour coding systems <input type="checkbox"/> Spend hours organizing and reorganizing documents <input type="checkbox"/> Other:

Perfectionism helps us in many aspects of our lives, so it doesn't feel all bad. Otherwise, it would probably be a whole lot easier to give up! However, sometimes perfectionism can cause problems as well.

What are the negatives or things you don't like about your perfectionism?

	Emotional:	<input type="checkbox"/> Feeling stressed <input type="checkbox"/> Feeling anxious <input type="checkbox"/> Lack of sense of achievement <input type="checkbox"/> Feeling depressed <input type="checkbox"/> Low self-esteem
	Social:	<input type="checkbox"/> Spending so much time and energy on achieving goals that you miss out on socializing and connecting with others <input type="checkbox"/> Get frustrated when others don't meet your standards <input type="checkbox"/> People might find it hard to get along with you because you're so focused on reaching high standards <input type="checkbox"/> Feeling anxious about making mistakes or seeming boring in social situations
	Cognitive:	<input type="checkbox"/> Constant self-criticism or negative thinking <input type="checkbox"/> Poor concentration <input type="checkbox"/> Forgetfulness <input type="checkbox"/> Rumination (dwelling on something frequently)
	Behavioural:	<input type="checkbox"/> Procrastination <input type="checkbox"/> Constantly check things, like comparing your work to others, asking for reassurance from teachers or bosses, or watching people's faces to see how you're doing socially.
	Physical:	<input type="checkbox"/> Poor sleep and night-time rumination <input type="checkbox"/> Exhaustion <input type="checkbox"/> Muscle strains <input type="checkbox"/> Headaches <input type="checkbox"/> Upset stomach

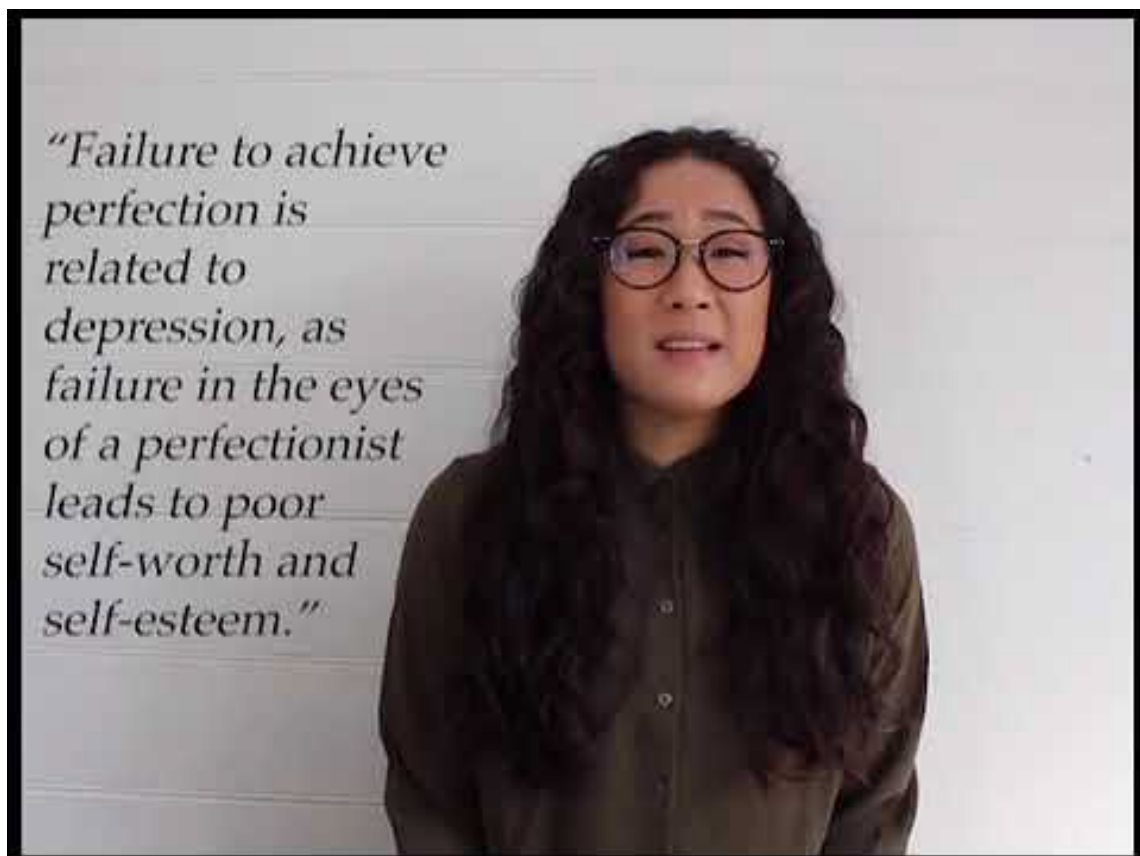
You might have not noticed that there were some downsides of having really high standards that you can't reach.

