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## **Treating Perfectionism: Cognitive Strategies**

Perfectionism centers around the belief that everything must be perfect all of the time. People with perfectionism can be resistant to change, because they consider their perfectionism to be a strength that aids them in their tasks. However, upon digging deeper, they may unearth the realization that perfectionism yields a number of problems, like stress, anxiety, procrastination, and depression. Below are a list of questions and techniques to explore with perfectionistic clients using a CBT framework. In doing so, clients can recalibrate cognitive biases and correct unrealistic beliefs and interpretations.

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### **Questions for Developing a Collaborative CBT Formulation:**

#### **High Standards and Striving**

- In what areas do you set high standards?
- In which areas of your life do you push yourself and feel that you have to excel?
- Of these areas, which are the most important for you to achieve your standards?

#### **Adverse Consequences of Perfectionism**

- What impact has your striving had on your life?
- What cost do you pay for pushing yourself?
- What is the effect of striving on your mood, work, relationships, etc.?
- What effect does it have on your thinking (e.g., rumination over mistakes, poor concentration)?
- What effect does it have on your behavior (e.g., counterproductive behaviors, reassurance seeking)?

#### **Self-Evaluation Dependent on Achievement**

- What factors affect how you judge yourself as a person?
- How much of your self-esteem is affected by how well you meet your high standards?
- Do you base your sense of self-worth on what you do, rather than who you are as a person?

#### **Setting Inflexible Standards and Rules**

- Do you change your standards and rules when you discover that they cannot be met?

#### **Cognitive Biases**

- Do you tend to perceive your standards as being either completely met or not at all met?
- When you think about your performance, what do you tend to focus on?
- How much do you notice mistakes in your performance?
- How much do you notice successes in your performance?

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## **Perfectionism Myths**

- To get ahead, you have to be single minded and give up all outside interests.
- People can't be happy if they're not successful.
- The harder people work, the better they will perform.
- If I avoid a problem, it will sort itself out.
- If a job's worth doing, then it's worth doing right.
- People notice every little detail and are quick to form critical judgments.

## **Identifying Double Standards**

- Do you have one set of rules for yourself, and another set of rules for other people?
- Are the rules for yourself stricter than your rules for others?

## **Challenging Double Standards**

- Is it fair to have stricter rules for yourself than for everyone else?
- What is the impact of holding a different set of standards for yourself than for others?
- What would you say to a friend who had a stricter set of rules for themselves than others?
- How does it follow that rules need to be stricter for yourself than for other people?

## **Examples of Should Statements**

- I should always push myself to achieve.
- I should always do things thoroughly.
- I should never waste time.
- I should always be productive.
- I should always be trying to better myself.
- I should try to be the best.

## **Identifying Should Statements**

- What runs through your mind when you think of the "to do" list that you have to get through?
- How often do you say "should" and "must" to yourself when you are thinking of everything you have to do?

## **Challenging Should Statements**

- How does saying "should" to yourself constantly make you feel? In what way does it impact your sense of self?
- What impact do you think it might have if you applied the sort of pressure you apply on yourself to a close friend?

Adapted from: Social Anxiety and Perfectionism: Clinical Tools to Let Go of Unrealistic Standards and Build Real Connections. Martin M. Antony, PhD, CPsych, FRSC, ABPP