Perfectionism

Definition of the Problem

- Setting impossibly high standards for ourselves and sometimes for others, believing that they should achieve their goals effortlessly and never make mistakes, have flaws, or be disagreeable. Consider anything less than perfect unacceptable and feel distressed when people (themselves and others) don't live up to expectations (Martin, 2019).
- Perfectionism is a transdiagnostic construct that can co-occur with a wide range of other psychological disorders (e.g., eating disorders, anxiety disorders, depression) (Egan et al., 2014).
- Underneath you find fear and anxiety. Perfectionists are afraid to disappoint others and don't want to reveal their weaknesses and vulnerabilities, for fear of judgment. They view failure as catastrophic and permanent. They try to avoid failure, criticism, and embarrassment by avoiding risk and favoring consistency and what feels safe (Martin, 2019).

3 Forms of Perfectionism Personality Traits (Hewitt & Flett, 1991)

1. Self-oriented perfectionism
   a. You have a self-imposed expectation that you need to be perfect. You create unrealistically high standards that are not attainable. You are goal oriented, driven, highly self-critical. You notice every flaw and mistake, ruminate about them, and beat yourself up over them.
2. Other-oriented perfectionism
   a. You have unrealistic expectations of others. When they fail to live up to that, you are critical and easily find fault or assign blame. You're highly critical of others and frequently feel disappointed and angry that others aren't living up to your expectations.
3. Socially prescribed perfectionism
   a. You believe that others have abnormally high expectations of you that are impossible to meet.

Case example

Cindy is a middle-aged, married, female and mother of two. She recently got promoted to Director of Marketing on her team. Cindy presents with "type A personality," tightly wound and competitive, demanding a lot of herself and everyone around her. She always seems to have a million things to do and lives with her phone and calendar implanted in her hand. Cindy suffers from insomnia and feels like she can't "turn off her mind." Even when she's awake, she can't seem to relax. Her husband just wants her to sit through an entire movie with the family without

getting up to wash the last of the dishes or check her work email. Cindy never seems to do just one thing at a time. In fact, the only time Cindy slows down is when she's got a migraine, which seems to be happening more and more as she adds more commitments to her to-do list.

Cognitive Behavioral Formulation

Core Belief

● If I make a mistake and I'm not the most productive, that is evidence that I am a failure and not as good as my colleagues.

Emotions/Physiological Reactions

● Anxiety

Behaviors

● Counterproductive behaviors such as
  ○ checking her work over and over
  ○ comparing the progress she's making on her projects compared to her coworkers

Key Assessment Questions

● Cues and Triggers for Perfectionistic Beliefs and Behaviors
  ○ What sorts of situations trigger feelings of anxiety, sadness, anger, or distress where your standards are not met?
● Cognitive Features
  ○ What sorts of thoughts trigger your perfectionism?
  ○ What would it mean about you if you didn't do your best, for example, if you didn't give a perfect presentation?
  ○ What are you predicting might happen if others were to notice your mistakes?
● Behavioral Features
  ○ Are there things that you do to prevent yourself from feeling anxious about not meeting your standards?
  ○ What sorts of things do you do to ensure that you meet your high standards?
● Emotional/Physical Responses
  ○ When you are unable to meet your high standards, what emotions and physical sensations do you experience?
● Domains of Perfectionism
  ○ In what areas of your life do you tend to be most perfectionistic?
  ○ How does perfectionism affect your relationships?

- Severity and Impact
  - Are you able to meet your standards? If so, at what cost?
  - Are other people able to meet your standards?
  - Do your standards help you to achieve your goals or do they get in the way (e.g., by making you overly disappointed or angry when your standards are not met or causing you to get less work done)?
- Development, Course, and Treatment History
  - Has the perfectionism worsened or improved or been stable over time?
  - Have changes in the perfectionism coincided with any major life events or other possible triggers?
  - Was there a time when your perfectionism was helpful to you (e.g., rewarded by others)? What changed over time?

Treatment Interventions

Session 1: Assessment, cognitive-behavioral formulation, and motivation to change: Pros and cons of changing perfectionism

Assessment and Conceptualization of Perfectionism
- See above

Treatment Goals
- SMART goals:
  - Specific
  - Measurable
  - Attainable
  - Relevant
  - Time-Bound

- Steps to Setting Specific Goals:
  - What: What do you want to accomplish?
  - Why: Specific reasons, purpose or benefits of accomplishing the goal.
  - Who: Who is involved?
  - Where: Identify a location.
  - Which: Identify requirements and constraints.