Looking at the two lists above, what do you think about how perfectionism is working for you?

Many people with perfectionism are afraid of being average. The idea of not doing a good job or not achieving enough feels worse than always working really hard.

Perfectionism can leave you **feeling stuck**. It can cause problems in your life, but it also brings rewards like praise, good grades, and feeling busy.

Let's watch a video about perfectionism:





Annabelle's Story

I've always been someone who gets things done properly. At university, I try to stay ahead of every deadline, attend every lecture, and make sure my assignments are as close to perfect as possible before I submit them. Even when I receive good grades, I usually focus on the few comments about what could have been stronger. Instead of feeling proud, I think, I should have known that already.

I also put a lot of pressure on myself socially. I want to be seen as friendly, capable, and easy to be around. In group projects, I often take on extra work because I don't want anyone to think I'm lazy or difficult. If someone replies to my message with a short answer, I immediately wonder whether I annoyed them or said something wrong.

Sometimes I look at other students who seem relaxed about grades, friendships, and the future, and I wish I could be more like them. I tell myself it shouldn't matter so much, but it does. The constant need to do well and be liked leaves me exhausted, tense, and unsure whether I'm ever doing enough.

What advice would you give to Annabelle?

The high achiever vs the perfectionist

You may ask, *are you saying I can't have high standards?* **NO, not at all** – aiming to achieve is healthy. However, doing this in a perfectionistic way damages your mental health, including your eating. Look at the examples below.



<p>Sets high goals, works hard towards them to be the best they can be – each outcome informs how to improve <i>Takes pride in their accomplishments and tends to be supportive of others</i></p> <p>Tends to be pulled towards their goals by a desire to achieve them Sets their goals high, enjoying going a little further once goals are reached <i>Enjoys the process of chasing a goal as much or more than the actual reaching of the goal itself</i></p> <p>Doesn't enjoy failure but sees it as a way to get better Bounces back from failure relatively quickly and gets ready to try again</p>	<p>Sets high goals and works hard towards them but "Almost perfect" is seen as failure: all or nothing thinking <i>Spots tiny imperfections in their work and themselves, as well as in others - selective attention for imperfections</i></p> <p>Tends to be pushed towards their goals by a fear of not reaching them Sets their initial goals out of reach</p> <p><i>So concerned about meeting the goal and avoiding failure that they don't enjoy the process of growing/striving</i></p> <p>Much more afraid to fail than most people Take longer to try again after a perceived failure</p>
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The main difference between aiming for excellence and perfectionism is **how you see yourself and handle mistakes**. A perfectionist judges their worth by how well they do something, believing they're only good enough when they get perfect results. Someone aiming for excellence might focus more on the process and sees mistakes as chances to learn, not something to get upset about.

