

ADHD & Perfectionism

Is it ADHD, is it anxiety, or maybe a little bit of both?

Ph.D. **Carol Ann Robbins,**

Webinar Agenda

- Define Perfectionism and its various subtypes.
- Explore the relationship between Perfectionism and ADHD.
- Explain how anxiety fits into the ADHD & Perfectionism duo.
- Discover effective strategies to overcome perfectionism.
- Learn the importance of changing your mindset, self compassion and self-love.
- Resources and references.



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What is Perfectionism?

Defining and describing it



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Definition of Perfectionism

Perfectionism as defined by the American Psychological Association Dictionary of Psychology is:

The tendency to demand of others or of oneself an extremely high or even flawless level of performance, in excess of what is required by the situation.

It is associated with depression, anxiety, eating disorders, and other mental health problems.

It is a cognitive distortion that can be maladaptive and is part of a personality trait, not an anxiety disorder.

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Features of Perfectionists

- They are quick to find fault and are overly critical of mistakes.
- They tend to procrastinate a project out of their fear of failure.
- They shrug off compliments and forget to celebrate their success.
- Instead, they look to specific people in their life for approval and validation.

Psychology Today
<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/perfectionism>

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Benefits of Healthy Perfectionism

- Perfectionism is a trait, and it exists on a continuum, much like ADHD.
- It can be healthy and adaptive when it comes from an achievement-oriented approach.
- It can be self-motivating and drive one to overcome adversity and achieve success.
- Healthy perfectionists tend to set lofty goals, have high standards, and work relentlessly hard for their success.
- They persevere and follow through.
- Adaptive perfectionists desire growth, enjoy being challenged, and problem-solve well.
- Their perfectionistic tendencies are a strength, not a weakness. They can be quite compensatory for ADHD and even mask it, making some people quite high-functioning, but it can be at a cost (as they tend to take longer to do things and to work harder than their peers).

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The Downside of Perfectionism

- Maladaptive perfectionists are failure-oriented and fear-based.
- Leads to negative outcomes like procrastination, a tendency to avoid challenges, rigid all-or-nothing thinking, toxic comparisons, and a lack of creativity.
- Maladaptive perfectionism is often 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.
- It can lead to missed deadlines, pickiness, difficulty making decisions, avoiding commitments, lost opportunities, general dissatisfaction with life, guardedness in relationships, and constant worry and ruminations.

Psychology Today

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The Two Types of Perfectionism

- Research has identified two distinctive types of Perfectionism:
- **Rigid perfectionism**, involves feeling that your performance should always be flawless and that your worth is based on being flawless.
- People who score high on rigid perfectionism tend to feel awful when they fail to meet the extremely high standards they have for themselves.
- These individuals tend to strongly agree with statements like, "My value as a person depends on being perfect."
- **Self-critical perfectionism** includes believing that other people make excessive demands of you, feeling intense doubt over any mistakes you make, and engaging in high levels of self-criticism.
- People who experience high levels of self-critical perfectionism are more vulnerable to depression. They tend to strongly agree with statements like, "When I make a mistake, I feel like a failure."

• [Renee Engeln, Ph.D.](#)

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Perfectionist Patterns

- Perfectionists tend to over-focus on the end result, not the process of getting there.
- They discount the learning that's happening along the way and fixate on the accomplishment.
- Without meeting the end goal, there's a perception of failure. Low self-worth, sensitivity to feedback, defensiveness, and sadness stemming from incomplete goals are also common. ([Sharon Saline, Psy.D.](#))
- There is also often an experience of being stuck due to the anxiety of doing it well enough, resulting in a great deal of procrastination, stress, and overwhelm.
- This is called Perfection Paralysis or Procrastination Paralysis and it can be brutal.



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Perfectionism and ADHD

A potentially disastrous duo! How are they related?

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How are Perfectionism and ADHD related?

- *Perfectionism is one way that adults with ADHD try to control outcomes, a fundamental aspect of managing anxiety.*
- *Living with ADHD means experiencing moments when you're aware that you are struggling or have messed up, but you don't necessarily know why or how to fix it.*
- *This develops into a persistent worry, "When is the next time I'm going to receive negative feedback when I wasn't expecting it?"*
- *Perfectionism thus acts as an inefficient coping mechanism for managing anxiety related to disappointment (yours or someone else's), insecurity, or embarrassment.*
 - Sharon Saline, Psy.D.
- *It can "become a defense against the chaos of impulsivity and weak executive functioning (memory, organization, planning skills, etc.) inherent with ADHD."* (<https://www.additudemag.com/adhd-and-perfectionism-no-one-is-perfect>)
- *By trying to control every little thing, it gives us a way to manage the sense of being out of control due to the ADHD.*

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Similarities between Perfectionists and those with ADHD

- *Perfectionism itself shares many similarities with ADHD.*
- *Perfectionists are often driven by the fear of disappointing themselves or others.*
- *They are "all-or-nothing" thinkers; if it's not completely right, then it must be a failure.*
- *Setting unreasonable standards and constantly comparing themselves negatively to others are common issues for perfectionists, just as individuals with ADHD often compare themselves critically to neurotypical peers.*
- *Both perfectionists and people with ADHD tend to be sensitive to criticism and can be easily discouraged when they can't complete goals.*
 - Sharon Saline, Psy.D.

