

perfectionism

unhelpful rules & assumptions



Since perfectionists tend to judge their self worth largely on their ability to achieve high standards, they often develop rules and assumptions designed to ensure that they meet these standards. Although many rules are healthy and useful, rigid rules and inaccurate assumptions can cause people to hold unrealistic expectations about themselves and others, which if unmet may bring about disappointment and criticism.

Helpful & Unhelpful Rules

We all need rules for living to help us make sense of the world and to cope with our everyday lives. So having rules, in itself, is not a bad thing. **Helpful rules are realistic, flexible and adaptable.** For example, the rule “it is good to try to eat healthy food” is helpful since it is based on evidence that shows that people who eat healthily have fewer health problems, and since it is flexible as it allows for times when it is preferable to eat less healthy foods (e.g. birthdays).

Unhelpful rules are inflexible, rigid, and unreasonable. For example, the rule “I must never make mistakes” is unhelpful because it not possible or reasonable that we would be able to maintain this standard and this means we are likely to feel bad when we make a mistake.

Unhelpful Rules & Perfectionism

Perfectionists’ self esteem is based heavily on their ability to attain extremely high standards. Consistent with their belief in the importance of achieving these high standards, their lives are often directed by a number of rules and assumptions designed to ensure that they meet their high standards.

Some rules commonly held by perfectionists include:

- ◇ Fear of failure (e.g., “I must do things perfectly”, or “If I try, then I will only fail”).
- ◇ Shoulds & musts (e.g., “My house must be tidy at all times”).
- ◇ All-or-nothing (e.g., “There is a right and a wrong way to do things”).
- ◇ Constant checking (e.g., “I must weigh myself several times a day to make sure I’m not gaining weight”).
- ◇ Control (e.g., “I must be prepared for anything”).



Such unhelpful rules often form the basis for the unrealistically high standards that perfectionists set for themselves.

Identifying Unhelpful Rules & Assumptions

To identify the unhelpful rules and assumptions that underlie your unrealistically high standards, ask yourself:

- ◇ What do I expect of myself at work or school?
- ◇ What standards do I expect myself to meet?
- ◇ What do I expect of myself in my various roles – child, friend, partner, parent, staff member/supervisor?
- ◇ What might happen if I relax my standards?
- ◇ What do I criticise in other people? What standards do I expect them to live up to?



Adjusting The Rules

Generating a more helpful rule or assumption involves thinking of another way to see yourself and the world that is balanced, flexible to different circumstances, and realistic given the real state of affairs. When thinking of how to put the new rule or assumption into practice, work out how you would act in everyday life if you already believed the new helpful rule or assumption, and then making a point of acting that way. Often when we act as if something were true, we actually start to take it on board and believe it.

To challenge your unhelpful rules and assumptions about your perfectionism, there are six steps to take:

1. Identify your unhelpful rule or assumption
2. Work out where it comes from or how it developed
3. Question whether your rule is realistic or reasonable or achievable
4. Recognise the negative consequences of having and keeping this rule
5. Develop a more helpful rule or assumption
6. Plan how you would need to act in every day life to put this new helpful rule or assumption into practice

Remember, practice is very important for challenging your perfectionism. We urge you to practice, and remind you that you don’t have to achieve change ‘perfectly’ or even quickly.



For more detailed information regarding Adjusting Unhelpful Rules and Assumptions see Perfectionism in Perspective Module 7.