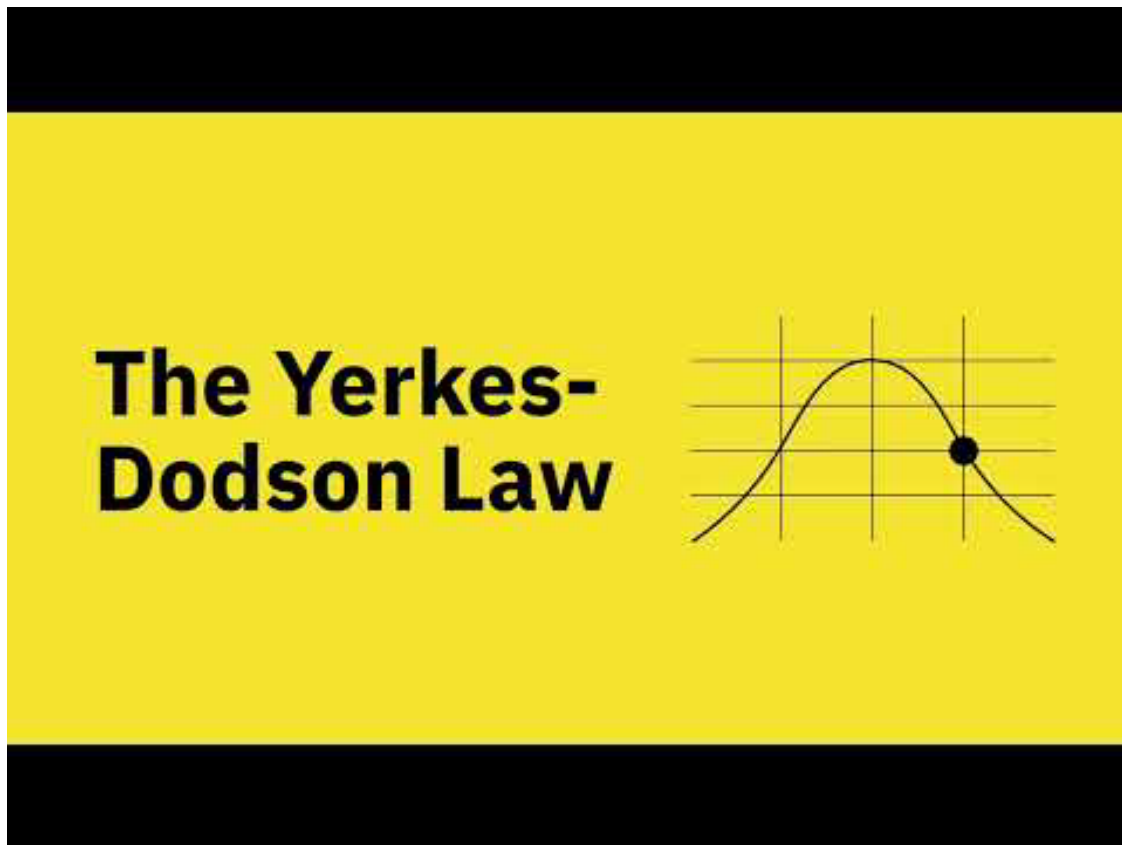
Learn from psychology research

Fact or Fiction? The harder you work, the better you'll do

Fact

Fiction

Please have a look at this video:



Would you change your previous answer after viewing this video? Why or why not?

It seems intuitive, doesn't it? If someone puts in no work, then they will do less well than someone who puts in a great deal of work. However, **it does not follow that the harder you work, the better you will do.**

Facts about perfectionism and performance

It isn't that people with perfectionism are typically putting in so much effort that their performance is extremely bad. Rather, in many cases, they are putting in much more effort and stress than they need to and could in fact achieve the same results with much less effort. At which point, effort/stress/arousal becomes unhelpful. That's a question for you to think about - experiment with finding your optimum zone of effort and performance.

Gather your own information

The information you need to overcome your perfectionism will be unique to you. Sometimes it is finding what works for you – by making a note of the effort you are putting in and the outcomes you are getting and reflecting on the importance of each task.

But can I change my perfectionism?

Many people think perfectionism is something you're born with and can't change. But that's not true! Research shows that you can definitely change your perfectionism by acting differently. This is because our brains can constantly change and adapt, a process called **neuroplasticity**. As you learn new skills and have new experiences, your brain will create new connections between neurons. The more you practice, the stronger the connections get.

But your brain needs fuel to do this! Just like a car needs gas to run, your brain needs energy from food. Eating regularly and including carbohydrates, like rice, bread, or pasta, gives your brain the fuel it needs. This energy helps your brain strengthen those connections, so you can learn and grow. Taking care of your brain with good food and regular meals makes it easier to build healthy habits and think in new ways!



TIP

Ever wonder why some days you feel totally “meh” and other days you’re on fire? Here’s a secret: your brain runs on fuel from food, especially **carbohydrates**! Carbs give your brain the power it needs to build new connections—super helpful when you’re trying to form healthy habits. So, if you’re feeling down, drained, or unmotivated, a simple fix might be making sure you’re getting enough healthy carbs in your meals. Fuel up, and you might just feel the difference!

Michelle's story



I am a Physiotherapist and own my own Pilates studio with a big social media following. My motto is, "Shoot for the moon; even if you miss, you'll land among the stars." I try to live by this in almost every aspect of my life, always reminding myself not to settle for anything less.

I have high standards for myself. I make sure to apply makeup, so I always look my best. I don't allow myself to eat anything I consider unhealthy, and I exercise whenever I can. I spend so much time working that I barely have time to socialize. Even when I'm not working, I often catch myself wondering if I should be doing something productive.

On the outside, I seem successful and put together. But on the inside, I always feel like a fraud.

What advice would you offer Michelle? Look at the description of the high achiever above to help.

