Overcoming Perfectionism and Self-Criticism

THE TALKING THERAPIES UK SELF-HELP SERIES



Overcoming Perfectionism and Self-Criticism

Guided Self-Help Programme (Step-2) for NHS Clients

A self-help workbook · 7 modules · about 7 weeks

TALKING THERAPIES UK

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First edition, 2026.

This workbook accompanies the Overcoming Perfectionism and Self-Criticism programme on the Talking Therapies UK self-help platform. Its text is drawn from the programme and is kept current with it: whenever the programme changes, the workbook is set again.

Revision 5. This printing was set on 8 November 2026 from the programme as it stood that day.

A note on using this workbook. It offers self-help based on established psychological approaches for difficulties of mild to moderate severity. It is not a substitute for assessment or treatment by a qualified professional and is not designed for use in a crisis. The examples in it are fictional; no real person appears in them. If you are worried about your safety, or your difficulties are getting worse, the page headed “When self-help is not enough” says where to turn.

Set in Poppins and Roboto, the Talking Therapies UK typefaces.

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How to use this workbook

This guided self-help programme draws on cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT), compassion-focused therapy (CFT) and acceptance-and-commitment therapy (ACT), all of which have strong evidence from randomised controlled trials for reducing perfectionism and self-criticism. It provides clear psycho-education, practical skills and relapse-prevention strategies that can be used alongside routine clinical support. The content is designed for weekly 30-minute sessions that can be completed at home with minimal therapist contact.

This workbook is the written form of the Overcoming Perfectionism and Self-Criticism programme on the Talking Therapies UK self-help platform. It follows the programme module by module: each part of the book is one module, and each chapter is one piece of the module's teaching, set in the order the programme presents it.

Read the chapters of a part in order, then turn to the worksheets that follow them. The worksheets are the part of the work that changes things, so give them the time they ask for and come back to them as the weeks go on. You may copy or print the worksheets for your own use, as often as you need.

Most people work through one module a week, which takes the whole programme about 7 weeks. Go at the pace that suits you: a module done properly is worth more than two done quickly.

The check-in questionnaires let you see how things are changing. Complete each one when you reach it, note the date and your total, and compare it with the last.

When self-help is not enough

- If you are in danger now, or have seriously harmed yourself, call 999 or go to your nearest accident and emergency department.
- If you need help urgently but it is not an emergency, call NHS 111 or contact your GP surgery.
- Samaritans are there day and night, every day of the year: call 116 123 free from any phone.
- If you would rather not talk, text SHOUT to 85258 for free, confidential support at any hour.
- If your difficulties are getting worse as you work through this book, or you find yourself thinking about ending your life, stop and speak to your GP or a mental health professional. A workbook can be a good start, and some difficulties need more help than a book can give.

What this workbook will help you to do

- You will be able to define perfectionism and self-criticism and recognise how they affect mood, motivation and relationships. You will also understand the common triggers and maintenance cycles that keep these patterns alive.
- You will learn to notice automatic negative thoughts and perfectionistic rules such as "must be perfect" or "never make mistakes". You will practise recording these thoughts in a simple worksheet to increase awareness.
- You will acquire skills to evaluate the evidence for and against perfectionistic beliefs and to

generate balanced alternatives. This module introduces thought-recording and Socratic questioning exercises.

- You will design small experiments that deliberately introduce imperfection in daily life, learning to observe the real consequences. This helps to weaken the fear that mistakes lead to disaster.
- You will practise self-compassion exercises such as the compassionate imagery and soothing voice techniques. These skills aim to replace harsh self-criticism with a supportive inner stance.
- You will clarify personal values and learn how to commit to actions that align with them, even when perfectionist urges arise. Mindful acceptance strategies will help you stay present without over-identifying with self-critical thoughts.
- You will create a personalised relapse-prevention plan, identifying early warning signs and coping strategies. The module also reviews key skills to ensure they become lasting habits.

PART 1

Understanding Perfectionism and Self-Criticism

What they are, why they matter and how they develop

CHAPTER 1

Welcome to Module 1 – Getting Started

You've taken an important step by joining this guided self-help programme to overcome perfectionism and self-criticism. Over the next seven weeks you'll have short, 30-minute sessions you can complete at home, with just a few brief check-ins with your therapist.

This first module is all about understanding what perfectionism and self-criticism really are, why they matter, and how they develop. We'll look at the evidence from cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT), compassion-focused therapy (CFT) and acceptance-and-commitment therapy (ACT) – all of which have strong trial data showing they help people reduce these patterns.

