

Mental Health & Wellbeing at the Bar

Perfectionism



Wellbeing
at the Bar

Perfectionism

As a barrister high expectations are placed on you from colleagues, clerks, clients and judges. You have naturally high expectations of your own capability and professional duty to your clients. These expectations are an obvious source of pressure. They are undoubtedly the driver that makes you successful. We know from psychological research that pressure is a positive motivating force.

There are a multitude of reasons why you may find yourself identifying with perfectionist thinking and behaviours.

Our view of the world around us impacts on our thoughts, feelings and behaviours. This happens right from an early age and becomes learned behaviour (habits). Our personality preferences are also thought to play a part in perfectionism.

A healthy level of perfectionism is often the result of these pressures and expectations. However, when self-imposed expectations and pressures become unrealistic, previously acceptable levels of perfectionism can become unhealthy and potentially damage your wellbeing.

Perfectionism can be driven by childhood experiences, parental role-modelling, schooling and social or work-based norms. We all have unwritten, implicit rules by which we live our lives. These beliefs and assumptions are deeply held and help us make sense of the complexities of relationships, culture and the social community in which we live and work. We might not even be aware of these assumptions until they are challenged or not met.

Most of these rules are helpful and healthy allowing us to save time and function well. However, there are times when beliefs may be flawed or unhelpful.

What are the symptoms of perfectionism?

- Feeling you let people down when you cannot balance your busy work schedule with the demands of family and friends
- Having to finish all your tasks before going to bed
- Being prepared for every event whether at work or home
- Even when you win a case for a client, in your head you go over the things you could have done better
- When you lose a case you feel a complete failure
- You can't take a break for lunch or rest when you are on an important case
- You blame yourself if things aren't done just right
- Sometimes you are so afraid of failing that you never get started

What are the risks of unhealthy perfectionism?

Unhealthy perfectionist tendencies are linked to a host of poor wellbeing outcomes including:

- Social isolation
- Frustration
- Worry and [rumination](#) (over-thinking)
- Reduced capacity to enjoy experiences
- Depression
- [Eating disorders](#)
- Relationship difficulties
- Obsessive-compulsive symptoms
- Reduced rest and relaxation
- [Insomnia](#)
- Procrastination
- Persistent sense of failure
- Exhaustion and burnout

Surely having high standards is a good thing?

- Having standards is great – they motivate us to excel and put our best efforts at work and in our personal lives. As a barrister or clerk, you have been trained to work hard and succeed for your clients and chambers. However, there are times when we relentlessly pursue perfection at any cost, including our health and wellbeing. This continual striving if not kept in check can be debilitating.
- Developing alternative constructive approaches and knowing when you might be tipping over into unhealthy or repetitive thought patterns or behaviours will help maintain a sense of perspective and balance.

Tools to help tackle negative thought patterns

We revert to default thinking styles when we are in challenging situations. These often involve self-critical thoughts, assumptions and judgements. This is very typical of unhealthy perfectionism. Examples include;

Catastrophizing: *‘The client will hate me if I am late for this meeting’ or ‘If head of chambers doesn’t give me this he clearly doesn’t trust me to do a good job’*

Black and white thinking: Refers to extremes – and no grey areas. *‘If I tell my colleague I am not coping with this workload, she will think I am weak’*

Mental filter: Noticing only the errors in a document rather than the vast majority of great work

Magnification and minimisation: Ignoring skills and strengths and assuming there are other explanations that don't involve you. *'I was only given this case because no-one else was available to do it'*

Try challenging and adapting your thinking style to a more constructive and realistic one. Try adopting a different mind-set about the situation and challenge your deep-set beliefs and rules.

How to embed new habits for life

Remember to practice and persist with techniques for managing unhealthy perfectionist thinking and behaviour. It takes time to undo the habits of a lifetime (or a career).

As you progress, evaluate how you feel and what your levels of performance look like;

- How will you know when you are successful with this new way of operating?
- What will be your personal milestones?
- Has your performance increased, decreased or stayed about the same since you started this new habit?
- What changes in your thinking patterns and behaviour have you noticed?

Research demonstrates that habits have a better chance of sticking when we write them down. Success is also increased when we tell someone we trust and respect of our intentions and ask for their support.

Gradually as you embed new healthier approaches to perfectionism, your wellbeing will start to improve, you will build resilience and improve your performance levels.

“I realised that my drive for work to be as perfect as it could be and to get everything done had left me no remaining personal resources for recovery. Had I realised what was happening over the long lead up [to my breakdown] I would have seen I needed to use appropriate stress busters. In the priority I was first introduced to mindfulness. This was a revelation to me and has taught me a new way to handle life's difficulties.”

Sophie Miller, former barrister

Self help

The following techniques can be used to manage your inner (unhealthy) perfectionist:

Goals: Start small, resist the temptation to make this about being a 'perfect' human being. For example: Your tendency is to sit up all night checking and re-checking your work when in reality you know from years of experience that there are hardly ever any errors, but you like to double-check, just in case.

Recognise that you can train your brain to operate in a healthier way. For example, set yourself the goal of only checking your opening argument notes thoroughly twice – once when you complete them and once again the next morning before court.

Acceptance: You will initially feel a level of anxiety about this new behaviour (that is completely acceptable). However, your brain will slowly adapt to this level of anxiety and it will reduce. You should remind yourself that it is normal to have a level of anxiety when trying out a new way of being.

Persist: The temptation may be to give up and default back to unhealthy perfectionist ways. They offer feelings of familiarity. Resist this by remembering why you are doing this. Ultimately you will produce better quality work first time, your focus will improve, you will be more likely to sleep well and you will perform better for your client.

Repeat: Habits only become habits when they are repeated over and over again. Our brains are not fixed, they are 'plastic' and will 're-wire' with this new learned behaviour. Trust in the capability of your brain to achieve this.

Acknowledge Setbacks: We are human and setbacks are an inevitable part of life. You might fall back into your old unhealthy patterns from time to time. Acknowledge this if it happens, especially at the beginning of habit formation and when you are under significant pressure. Maintain your focus on positive change.

Celebrate success: Reward yourself when you succeed.