Part.8. Do

Progress Over Perfection is here to help! Now you'll design your own experiment to challenge those beliefs and set realistic, kind goals for yourself. It's all about growing, not being flawless!

Understanding perfectionism is only the first step—true progress comes from applying what you've learned to make meaningful changes in your daily life. **It's time to put your new knowledge into action!**

In this chapter, you will create your own experiment to try out a new way of thinking and acting. Plus, you'll learn how to set realistic goals that keep you moving forward and challenging perfectionism in a positive way. Let's get started!

Behavioural experiment

A **behavioural experiment** is like being a scientist for your thoughts. You'll test your beliefs to see if they're really true or if they're causing more problems than they solve. By trying things out in real life, you can decide if those thoughts are helping or if it's time to let them go.



What's a belief you have about keeping high standards?

A **belief** is something you think is generally true about yourself, others, or the world. Once you identify a belief, think about a specific behaviour you do because of it. Then, write a **prediction** about this behaviour using an "If... (then)..." statement. On the next page is a list of common beliefs about lowering unrealistic standards—read through them to see if they resonate with you or inspire you to come up with your own!

Area of high standards	Belief	Prediction: If...then statement
Work	I must work hard	If I don't constantly check my work for mistakes, I will appear incompetent.
Productivity	I need to stay productive to be successful.	If I take time to rest, I'll be less productive.
Appearance	I need to look good all the time.	If I don't apply make-up, people will judge me by making comments about my appearance
Social media presence	My posts need to be perfect.	If I post a picture that has not been edited, I will get more anxious

What are your beliefs about holding high standards and what prediction can you make about specific behaviours (using an if...then statement)?

Area of high standards	Belief	Prediction: If...then statement



Great! Now let's think of a way to test out the predictions. Think about **where**, **when** and **how** you will test your prediction. This might involve doing something you've been avoiding or not doing something you've been doing.

You might also want to think about how you will gather the data you need to say whether your predictions were true or not. For example:

Area of high standards	Prediction:	How will I test it?	How will I gather the data?
Work	If I don't constantly check my work for mistakes, I will appear incompetent.	Check emails that I wrote only once, and sending it without repeated checking	Record the number of people who pointed out errors in my email. Write down any feedback or consequences, if they occur.
Self-care	If I take time to rest, I'll be less productive.	Set 30 mins of rest time each day of the week (e.g., go for a walk, or relax with no work involved)	Record whether you've still completed your usual tasks you've set out to do, or if your productivity dropped. Pay attention to your energy levels, focus, and how you felt emotionally after allowing rest.
Appearance	If I don't apply make-up, people will judge me by making comments about my appearance	I will pick 3 days of the week where I will not apply any make up.	Record the number of people who commented on my lack-up make-up, or whether I look bad.
Social media presence	If I post a picture that has not been edited, I will get more anxious	Post an unedited picture within 5 minutes that I would normally spend a long time editing/writing captions	Record my anxiety before and after posting and during the day to see how that made me feel.

You can now design your behavioural experiment below:

Area of high standards	Prediction	How will I test it?	How will I gather the data?

Great! This week you will conduct this behavioural experiment. **Come back again next week to write down your observations and data!**

We need your help!

We presented these materials to people attending our eating disorder service previously. Here are some of the things they said when they get to this point. Can you help us come up with something helpful to say to them?

People said...	How would you respond?
<i>"I know I need to stop obsessing over every little detail, but I just can't shake this feeling that I'm going to mess everything up if I try something new." – Jessica</i>	
<i>"Every time I think about doing this experiment, my mind races with "what-ifs". I keep telling myself it's easier to stay stuck in my perfectionism." – Mark</i>	
<i>"I feel embarrassed for even writing these behaviours down. It is so silly. I know other people are not like me. I'm weird. " – Priya</i>	
<i>"I know everyone says to give it a shot, but let's be real—I already know how it's going to play out. Why should I bother pretending it'll be any different?" – Tom</i>	

Reflection

Take a moment to reflect on your experience. Use the space below to jot down your thoughts.

- Did what happened match your original prediction, or did it surprise you?
- What do you think your results mean?
- What's the biggest lesson you learned from trying this out?

This is your chance to look at the "data" from your experiment like a scientist and figure out what it's telling you. What new insights did you discover?

What others said...



