



The Perfectionistic Therapist
Helping others with flexibility, courage and
compassion

Jennifer Kemp
MPsych(Clinical), MAPS, FCCLP



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Disclosures

I have not received and will not receive any
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Housekeeping

- Self-reflection, breakout rooms
- Chat, chat, chat!
- Timekeeping
- Questions at the end

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Introductions



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Welcome!

Introduce yourself in the **chat**
and...

What aspects of perfectionism
do you struggle with?



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Learning objectives



Concise formulation of perfectionism from a functional contextual behavioural perspective



Explore your own perfectionistic behaviour patterns and/or those of your trainees



Build greater flexibility and self-compassion when working as a helping professional

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Perfectionism from a contextual behavioural perspective



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Perfectionism is a transdiagnostic process

- OCD
- Obsessive Compulsive Personality Disorder
- Hoarding Disorder (e.g. Frost, Rosenfield, Steketee & Tolin, 2013)
- Body Dysmorphic Disorder
- Social Anxiety
- Panic Disorder
- GAD
- PTSD
- Eating disorders
- Depression
- Chronic Fatigue Syndrome
- Burnout
- Marital Dissatisfaction (e.g. Dimitrovsky, Levy-Shiff & Zanany, 2002; Haring, Hewitt & Flett, 2003)
- Suicide

Egan, Wade & Shafran, 2012

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Perfectionism is a transdiagnostic process

Risk factor
 Causal factor
 Maintaining factor
 Therapy interfering
 Risk of relapse
 Predictor of poorer treatment outcome

Egan, Wade & Shafran, 2012

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Perfectionism is therapy interfering

- Kobori, Dighton & Hunter (2019)
 - Perfectionists tend to procrastinate on CBT homework assignments
 - Those high in maladaptive perfectionism set and completed fewer activities to improve their mood



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Models of perfectionism

Personality & topographical models

- Hamachek: Normal / Neurotic
- Hewitt, Flett & colleagues: Self-Oriented, Socially-Prescribed, Other-Oriented
- Frost & colleagues (multi-dimensional): Concern over Mistakes, Personal Standards, Parental Expectations, Parental Criticism, Doubts about Actions, Organisation
- Rice & colleagues: Adaptive / Maladaptive



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'Dual Process Model' of perfectionism

Slade & Owens (1995; 1998; 2008)

Positive perfectionism:

- Characterised by pursuit behaviour
- Pursue success, perfection, excellence
- Motivated to get close to ideal self



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'Dual Process Model' of perfectionism

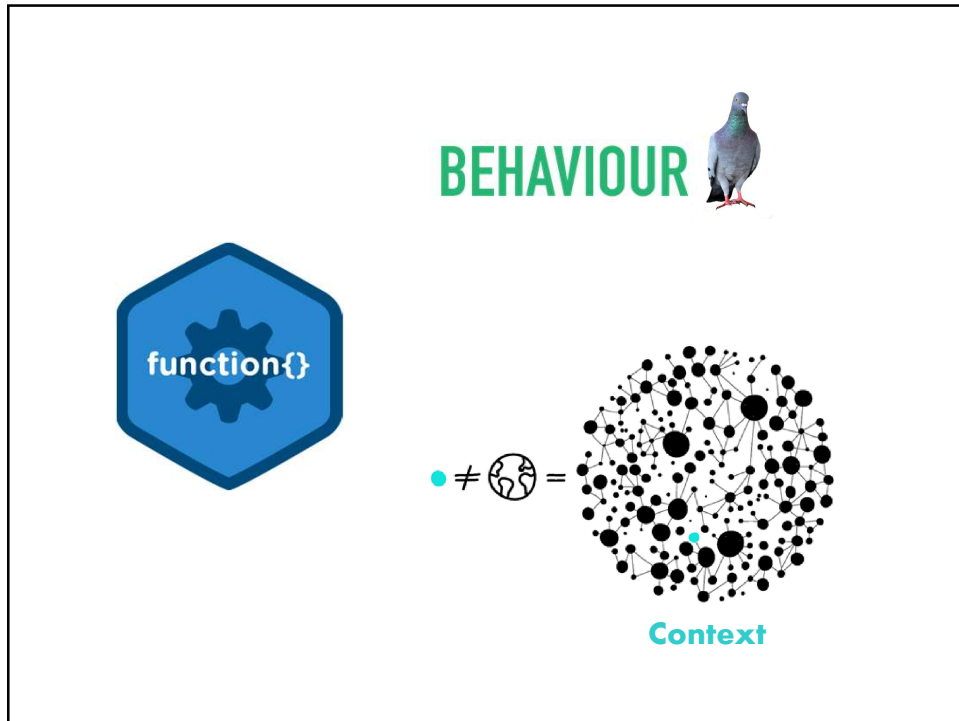


Negative perfectionism:

