Reducing the stress of perfectionism

Perfectionism comprises three key parts:

1. Relentless striving for extremely high standards (for yourself and/or others) that are personally demanding and often unattainable.

2. Measuring your self-worth largely on your ability to strive for and achieve such unrelenting high standards.

3. Experiencing negative consequences of setting such demanding standards, yet continuing to pursue them despite the cost to you.

Having high standards is not in itself a bad thing – it can be the spur we need to make our best effort and challenge ourselves. And having realistic goals helps us to achieve things in life. However, when these goals are either unrealistic (and therefore unachievable) or they are achievable only at great cost, striving to attain them becomes problematic and self-defeating.

Perfectionists set personally demanding standards and relentlessly pursue them. They judge their self-worth on their ability to strive in this way and to achieve these standards, resulting in a huge cost to their wellbeing. When perfectionism is problematic it can affect many areas of life including our relationships, work, self-esteem and mood.

Ironically, perfectionism is self-defeating. When we work in a perfectionist way, we tend to focus on the outcome, the goal we wish to reach, rather than engaging in the process. Focusing on the goal induces anxiety which impairs our concentration which, in turn, reduces our productivity. In short, we end up doing less well.

Have a look at the 'Psychoeducation' chapter excerpt below from the book: *Overcoming Perfectionism: A self-help guide using Cognitive Behavioural Techniques* by Roz Shafran, Sarah Egan and Tracey Wade and published by Robinson.

Self-criticism and unhelpful thinking patterns
The knock-on effect of this perfectionist behaviour is self-critical thoughts. Perfectionism tends to encourage us to be very critical of our performance (and sometimes very critical of others). We make a habit of misinterpreting mistakes as personal failure. This rigid way of thinking leaves us little room to learn and develop our skills. We can even end up avoiding challenges altogether, or not completing things that we set out to do. This is an example of an unhelpful thinking pattern called 'all or nothing' thinking that is frequently linked to perfectionism. When we can accept that being human means being imperfect, and that making mistakes provides us with the opportunity to learn and to grow, then we are more likely to achieve more.

Focusing on 'shoulds', 'musts', 'oughts' and 'have-tos' is another unhelpful thinking pattern that is often linked with perfectionism. Thinking in this way over a prolonged period can make us lose touch with what we would *like to do* in favour of what we believe we *have to do* or *must do* or *ought to do*. The end result is that we feel unhappy, low in mood and become dissatisfied with our lives.

TAKE-HOME MESSAGE

- Self-monitoring is important as it helps you to understand your perfectionism and become more objective about it.
- Self-monitoring can include identifying areas of perfectionism and monitoring perfectionism thoughts, emotions and behavior (avoidance, procrastination, performance checking, counterproductive behaviors).

7.2 Psychoeducation

We all hold beliefs about the 'right' way that tasks should be completed and the 'right' way to behave. For example, you may think that the 'right' way to read this book is chapter by chapter, thoroughly and without skipping anything. You may have a point – but the occasional foray into chapters a bit ahead that look interesting won't do a great deal of harm. Our beliefs about 'right' and 'wrong' concern both simple everyday tasks – such as making the bed, making breakfast, tidying up and showering – and more complex activities, such as having a successful relationship. Behind such beliefs are often other beliefs concerning the 'facts' of the situation. For example, you might believe it to be a 'fact' that if you shower for five minutes then you are just as clean as if you shower for 20 minutes. You might believe that if you leave the breakfast dishes out for a couple of hours then the food will attract flies and ants. Having read articles in the newspapers by relationship experts, you may hold the view that the most successful relationships are those where the couple split the household chores 50:50. When you're thinking about making changes to your personal standards and behavior, it's important to know how much of your beliefs is fact and how much is hearsay or myth – fiction.

Fact vs fiction

Later in this chapter we discuss tackling personal beliefs by testing them out using surveys (Section 7.3) and behavioral experiments (Section 7.4). It's important to get hold of the right factual information as the foundation for this later work – as illustrated by the example of Bernie.

Bernie: The 80:20 principle is a proven fact

Bernie was a 52-year-old management consultant who, ten years earlier, had come across the 80:20 principle in a management course. The 80:20 principle is also known as 'Pareto's Law'. In the management course, the 80:20 principle was defined as the principle that 80 per cent of the results flow from just 20 per cent of the causes. Examples were given: that 20 per cent of products account for 80 per cent of sales, 20 per cent of motorists cause 80 per cent of accidents and 20 per cent of your clothes are worn 80 per cent of the time. Much of the course concentrated on a book on this principle (by Richard Koch), which describes how you can achieve much more by concentrating on the 20 per cent of the causes. Using this principle was described as 'the key to controlling our lives'. What Bernie took home from the course was that if she went the extra mile – put in an extra 20 per cent of effort above what most people did – then she would achieve more than ever and be more in control of her life than before. She had misunderstood the principle, and she was also extending the principle to situations where its application had not been researched – her own personal situations. She decided that where she would normally stop her preparation for work, she would go on for another 20 per cent of the original time. Where she would normally just quickly make the bed, she spent extra time making sure it was done properly and 'going the extra mile'. She felt the principle was working: she perceived the extra effort to be paying off in terms of
• *results, and for a long time she felt it was worth the extra time. Over the next few months she became increasingly exhausted and isolated, but was reluctant to give up the perceived benefits of putting in that extra 20 per cent.*

Bernie's belief that she was achieving more because she was putting in 100 per cent of effort compared to most people's 80 per cent was driving a great deal of her behavior. In treatment, she and her therapist began by trying to understand what was keeping her difficulties going, following the process we outlined in Chapter 5. Her belief about the 80:20 rule was clearly part of the problem. The therapist had to confess to knowing nothing about the principle, but both agreed to go and research the information and find out the facts. It quickly emerged that Bernie both had misunderstood the principle and was applying it to situations for which it had not been intended. Did this change Bernie's perfectionism? No, not overnight. However, finding out the correct information was a very important part of the process of changing and led her to test some of her other beliefs using methods such as surveys, diaries and behavioral experiments.

The harder you work, the better you'll do: Fact or fiction?

It is necessary to test this personal belief with an experiment, as described in Section 7.4, but information about the general principle of the relationship between hard work and success is important as well. How many of us have been told that we could achieve more if we worked harder? How many teachers have written a report saying that grades could be improved with just a little more effort? Is this true? Intuitively it seems that if someone puts in no work (doesn't revise for an exam, for example) then they will do less well than someone who puts in a great deal of work. However, it does not follow that the harder you work (or the more you practice or train), the better you will do. Achievement, it turns out, is actually the result of a great many factors that are all

interrelated. Yes, it is necessary to put in *some* effort; but factors such as personal interest, ability, class sizes, peer support and mental health all influence actual achievement. Putting in some effort is necessary for achievement but it is not sufficient. Putting in too much may backfire due to the impact of exhaustion. It is also unhelpful because it perpetuates the belief held by some people that they are only achieving because they tried so hard and that they are naturally less able than others.

This fact is well known among athletes, where it underlies what is known as 'over-training'. Athletes who have perfectionism will often 'over-train', that is, add extra training sessions on top of what their coach recommends. This might involve secretly slipping in extra training sessions away from the training group, and not reporting these to their coach. They have to do this secretly because they know that if others find out they will say they are training 'too much'; but they believe that they must train harder than the others, and that they will only do well if they train harder and put in more sessions than the other athletes. The problem with this is that there is only a certain amount of training athletes can do before they become exhausted and their body becomes injured. Thus over-training often leads to injuries in athletes (e.g. stress fractures in the legs from too much running) which can put them out of training altogether for months on end. So instead of the extra training having the desired effect of helping them to win a race, it can end up by forcing the athlete to stop training completely and do nothing but walk for six months. Which route, then, actually leads to better performance for the athlete? The perfectionist drive to do ever more work and over-train, or a more balanced approach to training involving adequate rest days and following the coach's advice?
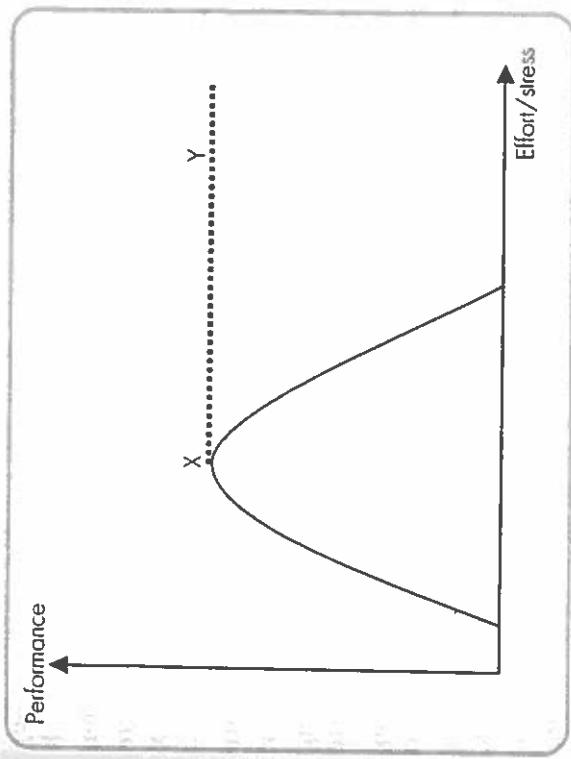
Figure 7.2.1 The connection between stress and performance

