

# Perfectionism in Perspective

## Module 9

### **Putting it all together**

Introduction	2
What have I learned?	2
The perfectionism cycle revisited	2
Loosening up my unrelenting standards	4
Action planning	6
My Perfectionism Action Plan	8
Maintaining my gains	9
Module Summary	10
About This Module	11

## **Introduction**

We are at the end of our journey to reduce your perfectionism! It is now time to take stock and see how far we have come.

It is also an opportunity to put together all you have learned so you have a clear 'road map' of how to continue this journey and how to keep on track. Remember, perfectionism is a habit and it will take time, practice and persistence to kick the habit and replace the old mindset with a new one. So let's look at what you need to keep doing. First we will revisit the vicious cycle of perfectionism.

## **What have I learned?**

So let's take a look at what we've learned throughout these modules about perfectionism:

In Module 1 we used a working definition of perfectionism: a pursuit of unrelenting, personally demanding standards, which form the basis of your self-worth and which you pursue despite the huge cost to your wellbeing. We looked at what's helpful and what's unhelpful about being a perfectionist, and you identified the areas of your life impacted by perfectionism.

In Module 2 you identified how you came to be a perfectionist, and learned how rules and assumptions, especially from your early years, guide your behaviour and thoughts.

In Module 3 we discussed unrelenting high standards and looked at how these keep perfectionism going, in a vicious cycle.

In Module 4 you weighed up the pros and cons of loosening up your unrelenting high standards, and made a decision to work on reducing your perfectionism.

In Modules 5 and 6 you began taking steps towards challenging your perfectionism behaviours and perfectionist thoughts.

In Module 7 you had the opportunity to look more deeply at the underlying rules and assumptions that formed and still guide your perfectionistic tendencies to pursue unrelenting standards, and were shown steps to developing healthier rules and assumptions.

In Module 8 you looked specifically at the impact of your over-evaluation of achievement and your perfectionism mindset, the way you view yourself and the world.

## **The Perfectionism Cycle Revisited**

Let's go back to the vicious cycle of perfectionism that we introduced in Module 3. It showed how certain aspects related to being a perfectionist keeps the perfectionism going.

We identified that perfectionism is driven by a sense of self-worth that is overly dependent on the pursuit and achievement of unrelenting high standards. This sense of self-worth is associated with underlying rules and assumptions that have developed throughout your life. These rules for living created a mindset that influenced how you saw yourself and the world, in terms of an overarching belief that you were required to set extremely high, unrelenting standards for yourself (and often for others).

