

Ep #234: Why Perfectionism is Holding You Back



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

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This is episode 234, and today we're talking about perfectionism. Let's get into it.

If you want to do things differently but need some help making it happen, then tune in for your weekly dose of coaching from me, Maisie Hill, Master Life Coach and author of *Period Power*. Welcome to *The Maisie Hill Experience*.

Perfectionism is holding many of you back. Some of you won't even realise that's what's going on. We're going to go through it all today. So perfectionism refers to a broad personality style that's characterised by concern with striving for flawlessness and perfection and is accompanied by critical self-evaluations and concerns regarding other people's evaluations of you. So I've come up with a list of traits and behaviours that I see amongst my clients who are prone to perfectionism.

But before we get on to that I just want to let you know that if you can kind of identify, or by the end of this episode, if you identify as someone who is prone to perfectionism, it's important to know that you're not alone. It's really quite prevalent. According to the research up to 30% of the population struggles with perfectionism to some degree. I would say it's very common amongst my clients but it's also more common among those socialised as female than male.

And people who experience perfectionism tend to have higher levels of stress, anxiety, and depression and it can just get in the way of life in so many different ways. Now, many of my clients have no idea that they're prone to perfectionism to begin with. And note how I'm not saying perfectionists. We always want to be careful not to take on these descriptions in a way that makes them part of your identity. So, we want to stick to describing behaviour rather than you as a person. So, stop referring to yourself as a perfectionist if that's what you have been doing.

And I think that the issue as to why so many of my clients think, "Oh, I'm not a perfectionist," is because there's this assumption that if you are, then your life is perfect, which is not the case. I mean, for some people it will be,

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but not everyone. Or that it will look perfect on the outside because we have these societal ideas of what someone who's perfect looks like. And they're usually very well put together, polished and manicured. Their home and car are very tidy and clean. They haven't got a kitchen drawer filled with junk and odds and ends. Everything's organised perfectly. You get where I'm going with this.

So one of my clients recently shared this great comment, and they said, "I only recently realised what a perfectionist I am. I thought for the longest time that perfectionism was decided by the media or someone else and that it was regarding fashion trends or a stereotype of someone who wears a lot of make-up. Rather than the act of judging myself about how I do or don't measure up to my own over-the-top expectations. Some of us set our own standards of what our version of perfect is, and I can't believe I didn't work this out sooner."

So, yes, your home can be a complete tip, you can look a mess, you can be disorganised, and you can be prone to perfectionism. I also can't help but spot a slight whiff of perfectionism in that comment. "I can't believe I didn't work this out sooner," implying that it should have been worked out sooner. Okay, I mentioned I was going to share with you a list of the traits and behaviours that I see happening within the umbrella term of perfectionism, so let's go through those.

Procrastination and paralysis, and at the same time, a sense of urgency and stress, including an urgency to do things, especially courses and qualifications. Having high expectations of yourself, being overly critical of yourself, ruminating, hiding mistakes, not having a lot of spare time and often cycling between periods of being productive and high achievement and then exhaustion, not much middle ground.

But I will also say that you may not identify as someone who achieves things and being a high achiever, because you set the bar so high that you are only ever focusing on the things that you haven't done. There can be an absence of joy and fun, and a need to control yourself and others, and the world around you. And that doesn't mean that things are in control or

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you're in control or that it feels that way, but that's the kind of behaviour. You can be driven by fear, and things just take a long time, longer than is necessary.

A task that's quite short becomes one that takes longer, and not because you didn't anticipate what was involved. It's just because you can't let it be done. So, overworking is also quite common here. And a lot of the time, you might not even realise that's what you're doing. But you can just have too much on your schedule and spending too long on those tasks as well. So if you are experiencing burnout or you're recovering from it, I encourage you to notice if perfectionism is a factor because perfectionist tendencies are associated with burnout.

And I definitely see this in my clients because perfectionism, it takes up a lot of time in terms of actual time, energy, input that you put into something, but also the amount of mental real estate that it takes up in your mind. And then the slight or severe level of stress that you experience, too, all whilst trying to achieve the impossible. So, you can end up sacrificing your health, sleep, relationships in the pursuit of perfection, and ultimately leaves you feeling depleted, pretty unhappy about things. So why do we do it?