Facts about perfectionism and performance

There is a big research literature on how perfectionism affects performance, particularly in the field of sport and exercise. One influential approach is known as the 'Yerkes–Dodson Law' stemming back to 1908. Yerkes and Dodson noticed that there was an inverted U-shaped relationship between effort/stress and performance. Performance was best when there wasn't too much or too little stress. Other research has supported the idea that too much stress/arousal can negatively affect performance. The relationship is shown in Figure 7.2.1 above.

In our experience, it isn't that people with perfectionism are typically putting in so much effort that their performance is extremely bad. Rather, it strikes us that, in many cases,

they are putting in much more effort and stress than they need to, and could in fact achieve the same results with much less effort. The dotted line on the graph shows what we often see in the clinic. What is important to know is that if you are at point Y on the dotted line above, you can move to point X without any negative impact on your actual performance – just an improvement in your stress levels. Whether you are at point X or Y is clearly important to know, and the point at which stress/arousal changes from being helpful to being unhelpful for you is the six million dollar question, closely related to the question, 'At what point does healthy striving become unhelpful?' It turns out that this is a complicated question (there is a great deal of variability depending on the task) and that it might not even be the right one to ask, because the research indicates that there is no particular universal *point* that is critical. An important factor is the person's reaction to perceived failure. Negative reactions to mistakes and perceived imperfections (which invariably happens to people who have the type of perfectionism we're discussing) can have a detrimental effect on achievement. The example of Soo-Lee illustrates how this can happen.

Soo-Lee: A triathlete

Soo-Lee was a 25-year-old triathlete who always enjoyed pushing her body and her mind as far as they would go. She was a very sociable person and although not the best triathlete in her club, she was in the top three and that was good enough for her. She would not have considered herself to be a perfectionist. Her friends, however, did think that she was a perfectionist. She would dwell on every conversation that she had, looking to see what she had said wrong and whether she had accidentally off-ended someone. If someone did not call her back, she

would rack her brain trying to think of what she had said to them that could cause them not to like her. She would usually focus on something she had said, or the way she had said it, and would be highly critical of herself. This tendency to find a mistake and then be very self-critical was beginning to impact on her relationships as she was constantly either seeking reassurance from her friends or canceling arrangements because she couldn't stand the invariable self-examination that would result. She was also beginning to experience problems training with her club – she found she was re-playing her races repeatedly in her head and telling herself off for having lost time, for example by doing slow transitions, and over-thinking about all the places where she should have pushed herself harder. Her enjoyment of the sport was beginning to decrease because she was getting less positive feelings from exercising now that she was beginning to think during races about how she should be going faster and improving her technique, and whether she would get home and worry about it all night. She became less and less motivated to train, and did not do so well in her races; this increased her frustration and made her think that triathlons were not for her. She gradually lost contact with her club and her friends, since seeing them was a reminder for her that she was a failure with no friends and no outside interests.

For Soo-Lee, the facts of the situation were that focusing on her mistakes and being self-critical were having a negative impact on her performance. It wouldn't have mattered if she had trained more; it was what was going on inside her head that was affecting both her enjoyment and her achievement. Focusing on mistakes can lead to a variety of emotional reactions – sadness, disappointment, frustration and fury are common – and it is these that interfere with performance.

This information is important, because the treatment in this book is not about having to accept that you will do things less well or achieve less. In fact, it is as much about you achieving more, because hopefully you will be changing some of the beliefs and behaviors that are stopping you from achieving. It is also important to know, though, that by the end of the book your self-esteem will probably be less based on striving and achievement than at present so that you can have more choice and more control over your life.

Facts about efficiency

Joachim Stoeber and his colleagues have been interested in perfectionism for many years and have raised the important notion of *efficiency*. This is about not just absolute performance, but the right amount of effort to achieve the desired level of performance. Too much effort might be wasted and indeed backfire by causing exhaustion, low mood, and the other negative effects we have mentioned. Too little effort will be insufficient to attain the desired outcome. The formula for the rest of your life to guide you about the right amount of effort to put into each task is given in the box below.

Formula for right amount of effort to obtain optimal outcome:

If the box above is blank in your copy of this book, it is not a mistake. *There is no magic formula.* If there were, the process

of writing this book might have been very different – and so would much of all of our lives. We have to work this out for ourselves by trial and error, and much of the time it can seem like mostly error! Any 'fact' or 'formula' would only ever be a general principle – what is important is how it works for you. By making a note of the effort you are putting in and the outcomes you are getting, and reflecting on the importance of each task, you will begin to find a formula (or more likely, many formulas) that work for you in a variety of situations.