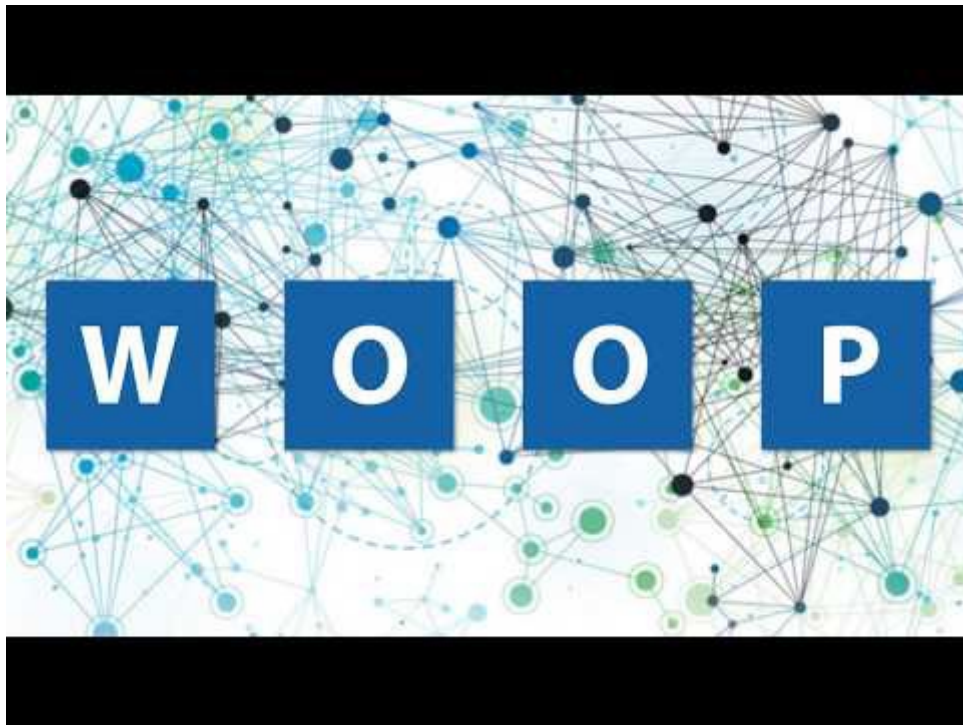
"My original prediction was that I'd miss something important if I didn't check my work multiple times. The data showed that this wasn't true—there were no mistakes, and no one noticed a difference. My prediction wasn't 100% accurate. I learned that my habit of over-checking isn't necessary for good quality work. A more helpful belief would be: 'It's okay to check once; I can trust my abilities.'" – Annabelle



"I thought if I don't do everything right, then everything will go wrong. So, I decided to let go of "doing everything right" for a week – I didn't wear makeup on some days, I allowed myself some fun food each day, and I finished work a bit earlier each day and did something just for me, that made me feel good, like catching up with a friend. Nothing major went wrong – in fact, over the week, clients were telling me how much more relaxed I looked, and my receptionist told me that the work environment seemed so much more pleasant.'" – Michelle

What now?

You have the option to revisit this module and create as many behavioural experiments as you like. We are now also going to use a science-backed method to create some ongoing goals in lowering your perfectionistic standards. It is called WOOP – see this video for an explanation.



Making your goals using WOOP



Wish:

Take a moment to close your eyes. Picture yourself in a calm, safe place—a place where you feel secure and supported. Imagine yourself looking ahead at the next week like a path stretching before you. At the end of this path is your wish. Now, think about your wish in **changing your unrealistic, demanding standards**. What do you truly want for yourself?

As you name your wish in 3-6 words, imagine writing it in glowing letters on a sign at the end of your path. Keep it in the front of your mind as you move forward in this exercise.

Name your wish in 3-6 words.

Outcome:

Now imagine yourself achieving this wish. Picture the scene in vivid detail—where are you, what are you doing, and how do you feel? Maybe you feel lighter, freer, or more in control. What is the best thing about fulfilling your wish? Let the feeling of this outcome wash over you like a warm sun light.

Write your best outcome in 3-6 words, as if it's a title for the snapshot of this moment.

Obstacle:

Pause for a moment and think about your journey toward this wish. Picture a wall or barrier that appears on the path towards your wish. This wall represents something inside you—a habit, a fear, or a thought—that makes it harder to move forward.

Take a deep breath and examine this wall. What words or images come to mind as you think about your main inner obstacle?

Write down the obstacles that come to mind.

Plan:

Now, imagine you have a tool in your hand—this tool represents your power to overcome the wall. It could be a key, a ladder, or even a burst of energy to break through. What action or thought is your tool? Picture yourself using it and watching the wall disappear.

Write your action or thought in one clear sentence that will guide you forward.

Thank you and well done – you’ve completed the progress over perfection chapter!

