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Pocket guide to Perfectionism.

- Perfectionism makes us ANXIOUS – our best is never good enough and falling short of perfection is experienced as failure.

Are you a perfectionist? Do you suffer from the following traits....?

- All or nothing thinking eg if something goes wrong “its all bad”
- Overly critical – even small things. Hard to feel satisfied
- Driven more by fear of failure than wish to succeed
- Focussed on outcome – not process ie mood is tied to results
- Feel down/depressed when high expectations not met
- Procrastination – starting a job creates anxiety when the risk of failure is high
- Quick to defensiveness – avoiding shame
- Low self esteem

Important distinction between Perfectionists and High Achievers

Striving for excellence has a focus on doing your best, enjoying the process, mistakes are seen as a learning opportunity and although disappointing – recovery is quick.

Perfectionism focusses on the outcome – the process is often stressful, pressured and steeped in anxiety and fear of failure. Mistakes are seen as evidence of unworthiness “I’m not good enough” .

Five steps to overcome perfectionism.

Acceptance combined with positive Action –

1. **Mindfulness:** Start noticing your perfectionist thoughts and feelings, self critical thoughts etc jot them down if possible. This will make you aware of your tendencies.
2. **Acceptance:** Try not to judge yourself – this is your tendency and there is most likely good reasons for it eg your family story and life experience have taught you to be this way in order to survive. You don’t have to like, it but acceptance will immediately reduce tension and anxiety.
3. **Self Compassion:** Kindness and reassurance helps all of us when we are unhappy, scared or miserable. Everyone makes mistakes, no one on this planet is perfect. Learn to be kind to yourself – it will radically change your internal world. Try saying something kind to yourself with a soothing gesture (eg hand on heart) “I know I can get really critical of myself when I am stressed, its OK, I am doing my best”. Self Compassion is a learned skill (See Pocket notes on Self Compassion)

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4. **Develop a positive focus:** This will feel weird as Perfectionism has a strong negative (critical) focus. Try noticing what you have done well, and practice praising yourself. Keep a notebook and be disciplined – write five things every day that you have done well. Choose things you can believe about yourself and focus on effort not outcome. Some people also find it helpful to use encouragement and supportive phrases to coach themselves through a difficult moment eg when trying to resist having a glass of wine at the end of the day actually stop, check in with yourself (how does my body feel?) relax any tension and commit to the self control process by saying quietly to yourself “This is good, I’m doing well, it’s hard to resist but I’m really pleased that I noticed in time and I’m managing really well at the moment.” Etc
5. **Take baby steps:** This will feel weird too as Perfectionists tend to set the bar very very high. Do the opposite – make it really easy. Eg rather than say I have to get up at 6.00 am for a run every day this week, you could try saying “I’m going to get to bed on time and put my running gear by my bed. When my alarm goes at 6.00 am all I have to do is put it on and go for a walk” often this way you can “coax” yourself into meeting your goals.

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