What are the facts about efficiency? In a Japanese study on solving problems, researchers found that people who had lots of perfectionist thoughts and beliefs did worse on the task than those who scored low in perfectionism. They concluded that those who were highly perfectionist were spending more time looking at irrelevant information in an attempt to be thorough than those who were less perfectionist, and that this impaired their performance. In another study looking at perfectionism and efficiency in proofreading, again there was support for the notion that high levels of perfectionism were associated with reduced efficiency. Again, perfectionism was also associated with worse performance in the task, in this case because those with high levels of perfectionism incorrectly identified more errors on the proofreading task than those with low levels of perfectionism.
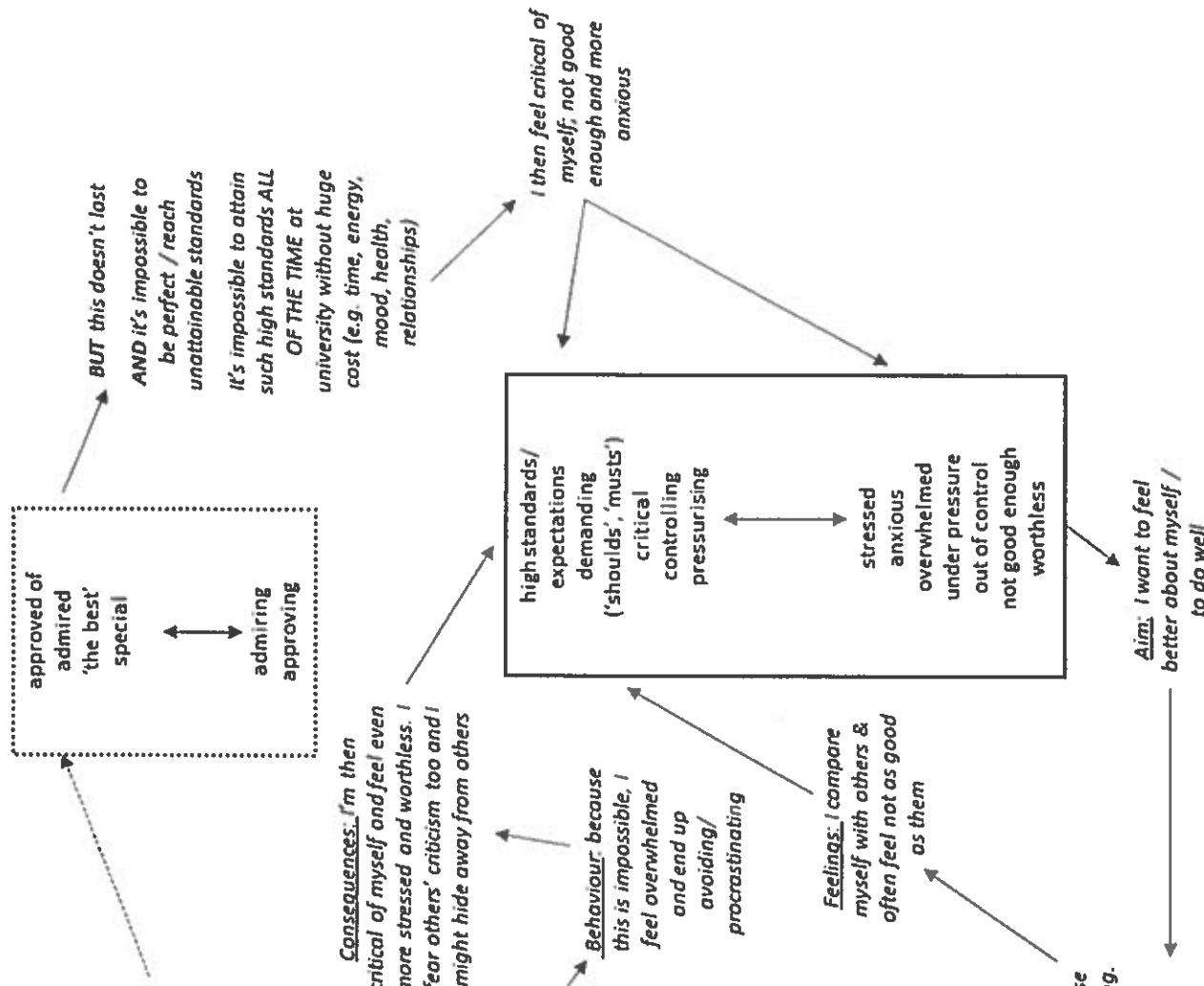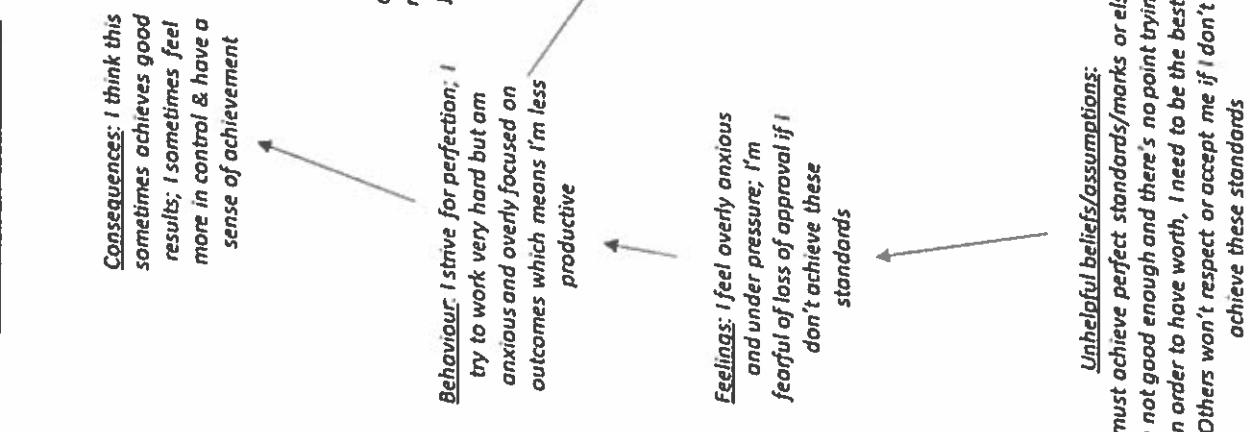
Facts about risk

In our work with people with obsessive compulsive disorder who have a fear of contamination, it is important to find out the facts about germs and diseases. For example, a patient with perfectionism and OCD was very worried about catching HIV from a cash machine. We worked together to find out the actual facts about this – how many people have HIV,

how long does the virus live, have there ever been any documented cases of people catching HIV this way? Similarly, when we have had patients with a fear of choking it has been an important part of treatment to find out how many people die from choking each year and how many die as the result of other incidents, to enable the patient to understand fully and then accept the level of risk involved. The kind of information that you will need to overcome your perfectionism is likely to be very particular to you, and it is important to know where to go to get *reliable* information. Some websites, for instance, 'scaremonger' and others just express personal points of view. Other websites are extremely thorough and medically oriented but difficult to find your way around. Use reputable websites from universities or respected national organizations. You will find some suggestions in the sections on 'useful' and 'essential' websites at the end of this book.

PERFECTIONISM PATTERNS (1)

noticing
reflecting

Unhelpful beliefs/assumptions:
I must achieve perfect standards/marks or else I'm not good enough and there's no point trying. In order to have worth, I need to be the best. Others won't respect or accept me if I don't achieve these standards

Feelings: I feel overly anxious and under pressure; I'm fearful of loss of approval if I don't achieve these standards

Behaviour: I strive for perfection; I try to work very hard but am anxious and overly focused on outcomes which means I'm less productive

Consequences: I think this sometimes achieves good results; I sometimes feel more in control & have a sense of achievement

---

approved of
admired
'the best'
special

↕

admiring
approving

BUT this doesn't last

AND it's impossible to be perfect / reach unattainable standards

It's impossible to attain such high standards ALL OF THE TIME at university without huge cost (e.g. time, energy, mood, health, relationships)

I then feel critical of myself; not good enough and more anxious

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high standards/
expectations
demanding
('shoulds', 'musts')
critical
controlling
pressurising

↔

stressed
anxious
overwhelmed
under pressure
out of control
not good enough
worthless

Aim: I want to feel better about myself / to do well

Feelings: I compare myself with others & often feel not as good as them

Behaviour: because this is impossible, I feel overwhelmed and end up avoiding/ procrastinating

Consequences: I'm then critical of myself and feel even more stressed and worthless. I fear others' criticism too and I might hide away from others

Taking the first steps to overcoming perfectionism

If perfectionism is causing you distress or is related to difficulties with anxiety, low mood, avoidance or procrastination, try the steps below.

1. Resist the 'all or nothing' approach to doing things

a. Define your goal. What do you actually want to achieve?

b. Be realistic; how important is it that you accomplish the goal perfectly? Is there any real consequence if it turns out less than perfect? Do you get any extra reward for achieving perfection? Keep in in mind that just because you know how to do something perfectly, this does not mean you have to do it perfectly each time. If there is a particularly important piece of work, you can prioritise more time and energy towards doing this particular piece very well.

c. Perform a behavioural experiment to test what happens if you lower your standards a little. Read the excerpt from the chapter below, on behavioural experiments, and test out your assumptions about the consequences of lowering your standards. Rate how uncomfortable you are before and after the experiment.

a survey. The key to changing beliefs is to gather as much evidence as possible about the reality using a variety of methods so that old beliefs that are no longer sustainable can be replaced by new, more realistic beliefs. At this point you have some information about what people think about people who present a 'perfect' front, but further information is likely to be required. Conducting a behavioral experiment of the type described in the next section will help you to gather more information to enable you to re-examine this belief.

TAKE-HOME MESSAGE

- Surveys can be used to gather information about 'normal' standards and about beliefs.
- The results of the survey will be a 'reality check'.
- The information from the survey should begin the process of helping to adjust your standards and beliefs, but further work on 'all or nothing' thinking' or conducting behavioral experiments will be needed.

7.4 Behavioral experiments

Questioning your behavior

By now you will have begun to gather some information that calls into question some of the thoughts and assumptions you previously held about the 'right' way to do things. You will have learned that some of your previously held beliefs might not be true, and the surveys will have given you more valuable information about the way the world works in reality and what other people may think. The next step is to question whether some of the things you do to help you are working the way you think they are or whether they are actually backfiring and causing more problems than they solve.

The principles of behavioral experiments

The goal of a behavioral experiment is to gather information to help test a belief about some action or behavior. For example, if you believed that writing something down about an accident will cause it to happen, you would test that belief by writing it down. You probably think that doing so would cause great anxiety and that the anxiety would continue for hours. Such beliefs can also be tested within the same experiment by making a note of the extent of the anxiety and its duration. If you believe that your work will receive a worse mark if you spend three hours on it rather than six hours, that belief can be tested by giving in a piece of work on which you have spent three and then another (as similar as possible) piece of work on which you have spent six hours. Similarly, if you're a teacher who is used to writing completely individual reports for each child, which is very

time-consuming, you might want to write more standardized reports to save time. Such an experiment could test your belief that if the reports were standardized you would attract comment from the head teacher and criticism from parents, that you would worry, and so on. Behavioral experiments are a very good way of testing your predictions and gathering personalized, meaningful information. They're hard to do – it takes courage to put yourself on the spot in this way – but if you don't test how far your beliefs and behaviors match up to reality, it's unlikely that you'll change.