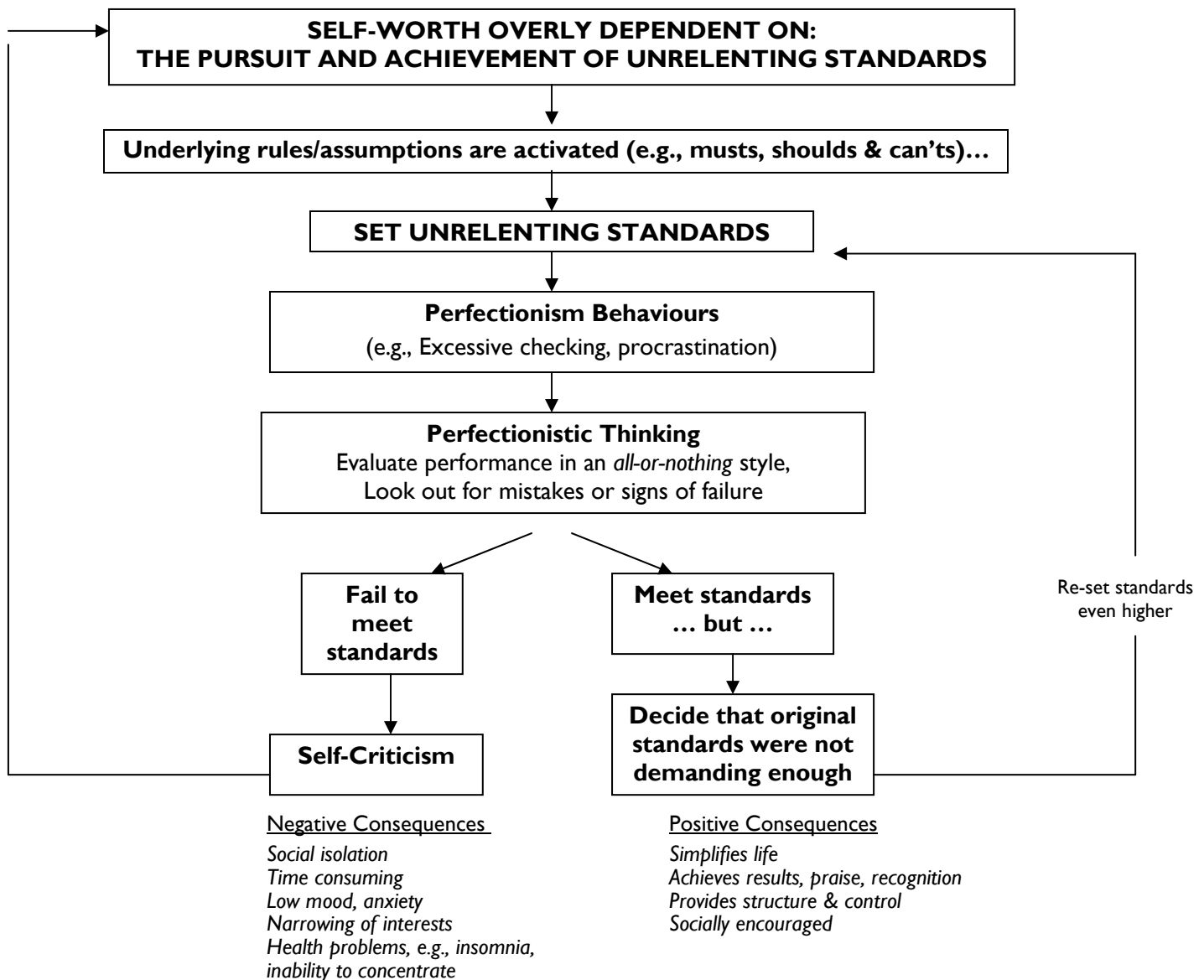
Once you set those demanding standards, you evaluated your performance – but not objectively. Instead, you tended to use black and white, or all-or-nothing thinking. One conclusion you came to is that you ‘failed’ to meet those unrelenting standards - or you were too anxious to even attempt to meet them and you prevaricated, procrastinated and avoided - which resulted in self-criticism and a sense of inadequacy. This in turn motivated you to increase your sense of self-worth by a further pursuit of unrelenting standards – and the perfectionism cycle persisted. An alternative conclusion was that your standards were met... but rather than feel satisfaction, you questioned the worth of those standards, and assumed they were not high enough, or were too easy. You belittled your success (and yourself) and re-set your standards to be higher and less achievable. Again, the vicious cycle of perfectionism continued.

No result was satisfying. The consequences that arose from your perfectionism, whether they were positive or negative, made it more likely that next time you were faced with a task, your perfectionism would kick in and you would once more set yourself unrelenting standards.



Here is the model to refresh your memory:

**Model of Perfectionism: The Pursuit of Unrelenting Standards**



Did you notice in the above model that there is no way to achieve satisfaction? Even if the positive consequences occurred, you still felt compelled to continue pursuing your perfectionistic path.

Having worked through the modules in this Information Pack, what do you now see as the pros and cons of this view of goal-setting and achievement? Write down some of your thoughts.

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## **Loosening up my unrelenting standards**

The vicious cycle of perfectionism shows us how we can get stuck into a negative spiral that keeps the perfectionism going. But the good thing about a cycle is that we can reverse it to become a more positive cycle. It's like a wheel that is moving in a certain direction, and we can slow down its momentum by putting some force against the old motion, shifting the direction of the spin into a more positive direction. Your perfectionist habit of unrelenting standards keeps the wheel spinning in its original direction, and you might feel stuck in that negative perfectionism cycle. To shift its direction involves loosening up your unrelenting standards. This requires a large amount of effort at first, but after a while and with some persistence it becomes easier, and the new positive spin develops its own momentum.

We hope by now that you have been able to begin loosening up your unrelenting high standards, and are experiencing some satisfaction from setting more reasonable goals which offer you more chance of success. Let's take a look at loosening up those unrelenting standards, and what you need to do to continue.

