Functional analysis of perfectionistic responding

Perfectionistic behaviours	Function of behaviour	Reinforcing contingencies	Therapeutic strategies
Avoiding mistakes & fear of failure			
Checking & rechecking work	Avoid risk of mistakes Avoid anxiety about performance	Mistakes avoided Risk averted Anxiety levels fall Positive reinforcement from others (e.g. teachers, boss)	Gradual exposure to anxiety Build acceptance & willingness to take small risks Choice-point decisions Agreed limits on checking
Procrastination	Avoid anxiety that will not be able to adequately complete task / performance not good enough Avoid risk of mistakes	Mistakes avoided Avoid negative evaluations from others & self Provides excuse for poor performance due to inadequate time/effort (ego defence)	Values-based committed action Choice-point Gradual exposure to anxiety
Excessive effort / overworking	Avoid risk of not being “good enough” Avoid perceived negative evaluation of others (and self) Validate “self=achievement” self-narrative	Positive reinforcement from others (e.g. teachers, boss) Pride in self	Values-based committed action Exposure to anxiety & acceptance Flexibility in narrative of “self=hard worker” Self-compassion
Not attempting activities where failure is a potential outcome, or performance not at a level felt good enough	Avoid difficult & unwelcome emotions (shame, embarrassment, worthlessness) Avoid evidence confirming self as “incompetent”, “imperfect” Maintain fragile self-worth	Avoid embarrassment, shame etc Avoid negative evaluations from others & self	Values-based committed action Self-compassion Acceptance of difficult feelings and present-moment awareness

Perfectionistic behaviours	Function of behaviour	Reinforcing contingencies	Therapeutic strategies
High standards			
Relentlessly striving for very high, and often unachievable ("perfect") standards	Pushing self to achieve Validate a "self=achievement" narrative Achieve validation of others Attempt to validate self as "good/whole/worthwhile/enough"**	High degree of goal attainment & achievement High quality / high volume of work Mastery Positive reinforcement from others (e.g. teachers, boss)	Flexible self-narrative that is values driven e.g. Passengers on the bus
Standards are continually raised over time, particularly if goal is attained ("If I could achieve that, I could have done even better")	Pushing self to achieve Validate a self=achievement narrative Achieve validation of others Continued attempt to validate self as "good/whole/worthwhile/enough"**	High degree of goal attainment & achievement High quality / high volume of work Mastery Positive reinforcement from others (e.g. teachers, boss)	Self-compassion Values-based decisions & cost analysis
Critical self-narrative			
Self-worth dependent on achieving high standards/achievements	Continued attempt to validate self as "good/whole/worthwhile/enough"**	(Fleeting) sense of self-acceptance	Self-compassion
Self-criticism when standards not achieved	Validate self-narrative as inadequate/worthless ("you see, I'm useless") Provide motivation to improve performance next time	Critical voice seen as motivating better performance ("if I don't criticise myself I will become lazy")	Defusion from critical thoughts Self-compassion
Discount achievements as "not perfect enough"	Validate self-narrative as inadequate/worthless Provide motivation to improve performance next time	Critical voice seen as motivating better performance ("if I don't criticise myself I will become lazy")	Defusion from critical thoughts Self-compassion

**This can be a desperate and self-defeating attempt to be good enough. Perfectionistic behaviours are not sufficient/not working to achieve this, yet person does not know any other method of achieving self-acceptance.