Behavioral experiment to address checking

Jeff the plumber

Jeff was an attractive, friendly and sociable 29-year-old plumber in a long-term relationship with his girlfriend. He worked for a small plumbing company and was the most senior of the three plumbers employed. He had been with the company since the start and was very motivated to make the enterprise a success. Jeff worked extremely hard, and covered the shifts that the other two plumbers did not want to do (Saturday nights, evenings and weekends). He felt it was his responsibility to do this as he was the most senior of the three. Jeff also dealt with the financial side of his plumbing work – giving customers bills and processing their payments, giving change, etc. When he came for therapy he was extremely agitated, having feared that he might have given a customer the wrong change. He had contacted the customer, who had told him not to worry (the sum was minimal) but Jeff could not get out of his mind that he had made such a mistake over something as important as giving change to his

customer. He replayed the scene where he had handed over the change again and again, trying to focus in on the coins to be certain whether he had given the wrong amount. He replayed the conversation with the customer again and again in his mind, trying to detect whether the customer was genuine when he said 'not to worry' or if the customer's tone implied that he thought that Jeff was a criminal and had taken the money on purpose. This incident had taken place three months earlier, and Jeff was now repeatedly checking all aspects of his plumbing work, in particular that taps were closed, several times. He had begun to phone clients to check that everything was OK, both with the plumbing and on the finance side, on the pretext of 'customer service'. He would then replay those conversations, trying to detect if the person was being polite when something really was wrong or if they were being genuine. His greatest difficulty, however, was with processing the invoices once each job was complete. Jeff was checking his calculations, the invoices and the financial processes to such an extent that it was taking an extra 30 minutes of the customer's time at the end of each job, and the customers were clearly getting frustrated. He feared he was jeopardizing the business and that it would close because of his checking behavior.

Jeff was checking both in his actions (repeatedly checking taps, repeatedly checking his calculations) and in his head (replaying the scene), and both aspects of checking are common in people with perfectionism. For people with social anxiety, repeatedly going over a social event is known as 'post-event processing', and it can cause a great deal of agitation. For Jeff, his checking was having real consequences for his customers, but he was 'catastrophizing' these consequences, imagining the worst-case scenario of the entire

business being in jeopardy. It should also be noted that Jeff was working extremely hard – evenings and weekends – and having very little time off. When you're very tired it is harder to dismiss concerns and worries, and thoughts seem to 'take hold'.

Why was Jeff checking? The answer seems obvious – to make sure he wasn't making a mistake. However, evidence from recent research suggests that, contrary to what one might expect, repeated checking of this nature doesn't actually prevent more mistakes being made, and it doesn't actually improve memory. In fact, the real consequence of such repeated checking is that it *decreases confidence* in memory. In other words, the more you check, the more uncertain you become. This information was discussed with Jeff in therapy but it didn't take root because it didn't have personal relevance for him. We therefore conducted a behavioral experiment to test Jeff's belief that repeatedly checking helped him remember.

BOX 7.4.1 JEFF'S BEHAVIORAL EXPERIMENT TO TEST THE BELIEF THAT REPEATED CHECKING HELPS MEMORY AND HELPS REDUCE ANXIETY AND WORRY

Prediction

If I repeatedly check my calculations, I won't worry so much afterwards and will feel more certain I haven't short-changed someone than if I only check my calculations once.

Experiment

Day 1: Repeatedly check calculations as usual (or even more)

Make note of worry level (0–10) immediately after checking, (0=no worry, 10=extreme worry) and again 1 hour later

Make note of certainty that I haven't short-changed someone immediately after checking (0=not certain; 10=certain) and again 1 hour later

Day 2: Check calculations once and make same notes as above

Day 3: Repeatedly check calculations as usual (or even more) and make same notes as above

Day 4: Check calculations once and make same notes as above

Day 5: Repeatedly check calculations as usual (or even more) and make same notes as above

Day 6: Check calculations once and make same notes as above

Day 7: Review information gathered over previous six days

Results

	Worry immediately	Worry after 1 hr	Certainty immediately	Certainty after 1 hr
Checking repeatedly				
Day 1	8	7	1	2
Day 3	9	8	2	1
Day 5	8	7	1	1
Checking once				
Day 2	4	4	9	8
Day 4	4	2	9	9
Day 6	4	1	8	9

Interpreting the results

On the days that Jeff checked repeatedly, his worry immediately after checking was high (8 and 9). One hour later, the worry had come down a little but was still high (7 and 8). On these days, he was really uncertain (1 and 2) whether he had short-changed someone and after an hour he was still uncertain. It was at these times he had a strong urge to phone the customer to check that everything was OK. On the days that he checked once, contrary to his predictions, his worry was much lower (4) and lower still an hour later on days 4 and 6. Another real surprise was that he was much more certain (8 and 9) that he had not short-changed anyone on the days when he checked his calculations once, and his certainty remained strong one hour later. He had no urges on these days to call the customer, and he therefore didn't have additional conversations to 'check' in his head.

Other checking experiments

Jeff did many other checking experiments. He tested his belief that checking conversations in his head made him feel better than not checking, and that phoning clients left him feeling more certain that he hadn't made a mistake. What he found by doing all of these experiments was that his checking in fact made him feel more uncertain and anxious, and this meant he was able to stop this counterproductive behavior.

Behavioral experiment to address avoidance

Callie, the frustrated author

Callie was a 38-year-old working in human resources in a university. She had not intended to work in human resources; she had wanted to be an author after graduating with a first-class degree in English. She had actually written a book and it was almost complete. She had shown drafts of it to friends and family, who had all praised it, and she had contacted a publishing agent who told her to send a draft when it was finished. It had been about five years since the publishing agent had said this, and although Callie had done a little more work on the book since then, she hadn't been able to complete it. In fact, for the past three years she hadn't looked at it, although she thought about the ending and how it should be every day. Her family felt this was a terrible waste of her potential and she agreed. She was unable to articulate why she couldn't complete the book. Some aspect of her avoidance was a fear that it would be rejected by publishers, although she acknowledged that this happened all the time. Another aspect was that she couldn't find an ending that 'felt right'; all the endings she ran over in her head (and

some attempts on paper) felt inadequate. She felt that she was a failure and pathetic for being unable to complete the book and send it off to the agent.

Callie had three predictions that she could test with behavioral experiments. The first was that her book would be rejected. The second was that no ending would 'feel right'. The third, related to this, was that the feeling of it 'not being right' would prey on her mind for a long time, causing distress.

A series of behavioral experiments were conducted with Callie to help her build up to being able to complete her book and test the prediction that it would be rejected. The first set of experiments were about 'not feeling right'. This feeling wasn't just restricted to the book but occurred in a variety of situations. She often felt that the reports she needed to submit at work 'weren't right', and so she avoided doing them until the very last minute. For her first experiment, she completed two reports. One was completed at the very last minute despite her feeling that it 'wasn't right'. The other was completed ahead of time. She had predicted that if she submitted the report earlier, then her discomfort associated with it 'not being right' would last longer than if she did it at the last minute and therefore would cause her more distress. In actual fact, when she submitted the report ahead of time, she felt a sense of achievement about it not being rushed and she didn't perceive it to be either more or less right than the report she submitted right on the deadline. She learned from this that submitting a report ahead of time didn't increase her feelings of 'not rightness' but did give her a sense of achievement. It also reduced her worry because she found that the report wasn't 'hanging over her head'.

Callie did more behavioral experiments to find out what influenced the feelings of being 'not right' – for example,

whether it was tiredness, mood or circumstances – and to see how long the feeling lasted (she predicted it would remain constant all day, every day). This behavioral experiment was very simple: she simply monitored her feeling of 'not right-ness' and found that it waxed and waned throughout the day depending on what she was doing. After doing more than six experiments, she agreed to write a single ending for the book despite acknowledging that it wouldn't be 'right'.

Callie then sent her book off to the publishing agent – who rejected it with little explanation. Callie was remarkably resilient, saying that she felt she now had the capacity to work on the book some more and complete it properly so she could send it to other publishers. Although she had known rationally that avoidance wasn't helping, it was her personal experience of conducting very small, specific behavioral experiments that helped her overcome it.