Why do we set ourselves up for failure by aiming for perfection? Well, there's a number of reasons. As you might well imagine, for some of us, it's a way to gain approval and validation from others. You might believe that if you're perfect, then people are going to like you, that they'll respect you, that they'll treat you a certain way. It can also be a way to avoid criticism and rejection because if you're perfect, then you never give anyone a reason to criticise or reject you.

And research suggests that women might be more susceptible to this than men. There are a few reasons for this. If you've been socialised as female, then you've likely been socialised to be a caregiver or a caretaker of others. And there can be this sense of responsibility for everything and everyone around you, which can then translate into the belief that you've got to get everything perfect in order to avoid any discomfort of any kind or potential negative consequences.

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Women are also held to higher standards than men, both in their personal and professional lives. There's the pressure to be perfect in appearance, behaviour, achievements as well in order to be taken seriously or respected in your field. And this pressure can feel overwhelming and lead to the development of perfectionist tendencies. Those socialised as female are also, of course, more likely to experience discrimination and sexism, which can exacerbate feelings of inadequacy and perfectionism.

You might feel like you have to work harder and achieve more than your male counterparts in order to be recognised and respected. And that can end up leading to an unhealthy focus on perfectionism and success. And of course, for those who are BIPOC, being Black, Indigenous and People of Colour, there are then the additional challenges or layers in relation to perfectionism that involve racial discrimination such as the pressures and expectations regarding appearance, regarding behaviour, very different standards than what for example I experience as a white cis woman.

And there's just a far higher level of scrutiny, working twice as hard as white people only to receive half the credit, in addition to other systemic barriers that limit opportunities for success, also about safety and security and survival in a white supremacist patriarchal society. So there are multiple reasons why being perfect can feel like the best way to keep yourself safe.

And I want to acknowledge that there are times when, as a survival mechanism, that can work, but a lot of the time, perfectionism is a trap. It keeps us stuck, unable to move forward or take risks. And it prevents us from learning and growing because we're so afraid of making mistakes. And it just robs the joy and satisfaction that comes from doing our best and being proud of ourselves for trying. I've had plenty of perfectionist tendencies. I've done a lot of personal work around this.

And I've got a childhood, a core childhood memory that I'm going to share with you that I think just really illustrates what we're talking about here. So, this memory is from when I was in primary school. And so it must have been my final year because I needed one year in this particular school before moving up to junior school, which means I was six, the same age as

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Nelson is at the moment. And we had this reading test. We had 40 words to read out loud. I very painfully got one wrong. And I can still remember what the word was. It was tongue and I read it out loud as ton-gue.

And at the end, when my lovely teacher told me that I'd got it wrong and how to actually say it, I was just kicking myself for it. And I was an excellent reader. I'd actually at that point run out of books to read in the school library. And I remember them bringing me and my mum into the library and the teachers revealing these books that they'd ordered in especially for me. And so when I said tongue incorrectly, it just felt so painful because there was this high standard that I had created for myself, or the expectation that others had of me.

And literally for decades, any time I did anything wrong, I would go back to the memory of that reading test. I don't do that anymore, thanks to coaching, which is just the best thing ever. But it was my go-to critical place of how I wasn't good enough. So you know how you could just make a mistake in your day, a tiny one that has zero implications, but it just feels so intolerable to you. And instead of containing that inner criticism, you just zoom back to all the examples of your past, all the evidence that's available to you of how useless you are as a human, including reading one word incorrectly when you were six.

So, perfectionism can hold you back from achieving your goals and living a fulfilling life. When you're so focused on being perfect, what happens is you'll avoid taking risks or trying new things because you're afraid of failing or making mistakes. So this prevents you from pursuing your passions, giving things a go, living up to your full potential. So, while perfectionism may seem like a noble pursuit, it's actually a harmful and unsustainable way of living. And it is important to recognise the negative impact it can have on your life and take steps to overcome it, because you can do that.

