

It's exhilarating to be at the top of your game, but you have to be able to cope with the inevitable stumbles.



THE HIGHEST

If striving for perfection is making you miserable, it's time to take action.

BY KAREN ASP

BAR

ARE YOU SOMEBODY who strives to be so perfect that you have an all-or-nothing mentality? Maybe you decide to start an exercise program or go on a diet, but the second you break your commitment, you quit. If this sounds familiar, it's possible you may be a perfectionist.

While this personality trait certainly seems desirable—a drive to do things right and succeed—it can be self-defeating. Nobody's perfect, after all. Nobody. Instead of helping you achieve success, striving for a bar that you can never reach can take a toll on your health and psyche and suck the joy out of life.

But hear this: You're not doomed to perpetually trying to live up to those too-high expectations you've set for yourself. Some mindset shifts can help you view that “bar” in a new light and stop letting it rule—and ruin—your life.

PICTURE-PERFECT

You might assume that perfectionism simply means striving to be perfect. But it's more complex than that. “It's an obsessive preoccupation with performance, achievement and appearance,” says Andrea Anderson Polk, LPC, CPC, a licensed professional counselor in Washington, D.C., and author of *The Cuckoo Syndrome*. “People with perfectionism look to people and work for approval and validation; their worth and value are tied to what they do versus who they are.”

This distorted mindset is more common than you think, says Elizabeth Lombardo, PhD, a speaker, consultant and author of several books, including her latest, *Get Out of the Red Zone*. While there aren't statistics on how many people suffer from this personality trait, there is data showing it's on the rise, especially among younger people. A 2017 review of research published in

the *Psychological Bulletin*, a publication of the American Psychological Association, found perfectionism, as rated on the Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale by college students, had increased between 1986 and 2016.

Lombardo is seeing high schoolers and young adults increasingly struggling with perfectionism. One factor that could be driving the trend: social media. “There's this fear that everyone else has a better life or more friends, and it's justified by social media,” she says. It's also more common in women than men. “Women who are perfectionists are often leaders or working their way up, either in corporate America or as an entrepreneur or athlete, and they're pushing themselves hard,” says Lombardo, who admits to being a recovered perfectionist.

TAKING ROOT

The cause of perfectionism varies from person to person, but it's usually rooted in nurture versus nature—in other words, you're not necessarily born with it. “It often comes down to the environment you're raised or live in and what somebody is hearing directly or indirectly,” Lombardo says. For instance, a parent might

People-pleasing—putting others' wants and needs ahead of yours—is an aspect of perfectionism.



applaud a child for doing a good job in school or a sport, and while the parent has good intentions, the child might interpret it differently. “Getting rewarded for positive behaviors can be interpreted as you’re only good, worthy or lovable if you’re successful,” she says.

The strive to be perfect can arise at any time in life as a coping mechanism. “When you feel like you have no control over situations, striving to be perfect is a way to gain control,” Lombardo says. The eating disorder anorexia is one example. Individuals with anorexia are trying to create what they think will be viewed as the perfect body, which is why they’re extra diligent about how much and what they eat, she adds.

Shame may even be at the root of perfectionism. “Shame seems like a strong word, but people who struggle with perfectionism often have deep-seated feelings of low self-esteem, inadequacy and inferiority that they’re unconsciously trying to avoid,” Polk says. Shame might stem from difficult childhood

critic who’s constantly picking at you, saying things like, “You’re not good enough.” In fact, rather than feeling good about accomplishing something, if you’re a perfectionist you’ll always be looking for ways to raise the bar. You might seek out a promotion, thinking that you’ll feel good about yourself as a result. No harm there. That’s normal. Yet soon after receiving it, you start looking for other external achievements to feel good about yourself because you’re not able to fill that internal well of self-worth without it.

“Perfectionists are constantly scanning the environment to determine how to view themselves, which is tied to self-worth,” Lombardo says. She calls this conditional self-worth, meaning that you believe in yourself only if certain external conditions are met. “If you’re thinking you’re not good enough, that inner critic will never be satisfied.”

These thought patterns become a significant source of stress, which can lead to a host of mental and physical health issues, such as

“Perfectionism as a coping mechanism is a way to try to assert some control over your life.” —Elizabeth Lombardo, PhD

relationships with parents or a caregiver, trauma or abuse, or societal pressures like social media popularity and likes. “Overall, it comes from a lack of love for yourself.”