Different forms of behavioral experiments

Behavioral experiments can take a variety of different forms. Some are straightforward – monitoring how anxious you will be in a particular situation, what will happen if you do something, how long an emotion might last, how other people might react. Sometimes they are more complicated and involve contrasting one behavior with another; for example, in Jeff's case he contrasted repeated checking with a single check. The key point about all of them is that behavioral experiments test predictions and provide personally relevant, meaningful information about your emotions, beliefs and behavior. Turning your perfectionism 'on' or 'off' and seeing the consequences is a great way to gather important information about what way of behaving works best for *you*. Such information enables you to have choices and, ultimately, freedom.

Now, using the example of a completed behavioral experiment in Box 7.4.2 for guidance, set up your own behavioral experiment using Worksheet 7.4.1.

BOX 7.4.2 AN EXAMPLE OF A BEHAVIORAL EXPERIMENT

1. Belief: I must keep my house perfectly tidy at all times.

2. Identify prediction(s) in general: If my house is not clean and tidy, people will think I am lazy and dirty. I will be extremely embarrassed

3. Specify the prediction: My friend will show clearly that she is disgusted by staring at the mess and dirt, avoiding eye contact, commenting on the mess and not relaxing. I will feel embarrassed and anxious (intensity ratings: 90 per cent and 75 per cent), will make excuses for the mess and will not enjoy myself (belief rating: 100 per cent).

4. Experiment: Invite a friend to visit; deliberately leave dirty dishes in the sink, and don't vacuum before she arrives.

5. Results: The friend visited and did not even look at the washing or floor. She did not avoid eye contact but chatted as usual. I did feel anxious (65 per cent) and made excuses for the mess. However, my friend said she too rarely managed to keep on top of everything. The anxiety was less severe than anticipated, and reduced rapidly within the first half-hour of the friend's visit. I was surprised to discover that I enjoyed myself.

6. Reflection: I not only enjoyed the visit, I also appreciated not having to spend hours beforehand cleaning. I was interested to learn that my friend's house is not always tidy. I concluded that my perfectionism did not necessarily help me to enjoy entertaining but actually made it more stressful.

7. Revised belief: I should try to keep my house reasonably tidy most of the time, but the odd bit of mess doesn't matter.

What did you find by completing a behavioral experiment? Hopefully you will have gained new information about the unhelpful predictions you were making about your perfectionism.

Keep going with behavioral experiments. The key is to try to 'shake up' beliefs that have not been working for you – to test out the way you have been seeing the world until now to see whether some of your predictions are in fact true or not. Try some of the ideas for behavioral experiments in Box 7.4.3, which attack some common perfectionist predictions.

BOX 7.4.3 EXAMPLES OF PERFECTIONIST BELIEFS AND PREDICTIONS THAT CAN USEFULLY BE TESTED IN BEHAVIORAL EXPERIMENTS

Belief/prediction	Experiment
Belief: I'll do better if I work hard. *Prediction:* I'll get A if I work hard, B if I work moderately and I'll fail if I don't work at all.	Work excessively hard for one piece of work, moderately for another and minimally for a third. Is the outcome as you predicted?
Belief: If I don't come top, I'll feel like a failure for ages. *Prediction:* I'll feel anxious, miserable and think that I am a failure as a person all day, every day, for at least a week.	Deliberately don't come top in something trivial (e.g. a running race with a friend down the street). Is the outcome as you predicted? Build up to testing the prediction in more meaningful/important situations.
Belief: If I start something, I have to finish it completely. *Prediction:* If I leave something half-done, it will prey on my mind (100 per cent) and I won't be able to sleep for more than a couple of hours.	Leave something half-finished. Does it prey on your mind? How much? For how long? Did you sleep? For how long?

WORKSHEET 7.4.1: BEHAVIORAL EXPERIMENT

1. Belief:

2. Identify the prediction in general:

3. Specify the prediction precisely (specify behaviors and rate intensity of beliefs and emotions):

4. Experiment:

5. Results:

6. Reflection:

7. Revised belief:

Belief: If I don't take everything with me on a weekend away, I might have the wrong clothes and will have to come home.

Prediction: If I don't bring lots of different choices, I will worry about it (100 per cent) and will end up coming home.

Leave just one item behind. What happens to your worry? Did you end up coming home? Can you build up to packing fewer clothes?

Belief: If I don't write everything down, I'll make lots of serious mistakes.

Prediction: If I don't write down everything I need to do today, I'll forget something important like giving my daughter her medicine.

Leave one thing off a list (such as your daughter's medicine). Did you remember it? What was it like not writing it down? Can you write a shorter list with just very important things on it? How many mistakes do you make?

Belief: Training hard makes me happy because it is the right thing to do and I achieve more.

Prediction: I'm happier when I train hard than when I don't and I will win more races.

Train hard for one week – really push yourself. How happy does it make you (0–10)? How unhappy does it make you (0–100)? What else do you observe? How did you do? Don't train as hard for a week and make the same notes. Compare the results.

Final comment

There is no 'right' behavioral experiment and you should be spending time doing many experiments to test a whole range of beliefs. Gradually you will gather information about the reality of a variety of situations. That in turn will lead you to some conclusions about how to live a happier, more relaxed, more fulfilling life where success and achievement are balanced with enjoyment and relaxation.

TAKE-HOME MESSAGE

- Behavioral experiments are used to gather information about your beliefs, emotions and behaviors.
- The results of the experiments will give you personalized, meaningful information about your beliefs and behaviors associated with perfectionism.
- The information from the experiments should be added to the growing pile of information you are gathering about reality and should help you on your way to a more balanced, happier way of living.

2. Stop procrastinating!

If procrastination or avoidance is at one end of the scale and perfection is at the other extreme, what is in between? This more flexible middle ground might include doing part of a piece of work instead of procrastinating and not doing any of it. It might mean doing a little at a time or doing all of it but, as above, reducing the standard slightly (so that it is done well and on time – which means the time set aside for other assignments, projects, revision etc. is still available).

Which is worse? Not doing something perfectly or not doing it at all? Use positive self-talk: tell yourself that it is better to do something than to do nothing, and take a step towards that goal. If you feel very stuck in a procrastination pattern, identify and take the smallest step forward. These can be small time goals (e.g. I will work for 5 minutes; or 25 minutes – whatever feels possible); or small task goals.

Read the article below and try the Pomodoro technique for tackling procrastination. Rate how you feel before and after trying the Pomodoro technique for a few days.

Pain, procrastination and pomodoros

If you have ever noticed yourself staring into space and wondering how long you might have been doing that for (and whether anyone else had noticed) you are probably a novice procrastinator. A seasoned procrastinator would have probably been on YouTube, or baking a cake or buying a latte or texting a friend ……. you get the picture. Whichever you are, understanding the science behind procrastination may help you break the habit.

We are creatures of habit and procrastination is just another habit. To form a habit, you need four ingredients: a Cue, the Response to the cue, a Reward from the response and a Belief that props up the other three. For example the Cue that will pull me away from today's work plan might be a pop-up message on my computer screen, a text message, a feeling of emptiness in my tummy, a distracting thought about another task that I haven't done and so on. Essentially the Cue is a powerful distraction of one kind or another.

My Response to the Cue would be to read the message, text a reply, buy a Hot Cross Bun or faff around with my list of priorities. And I'm off. Once I make this kind of response, I may as well write off the next few hours as lost to procrastination. Why? Because the Reward that results from my response is the instant feeling of relief that I get when I turn my attention away from work (even though this feeling is temporary). This relief has a neurobiological basis – research shows that a neuromodulator called dopamine is released in brain – which produces a short-lived feeling of wellbeing. Repeating this cycle of cue, response and reward can lead to a sort of addiction – in effect, I am rewarding myself for avoiding the tasks I have set myself. No surprise then, that a Belief quickly follows: I work best under pressure, or I'm just not that organised, or I don't respond well to deadlines etc.

As you can see the entire procrastination cycle is driven by discomfort – the thought of the task (and all the anxieties I may have about needing to produce a first-class piece of work, or that I may not be up to the task, or that my tutors will realise I am not as bright as they first thought and so on) – make me uncomfortable. As soon as I begin to detect that discomfort I become an easy target for distraction (and the many excuses that I will then make about why it is better to put off till tomorrow what I promised myself yesterday that I would *without fail* do today). And away we go, procrastination 1, my resolve, nil.

