

Obsessive Compulsive Disorder and Perfectionism

What is O.C.D.?

by Steven Phillipson, Ph.D.

Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) is an anxiety disorder, first and foremost. It is not a thought disorder. Although the thoughts associated with OCD are bizarre, they are not at all the focal point of the therapeutic objective. The essential features of OCD are recurrent obsessions (thoughts) that create an awareness of alarm or threat. (e.g., "I might get AIDS from the germs on that door knob;" "Since I had the thought of killing my baby, I might be capable of doing it;" "If I don't pick up that Band-Aid someone else might get sick from it, and I would hold myself culpable;" etc.). Persons typically engage in some avoidance or escape response in reaction to the obsessive threat (I typically refer to the obsessive threat as a "spike."). Obsessions take the form of either a perceived threat of physical harm to oneself or others or, in some cases, more of a metaphysical or spiritual threat to oneself, others, or perhaps a deity. I conceptualize the overall syndrome of OCD to consist of three primary branches. Within all three branches, in approximately 80% of all cases, persons performing these rituals are painfully aware that their behavior is unreasonable and irrational (see [Speak of the Devil](#)). However this insight provides no relief. Therefore attempting to help sufferers through reassurance has no long lasting positive effect.

It is not unusual for people to question whether they might qualify for a diagnosis of OCD given that most of the following examples are not unlike what most of us do to a limited degree on an everyday basis. Everyday examples of OCD like behavior include using one's foot to flush a toilet, knocking on wood three times to ward off a bad omen, throwing salt over one's shoulder for a positive future, or feeling inspired to say "God forbid!" after mentioning the potential death of a living person. Simplistic tests to determine whether these behaviors cross the line into the OCD realm include asking yourself how much money it would take for you not to perform the safe behavior. Persons operating in the non-OCD realm would most likely accept between \$10 to \$100 to do something that would make them feel uncomfortable. Persons with OCD typically would not accept upwards in the neighborhood of \$100,000 to face their feared concern. Another criterion involves the degree to life's disruption. We all have quirks that take up small bits of the day. Very often, people wrestling with OCD invest hours of their day avoiding these concerns. All of us periodically hear a song (typically a noxious one) repeat itself like a broken record, playing over and over again in our mind. For the great majority of us the repetitiousness of this becomes mildly annoying, for persons with OCD the intolerance and rejection of this mental experience generates a tremendous amount of agitation and anxiety over losing control of one's mind!

The most common and well-studied branch of OCD involves the OC where the undoing response generally involves some overt behavior. The most commonly thought of form of OCD involves contamination. Here an awareness of germs, disease, or the mere presence of dirt evokes a sense of threat and an incredible inspiration to reduce the presence of these contaminants. Most commonly the escape ritual involves a cleaning response (e.g.,

hand washing, chronic cleaning). The next most common form of OCD involves checking. Typically checking involves door locks, light switches, faucets, stoves or items that left unchecked might pose a risk to either one's well-being or the well-being of others. It is not at all uncommon for persons with this manifestation to check items between 10 to 100 times. The overwhelming impulse to recheck remains until the person experiences a reduction in tension despite the realization that the item is secure.

Perfectionism is:

- the irrational belief that you and/or your environment must be perfect
- the striving to be the best, to reach the ideal, and to never make a mistake
- an all pervasive attitude that whatever you attempt in life must be done letter perfect with no deviation, mistakes, slip ups, or inconsistencies
- a habit developed from youth that keeps you constantly alert to the imperfections, failings, and weakness in yourself and others
- a level of consciousness that keeps you ever vigilant to any deviations from the norm, the guidelines, or the way things are ``supposed to be"
- the underlying motive present in the fear of failure and fear of rejection, i.e., if I am not perfect I will fail and/or I will be rejected by others
- a reason why you may be fearful of success, i.e., if I achieve my goal, will I be able to continue, maintain that level of achievement
- a rigid, moralistic outlook that does not allow for humanism or imperfection
- an inhibiting factor that keeps you from making a commitment to change habitual, unproductive behavior out of fear of not making the change ``good enough"
- the belief that no matter what you attempt it is never ``good enough" to meet your own or others' expectations

What irrational beliefs contribute to perfectionism?

