

Overcoming the Power of Perfectionism



KIMBERLY MORROW, LCSW

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FEAR
KILLS MORE
DREAMS THAN
FAILURE

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Components of Perfectionism

1. **Desire to do well** (that becomes a rule you have to follow)
-Perfectionists keep raising the bar so that success is constantly out of reach
2. **Fear of failure**
-Experiential Avoidance: fear of the uncomfortable feelings of failure
3. **Self Criticism**
-If I do fail, then I will beat myself up
4. **Behavioral response**
-avoiding, resisting, hiding from the distressing experience. Work harder, stay up later, procrastinate
5. **Consequences**
-Problems in academic life, social life, burn out, exhaustion, life is getting smaller

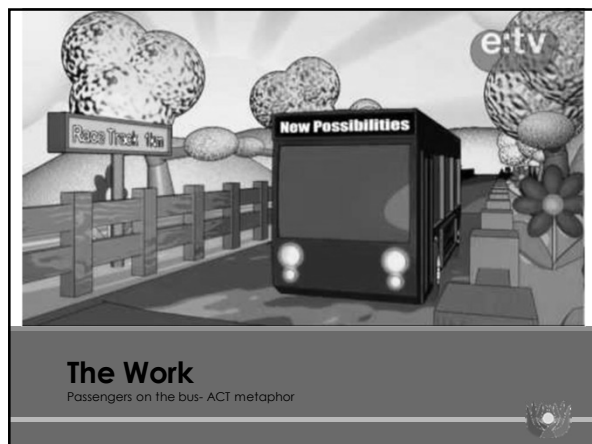


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One teen's experience....



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Inner Critic

- Bad motivational speaker
- Function: to protect us from failing and looking stupid
- 2 teachers' metaphor

When Your Inner Critic Is
Loudest at Night



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Unhelpful Responses to Inner Critic

1. Believe it, and go no where
2. Argue with it, and you will have to take your hands off the wheel of your bus
3. White knuckle it, and you will have to work hard at pushing the passengers aside, it will feel relentless, you will carry hate with you for how hard it is



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The Way

Accept and Allow the
distressing feelings with
compassion and
curiosity

"There it is, got it, and keep going toward what is important to you"



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Self Compassion

Kristen Neff- the space between self esteem and self compassion

- 1. Treat ourselves with Kindness**
 - treat ourselves like we treat our friends
- 2. Common humanity:**
 - Self Esteem-how am I different than others (the feeling of being separate from others causes our suffering)
 - Self Compassion-how am I the same as others (we are all imperfect – this is the shared human experience)
- 3. Mindfulness:**
 - Being with what is in the present moment without changing it. Validate our experience and accept that we are suffering.



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Research

Breines, J. G., & Chen, S. (2012). Self-Compassion Increases Self-Improvement Motivation. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 38(9), 1133-1143.

Treating yourself with self-compassion — seeing weaknesses, failures, and mistakes as a natural part of life — better motivates people to improve weaknesses and improve performance.

As the researchers write, "These findings suggest that, somewhat paradoxically, taking an accepting approach to personal failure may make people more motivated to improve themselves."



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Exposure Therapy

Core Fear: Fear of failure. Can also be connected to social anxiety

1. Increase ability to tolerate making mistakes.
2. Decision Making: "Any decision is an opportunity to make a wrong one"
 - Practice the 100% rule
3. Showing up:
 - for things you have been avoiding
4. Decrease over functioning
 - Practice "good enough"
5. Increase ability to tolerate criticism from others



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Step-by-Step Guide to Conducting the Experiment

Identify the Belief/Fear: Define the exact fear you have (e.g., "If I don't check this homework one more time, I will fail").

Define the Experiment: Set up a specific, safe situation to test this fear by reducing perfectionistic behaviors (e.g., "I will check the homework only once" or "I will purposely leave one small error").

Predict the Outcome: Write down what you think will happen (e.g., "The teacher will be disappointed in me").

Carry Out the Experiment: Do the task with the reduced behavior. Do not use safety behaviors (e.g., do not ask someone else to double-check for you).

Evaluate the Results: What actually happened? Did your fear come true?

Draw Conclusions: What did you learn? Update your belief based on the evidence, not your anxiety.



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Example:

Experiment: Write a paper with a mistake

Prediction: "Teacher will think I am stupid and I won't get into my college choice."

Fear Rating: 85

What Actually Happened: The teacher answered my question about the paper and did not mention the mistake.

New Learning: Mistakes don't equal catastrophe. I can handle minor errors.



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Examples of Perfectionism Exposures

Deliberately making a small "mistake" (e.g., mispronouncing a word in a casual setting, making an error in a paper, don't answer all questions correctly).

Setting a time limit for a task and stopping when time is up, even if it's not perfect.

Sending a "good enough" text or paper.

Submitting a project early, even if it could be improved.

Allowing someone else to do a task, even if they won't do it as "well" as you.



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The 100% / 50% / 10% Rule

Give yourself permission to not give 100% to everything.

100%

FULL EFFORT

Reserve this for what truly matters — your core values, key relationships, and the work that defines you.

- Health and well-being
- Important relationships
- High-stakes projects, tests
- Sports games

50%

GOOD ENOUGH

These tasks matter, but "good enough" is genuinely good enough. Aim for solid, not flawless.

- Routine school-work
- Sports practice
- Household chores
- Everyday decisions

10%

LET IT GO

These are low-stakes tasks. Doing them "imperfectly" is a brave act of self-compassion.

- Casual messages
- Minor appearance details
- Social media posts

Not everything deserves your best — and that's the whole point.



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Helping Perfectionist Students Handle Down Time

Why downtime can feel uncomfortable

- Perfectionist students may equate "being productive" with being successful.
- Unstructured time can trigger guilt, anxiety, or the feeling that they *should* be doing more.
- They may struggle to recognize rest as a valuable part of learning.



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What you can do:

Normalize rest: Explain that breaks are part of productive learning—not a reward for finishing everything.

Give structure to downtime: Offer a short menu of choices: read, draw, listen to music, stretch, talk with a friend, or simply rest.

Set a clear stopping point: "You've done enough for today. Now it's time to recharge."

Praise balance, not constant achievement: Reinforce flexibility, self-care, and knowing when to stop.

Model imperfection: Let students see adults take breaks without feeling guilty.

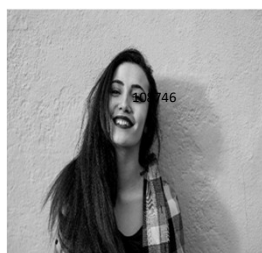
Helpful message to students:

"You don't have to earn rest. Rest helps your brain recharge so you can keep learning."



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Help students tune in to what makes them happy



• Why are you doing what you are doing?

• Who are you doing it for?

• What would you do if you didn't feel the pressure to be successful from others?

- "study bugs instead of skeet shoot"
- "travel instead of ballet"
- "hang with friends instead of travel hockey"
- "wouldn't wear makeup everyday"



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One teen's solution....



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