That deals with pain and procrastination. Now for the pomodoro technique which, with a very little practice, can hijack the brain's reward centre to work for me instead of against me. There are three

simple steps: first turn off all distractions. Find a quiet corner of the library or learning commons, leave your phone in another room, turn off your server. Second, choose a period of time you think you can work efficiently for, even if it is only 15 minutes and go through with it. Thirdly, reward yourself with a five-minute break. Now the reward is linked to tolerating anxiety for a set period of time and to achieving at least 15 minutes of work! Repeat it enough and you will form a new habit. After four or five pomodoros (strictly pomodori) you can reward yourself with a longer break of say 15 minutes.

Maybe you will come out of it with a new belief something like: "yeah, it's a pain. But it's only for a short while and I get more and better work done, on time". Find out more – and why it's called pomodoro – here:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pomodoro_Technique

There are some useful apps:
http://www.makeuseof.com/tag/3-free-pomodoro-productivity-apps/

https://gigaom.com/2010/11/10/9-free-pomodoro-timers/

http://tomato-timer.com/

Try the University's online resource:

https://www.escholar.manchester.ac.uk/learning-objects/mle/packages/counselling/procrastination/

3. Developing a more compassionate perspective

Self-criticism and denigration is a common consequence of perfectionism. It is part of the perfectionist thinking pattern that maintains perfectionist behaviour. Recognising when this happens and challenging this type of thinking is an important step towards overcoming perfectionism. Read the following chapter excerpt on Self-criticism and Compassion and start to cultivate a more compassionate perspective towards yourself and others.

Self-criticism and compassion

In the first chapter of this book we said that unhelpful perfectionism is when your view of yourself is dependent on how well you think you have achieved in areas of life that are important to you, with self-criticism resulting if you think that you have failed to reach your required standards. We know that self-criticism is strongly associated with unhelpful perfectionism. In other words, where one occurs, the other is highly likely to be present. Self-criticism can cause problems in its own right, leading to more perceived daily hassles, more coping by avoidance (that is, rather than trying to deal with or solve the problem, you avoid it and hope it goes away), more negative social interactions and a perception of less social support, and increased levels of depression.

What does self-criticism look like?

Self-criticism can be seen as the internal critic or bully, or the voice in your head that is always pointing out your faults. One of the hallmarks of the critical voice is that it will call you names, like bad, fake, hopeless, loser, useless or failure. Look at the statements set out in Box 8.1: if most of them apply to you, this indicates that the self-critical voice is a strong influence in your head and in your life.

BOX 8.1 AM I SELF-CRITICAL?

- I often find that I don't live up to my own standards or ideals
- I tend to devalue or undersell myself
- I have a difficult time accepting weaknesses in myself
- I tend to be very critical of myself
- If I do well, it is probably because of chance, but if I do badly it is probably my own fault

Why are people self-critical?

The reasons why people can tend to be self-critical vary. It may have originated with the way your parents related to you, if they tended not to reward and reinforce good conduct when you were a child, but were quick to punish you for misbehavior. Alternatively, your discipline as a child may have been unpredictable and inconsistent; in such situations children can learn to blame themselves for anything that goes wrong, as this seems like the most consistent explanation. They then carry this habit with them into adulthood. Whatever the origin of the tendency, many people continue to be self-critical as adults because they believe that it is the only way to motivate themselves to do things and to do them better. In order to consider how useful self-criticism is to you, read the story in Box 8.2 and answer the associated questions.

BOX 8.2 WHICH COACH WOULD YOU CHOOSE?

Imagine that as a parent you took your child along to coaching sessions to teach them to play basketball. It has always been your child's dream to play basketball well, and so they are really excited and determined to try hard in the lessons. Now imagine that your child has lessons under two different coaches: Coach Smith and Coach Jones.

Coach Smith does not say anything every time your child bounces and throws the ball. However, when your child drops the ball or misses

a catch, Coach Smith berates them, telling them what a terrible job they are doing, that they are getting it all wrong, and says that they need to try harder because they are just not getting it right. He may also call your child names, such as a 'wimp' and 'pathetic'.

In comparison, Coach Jones does not tell off your child every time they drop the ball but rather encourages the child and says they are doing well when they catch the ball. When your child drops the ball, Coach Jones says things like: 'That doesn't matter, you are only learning; as you keep practising you will get better', and 'It is OK to make mistakes because it helps us to learn how to do it better'.

Now, when it comes to choosing which coach you want to go on teaching your child, which coach would you choose? Importantly, which coach do you think would get a better performance out of your child – Coach Smith or Coach Jones?

Source: adapted from Pollack and Otto (2000)

It is highly likely that you have chosen Coach Jones for your child. Why is this? We know that when people are continually criticized, it can damage their self-esteem and decrease their motivation, leading them to stop trying in order to avoid the criticism. When we are praised, on the other hand, we tend to try harder and work better. Thus most people would agree that Coach Jones would be more likely to get a better performance out of a child.

It is likely that for most of your life the way you have talked to yourself sounds more like Coach Smith – that you have called yourself names and criticized yourself for making mistakes, ignoring the times when you have done well. Just like the child in the story in the box, learning how you can strive to achieve without criticizing yourself will ultimately lead to a better performance. It is not about lowering your standards, but about deciding which coach you want to have for yourself – Coach Smith, the critical voice who will berate you and ignore your achievements, thus leading to a

self-defeating cycle where your motivation and performance are impaired; or Coach Jones, the compassionate voice, who will recognize when you are trying and encourage you to learn from your mistakes, thus improving your performance over time.

What is the goal?

When trying to change your self-critical voice and decrease self-criticism in your life, the ultimate goal is not to stop yourself from ever being self-critical again. This is not realistic, given that you have probably had a lifetime of listening to the self-critical voice. Also, it is important to realize that all people have a critical voice; it's just that most of the time many of them don't choose to listen to it or don't choose to take its messages to heart. Setting yourself the goal of not having a critical voice will just give you one more thing to criticize yourself about the first time you encounter the critical voice! Therefore the goal is to *decrease the power of the self-critical voice*. Imagine the volume control on a radio that can be turned down but not off – the aim is to turn down the volume of the self-critical voice. At the same time, we want to *increase the power of the compassionate voice* – in other words, turn up the volume of the compassionate voice. The next section leads you through a three-step procedure for working towards these goals.

How do I turn down the self-critical voice and turn up the compassionate voice?

Step 1: Identify the critical voice

Go back to Section 7.1 on 'identifying problem areas' and look through your completed Worksheet 7.1.2. In the column

called 'Perfectionism thoughts', see if you can identify those thoughts that express criticism of you. One way to help you identify these is to look for the thoughts that you would hesitate to say to another person, because they sound judgmental and critical. When you have been used to being self-critical, it can sometimes be hard to recognize the self-critical voice because you accept it as 'truth' or how things really are. Therefore it can be helpful to note the terms or names you call yourself that appear most frequently, as this will alert you to the self-critical voice more quickly when it speaks up in the future.

Now, for the next week, keep a diary or monitoring sheet that relates specifically to these self-critical thoughts, using Worksheet 8.1. The first column, headed 'Triggering events', is where you put whatever immediately preceded the self-critical thought. It may be a strong feeling that you experience that first alerts you to the fact that you are having a self-critical thought. Reflect on what may have been happening to trigger the feeling. The second column, headed 'Self-critical thoughts', is where you write the self-critical thought that you have in your mind. In particular, note when you over-generalize *from* your perceived lack of performance, or the times when you do not stick to the rules that you have imposed on yourself for achieving a certain goal, *to* an unfavorable judgment on yourself as a person. To help you with this, an example from Gemma's case is provided below.

Gemma: An unfavorable judgment of herself as a person

Gemma, a university student aged 28, noticed that she felt most upset when she listened to other students answering questions in tutorials. She felt that she was

incapable of sounding intellectual, confident or verbally polished. She avoided answering questions because she thought: 'I am stupid because I can't sound that knowledgeable in my answers.'

The third column, headed 'Associated feelings', asks you to describe how you felt (e.g. sad, ashamed, angry, depressed) and to rate the strength of that feeling from 0 per cent to 100 per cent. Your feelings can give you a clue as to whether self-criticism is productive or not. If you are feeling ashamed or depressed, it is unlikely that determination to achieve will follow. Rather, it is likely that you will feel less motivated to try again.

Step 2: Identify the compassionate voice

When people have been listening to the critical voice for a long time, they can find it very hard to identify their own compassionate voice. One way to help you tune in to your compassionate voice is to think about the values you apply to your friends and the people you care about in your relationships with them. Look at Worksheet 8.2 and circle those values that are of importance to you with respect to the way you treat your friends, and add any others you can think of in the empty boxes.