We realise that old negative rules and assumptions might get activated when faced with certain tasks or goals. Those unhelpful rules for living have been around for a long time, and we can't expect them to disappear overnight. Over time we can expect them to fade somewhat and not be so easily activated, but for now it is extremely important to be aware when those old rules and your perfectionism mindset become activated. Instead of being influenced by them into an old pattern of unrelenting standards, you can choose to react differently, by setting more appropriate standards for yourself (and others).

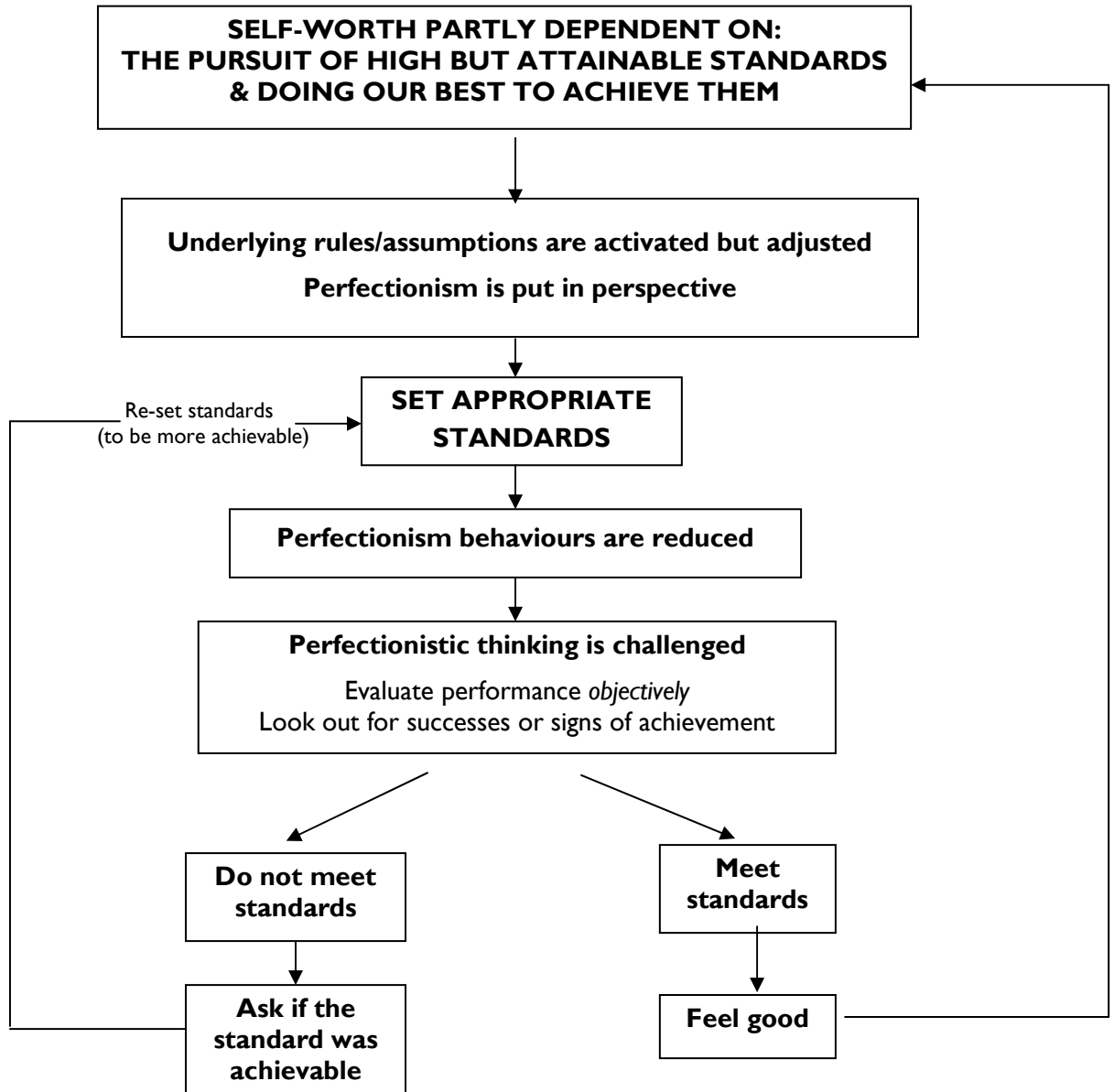
To remind you, this new and different approach to your old rules and assumptions involves the following:

- **Adjust your unhelpful rules and assumptions** by challenging them, developing new and more helpful rules and assumptions and putting them into practice
- **Put your perfectionism in perspective** by setting yourself reasonable and attainable standards
- **Evaluate your performance objectively**, looking out for signs of success and achievement
- **Give yourself a pat on the back** if your standards have been met. If they have not been met, take a good look at the standards, and ask yourself if you'd set them too high to be achievable.
- **Practice.** Keep up the good work and it will become easier. Remember, *practice makes perfect!!!!*

We have developed a new model to incorporate more appropriate goal-setting. Overleaf is a way of looking at a healthier approach to achievement.



**Model of the Pursuit of Appropriate Standards**



Did you notice that there is the opportunity in this model to feel good about your achievements? Take another look at this way of looking at achievement, and ask yourself what are the pros and cons of this view of goal-setting and achievement. Write down some of your thoughts.

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## **Action Planning**

It might be helpful to create a clear action plan for what you could do when your perfectionism mindset threatens to kick in.

**Step 1: Identify the task or standard** that threatens to be unrelenting in nature.

**Step 2: Adjust unhelpful rules & Assumptions (Module 7)**

Identify the unhelpful rule or assumption that is being activated. Challenge it by the following:

- work out where it comes from or how it developed;
- question how realistic or reasonable or achievable it is;
- recognise the negative consequences of having and keeping this rule;
- identify a more balanced rule to live by.
- put this new rule into practice

**Step 3: Put perfectionism in perspective. (Modules 1-4)**

Remind yourself of the pros and cons of change versus staying stuck in your perfectionism, and the reasons that you decided to work on loosening up your unrelenting standards

**Step 4: Set an appropriate standard**

**Step 5: Carry out practical strategies to reduce your perfectionism behaviours (Module 5)**

Consider using behavioural experiments. Face your fears!

**Step 6: Challenge your perfectionist thinking (Module 6)**

Think about using a thought diary.

**Step 7: Re-evaluate achieving and challenge the perfectionism mindset. (Module 8)**

**Step 8: Reflect and revise your plan**

Take a step back and reflect on how you're doing. Appreciate the gains you've made and don't beat yourself up for not having overcome your perfectionism 'perfectly'...identify the areas which need more work...and develop a new plan based on Steps 1-6.

Overleaf you will find an example Perfectionism Action Plan, which takes you through the 6 steps. On Page 8 is a blank sheet for you to use as you work through your own task in the same way.



<b>Perfectionism Action Plan (Peter's example)</b>
<p><b>Step 1. Identify the unrelenting standard</b></p> <p><i>I must NOT make mistakes and so I feel I have to check my work over several times</i></p>
<p><b>Step 2. Adjust Unhelpful Rules &amp; Assumptions</b></p> <p><b>Unhelpful rule/assumption:</b> <i>I have to check all my work over three times or I'll make a mistake and I'll be a failure. This comes from believing that being thorough is vital. My dad would pick up on any mistakes I made in my homework and belittle me if he found any.</i></p> <p><b>A more balanced rule/assumption is:</b> <i>I do a good job and it is sufficient to check everything just over once before I hand over the job</i></p>
<p><b>Step 3. Put Perfectionism in Perspective</b></p> <p><b>Is the old assumption reasonable?</b> <i>I think to myself that I need to check things over many times but in reality I never find mistakes, it's always done right the first time. It's just not possible to do EVERYTHING perfectly ALL the time! It's so exhausting!</i></p> <p><b>Pros and cons of my perfectionism:</b> <i>I hate being so stuck and it takes so long to do my work and we're losing money by being so slow. On the other hand I do like being thorough....but if I spent less time checking then I'd schedule more cars and I'd make more money. It might be hard not checking more than once at first. I spend so much time thinking that being thorough is important - maybe I overdo it.</i></p>
<p><b>Step 4. Set an appropriate standard</b></p> <p><i>Work hard, do my best, be thorough - checking work over once is what efficient people do.</i></p>
<p><b>Step 5. Carry Out Practical Strategies to reduce your Perfectionism Behaviours</b></p> <p><i>I'll try a behavioural experiment for my checking. I'll get my mechanic to take over the car once I've checked it over once, so that I can't keep checking it.</i></p>
<p><b>Step 6. Challenge my Perfectionist Thinking</b></p> <p><i>I'll do a thought diary for my unhelpful beliefs that I need to keep checking my work over and over so that I don't screw up</i></p>
<p><b>Step 7. Re-evaluate achieving &amp; challenge the perfectionism mindset</b></p> <p><i>I am so bound up in this belief that I must be perfect - maybe I just need to start thinking new messages</i></p>
<p><b>Step 8. Reflect &amp; Revise</b></p> <p><i>This is the first time I've really believed that I can change and I've been able to face my fears. I worked for only four hours on Saturday. And this was the first time in 3 years that I only checked my work over once. It was hard at first but the second time was easier. I feel like I deserve a big pat on the back. I never believed I could change. This has made me determined to keep on.</i></p>