- Everything in life must be done to your level of perfection, which is often higher than anyone else's.
- It is unacceptable to make a mistake.
- You must always reach the ideal no matter what.
- If those in authority say this is the way it is supposed to be, then that is the way it is supposed to be.
- You are a loser if you cannot be perfect.
- It is what you achieve rather than who you are that is important.
- I have no value in life unless I am successful.
- There is no sense in trying to do something unless I can do it perfectly, e.g., ``I don't attempt things I can't do well."

- If I have a failure or experience a set back in my efforts to change then I should give up.
- The ideal is what is real; unless I reach the ideal I am a failure.
- There are so many roadblocks and pitfalls to keep me from succeeding. It is better just to give up and forget my goal.
- Unless I am "Number One" there is no sense in trying. Everyone knows what "Number Two" is. To win is the only acceptable goal.
- If you screw up in your efforts to achieve a goal, just give up. It must be too hard to achieve.

You must always strive to reach the ideal in everything you do because it is in the achievement of the ideal that you give meaning to your life.

Don't ever let anyone know what goal you're working on. That way they won't consider you a failure if you don't reach it.

If you can't do it right the first time, why try to do it at all?

There is only one way to reach a goal: the right way.

It takes too much effort and energy to reach a goal. I save myself the aggravation and discouragement by not setting goals for myself.

I'll never be able to change and grow the way I want to, so why try.

I am a human being prone to error, frailty and imperfections; therefore, I won't be able to accomplish things in a perfect or ideal way. I'll just give up on achieving any of my goals or desires.

What are some negative consequences of perfectionism?

Examples of the negative consequences of perfectionism include:

Low self-esteem. Because a perfectionist never feels "good enough" about personal performance, feelings of being a "failure" or a "loser" with a lessening of self-confidence and self-esteem may result.

Guilt. Because a perfectionist never feels good about the way responsibility has been handled in life (by himself or others) a sense of shame, self recrimination, and guilt may result.

Pessimism. Since a perfectionist is convinced that it will be extremely difficult to achieve an "ideal goal," he can easily become discouraged, fatalistic, disheartened, and pessimistic about future efforts to reach a goal.

Depression. Needing always to be "perfect," yet recognizing that it is impossible to achieve such a goal, a perfectionist runs the risk of feeling down, blue, and depressed.

Rigidity. Needing to have everything in one's life perfect or "just so" can lead a perfectionistic to an extreme case of being inflexible, non-spontaneous, and rigid.

Obsessiveness. Being in need of an excessive amount of order, pattern, or structure in life can lead a perfectionistic person to become nit-picky, finicky, or obsessive in an effort to maintain a certain order.

Compulsive behavior. Over-indulgence or the compulsive use of alcohol, drugs, gambling, food, shopping, sex, smoking, risk-taking, or novelty, is often used to medicate a perfectionist who feels like a failure or loser for never being able to be "good enough" in life.

Lack of motivation. Believing that the goal of "change" will never be able to be ideally or perfectly achieved can often give a perfectionist a lack of motivation to attempt change in the first place, or to persevere if change has already begun.

Immobilization. Because a perfectionist is often burdened with an extreme fear of failure, the person can become immobilized. With no energy, effort or creative juices applied to rectify, improve, or change the problem behavior in the person's life, he becomes stagnant.

Lack of belief in self. Knowing that one will never be able to achieve an idyllic goal can lead a perfectionist to lose the belief that he will ever be able to improve his life significantly.

What rational behaviors are needed to overcome perfectionistic tendencies?