Now think about whether you apply any of those values to yourself or whether you do not. Think how different your life would look if you applied the same values to yourself. Worksheet 8.3 on page 229 shows some suggestions about how you might apply the same values you use with friends to yourself. Add in your own ideas and values in the blank boxes.

Now for another month use a new monitoring diary, as shown in Worksheet 8.4, with an example. The first three

WORKSHEET 8.1: DIARY TO HELP IDENTIFY THE SELF-CRITICAL THOUGHTS

Triggering events Can be something someone does, something you do, or an upsetting image	Self-critical thoughts What went through your mind? What does it say about you as a person?	Associated feelings What did you feel? Rate the strength of the mood from 0 per cent (no feeling at all) to 100 per cent (the strongest you have ever experienced that feeling)

WORKSHEET 8.2: WHAT VALUES ARE IMPORTANT TO YOU IN YOUR FRIENDSHIPS? (Circle all those that apply)

Acceptance To accept my friends no matter what they do	**Caring** To be caring towards others	**Compassion** To feel concern for others
Courtesy To be polite and considerate to others	**Forgiveness** To be forgiving of others	**Generosity** To give people the benefit of the doubt
Helpfulness To be helpful to others	**Hope** To keep believing in my friends	**Fun** To have fun with friends and share a sense of humor with them
Justice To treat my friends fairly	**Service** To be of service to others	**Respect** To treat my friends with respect and not run them down

WORKSHEET 8.3. APPLYING THE SAME VALUES TO YOURSELF THAT YOU APPLY TO FRIENDS

Acceptance To accept myself as being intrinsically worthwhile no matter what I achieve	**Caring** To be caring towards myself	**Compassion** To feel concern for myself when I am feeling bad and not beat myself up
Courtesy To be considerate of myself	**Forgiveness** To be forgiving of myself	**Generosity** To give myself the benefit of the doubt
Helpfulness To be helpful to myself, acknowledging that criticizing myself doesn't get the best out of me	**Hope** To keep believing in myself even when I don't perform as well as I would like	**Fun** Not to take myself too seriously but be able to laugh at myself
Justice To treat myself fairly and focus not just on what I do that is wrong or not good enough but on what I like about myself	**Service** To be of service to myself by offering support rather than criticism	**Respect** To treat myself with respect and not run myself down

columns are the same as Worksheet 8.1, but two columns have been added. In the column headed 'What does the compassionate voice say?' use your knowledge of the values you apply to friends to write a specific message from the compassionate voice, which will sound like something you would say to a friend. Alternatively, returning to our coach story at the beginning of this chapter, think what you would want to say if you were talking to a child of yours. Rate your belief in that thought. At this stage your belief may be low, and much lower than your belief in your self-critical thought, but that is fine. Like any muscle group in your body, the compassionate voice will only get stronger the more it is used, and the self-critical voice will get weaker the less it is used. This takes time and practice. Imagine you were preparing to go for a cycling trip in your holidays – if you haven't been doing any cycling for quite a while, you don't expect to just start cycling on your holiday. Rather, you would practice beforehand, and start cycling near where you live in order to build up the muscles required to stay in the saddle for a few hours and keep pushing the pedals. After practicing over time, it feels easier to go further and faster. It is the same with the compassionate voice. As it gets exercised more, it will become stronger and more believable, and the unfairness of the self-critical voice will become more apparent. Thus you will be more likely to question the validity of the self-critical thought, and believe it less.

In the final column you will see that you are asked to rate the strength of the associated feeling once more after having identified the compassionate voice. Once again, initially this may not make a major change in your feelings, but *any* reduction of negative feelings will free you to achieve more and paralyze yourself less with criticism.

WORKSHEET 8.4: DIARY TO HELP IDENTIFY THE COMPASSIONATE THOUGHTS

Triggering events	Self-critical thoughts	Associated feelings	What does the compassionate voice say?	What has happened to your first feelings when you think this?
Can be something someone does, or may be a strong feeling or upsetting image	What went through your mind? What does it say about you as a person? Degree of belief in the thought from 0 per cent (not at all) to 100 per cent (completely believe it, no doubt at all)	What did you feel? Rate the strength of the mood from 0 per cent (no feeling at all) to 100 per cent (the strongest you have ever experienced that feeling)	What would you say to a friend? Degree of belief in the thought (0 per cent to 100 per cent)	Rate the strength of the feeling you wrote down in the third column – what strength is it now?
A student's mother complained about my teaching, saying her child was not learning satisfactorily	I am useless (90 per cent) I am a fraud (85 per cent)	Depressed (95 per cent) Humiliated (100 per cent)	This is the only complaint you have received this year – three parents have thanked you for your work with their children (100 per cent) You can't please everyone all the time, no matter how good a teacher you are (30 per cent)	Depressed (75 per cent) Humiliated (80 per cent)

Step 3: How to react to the critical voice when it starts speaking

Imagine your self-critical voice is like a bully. We know that there are a couple of ways to respond to bullying that can be helpful. The first is to have a practiced response ready to use when the bullying occurs, so that you don't react sponta-neously and therefore show that the bully is getting to you. The second is to observe but not react to the bullying. We will examine in turn how each of these strategies might help you in combating your critical voice.

When the self-critical voice is dominating, it is difficult to remember or hear the compassionate voice. Therefore it can be very helpful to have the compassionate voice written down, in order to make it much more salient and audible. In order to have a practiced and helpful response to use when your critical voice is loud, you will need to identify the types of compassionate thoughts that most helped your mood and motivation in the diary (Worksheet 8.4) that you were keeping. Write out the most helpful thoughts on small index cards, or even pieces of paper the size of a business card. There should be just one thought per card. You can carry these around with you in your purse or wallet so that they are readily available no matter where you are. You can also put them up around the house, on a wall or fridge, if you do not mind other people seeing them. Over the page are some examples of the compassionate voice that may be helpful ways to respond to the self-critical voice. It may also be helpful to say the words on the cards out loud at times (when no one else is around) as this may help the compassionate voice get a firmer hold in your mind.

> *The self-critical voice is always going to look for the worst – that doesn't make it true or a fair reflection of my efforts and abilities.*

> *When I don't achieve the standards I set myself, it doesn't make me any less worthwhile as a person.*

> *I don't judge others based on what they achieve and so I will refuse to judge myself based on what I achieve.*

> *Having and pursuing high standards is fine. Judging myself as being faulty as a person based on reaching these standards will only get in the way of my attaining these standards.*

> *Making mistakes is part of the learning process and the pathway to attaining excellence.*

The second way of responding to the self-critical voice is to observe but not to react to it. This is a technique called *acceptance*, which is about experiencing without judging. Acceptance has been found to reduce negative mood states. For example, it decreases depressive episodes in people who experience recurrent depression, and it has also been found to decrease body dissatisfaction.

In some ways, using acceptance to respond to the critical voice is like keeping the first thought diary from this chapter (Worksheet 8.1) in your head. When practicing this tech-nique, you are encouraged simply to observe the self-critical

thoughts and feelings that follow when you hear the self-critical voice by bringing them to your awareness and holding them there. One way to relate to unpleasant experiences is to register that they are there, to allow them to be as they are in that moment and simply hold them in awareness.

When practicing this technique it is often helpful to close your eyes, if that feels comfortable for you. The first step is being aware, really aware, of what is going on with you right now. Think of thoughts as if they were projected on the screen at the cinema. You sit, watching the screen, waiting for the thought or image to arise. When it does, you pay attention to it so long as it is there 'on the screen' and then let it go as it passes away. The second step is just to acknowledge the thoughts rather than try to push them away or shut them out, perhaps saying, '*Ah, there you are, that's how it is right now.*' Similarly with sensations in the body: if there are sensations of tension, of holding, or whatever, then encourage awareness of them, simply noting them: '*OK, that is how it is right now.*' It can be helpful to label what the thoughts or sensations are, without having to react to them. For example, you might say to yourself, '*A self-critical thought has just come into my mind*' without having to engage with the thought, or '*A feeling of anxiety has just come in*' without having to engage with the feeling.

You can also think of your thoughts like an old tape or re-run of a film, so that you might say to yourself, '*This is my self-criticism tape again.*' This helps us to recognize the repetitive nature of our self-critical thoughts, without necessarily having to engage with them or listen to them. It is a bit like listening to a radio station. When the self-critical thoughts come on the radio, do you have to choose to turn up the volume and listen to them and give them airplay? Or could you choose to leave the volume on the radio where it is and just wait for the next track to come in, without having to give

particular attention to listening in to the self-critical thoughts?