- Characterised by avoidance (escape) behaviour
- Avoid failure, imperfection, mediocrity
- Motivated to get away from their feared self

People may be motivated by one, both or neither

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Helpful perfectionism





- Pursuit of excellence & accomplishment
- Goal attainment

- Values-led, under appetitive control
- Characterised by flexibility, freedom, choice
- Intrinsically motivated

- Positive reinforcement: rewards, praise, encouragement
- Goals are achievable

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Patterns of perfectionistic responding

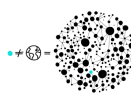
Workability: Helpful or unhelpful in context?



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Unhelpful perfectionistic responding

- Unhelpful behaviour learned through negative reinforcement
- Responding to short-term contingencies
- Persists despite long-term negative consequences



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The five processes of unhelpful perfectionistic responding

1. Extremely high & rigid standards
2. Intense fear of failure
3. Avoidant responses to this fear
4. Relentless self-criticism
5. Bigger problems as a result of rigid standards, avoidance & self-criticism (not the fear)



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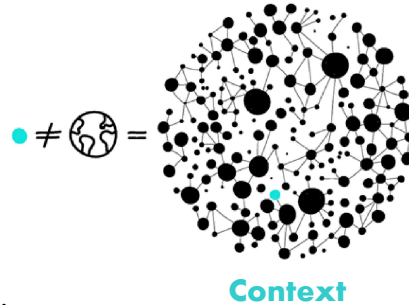
Introducing The Perfectionistic Therapist



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The Perfectionistic Therapist in context

- Our work is uncertain, novel & ambiguous
- Competitive programs
- Pressure to succeed
- Complex clients
- Clients can scare us
- Time pressure
- Personal learning history
- Desire to help & be useful



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The Perfectionistic Therapist

Process 1:

**Extremely
high & rigid
standards**



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Extremely high & rigid standards

- Relentless striving for very high standards
- Raising standards over time
- Just out of reach
- Self concept based on achieving standards
- Insensitive to context – rigid rules



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Extremely high & rigid standards

Irrational beliefs that contribute most to therapist stress (Deutsch, 1984):

1. I should always work at my peak level of enthusiasm and competence.
2. I should be able to handle any client emergency that arises.
3. I should be able to help every client.
4. When a client does not progress, it is my fault.

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Breakout rooms

What standards have you set for yourself
as a therapist that have become **non-negotiable**?

What standards would you find hard to let go?



(4 mins)



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Rigid standards can become how we see ourselves

- I am...
- I must...
- I always...

Conceptualised
self



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Rules → Flexible self-ing

Perfectionistic rules for
my performance
Self ≠ Personal Standards



Who am I **being** right now?
How do I want to be?
Flexible self-ing



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Flexible self-ing activity

Think about someone you admire.
This person could be **real** or **fictional**.

Visualise this person as they handle a difficult situation.
How do they hold themselves?
What do they do?

What **personal qualities** do they have
that you admire?

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Flexible self-ing activity

Which of these qualities would you like to
embody in your therapeutic practice?

How could you “**be like** _____”?

Visualise yourself behaving in a way
consistent with these qualities.



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Breakout rooms

Share your experiences in your small groups

What was your challenge?

Who did you visualise?

How did this influence what was possible?

(5 mins)



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The
Perfectionistic
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Process 2:

**Intense fear
of failure**



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Intense fear of failure

- Fear of making mistakes
- Fear of not helping enough
- Fear of rejection
- Fear of not being good enough
- Fear of not being liked...

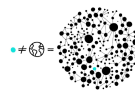


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*Unhelpful perfectionism is behaviour under
aversive control*

Behaviour under the control of things
we want to move away from

Fear of failure is the aversive that controls
unhelpful perfectionistic behaviour



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*Behaviour under **aversive control** is
characterised by:*

Rigidity

Inflexibility

Rule-following

Certain context sensitivity

Certain context insensitivity



“Snake in the room”

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Fear of failure & the 'Big Bad'

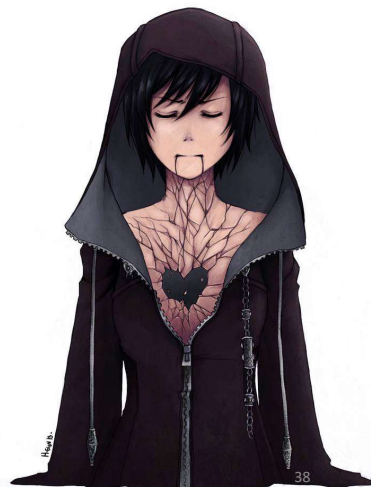


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The 'Big Bad' in perfectionism

- Other people judging you negatively
- Being incompetent
- Being seen by others as incompetent
- Not being liked
- Not being good enough, or
- Not being enough
- Being a failure as a person
- Being a failure in your work
- Failing at relationships
- Destitution, penniless and homeless...