Now, I know for many of you, as you're listening, there might be a question in your mind about if perfectionism is ever useful, so let's address that. I don't think there is, but perfectionism is different to striving for excellence. So, I want you to see a so-called perfect result as different from taking

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perfect action which is what perfectionism is. And if you can separate those things out it will make a massive difference. Perfectionism is an approach. I don't think it leads to perfect results.

And I've been quizzing people all week on this. Here's why. How does it feel in your body when you think that you have to do things perfectly? What about needing to get it right, how does that feel in your body? Because to me and to everyone that I have quizzed about this, it feels tight and it creates anxiety and fear, or adds to it if it's already there. And there's that sense of urgency and franticness to it. And my opinion is that anxiety, fear and tightness don't produce the best results.

You may well have produced great results that have been partially driven by fear and anxiety, but being in that kind of stress response rarely produces an optimal result. So, think about being in a meeting and your boss raising their voice and kind of barking at you about a problem or something, a mistake that's been made. And you have to come up with a solution on the spot, that's what they're demanding of you. Now, you might come up with one, but have you ever had the experience where you're just in the shower the next day and the solution just comes to you?

There's actually a whole bunch of research on this. So that's what I mean by I don't think that tightness and pressure creates optimal results. I think when we have spaciousness and we're able to think creatively, when we're out of survival mode, that's when we can produce the best results, but you and I were socialised to be good girls, I imagine, I know I was. And have you ever noticed how trying to be perfect can feel like the safest thing to do?

Maybe you think that if you get everything right, then nothing bad will happen to you or that you need to be perfect in order to not get in trouble with someone, to not get told off. If you get everything right on a test then you're worthy and lovable and a good girl. And if you do things correctly, then you're safe. As you might imagine, this was my experience when I was younger, when I did that test as a six-year-old and the many years in education that came after that, which spilt out into the rest of my life too.

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Which is why one of my proudest moments in life was when I was at university, and I was doing my integrated Master's in Acupuncture. So, Bachelor of Science and a Master's all in one. And I was on track for a first, the best grade you can get at degree level, because all of my grades were over the 70% rate, which took me into that category, a first or a distinction. I can't even remember what the thing is, which I think is actually evidence of how much progress I've made in this area. We had this exam, so basically I'd had exceptional results on all of my tests.

And then we had this exam at the end of the Year 2 that was Chinese medicine theory. And I sat down to take the exam, I opened the paper up, and as I read through it I realised that I couldn't answer the questions. Now, I am great at taking exams. I actually enjoy them, and I'd also studied for this exam. So, as I realised that I couldn't answer the questions I simultaneously knew that it wasn't about me. And I gave it a go, I tried to answer the questions. I looked at the information that was provided. I looked at the questions.

I tried all sorts of approaches, and it was just like, no, can't do this. I don't mean that in a I can't do this like a way of thinking about myself and my capabilities. It was no, we just have not been prepared for this. So, I walked out of the exam, which for me was the wildest thing ever to do, especially with me as being perfect and getting the best grades, etc, etc. And I say it's the wildest thing I've ever done. I've done a lot of wild things in my life that are maybe more expected of me.

But to walk out of an exam knowing that it would mean that I wouldn't be able to get a first or a distinction, whatever it was, that was huge for me. And I gave them that feedback. We are not equipped for this exam. We haven't been taught well enough to answer these questions, so I failed that exam. But as a result of walking out and giving that feedback, they taught us that class all over again over the summer break with a different teacher. We had a great teacher, shout out to Kim, he was amazing. And he taught us the theory of Chinese medicine.

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And then we all sat the exam again and passed, and we were ready for our third year. So I share this as evidence that if I can shrug off perfectionism in that kind of way, then you can too. Some of my clients are very reluctant to let go of perfectionism because it has created great results for them. I would argue that there's even better ones available if you come at it from a different approach. But when you're doing well at something, you're successful, you've achieved things, even if you can't fully recognise just how great you are.