What happens when the self-critical voice gets louder at times?
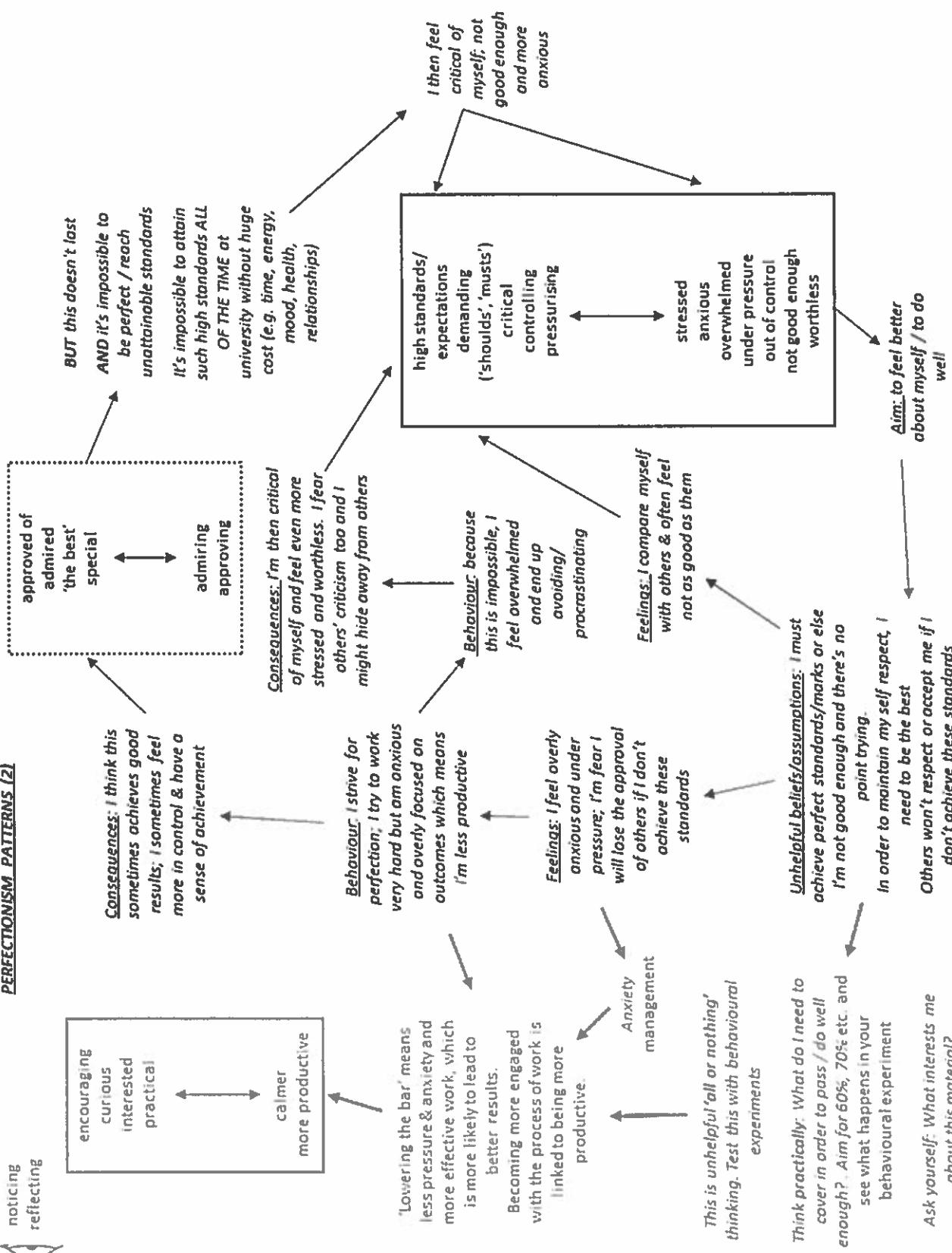
As you practice these techniques over time, we expect that the compassionate voice will get stronger and the self-critical voice weaker. As we pointed out earlier in this chapter, though, this does not mean that the self-critical voice will disappear. Also, you can expect progress to be uneven: on some days it will be easier to listen to the compassionate voice than on others. You can also expect that over time there will be periods in your life when the self-critical voice starts to become louder again and tries harder to capture your attention. Usually this will indicate that some trigger has occurred in your life that has caused you to feel bad about yourself so that you start listening to the self-critical voice again. It can be helpful to identify the trigger, and to use the problem-solving tool to deal with this, as outlined in Section 7.8 of this book. If there is nothing that can be done about the trigger, you will still benefit from practicing the techniques in this chapter, reintroducing them fully into your life. You can expect them to be effective more quickly, as you have already laid down a foundation on which they can be rebuilt. Above all, don't be disappointed in yourself when the self-critical voice gets louder. This is part of the natural ebb and flow of thoughts in our lives, and each time you experience difficulties and work your way through them, you are consolidating your learning and getting a little further ahead.

TAKE-HOME MESSAGE

- Self-criticism can be seen as the internal critic or bully, or the voice in your head that is always pointing out your faults and calling you names.

- People continue to be self-critical because they believe that it is the only way to motivate themselves to do things and to do things better, but evidence suggests the opposite – that it reduces motivation and performance.

- The goal is to reduce the power of the self-critical voice and increase the power of the compassionate voice – the words you would use if you were talking to someone you cared about.

- There are three steps to reducing the power of the self-critical voice – identifying the self-critical voice, identifying the compassionate voice, and then deciding how to react to the self-critical voice when it occurs rather than being taken in by it.

PERFECTIONISM PATTERNS (2)

noticing
reflecting

I then feel critical of myself; not good enough and more anxious

high standards/ expectations demanding ('shoulds', 'musts') critical controlling pressurising ⟷ **stressed anxious overwhelmed under pressure out of control not good enough worthless**

Aim: to feel better about myself / to do well

BUT this doesn't last

AND it's impossible to be perfect / reach unattainable standards

It's impossible to attain such high standards ALL OF THE TIME at university without huge cost (e.g. time, energy, mood, health, relationships)

approved of admired 'the best' special ⟷ admiring approving

Consequences: I'm then critical of myself and feel even more stressed and worthless. I fear others' criticism too and I might hide away from others

Behaviour: because this is impossible, I feel overwhelmed and end up avoiding/ procrastinating

Feelings: I compare myself with others & often feel not as good as them

Consequences: I think this sometimes achieves good results; I sometimes feel more in control & have a sense of achievement

Behaviour: I strive for perfection; I try to work very hard but am anxious and overly focused on outcomes which means I'm less productive

Feelings: I feel overly anxious and under pressure; I'm fear I will lose the approval of others if I don't achieve these standards

Unhelpful beliefs/assumptions: I must achieve perfect standards/marks or else I'm not good enough and there's no point trying.
In order to maintain my self respect, I need to be the best
Others won't respect or accept me if I don't achieve these standards

encouraging curious interested practical ⟷ calmer more productive

'Lowering the bar' means less pressure & anxiety and more effective work, which is more likely to lead to better results.
Becoming more engaged with the process of work is linked to being more productive.

Anxiety management

This is unhelpful 'all or nothing' thinking. Test this with behavioural experiments

Think practically: What do I need to cover in order to pass / do well enough? Aim for 60%, 70% etc. and see what happens in your behavioural experiment

Ask yourself: What interests me about this material?

Summary of helpful ways forward

- Resist the 'all or nothing' approach to doing things
- Start to work on procrastination using the Pomodoro technique
- Cultivate compassionate thoughts
- Focus on process rather than product/outcome
- Lower the bar to lower the pressure and anxiety that you feel
- Adopt a pragmatic rather than emotional response to mistakes or perceived 'failures'
- Accept that we need to set limits - as we have seen overworking achieves no better result
- Reflect on and write out our priorities in life and check this against what we are actually doing with our time.
- Other useful strategies I can put in place..

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Further help with perfectionism

It might be useful to work through a systematic programme on overcoming perfectionism called *Perfectionism in perspective*. You can download the modules free of charge here:

http://www.cci.health.wa.gov.au/resources/infopax.cfm?Info_ID=52

If you are not already attending individual counselling sessions and would like to discuss any difficulties with perfectionism in more detail, or anything else affecting your wellbeing, please call our Reception on 0161 275 2864 to book an appointment.

www.manchester.ac.uk/counselling