

Three Types of Perfectionism

Perfection. A wonderful description of God, but elusive for us as human beings. As believers, we acknowledge the perfect holiness and righteousness of God and that He is without sin or error. It can be difficult to make sense of what perfection means for us, practically and personally, as we realize we are far from perfect. For some, Christ's call to be fully complete and mature in Him (*Matthew 5:48*, "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.") accidentally leads to a never-ending perfectionism cycle of trying hard to get it right, followed by the defeat and shameful feelings of never being good enough. Often, the trap of perfectionism sneaks its way into the lives of believers by taking a good motive (i.e., to be like Christ and to do everything as unto the Lord), but then cripples them through trying to achieve this through self-effort. While having high standards for our conduct, work, and effort can (and often does) bring us rewards, there comes a point at which high standards turn into unhealthy perfectionism that end up hurting us and others.

Perfectionism:

- Can lead to procrastination or avoidance of trying because of fear of failure.
- Often is a root cause of depression and anxiety.
- Often leads to a cycle of hurt emotions and strained relationships.
- Can be mistaken for spiritual devotion and can hinder and cause difficulty in one's spiritual walk.

In 1991, Paul Hewitt and Gordon Flett published a model of three types of perfectionism that provides a helpful way to understand how perfectionism can impact us individually and in our relationships.

SELF-ORIENTED PERFECTIONISM

Self-oriented perfectionism describes self-imposed, very high standards that allow no room for mistakes. Individuals with high self-oriented perfectionism seek to avoid failure by trying to live up to their expectations of flawless performance. It is related to self-criticism, self-blame, very high standards for achievement, and depression. At milder levels, this type of perfectionism is often rewarded and praised because these individuals are viewed as diligent workers who are reliable, follow rules, and do excellent work. At high levels, this kind of perfectionism adds emotional pressure and stress, 'analysis paralysis', self-shaming, and mentally replaying of failures (or perceived failures).

Helpful Tip: Self-oriented perfectionists often need to identify and challenge a thinking error called "all-or-nothing thinking". This thinking error leads them to conclude that anything short of perfection is a failure and there is no such thing as something being "good enough." Consider going through the online ACCFS course called **Telling Myself the Truth** (www.accounseling.org/accfs-courses) with a mentor and learn how to identify thinking errors that often lie behind perfectionism and replace them with healthy, Godly self-talk and beliefs.

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OTHER-ORIENTED PERFECTIONISM

Other-oriented perfectionism is an interpersonal form of perfectionism. Individuals with this type of perfectionism tend to rigidly evaluate and criticize the behavior of others based on how well others conform to their very high standards. Other-oriented perfectionists may be highly critical of others, blaming, and controlling, however, they rarely see themselves this way. Rather, they believe they are being helpful to others by giving them “suggestions.” Unfortunately, they end up pushing other people away and harming relationships. Learning to be ‘direct with respect’ and growing in being patient and forbearing with others is key.

Helpful Tip: Other-oriented perfectionists often need help recognizing that *the way they relate* to others is as important as the outcome they are trying to achieve. Consider going through the ACCFS online course called **Emotional Intelligence** (www.accounseling.org/accfs-courses). It will not only help you understand your own emotions and thinking, but how to improve your ability to relate to others in a way that treats them as fellow-image bearers.

SOCIALLY-PRESCRIBED PERFECTIONISM

Socially-prescribed perfectionists try to live up to very high standards that they believe other people are placing on them. Often, these individuals are trying to meet the perceived (versus actual) expectations of others in effort to avoid disapproval and rejection. Other times, this involves trying to meet the actual, but unrealistic, expectations of others. They tend to live in a routine state of anxiety, thinking thoughts such as “I think they think...” or “What if they think...”, which leaves them feeling insecure. They may find social situations anxiety provoking, be people pleasers, have low-self-confidence, or get depressed.

Helpful Tip: Socially-prescribed perfectionists need to practice identifying when they are using a thinking error called “mind reading.” They need to practice identifying when they are “in other people’s heads” and to stop basing their self-worth on their beliefs about what other people may think of them. Consider taking time to watch the brief videos describing thinking errors called **Cognitive Distortions** (www.accounseling.org/cognitive-distortions)

Christian Perfection: Imputed Righteous, not Perfectionism

In this article, three common types of perfectionism have been described along with helpful tips for addressing each. However, the most important and encouraging antidote to unhealthy perfectionism is to remember the basis of our justification by faith. Christ’s righteousness is imputed [accounted to us as our own] to us by faith (*Romans 4:22-25*) and so His perfection covers our imperfection. That is truly amazing grace! Being wrapped in Christ’s robe of righteousness allows us to live as the Apostle Paul described in *Philippians 3:9-14*, knowing that while he hadn’t achieved perfection, he was pressing toward the mark and full Christlikeness over time. This describes the progressive role of sanctification in the lives of believers. Let’s encourage one another to keep pressing forward in joy as we serve Christ and reminding each other that we don’t earn our righteousness through our own perfectionism.