General Goal of Therapy:

"It is not about reducing standards, as there is nothing wrong in striving itself. Rather, therapy is about reducing the self-criticism that accompanies striving and reducing the degree to which self-worth is based on achievement" (Egan et al., 2014)

Assignment

- Digital lesson
  - Intro to CBT
  - Understanding Anxiety
- Digital practice
  - Pros and Cons to Change

Session 2: Psychoeducation and self-monitoring

Psychoeducation

- Help clients obtain objective information about the way their world works and what works best for them. Start to explore myths they might hold.
- Yerkes-Dodson Law: There is a "zone of optimal performance." Operation beyond zone of optimal performance would be a waste of effort and counterproductive.
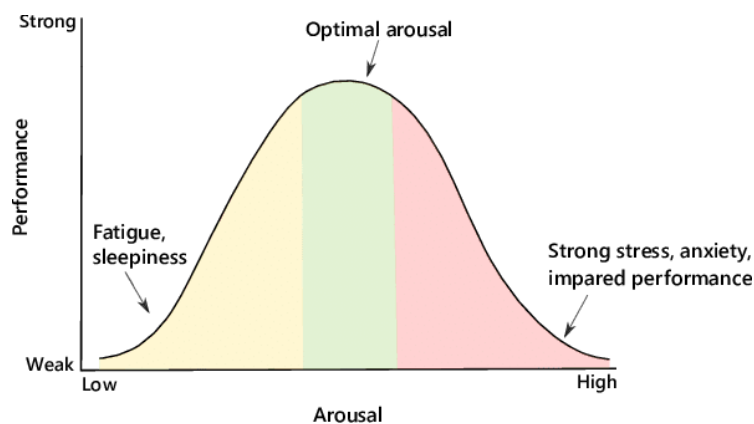
- What makes "success?"
  - Many factors that come into play - intelligence, personality, drive, opportunities, luck, and good mentoring - not just hard work.
- Relationship between success and mistakes
  - Successful people made mistakes in the past and learned from them.
  - Albert Einstein: "anyone who never made a mistake never tried anything new."
- If I don't do something perfectly, I will be anxious all day
  - With time anxiety has nowhere to go but down. Panic attacks peak within 10 minutes and die down naturally within an hour.
- Self-criticism helps people work harder and achieve more

- ○ Research shows that self-criticism is linked with lower goal achievement (e.g., Powers et la., 2007, 2009).

Self-Monitoring

- Encourage client to become more aware of their perfectionism and self-monitor their rigid beliefs and counterproductive behaviors.
- Digital Practice: Emotions in Context
  - ○ Situation
    - ■ Work - completing a presentation
  - ○ Thoughts
    - ■ There must be no mistakes in this; each word must be perfect on each slide.
  - ○ Emotions
    - ■ Anxiety
  - ○ Behaviors
    - ■ Spend 30 minutes using thesaurus on computer to find the best word possible
  - ○ Consequences
    - ■ Felt worse and negative self talk - It's taking me so long. I can never find the right word. I'm stupid.

Assignment

- Digital lesson (choose from the following)
  - ○ Understanding Emotions
  - ○ Mindful Awareness
- Digital practice
  - ○ Emotions in Context

Session 3: Behavioral experiments (exposure response prevention)

Behavioral Experiments (exposure response prevention)

Set up a range of behavioral experiments for the client to try where they put in less time than usual and decrease their unhelpful perfectionism-related behaviors. This leads them to examine the validity of unhelpful beliefs and gather evidence for newer, realistic beliefs.

Guidelines:
- Step 1 - Consider the formulation and identify a key thought/behavior/process that keeps the client stuck in the vicious cycle of perfectionism.

- Step 2 - Collaboratively brainstorm ideas for an experiment to test the thought/behavior/process. Make sure the experiment is not too challenging and it will yield useful and meaningful information. Be specific when/where the experiment will be conducted.
- Step 3 - Elicit from the client specific predictions about the outcome of the experiment and discuss how to record on the Exposure Practice.
- Step 4 - Anticipate any problems and brainstorm solutions.
- Step 5 - Have the client conduct the behavioral experiment.
- Step 6 - Review the experiment and draw conclusions.