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Three types of Perfectionism in adults with ADHD

- **"Perfectionism procrastination"** refers to being immobilized by worry about messing up. This form of procrastination attempts to limit mistakes and reduce future shame: "I'm not going to get started on this because I don't know if I can do it perfectly, so instead, I'm going to avoid doing it."
- **"Avoidance procrastination"** is related to a fear of failure or an expectation of failure based on past experience: "I'm going to avoid doing this thing because, in the past, I haven't succeeded. Why do I think I'm going to succeed now?" or, "I'm going to avoid trying this because I don't know how to get started, and I'm afraid of how it's going to turn out."
- **"Productive procrastination"** is a delay tactic that feels really good. "I'm going to do these other things that I know I can do pretty well and get short-term relief, but I'm not going to do that big thing because I don't know if I'm going to do it well enough."

• Sharon Saline, Psy.D., April 1, 2021
 • Is ADHD or Anxiety to Blame for my ADHD? Attitude Magazine

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Negative cycle of Perfectionism and ADHD

- *Trying to have things just right can keep you overfocused on the end result, critical of what you accomplish, and never satisfied.*
- *It's a cycle of aiming for personal excellence that increases anxiety.*
- *You're tied to a negative, fixed mindset and expectations based on "shoulds" instead of focusing on what you actually can do, taking risks, and learning from your experiences.*
- *Deep inside, you may be walking around feeling ashamed and deficient.*
- *At times, you may want something to be right so much that it becomes difficult to start tasks, assignments, and projects, and complete them. (Sharon Saline, Psy.D)*

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Perfectionism and Anxiety

- *The need to do something perfectly can create a lot of anxiety. And anxiety can make perfectionism even harder to manage.*
ADHD and Perfectionism By Tara Drinks
<https://www.understood.org/articles/en/adhd-and-perfectionism>
- *Perfectionists worry a lot in advance about an upcoming project as they tend to picture how it should turn out, setting a very high standard of excellence, which further drives the anxiety and overwhelm.*
- *They feel the need to prove their worth and compensate for having ADHD by striving for perfection and working harder.*
- *They drive themselves to keep working to achieve this standard, which can be very stressful, especially when ADHD-related executive functioning challenges further contribute to the difficulty. They do this to avoid criticism, which is often frequent with ADHD.*
- *There is often a lot of secondary anxiety which co-exists with ADHD due to stress of managing ADHD, especially in demanding environments. This can include the sense of being an imposter and not measuring up and worrying about dropping the ball.*

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Perfectionism & ADHD Outlook

- The perfectionistic outlook leads to difficulties completing and submitting projects because they are not impeccable, often driven by a vague, gut-level sense that – “with just a little more time” – the product could still be better.
- Assignments or projects become tedious because every detail is seen as the one that, if it is not adequately crafted, will undermine the whole project. ([J. Russell Ramsay, Ph.D.](#))
- As a result, deadlines are missed, too much time is spent making something perfect, and small details can take an exorbitant amount of time—such as formatting and making it look pretty.
- Perfectionism magnifies and is magnified by the core features of ADHD and interferes with getting things done.

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To Compare is to Despair

- Perfectionists focus on comparing themselves to others and to standards that are much too high.
- Our modern social media culture promotes and intensifies our tendency to compare ourselves to others.
- This often leaves us feeling disparaged, as it seems that we can never measure up. There is always someone in our feed or friend group who is prettier, smarter, more successful, happier, etc.
- I remind my clients regularly that each of us is designed with a unique set of gifts and attributes which no one else has—no one else can be you, so why waste time and energy comparing! Be your *perfectly imperfect* self!
- Own your uniqueness and all the ways that you shine!
- Just do you—you can't be anybody but you anyway;

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Strategies for Overcoming Perfectionism

- These strategies focus on changing your mindset so that you can better support yourself through the doubt and negative self-talk.
- Awareness of your self-critical talk is the first step to changing it.
- Replace the judgement with encouragement and support—you can do this, you have done it before, you don't need to be perfect, make it just good enough, mistakes are how we learn.
- Learning to shift into a “good enough” mindset (lower standard) is critical to shifting your maladaptive perfectionism to an adaptive advantage. Perfect is the enemy of good.
- Start with the easiest part first to get the flow going, rather than having to rigidly start at the beginning. Sometimes dictating helps.
- Catch yourself doing well—notice the small successes, what you are good at and what is working and build on those.
- Expect to make mistakes and be gentle with yourself when you do, speaking to yourself the way you would a dear friend or loved one.