<b>My Perfectionism Action Plan</b>
<u>Step 1. Identify the unrelenting standard</u>
<u>Step 2. Adjust Unhelpful Rules &amp; Assumptions</u> <b>Unhelpful rules/assumption:</b>  <b>A more balanced rule/assumption is:</b>
<u>Step 3. Put Perfectionism in Perspective</u> <b>Is the old assumption reasonable?</b>  <b>Pros and cons of my perfectionism:</b>
<u>Step 4. Set an appropriate standard</u>
<u>Step 5. Carry Out Practical Strategies to Reduce my Perfectionism Behaviours</u>
<u>Step 6. Challenge my Perfectionist Thinking</u>
<u>Step 7. Re-evaluate achieving &amp; challenge the perfectionism mindset</u>
<u>Step 8. Reflect &amp; Revise</u>



## Maintaining My Gains

Congratulations for making it to the end of this Information Pack! Now the important thing is for you to keep going and keep practicing what you have learned. You'll have good days and bad days. Sometimes you will feel you're getting somewhere, and sometimes you will doubt it. We encourage you not to give up. It will take time and practice and perseverance to loosen up the hold that perfectionism has had on you.

Remind yourself why you decided to stop being so perfectionistic. You may want to refer back to earlier modules, especially Module 3, and note that by loosening up your unrelenting standards, you are freeing yourself from the straitjacket and vicious cycle of perfectionism. Be aware of when your old pattern of thinking kicks in – refer back to Module 8 for how to 'eject' the perfectionism mindset. If you're having a tough time, refer back to Module 4: check the possible obstacles to progress that you identified and refresh your memory on practical tips for reducing your perfectionism. Roll the dice and have fun! (Module 5)

One last step to help you maintain your gains is to identify how far you've come and how your life has changed for the better. Being a perfectionist, and with a tendency to black and white thinking, it's easy to think you haven't changed at all, or not enough! DON'T let yourself fall into that old way of thinking. You will be more likely to keep going if you appreciate the changes you have made and the positive effect those changes have had on your life. Jot down some thoughts about this.

Positive changes I have made	How my life is better

You can add to this as you find yourself with more even more gains and more positive effects, as you move from being a perfectionist - someone with *unrelenting high standards* - to someone who takes pride in pursuing *high but achievable standards*.

Remember, reducing perfectionism does not mean that you can no longer have high standards and go for them. Of course you can. But remember that you can also think, behave, live, work, and play in a balanced, healthy, and helpful way! Remember that **there is a big difference between the healthy and helpful pursuit of excellence and the unhealthy and unhelpful striving for perfection.**



Good luck!

## Module Summary

- It is useful to summarise what you have learned from the modules in this Information Pack
- Revisiting the vicious cycle of perfectionism serves to remind you of the negative consequences of being a perfectionist
- Loosening up unrelenting standards still involves setting high – but appropriate - standards
- Having an action plan can help you stay on track with reducing your perfectionism
- Recognising your progress is important in maintaining your gains and keeping you motivated

## What I Have Learned in this Module

Think about what you have learned in this module and any useful bits of information, tips or strategies that you want to remember. Write them down below so you can refer to them later.

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Think about how you might use the information you have just learned. Write down some ways in which you could make use of this information.

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## About this Module

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### BACKGROUND

The concepts and strategies in this module have been developed from evidence-based psychological treatment, primarily Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT). CBT for perfectionism is based on the approach that perfectionism is the result of problematic cognitions (thoughts) and behaviours.

### REFERENCES

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