

# 15 perfectionism

## for you to know

Perfectionism is a way of thinking that often raises our anxiety level. Since complete perfection isn't actually possible for anyone to achieve, the more you try to be perfect, the more anxious you will feel because you will continually fall short of your goal.

Michael was a good student, a good baseball player, a good musician, and a good friend. A lot of kids at school liked Michael, and he got along well with his parents and his little brother, too. From the outside, it looked like Michael had much to be happy about. But Michael didn't feel happy. He felt anxious all the time. Even though Michael had nearly all As, he wasn't number one in his grade. Even though he played baseball well, he still struck out sometimes. Even though he was a good drummer and in the school band, he wasn't as good as he wanted to be. No matter how much Michael accomplished, he never stopped making mistakes, and that filled him with anxiety. When he started having headaches almost every day, his mother took him to the doctor.

The doctor couldn't find anything physically wrong with Michael, so he asked how Michael's life was going. Michael admitted that he was having a hard time. He was always anxious from pushing himself so hard but never achieving perfection. Picking up a pencil from his desk, the doctor asked Michael what he saw at its end. Michael answered, "An eraser." "Right," said the doctor, "and do you know that erasers are automatically built into pencils because it is assumed that anyone who uses a pencil will make a mistake at some time?" The doctor pointed out that pencils with erasers are sold not just to some people, but to *everyone*. No one is asked as they check out at the store, "Do you make mistakes? If so, you must buy the pencil with the eraser. If not, you can buy the pencil without the eraser."

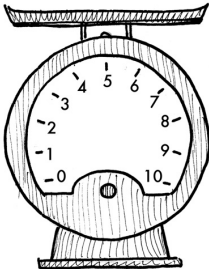
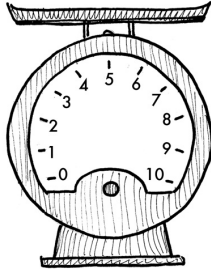
The doctor told Michael that the pencil with an eraser is a great reminder of human imperfection. No matter how smart, strong, wise, or practiced a person is in any field at any time, they are not and cannot be perfect. They still need erasers on their pencils. He told Michael to remember the acronym **PENCIL for Perfectionists Enjoy No Contentment In Life.**

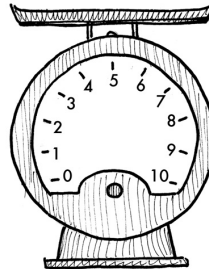
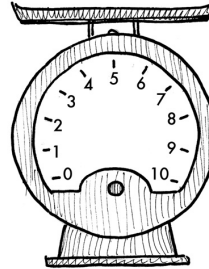
From that day on, Michael carried a pencil with him wherever he went. He decided to change his goal from trying to be perfect to just doing the best he could. He stopped feeling anxious all the time, his headaches went away, and he started enjoying school, baseball, music, and his family a lot more.

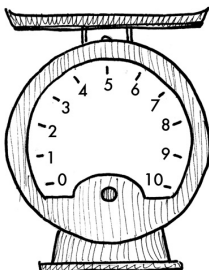
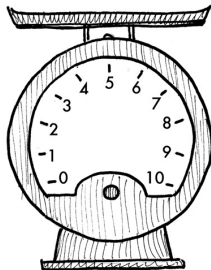
activity 15 \* perfectionism

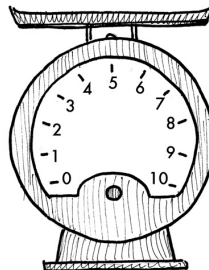
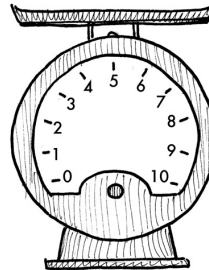
directions

Under each pair of scales below, write one thing that you try to do well in your life. On each perfection scale, draw an arrow pointing to the number that shows how hard you try to do it perfectly. On each anxiety scale draw an arrow pointing to the number that shows how anxious you feel about doing well at that activity.

<b>PERFECTION SCALE</b>	<b>ANXIETY SCALE</b>
	
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<b>PERFECTION SCALE</b>	<b>ANXIETY SCALE</b>
	
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<b>PERFECTION SCALE</b>	<b>ANXIETY SCALE</b>
	
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<b>PERFECTION SCALE</b>	<b>ANXIETY SCALE</b>
	
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## more to do

Look at the activities you listed. Have you ever been able to do any of them perfectly?

Yes  No

Do you think that if you continue to try harder and harder, you will achieve perfection in any of these things someday?

Yes  No

Look at your rating scales. Notice which activities make you more anxious: those that you try to do perfectly or those where you allow yourself to be imperfect.

How would your anxiety level change if you didn't try to do these activities perfectly?

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People often think that they are doing a better job if they try to do things perfectly. Actually, the opposite is true. Perfectionists tend to achieve less in the long run because of their inability to complete tasks and make final decisions. In the excessive amount of time the perfectionist spends correcting and refining the "unacceptable," the nonperfectionist can accomplish twice as much work that is acceptable.

Can you think of a time when trying to do something perfectly actually caused you to do a worse job? If so, describe it here.

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