But along with those things, there's usually some exhaustion or burnout or just a deep need to have some fun, joy or pleasure. And so, one way or another, the work that we do together involves them doing less. And it's really fun for me as their coach to see how astonished they are to realise they can do B minus work and nothing bad happens. Nobody even realises, honestly, in all of my clients who I have coached on this, which is so many, they've all gone off and experimented once we've got them into that place because they're usually terrified to do this.

I'm like, "Let's just give it a go. Let's just see what happens." And so, they do a bit less. So, for them, there's the high standard they set for themselves. I'm like, "Yeah, but maybe other people have a different standard to you, how about you just try and come down to their level for a bit and just see how it goes." So, they do B minus work by their standard, and nothing bad happens, nobody even realises, nobody's paying attention. And their work is just so good, it's just such a high calibre that no one perceives it as any less valuable or well done.

And it is just so wonderfully freeing to let go of that fear that you're going to be pulled into the headteacher's office or told off by your parents. We're grown-ups, people, we have a say in things. You can walk away. You can say, "Listen, I'm not going to tolerate being spoken to like that." You can shout back if you need or want to. But the vast majority of the time, nobody is going to bat an eyelid. So, within that, you've got to assess whether spending extra time and attention on something is actually going to impact the result that you're creating in a meaningful way.

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Is spending extra time on a project or preparing a document of some kind, is it going to make a difference? If so, what is the difference? Get clarity on that because sometimes it will make a difference. If you've got something that's going to go to print and be sent out to loads of people, you'll probably want to take some time to ensure it's perfect. But listen, in both my books, there are errors. There are typos. There was a diagram line labelled incorrectly, and that's after I proofread it multiple times, and several other people have also done that.

So, these things are just going to happen. Of course, it would be great if they didn't, but you just, you catch the mistakes and you correct them as best you can. Typos haven't prevented thousands of people, hundreds of thousands of people from benefiting from what I had to say in my books. That's different to doing sloppy work where barely any effort is put in. But I think some of you are thinking that if you do a bit less, then you're going to get an F, you're going to fail, and your whole world is going to fall apart.

But what my clients actually discover is that someone else's assessment is usually more favourable than their own because when it's your work, you've been in the whole process, the struggle to start, the messy middle, all the elements that didn't work along the way that were scrapped. And you've observed your own brain throughout that process, too. But that's not what's being presented to someone else.

That's not what they are seeing because people with perfectionist tendencies like these have very loud and domineering inner critics in addition to human brains just having an inherent negativity bias. So of course, they're less likely to see what has worked and where they have been successful because when you do that, you're just too busy focusing on the typo that you missed and beating yourself up for that. You're not seeing all the amazing stuff that you have done.

And when I was writing my books, I knew they were good. I was really happy with what I'd created, but the other day, someone shared a photo from a page from *Period Power*, my first book, on Instagram. And it was from the section about anger, and I was just blown away by my own words,

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my own genius. And that's more available to me now because I have the distance from the experience of writing it. So when you are very close to something or when you are in it you're just less able to judge things in a more objective or accurate way.

And as I've been preparing for this particular episode, I've been thinking about what I actually perceive as perfect. And you can do the same because we all have our differences, because perfect is debatable. There are things that I notice that to me really are perfect, but I would bet my house on the creators of these things never ever thinking that someone would describe their work as perfect.

One example I'll give you is the music for the TV series, Succession, which I think is just great music anyway. But there's a couple of seconds, maybe it's even just one second in the title music that for me just brings me so much joy because to my mind it goes so perfectly with the visual of what's happening in the title sequence. And it's the bit where the kids are on the elephant and the piano is doing something, and it just, the movement of the elephant and the kids, it just goes so well with the music. It brings me a lot of pleasure.

Paul thinks I'm absolutely nuts. And I bet the people who created it did not anticipate me reacting this way to that second or two of music and the visual imagery. And the other thing that I talk about a lot of the time as being perfection is food. So, have you ever had a dish or a meal that you've described as perfection? I love food, so I've said that quite a lot, but one of my top food memories is when Paul and I were on holiday together in Spain, we went to Malaga, Tarifa and Cadiz.