Exposure Practice:
Exposure task description - *Test out unhelpful thought and behavior of not being able to tolerate being idle. "The devil makes work for idle hands - I must always be busy, and it's wrong not to be busy." Engage in an activity that's relaxing and would fall under being idle.*
Situation: Go to a local cafe and read a newspaper for 20 minutes.
SUDS before (rating of discomfort) - *50*
SUDS after - *20*
SUDS peak - *70*
What did you take away from this exposure - *It was difficult to refrain from not checking emails on my phone. I felt uncomfortable at first but this decreased pretty quickly after 5 minutes. I was surprised because afterward I didn't feel as guilty as I thought I would for not having done something "more productive."*

Assignment

- Digital lesson
    - Challenging Avoidance
- Digital practice
    - Exposure Practice

Session 4: Challenging dichotomous thinking via behavioral experiments and continua

- Identify and discuss the various thinking traps that are rigid and rules that the client has set up for themselves (e.g., I must never go to bed before finishing my work I have set myself for the day or else that means I failed," "Only being the best is useful; anything else indicates I am a failure.")
- Discuss that everything is on a continua and that there are many "shades of gray" in every situation.
- Encourage client to continue engaging in behavioral experiments to test out their thinking traps (e.g., submitting an email to her boss with a minor error in it and not judging her performance in a black and white way).

Assignment

- Digital lesson   (choose from the following)
  - Mindful Awareness
  - Thinking Traps
- Digital practice
  - Exposure Practice

Session 5: Challenging cognitive bias

Introduce thought record to challenge client's unhelpful thinking styles.

Thought Record
- Situation - What happened that caused you to have the unpleasant emotion(s)? Who? What? When? Where? How?
  - *At home Monday night lying in bed thinking about presentation that I gave in the afternoon. I said "um" a lot and stumbled over my words at the start, so the whole presentation was ruined.*
- Unhelpful Thought - What thought went through your mind when this happened? How much do you believe this thought?
  - *I screwed up the presentation; I am such a failure; what a loser. (90%)*
- Emotions - What emotion(s) did you feel when you had the unhelpful thought? How intense are the emotions overall?
  - *Anxious (90%), Angry toward self (80%)*
- Check the Thought - What is the evidence for the unhelpful thought? What is the evidence against the unhelpful thought?
  - Evidence for: *All my other coworkers gave flawless presentations. I'm the only one who messed up.*
  - Evidence against: *No one said the presentation was bad. There's no evidence that I'm at risk of losing my job from this presentation. In the past other people have stumbled on their words in presentations.*
  - Were you engaging any thinking traps?
    - *Exaggerating or minimizing a situation*
    - *Oversimplifying*
    - *Overgeneralizing from a single incident*
- Alternative Thought: What is another way to think of this situation? How else can you interpret the event instead of using the unhelpful thought? How much do you believe this alternative thought?
  - *Just because I stumbled over a few words does not mean the whole thing was ruined; I was more confident after the start. (80%)*
- New Emotions: When you told yourself the old unhelpful thought, you felt emotions. Now, when you tell yourself the alternative thought, what emotion(s) do you feel?

- ○ *Anxious (45%)*

Assignment

- Digital lesson   (choose from the following)
  - ○ Thinking Traps
  - ○ Mindful Awareness
- Digital practice
  - ○ Thought Record

Session 6: Procrastination, time management, and pleasant events

(This session could be moved to earlier in treatment if client is unable to engage in the behavioral experiments upfront)

Procrastination, Time Management

- A fundamental problem in clients with perfectionism is poor time management.
  - ○ They might try to fit too much into their schedules due to achievement striving, so they are always rushing, running late, never allowing time for rest or relaxation.
  - ○ Or, they may have periods of procrastination in which they ruminate and put off tasks that need to be done, often due to worry over not doing them well enough.
- Identify the areas of procrastination and the impact of it.
  - ○ Perfectionism area: Work
  - ○ Perfectionistic prediction: I will never be able to create a good presentation.
  - ○ Procrastination behavior: Staring at the computer trying to think of ideas, surfing the internet.
  - ○ How procrastination keeps going by increasing belief in predictions: The more the client put off working on the presentation, the more they believed prediction that they would not be able to create a good presentation, and the more the client continued to procrastinate.