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Shifting Maladaptive Mindsets

- Perfectionists with ADHD tend to believe that the conditions have to be right for them to be successful—they cannot get themselves to start if they feel tired, overwhelmed, distracted, not in the mood, or if circumstances are not exactly right (e.g., the library is too full; there is too much noise here).
- This insufficiency mindset prompts escape and avoidance.
- Shift your mindset into breaking down and framing tasks as doable and the conditions as sufficient.
- Tell yourself that you do have enough energy to do it and focus on initiating a doable task for a discrete amount of time. (*"I'm tired but I can re-read the last paragraph I wrote and work on the report for at least 15 minutes."*).
- It helps to normalize the discomfort with starting a task and reframe it as short-lived and tolerable. *"No one is every 'in the mood' to do work. Remind yourself that working on it will relieve some of the discomfort."*

(J. Russell Ramsay, Ph.D.)

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Moving Forward with Perfectionism Procrastination

- Creating steps for a specific actionable plan is important.
- Particularly steps for task initiation.
- Eat the frog first tasking can help you get the hard part over with.
- Creating structure, support and accountability can help.
- If you don't have a friend, roommate, family member or partner to serve as a "body double" or accountability partner, you can obtain one virtually through Focusmate, an online co-working session platform.
- Focusmate helps people stay motivated and get tasks done that would otherwise be avoided. It helps with time keeping and time management. You can do 25 min or 50 min sessions.
- You connect with real people which provide a great sense of support and community. (It's free for up to three sessions a week and \$5/month for unlimited sessions.)

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Prioritization and Time Allocation

- It is important to set reasonable goals that align with your capabilities, setting healthy boundaries and limits for yourself, rather than taking on too much to try to please others or strive for unreasonable standards of success.
- Often with ADHD, one's sense of the amount of time a task will take or how much effort a task requires is impaired, so your ability to match time and effort to the value of the task is compromised. So, every tasks is weighted the same and the goal is perfection.
- Learning to prioritize tasks and assessing their importance are important tools to help you allocate your time and effort more effectively. This helps you work smarter not harder.
- Remind yourself that it is better to get something done than run out of time trying to be too perfect and not get it done.
- Perfection is a myth that does not really exist, so we need to learn to put a reasonable level of energy, effort, and time into our "work" which also allows us to have a balanced life.



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More Helpful Strategies

- Learning not to take things personally can really help. Most of the time, it's not about you. Try to assume the best about the other.
- When you do get feedback, try to receive it as a gift and an opportunity to learn helpful information to improve the outcome.
- Don't sweat the small stuff—or you can get too bogged down in the unimportant details and miss the deadline or be stuck for hours.
- As Sandy Maynard shared: *When I catch myself obsessing over unimportant details, I stop and ask myself the following questions: "Does it really matter?" "What is the worst that could happen?" "If the worst does happen, will I still be OK?" "Will this matter next week or next year?"* [Sandy Maynard, M.S.](#)
- Forgive yourself for any past mistakes and move forward, reminding yourself that you did the best you could at the time.
- Try to envision yourself being in a productive flow state as you approach a project and see yourself doing well.

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Changing Your Self-Talk

- Awareness of critical self-talk is very important for shifting your mindset and moving away from toxic perfectionism.
- It's important to use compassionate self-talk, and challenge negative self-judgments. *The key is to realize that an endeavor can be worthwhile even if it's not perfect.* (<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/perfectionism>)
- Self-talk must be more realistic and compassionate;
 - "Mistakes are bound to happen."
 - "Remember, nobody is perfect, not even my boss."
 - "Making a mistake does not make me less than, it only makes me human."
 - "It's OK to have a bad day."
 - "Given my busy schedule, I do pretty darn well." [Sandy Maynard, M.S.](#)

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Self-Love and Worthiness

- Learning unconditional Self-love is the key to not being dependent on having to prove yourself to others in order to receive affection and approval (or avoid criticism and rejection).
- You are enough and worthy just as you are, even if you would still like to make some adjustments or improvements, as we all do.
- Recovering from Perfectionism requires us to value and honor ourselves as just as good as anyone else—not as an imposter who may get found out or as deficient and needing to work harder to prove ourselves.
- Appreciating and valuing your inherent gifts and attributes is essential to loving yourself. Try listing all the positive things others have said about you over the years.
- Take it all in and recognize that is you. You need to define yourself by your strengths and gifts, not by your struggles. Then you can also own the quirkiness, creativity and uniqueness of you!

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Meditation and Self-Forgiveness

- Journey to success of one man (now a professor) with ADHD:
- *Meditation has allowed me to let go and not hang onto unwanted thoughts and instead focus on the more important things in life. It has taught me to be forgiving of myself and to control myself when I get nervous or stressed.*
 - *This is important, as self-forgiveness plays a big role in procrastination and was a problem for me. Consider procrastination as a transgression against the self, and if you forgive yourself, you are more likely to approach the task in the future.*
 - *I found that meditation and self-forgiveness, paired with exercise, has allowed me to be a lot less stressed and have the ability to take a step back to deal with the task at hand effectively. In particular, most days before going somewhere or completing a task, I need to stop and take deep breaths.*

[Timothy A. Pychyl, Ph.D](#)
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References & Resources

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