

# What is a "PERFECTIONIST"?

## BACKGROUND

Perfectionist is a word used by many to describe themselves and others, though whether they intend this as a compliment or insult depends on their personal construct of perfectionist. International research links perfectionism with high achievement, but also with school refusal, mental health issues and suicide. If schools and families perceive perfectionism positively, they are likely to directly or indirectly reinforce it, potentially putting students at risk of mental ill health. The current Participatory Action Research study aimed to find out how a sample of students, staff and parents in UK secondary schools construct perfectionism and how this might shape their behaviour (Phase One). It also aimed to produce and provisionally evaluate guidance for schools and families to support the emotional wellbeing of these students (Phase Two).

## PARTICIPANTS

**Phase 1:** 17 Year 9 and 10 students (11 girls, 6 boys), 9 parents, 6 teachers from 4 UK secondary schools; an independent girls' grammar; an independent boys' grammar, an 'Outstanding' Academy and an 'Outstanding' comprehensive.

**Phase 2:** art psychotherapist, CAMHS Psychiatrist, CBT therapist, Integrative Counsellor, 3 Educational Psychologists, 2 Mental Health Nurses (plus Phase 1 participants).

## METHOD

**Phase 1:** Semi-structured interviews were carried out with each participant, using Personal Construct Psychology ('successful/not successful', 'happy/not happy', 'perfectionist/not perfectionist'), Dynamic Assessment (adapted Rey-Osterrieth Complex Figure Test) and Projective Techniques (e.g. identifying a perfectionist in the Blob classroom) to ascertain participant knowledge, understanding and 'level' of perfectionism (researcher assessment based loosely upon an amalgamation of published rating scales). Interviews were transcribed and analysed using 6-stage thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006), identifying (amongst other themes) thoughts, feelings and behaviours ascribed to perfectionists, and conflicts and misconceptions in participants' constructs.

**Phase 2:** Semi-structured interviews were carried out with external professionals to share Phase 1 findings and identify targets for intervention. These were integrated with considerations from the literature, psychological theory and identified preferences from Phase 1, to produce guidance for schools and families. This was evaluated by Phase 1 participants through e-mails and face-to-face interviews. Amendments were made and final copies of the guidance distributed to participants.

## CONFLICTS AND MISCONCEPTIONS

### Perfectionists are:

- High-achievers, likely to do well and be happy in life, liked by staff and parents and proud of themselves, **but**
- stressed and isolated.
- Born that way.

### Perfectionists should:

- Just 'let it go', **but**
- not change in case they become lazy, unmotivated and start getting things 'wrong'.
- Get help from someone they respect, **but** they probably won't listen.

### The opposite of a perfectionist is:

- Lazy and unmotivated
- Disruptive and low achieving, **but**
- Happy, content, relaxed.
- The result of 'nurture'.

## IMPLICATIONS

If students, parents and staff perceive perfectionism as resulting in positive outcomes (such as achievement) and avoiding negative outcomes (such as underachievement), they are likely to reinforce it. If they are unaware of the risks of perfectionism (such as serious mental health difficulties, social isolation and underachievement), they are unlikely to challenge it.

This puts students high in perfectionism at risk of not getting early support to challenge their perfectionist beliefs and related behaviours. These become more engrained and harder to change over time. Educational Psychologists could play a valuable role here in changing unhelpful constructs.

## THOUGHTS

Turmoil and torment  
Unrealistic expectations  
Critically comparing to others  
Lack of self-belief  
Paranoia  
Obsessiveness  
Critical messages around failure  
Self-induced pressure  
Outcome-focussed  
Over-attention to mistakes  
Never accept less than 'perfect'  
Pleased with achievements  
Driven, motivated, sense of purpose  
Positive self-talk  
Confident in abilities

## FEELINGS

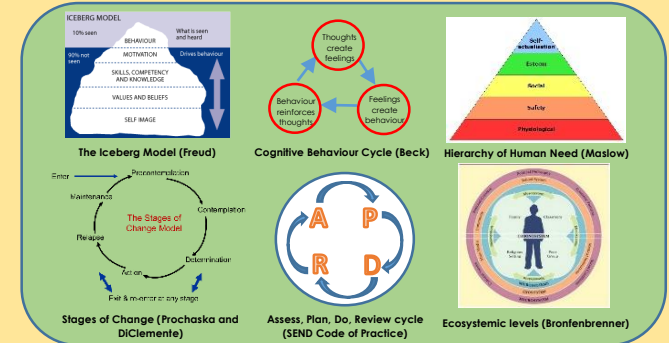
Nervousness, worry, stress  
Disappointment, exhaustion  
Apprehension, uncertainty  
Dread, panic, anger, angst  
Annoyed, irritated, frustrated  
Upset, distressed, misery  
Scared, terrified  
Confidence  
Happiness  
Validation  
Pride  
Satisfaction  
Excitement  
Calm  
Pleased  
Comfortable

## BEHAVIOURS

Cloacts  
Chests  
Angry when others disrupt learning  
Cries if things not to their standard  
Self-critical comments  
Poor sleep, edgy, fussy, fretting  
Takes too long on tasks  
Attention-seeking  
Concentrates, focused  
Improves their performance  
Works hard, conscientious  
Inquisitive, eager to learn  
Prepared, organised  
Excels  
Neat, tidy  
Demonstrates self-control

## ...and how can we support them in school?

### Considerations



### What to target for intervention:

<b>Emotional Needs</b> Acceptance/belonging, security	<b>Environmental Change</b> 'Growth mindset' approach to teaching and learning Opportunities for sensory breaks	<b>Reactive Strategies</b> Therapeutic interventions Involvement of external professionals	CBT ACT Art/Play Drama Mindfulness EP CAMHS GP Social care
<b>Communicative Function</b> anxiety-management from unmet need (cognitive, emotional, sensory/neurological, social communication)	<b>Reinforcement</b> Individual support plan, including review and recognition of progress Home-school communication		
<b>Teaching New Skills</b> Coping skills (including communication, self-esteem, problem-solving, planning, emotion regulation)			

### The research produced and evaluated the following guidance:

<b>STAFF</b> ➢ School guidance pack, including: ➢ INSET presentation (to be delivered by school staff or EP) ➢ Guidance booklet (theory, interventions, resources) ➢ Staffroom poster ➢ Staff 'top tips' crib sheet ➢ Case study handout	<b>PARENTS</b> ➢ Presentation (to be delivered by school staff or EP) ➢ Leaflet ➢ Social Media page	<b>STUDENTS</b> ➢ Assembly (to be delivered by school staff or EP) ➢ Leaflet ➢ Personal pocket/wallet card ➢ Worksheet (to identify targets) ➢ Strategy booklet ➢ Social Media page
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## CONCLUSIONS

- ✓ Participants were pleased with the final guidance and felt they had personally benefited from both the process and product.
- ✓ Constructs around perfectionism were altered; the word OPTIMALIST (Ben-Shahar, 2009) was added to participants' vocabularies to describe a healthy, adaptive and desirable opposite of a PERFECTIONIST.
- ✓ There is a role for the Educational Psychologist in supporting schools to better meet the social, emotional and mental health needs of students high in perfectionism through raising awareness of the construct, students' needs and supporting schools to personalise interventions to the individual, including improving systemic policy, practice and culture.
- ✓ Students identifying as high in perfectionism felt their voice had been heard.

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"Exploring and challenging perfectionism in four high-achieving UK secondary schools"

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