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Self-reflection

What is your Big Bad?

(What are you frightened might happen if you fail?)
(i.e. What is *your* snake in the room?)



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Process 3:

**Avoidant
responses to
fear of failure**



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Avoidant responses to fear of failure

Active avoidance:

- Working excessively hard
- Checking
- Reassurance-seeking

Passive avoidance:

- Procrastination
- Taking the safe option
- Complete avoidance



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Avoidant responses in the therapy room

Active avoidance:

- Being (excessively) prepared
- Working much harder than the client
- Being (appearing) clever
- Chasing perfect understanding
- Problem-solving
- Delivering perfect ACT therapy



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Avoidant responses in the therapy room

Passive avoidance:

- Being under prepared
- Avoiding complex clients
- Not following up
- Avoiding tough conversations

Mindfulness for Two (Wilson, 2008)



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Chat

In what unhelpful ways might you attempt to avoid failure in therapy?



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The function of avoidance in the therapy room

Reducing **actual** experiences of failure
and

Reducing **our own** uncomfortable and unwanted emotions, physical sensations and self-criticism



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The function of avoidance in the therapy room

Reducing **actual** experiences of failure
and

Reducing **our own** uncomfortable and unwanted emotions, physical sensations and self-criticism

Experiential avoidance

Fear is not a problem to be solved



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Self-reflection & Breakout rooms

Think about a time when you've made a mistake.

What specific **uncomfortable inner sensations** accompanied this experience?



(5 mins)



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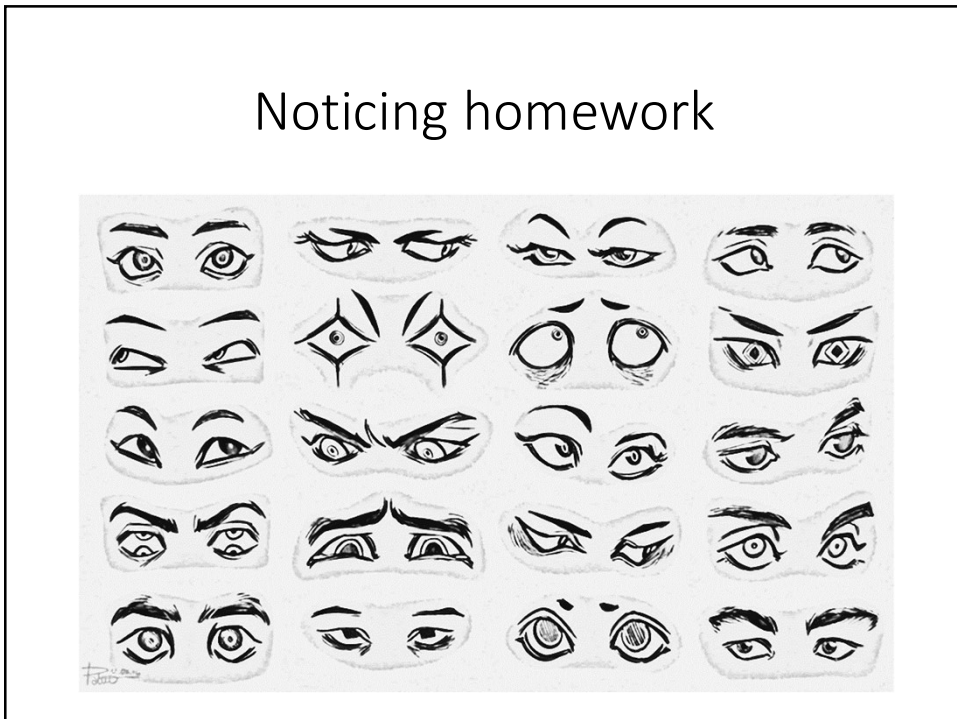
Physical sensations often associated with making mistakes