- Explore client's motivation, cognitive biases, and behavioral techniques to overcome procrastination.
  - ○ Define the task/goal - *Start presentation the week before it is due; submit to boss 1 day early.*
- Break the task down into manageable chunks and rate chunks from easiest to hardest (0-100).
  - ○ 100 - *submit presentation to boss*
  - ○ 90 - *Read over presentation for flow, check spelling errors, and make sure it sounds good*
  - ○ 80 - *Write introduction and conclusion point for presentation*

- ○ 70 - *Write main arguments for each area by expanding bullet points*
  - ○ 60 - *Summarize main points from research in bullet points under each subheading*
  - ○ 50 - *Read articles and research on each of the areas in the presentation*
  - ○ 40 - *Do research on computer to find information on each of the subheading areas*
  - ○ 30 - *Write bullet points for areas that might be included under each subheading*
  - ○ 20 - *Write subheadings that will be used throughout the presentation*
  - ○ 10 - *Save a new file name on computer for the presentation*
  - ○ 0 - *think about the presentation*

Pleasant Events

- Discuss a time management schedule with the purpose of introducing time for reset and relaxation and addressing areas of life that client was trying to expand in order to broaden their self-evaluation (i.e., relationships, hobbies).

Activity Log
- Activity Name
  - ○ *Invite friend over for coffee. I want to see my friend but I feel that I need to spend all day cleaning the house before she comes. Therefore, I feel like I want to cancel the visit.*
- Depression/Stress - Before activity, after activity
  - ○ *Before activity 9, After activity 2*
- Pleasure - Before activity, after activity
  - ○ *Before activity 1, After activity 10*
- Achievement - Before activity, after activity
  - ○ *Before activity 0, After activity 9*

Assignment

- Digital lesson
  - ○ Stress Management
- Digital practice
  - ○ Activity Log
  - ○ Structured Problem Solving
    - ■ Utilize this practice if the client needs help to overcome perfectionism. The process of writing out the steps to solve a problem is useful, as it often helps the person to gain objectivity about the problem and think of ways to address it that they might have considered before.

Session 7: Self-criticism and self-compassion

(This session could be moved to earlier in treatment if client is unable to engage in the behavioral experiments upfront)

Self-Criticism and Self-Compassion

- Clients with perfectionism often self-criticism with negative labels, such as "failure, screw up, useless."
- Discuss the notion of self-compassion. Have the client identify values that they use to treat their colleagues and friends (e.g., respect, care, politeness) and ask how they might use these values for themselves.
- Have the client challenge the self-criticism with Thought Record and have them practice replacing the criticisms with self-compassionate thoughts.
- Help clients to see that their self-worth is not only defined by achievement

Self-Evaluation

- Generate a pie chart that reflects how much each domain of their life influenced their judgment of their self-worth at the time they started therapy. The relative influence of such domains is indicated by how bad clients feel about themselves when things are not going well in that domain.
  - Example initial pie chart:
    - Friends 5%, Family 5%, Appearance 20%, Work 75%
- Help the client expand current domains that contribute to their self-evaluation that are not performance based, introduce new domains in life that are not performance based, decrease the extent to which performance impacts on self-evaluation in domains that have most influence on self-worth.
  - Example revised pie chart:
- Animals 2%, Appearance 8%, Spirituality 15%, Friends 20%, Family 20%, Work 35%

Assignment

- Digital lesson
  - Self-compassion
- Digital practice
- Thought Record

Session 8: Relapse prevention

- Discuss ways that the client could keep these changes going, including continuing to conduct behavioral experiments and challenging unhelpful thoughts.
  - Do things less than perfectly

- Reduce time spent on work tasks
- Broaden self-evaluation by continuing to engage in new activities client had been ignoring such as pleasant events and socializing
- Keep self-critical voice in check

References

Egan, S. S., Wade, T. D., Shafran, R., Antony, M. M. (2014). Cognitive-Behavioral Treatment of Perfectionism. The Guilford Press.

Martin, S. (2019). The CBT Workbook for Perfectionism: Evidence-based skills to help you let go of self-criticism, build self-esteem & find balance. New Harbinger Publications, Inc.