And Paul's friend is from Malaga, and he gave us this amazing three-page document listing all the places that we should eat and what we should order specifically in those restaurants. It was a dream to have this, and we've lost it. So please don't email me asking for it. I don't have it anymore. But we went to this little restaurant in Tarifa and ordered squid ink croquettes. And they were so good that they brought tears to my eyes. So good that I still think about them nine years later.

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To me, they were perfect. But I don't imagine that the chef who made them sent them out thinking they're perfect. So, striving for excellence is different from perfectionism. Perfection is a result that comes from experimentation and multiple failures, usually, and it also comes from repetition, doing something over and over. But so many of my clients and people listening as well are holding off from taking action because you want it to be perfect in the first instance.

And not for nothing, but I bet some of you are using this episode as a way to avoid taking action. If I can just understand perfectionism more, then I'll be able to take action. Maybe you just need to just jump ahead and just do it messy in the first place because it's rare to get something right straight out of the gate. You've just got to give it a go and move on. And I was thinking about this food again.

My mum would always make these pancakes, the style that are crepes rather than Scotch pancakes or American pancakes. And she always expected the first one to be crap. So the plan was for it to be not great just whilst the pan was heating up or having the right level of fat on it or it absorbing any flavours that existed in the pan, that kind of thing. She wasn't expecting it to be the one that we eat, it's just the one that needs to be made in order for the other ones to be made, the ones that we're going to eat.

So you can consider that in your approach to things. Now, speaking of approach to things, I'm sure you're dying to know what can be done to break free from the grip of perfectionism, so let's get into that. But the first step is to recognise that perfectionism is not a healthy or sustainable way of living. It's a trap, and it's time to let go of it.

So instead, embrace the idea of good enough. You can experiment with doing something to 95% rather than 100% or 99% if that's where you need to start. And then you just come down, just see what you can get away with. Like I said, you can do it 1% at a time, do 1% less or 5%, or 10% less or go wild, 50% less. You can always go back to doing it 100%.

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But just decide where you're going to put your effort, because what often happens is there's this general approach to everything where everything is important and everything requires the same level of care and being prepared. You can decide where you're going to put your effort because often there's this general approach to everything where everything requires a high level of effort, a high level of care. It all needs to be perfect.

Just think about what are the areas where you could do less, the tasks and projects that require less that you could maybe even do the bare minimum required in order to create a result. And you can take that approach with important tasks, too, but your brain might not like that idea. So just start off experimenting with the not-so-important things. Practice stopping when something is good enough and let it be enough. That means you're going to need to address any urges that you have to prove yourself. If you can do that, it's going to free up like nothing else. I love helping my clients with this.

You can also practise self-compassion and accept that you are human, just like me, and that means making mistakes is just part of it. It's part of life. Give yourself permission to make mistakes and to fail and to be a beginner as well, even when you're not a beginner, to just let yourself have that experience, to have that level of compassion for yourself because you are going to make mistakes.

I emphasise that because I think many of us have got to a point in life where we think we shouldn't be making these mistakes anymore. You will, there's no getting around that. But can you be kind and gentle with yourself through them? Can you treat yourself in the way that you would with a friend who was going through a tough time? You're not defined by your mistakes unless you decide that you are. So, decide not to let your mistakes define you.

And if you're struggling with perfectionism, just remember you're not alone, plenty of people are doing it. It's very common in my community. It's a common struggle, but it's also one that you can overcome. Literally all the things I've talked about here in this episode are what I help my clients with in the membership. The same goes for every other episode that I do, too.

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So, if you want to join us, get your name on the waitlist. Or if you're listening to this episode when the doors are open, just jump in and join us. And I will be back next week.

Have a fantastic time, whatever you're up to this week, and I just encourage you to be playful and experiment with ways that you can drop perfectionism. I'll catch you next week.

Hey, if you love listening to this podcast then come and check out my membership, Powerful, where you get my best resources and all the coaching you need to transform your inner and outer life. Sign up to the waitlist at maisiehill.com/powerful, and I'll see you in the community.