You'll learn:

- The key features of perfectionism and self-criticism and how they differ.
- How thoughts, feelings and behaviours feed each other in a cycle that keeps the problem alive.
- The everyday triggers that set the cycle in motion.
- The impact on mood, motivation and relationships.

By the end of this module you'll be able to label the thoughts and behaviours that are part of the cycle, recognise the triggers that start it, and see how they affect your day-to-day life. This knowledge is the foundation for the skills we'll practice in later modules.

Take a moment to settle into a quiet space, breathe, and let yourself be open to learning something new about yourself. You're not alone – this programme is designed to be supportive, evidence-based, and gentle.

A NOTE

Tip: Keep a small notebook or a note on your phone handy. Jot down any thoughts or feelings that pop up during the session – you'll use these in the exercise later.

CHAPTER 2

How Perfectionism and Self-Criticism Develop – The Cognitive-Behavioural Cycle

In this second block we explore how perfectionism and self-criticism are formed and maintained. The cognitive-behavioural model provides a clear picture of the cycle that keeps these patterns alive. The cycle consists of four main parts: situations, thoughts, emotions, and behaviours. Each part influences the next, creating a feedback loop that can become automatic over time.

1. Situations – These are the external events that trigger the cycle. They can be real or imagined, such as a work deadline, a social invitation, or a memory of a past failure. For many people, the trigger is a subtle cue – a comment from a colleague, a grade on an assignment, or even a quiet moment when the mind starts to wander.

2. Thoughts – When the situation occurs, a rapid cascade of thoughts follows. In perfectionism, the thoughts often involve unrealistic standards ("I must get an A or I'm worthless") and catastrophic predictions ("If I don't get an A, my future is ruined"). In self-criticism, the thoughts turn inward with harsh language ("I'm incompetent", "I always mess things up").

3. Emotions – The thoughts generate strong emotional responses: anxiety, shame, guilt, or sadness. These emotions are uncomfortable and create a strong motivation to escape or avoid the feeling.

4. Behaviours – To reduce the distress, people engage in behaviours that temporarily soothe the emotion but reinforce the cycle. Common behaviours include over-preparing, procrastination, avoidance, reassurance-seeking, or self-punishment (e.g., denying oneself a break). While these actions may provide short-term relief, they also strengthen the belief that only perfection can prevent negative emotions.

Over time, the brain learns that the pattern of thoughts-emotions-behaviours is the most efficient way to cope, even though it is ultimately counter-productive. This learning is supported by neuro-plastic changes that make the cycle increasingly automatic.

Early experiences also play a crucial role. Children who receive conditional love – "You are loved when you achieve" – or who experience harsh criticism from parents or teachers are more likely to internalise the belief that worth is contingent on performance. A study published in Behaviour Research and Therapy (2019) found that adults who reported high parental criticism in childhood scored significantly higher on measures of perfectionistic self-criticism.

Cultural and societal pressures add another layer. In the UK, educational and professional cultures often celebrate high achievement, and social media amplifies the display of flawless lives. These external messages reinforce the internal standards that perfectionists set for themselves.

A NOTE

The cognitive-behavioural cycle is not a rigid sequence – thoughts, emotions and behaviours can influence each other in many directions. The key is to notice the pattern as it unfolds in your own life.

Below is a worked example that maps the cycle onto a typical workplace scenario.

Emma is a project manager. Situation: her team is due to present a report to senior leadership tomorrow.

Thoughts: “If the report isn’t perfect, the directors will think I’m incompetent and I’ll lose my promotion.”

Emotions: rapid heartbeat, sweating, a sense of dread.

Behaviours: Emma spends the whole night re-writing sections, double-checking every sentence, and refusing to delegate. She skips dinner and sleeps only a few hours. The next day she feels exhausted, and the report still contains a few minor errors. The anxiety persists, and she interprets the minor errors as proof of her inadequacy, reinforcing the original thought.

Notice how each step feeds the next, creating a self-fulfilling prophecy. The more Emma repeats this pattern, the stronger the belief that only flawless work will protect her self-esteem.

Breaking the cycle begins with awareness. By learning to pause and label each part of the cycle, you create a space where you can choose a different response. In later modules we will introduce specific techniques – such as thought records, behavioural experiments and compassionate imagery – that help you intervene at each stage.

For now, try a simple observation exercise: when you notice a strong urge to “do it perfectly”, ask yourself:

- What triggered the urge? (Situation)
- What am I telling myself? (Thought)
- How does that make me feel? (Emotion)
- What am I about to do? (Behaviour)

Write down your answers in a notebook. This practice will become the foundation for the skills you will develop later in the programme.