To overcome perfectionism one needs to:

- accept self as a human being
- forgive self for mistakes or failings
- put self back on the wagon immediately after falling off
- accept that the "ideal" is only a guideline or goal to be worked toward, not to be achieved 100%
- set realistic and flexible time frames for the achievement of a goal
- develop a sense of patience and to reduce the need to "get it done yesterday"
- be easier on oneself; setting unrealistic or unreasonable goals or deadlines sets you up for failure
- recognize that the human condition is one of failings, weakness, deviations, imperfections, and mistakes; it is acceptable to be human
- recognize that one's backsliding does not mean the end of the world; it is OK to pick oneself up and start all over again
- develop an ability to use "thought stopping" techniques whenever you find yourself mentally scolding yourself for not being "good enough"
- visualize reality as it will be for a "human" rather than for a "super human"

learn to accept yourself the way you are; let go of the ideas of how you "should be"

enjoy success and achievement with a healthy self-pride, and eliminate the need for self deprecation or false humility

learn to enjoy success without the need to second guess your ability to sustain the achievement

reward yourself for your progress, to reinforce your efforts to change even when progress is slight or doesn't meet up to your idealistic expectations

love yourself; to believe that you deserve good things

to eliminate unrealistic expectations and the idea that you are infallible

visualize yourself as "winning" even when it takes more energy, and more perseverance, than what you had planned

let go of rigid, moralistic judgments of your performance and to develop an open, compassionate understanding for the hard times, obstacles, and temptations

be flexible in setting goals and be willing to reassess your plan from time to time to keep things realistic

be open to the idea that you will be successful in your efforts to change, even if you are not "first," "the best," "the model," "the star pupil," "the exemplar," "the finest"

realize that the important thing is to be going in a positive direction

How can a social support system help in overcoming perfectionism?

Social support systems can help you overcome perfectionism if you:

select realistic people who are not perfectionistic in their own life

encourage your support system members to not be rigid or moralistic in their attempts to keep you on an honest course

have support people who role model forgiving and forgetting when mistakes, failures, offenses, or backsliding occur

have given them permission to call you on being "too hard," "too brutal," "too rigid," "too unrealistic," or "too idealistic" in your expectations

have people who will give positive reinforcement for any positive change, no matter how small or slight it is

select trustworthy people who are open, honest, and have a sincere interest in your personal growth

Steps to overcome perfectionism

Step 1: In your journal, answer the following questions:

Error! Bookmark not defined. What characteristics of perfectionism are true for me? How do these perfectionistic traits impede my efforts to change my problematic behavior?

Error! Bookmark not defined. What irrational beliefs of perfectionists do I ascribe to? How do these beliefs influence my desire to change? How do these beliefs contribute to a failure script in my efforts to change? What rational alternatives can I adopt to reduce the negative impact of perfectionism in my life?

Error! Bookmark not defined. What are the negative consequences of perfectionism in my life? What am I doing to address these negative issues in my life? How do these negative issues affect my past and current efforts to change my problematic behavior?

Error! Bookmark not defined. What new rational behavior do I need to develop in order to overcome the negative impact of perfectionism? How will these new behavior traits help me to fully achieve change in my life?

Error! Bookmark not defined. How can my social support system help me in overcoming my perfectionistic attitude? What contributes to perfectionism in my support system? What changes in my support system would reduce its perfectionistic character?

Error! Bookmark not defined. How does dealing with my perfectionism help me in my efforts to change? How well does perfectionism explain why past attempts to change have failed?

Step 2: In your journal, identify a problematic behavioral pattern you want to change; then list the characteristic negative behavior traits of the pattern. For each of the negative characteristics list positive alternative behavior traits. For each of the new alternative behavior list your likelihood of achieving them 100% of the time. How many new behavior traits could you achieve 100% of the time?

Step 3: Once you have recognized that no change can be achieved 100% of the time, continue changing your problematic behavior patterns. If you continue to be hindered by perfectionism, return to Step 1 and begin again.