WHEN GOOD GOES BAD

Of course, striving to do your best and wanting to make positive changes in the world are good goals, but perfectionism comes with negative aspects that can start to outweigh the good.

For starters, if you’re a perfectionist, you probably have a strong inner

chronic fatigue, depression, anxiety and sleep difficulties. Self-care might get relegated to the back burner, and your work and relationships with others can suffer, something Lombardo experienced with her own children. “When you’re constantly judging yourself, you’re also judging other people,” she says.

And that’s not all. “Perfectionism turns your passions into obsessions, which takes the joy out of them,” Polk says. You become driven by your performance rather than the joy of doing something.

CHANGE YOUR MINDSET

Even if you’ve been a perfectionist your whole life, there are ways to change your thought patterns and find balance. Try these six steps:

1 Dig Deep Head off feelings of failure by asking why you didn’t get the results you wanted. “Perfectionists think in terms of it’s either perfect or a failure, which then leads them to think that if it’s a failure, they’re a failure,” Lombardo says. “Yet by viewing events where you don’t get the outcome you want as data, you’ll be able to change to a growth mindset, which is obviously healthier.” (A growth mindset involves believing that your skills are constantly evolving and failure is just another step on the way to getting better.)

2 Act Against Inaction The ruminating and overthinking associated with perfectionism can lead to paralysis by analysis, namely procrastination. “Because perfectionists want to do things perfectly and are afraid of failing, they may put off doing something they really enjoy or want to achieve,” Polk says. Instead, step out of your head and just try the activity you’ve been putting off—without putting expectations on it.

3 Redefine Success Perfectionists often develop a mindset of how things should be versus how they really are. “People who struggle with perfectionism are driven by internal pressures such as unreasonable and unrealistically high expectations as well as extremely high ideals and standards, and often their happiness is dependent upon their success and achievements,” Polk says, adding that this results in a lack of self-compassion and being self-critical. Rather than measuring your success by outcomes like social media followers

and podcast ratings, instead think about how you’re helping people and making a real difference in their lives.

4 Accept That Perfect Doesn’t Exist “You might be gifted at many things, but you have to accept that you can’t do all of them perfectly,” Polk says. Instead, seek balance by pausing to celebrate the wins instead of quickly moving to the next project and accepting the reality of who you are, which includes embracing your limitations.

5 Grab Stress by the HELM When you’re experiencing high amounts of stress, what Lombardo calls the red zone, you tend to think more negatively and judge yourself more. To get out of the red zone, follow HELM: halt anything going in (food) or coming out (words) of your mouth, exercise, laugh (because it’s the best medicine) and listen to music. “Getting out of the red zone will help you think more rationally,” she says. Do this at least three times a day for five minutes at a time.

6 Seek Help It’s especially important if perfectionism is destroying your life, causing issues in your relationships and starting to impact your mood, health and sleep. In Lombardo’s case, she would get mad at her kids when they were young for not scoring 100% on tests, which she interpreted as failing as a parent. A therapist can help you work through why you have these tendencies and how to give yourself a break.

Learning to embrace your successes and understand that you are enough takes work, but it’s worth it, something Lombardo knows firsthand. “When I stopped beating myself up so much, I became a better speaker, writer and clinician,” she says.

8 Questions to Reveal Your Hidden Perfectionist

Did you get a familiar but somewhat uneasy feeling while reading the story here? If you’re worried you may have some perfectionist tendencies, ask yourself these questions:

	YES	NO
Do you often think that if you can’t do something perfectly, why even bother?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are you always comparing yourself to others?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Is fear of failure causing you to procrastinate doing something you’ve wanted to accomplish?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Do you often replay a past “mistake” over and over?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Do you avoid putting yourself out there (like for a job promotion) because you’re scared of failing?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Do you find it difficult to receive compliments or celebrate your successes?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Do you struggle to have fun and relax?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are you always setting the bar higher, even though you’ve just achieved something?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

If you have more yeses than nos, see “Change Your Mindset,” at left, and consider speaking with a counselor or therapist who can help you identify whether perfectionism is negatively impacting your life and help you to switch course before it derails you.



Being too critical of others may be your way of trying to keep them from grabbing the glory you crave.