

Mental Health & Wellbeing at the Bar

Perfectionism



Wellbeing
at the Bar

Perfectionism

'Pupillage feels like a year-long exam, and I am under increasing pressure to perfect my work'

As one of the most junior barristers in your Chambers/ workplace, you have to meet the expectations of more senior colleagues, your clerks, clients and judges. 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.

Having standards is great. It can motivate you to excel and put your best foot forward. As a recent graduate or pupil, you have just finished the academic stage of training and will be familiar with the pressure to succeed. A healthy level of perfectionism is often the result of these pressures and expectations.

However, there are times when we relentlessly pursue perfection at any cost, including our health and wellbeing. Pupil Supervisors tell us that they have seen pupils fail to complete pupillage because they have been unable to address keep their perfectionist tendencies in check.

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.

Triggers – what to watch out for

- Feeling you let people down when you cannot balance your busy work schedule with the demands of your personal life
- 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, impress your supervisor and colleagues (or for an applicant, interview well) in your head you go over the things you could have done better
- When you lose a case, or get less than stellar feedback, you feel like a complete failure
- You can't take a break for lunch or rest when you are on an important case/doing a piece of work
- 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 fear of failure
- Exhaustion and burnout

Tools to help tackle unhelpful thought patterns

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

Catastrophizing: *'It's my first appearance in court and I am running late. My client will hate me' or 'The Senior Clerk isn't sending me as many briefs as my co-pupil. This must be because he 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 that I am weak'*

Mental filter: Noticing only the errors in a document rather than the vast majority of great work *'My Pupil Supervisor made amendments to my opinion, AGAIN'*

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'*

Possible Solutions & Self-help

It takes time to undo the habits of a lifetime.

Here are some techniques for managing unhealthy perfectionist thinking and behaviour:

Evaluate: check on your progress by asking yourself 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?

Write it down: research demonstrates that habits have a better chance of sticking when we write them down.

Talk to someone: success is also increased when we tell someone we trust and respect of our intentions and ask for their support.

Goals: start small. Resist the temptation to make this about being a 'perfect' human being e.g. 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.

Accept: it is completely acceptable to initially feel a level of anxiety about this new behaviour. However, your brain will slowly adapt to this feeling, and it will reduce.

Persist: you might be tempted to give up and default back to unhealthy perfectionist ways, which may offer feelings of familiarity. Try to resist this because 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: we develop habits through repetition. Our brains can be rewired with a 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.

Gradually, as you embed new healthier approaches to perfectionism, your wellbeing will start to improve. These new approaches should help to rebuild your 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 Priory, 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