Physical Location	Common Sensations
In your chest and torso:	<input type="checkbox"/> Tension <input type="checkbox"/> Tightness <input type="checkbox"/> Heaviness <input type="checkbox"/> Restlessness
In your stomach:	<input type="checkbox"/> Churning/Twisting <input type="checkbox"/> Nausea/sick feeling <input type="checkbox"/> Lurching <input type="checkbox"/> Tension <input type="checkbox"/> Heaviness <input type="checkbox"/> Falling/sinking/dropping
Elsewhere in your body:	<input type="checkbox"/> Muscle tension in head, shoulders, back, legs, neck or arms <input type="checkbox"/> Agitation/restlessness <input type="checkbox"/> Headache <input type="checkbox"/> Mind spinning or foggy <input type="checkbox"/> Shakiness <input type="checkbox"/> Hands fidgeting

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The Perfectionistic Therapist Process 4: **Relentless self-criticism**



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Relentless self-criticism

- Hallmark of perfectionism
- Focus on perceived failures
- Persistent, pervasive
- Not everyone can hear their self-critical thoughts, yet they usually know exactly what they think of themselves



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Relentless self-criticism



"I am not a good enough therapist"

"I can't do this"

"A better therapist would be able to treat this person"

"A better therapist would have sorted this out by now"

"They would be improving faster if I had better skills"

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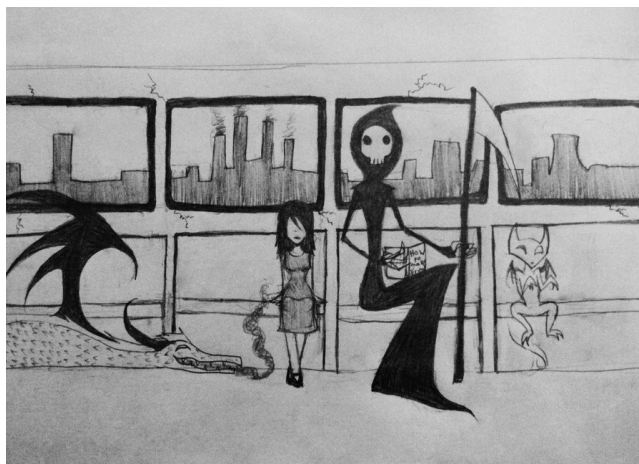
Reluctance to give up self-criticism

Motivating
Will be "lazy"
Need to change = being imperfect
Unworthy



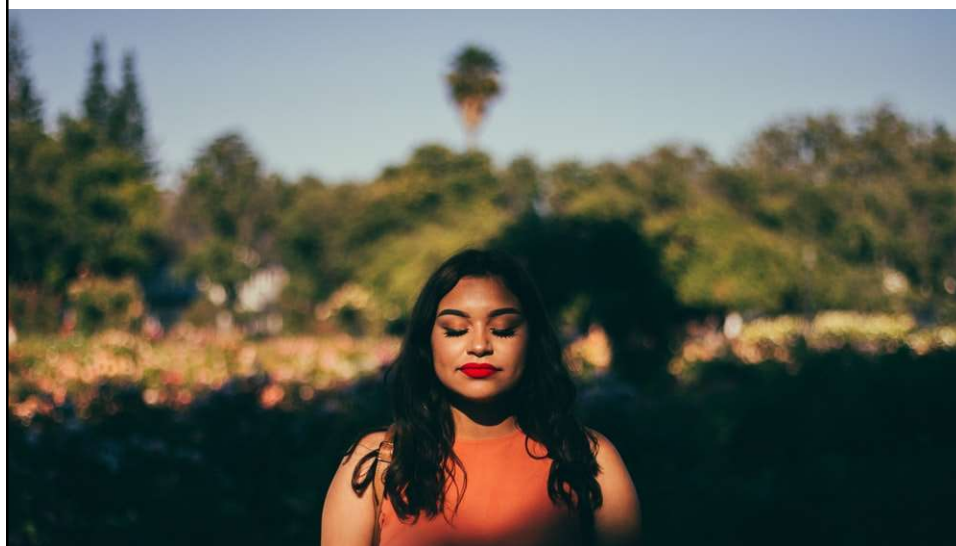
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Meeting your Perfectionistic Self-Critic



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Mindfulness Activity



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Chat

What might be the **good intention** behind your perfectionistic self-critic?



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Offering yourself compassion as a therapist

- Privilege and a burden
- Intermittent reinforcement schedule
- Uncertainty the price of admission
- Being useful not perfect
- Start where you are




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Thank you & Questions




Jennifer Kemp

jennifer@preciousminds.com.au

 Jennifer Kemp

 jenniferkemp2

 Jennifer (Robertson) Kemp

Upcoming book in December 2021:

The ACT Workbook for Perfectionism:

Build Your Best (Imperfect) Life Using Powerful Acceptance & Commitment Therapy and Self-Compassion Skills