Contents

Perfectionism 2
Back End Perfectionism 3
    Back End Perfectionism 3
Back-end and Front-end Perfectionism 4
    Front-end Perfectionism 4
A New Definition 5
    Where Does Perfectionism Come From? 6
        Why Perfectionism Might Not Work Anymore 7
        Stereotype Threat and Perfectionism 8
        Perfectionism and Mental Health 9
        Perfectionism was an old coping skill. 10
        Front End Perfectionism or Accommodation? 12
        Back End Perfectionism or Conscientious? 13
        Using Self Awareness Skills 14
        Growth Mindset? 15
        Exploring Your Beliefs About Mistakes 16
        How Did Your Family Treat Mistakes? 17
        How to Use the Stress Model 22
        More Questions 24
        Using The Flourish Model: Self-Advocacy. Your Rights 25
        Using The Flourish Model: Self-Advocacy. Your Rights 26
        Using The Flourish Model:Self-Care and Self-Compassion for Perfectionism 27
        Using The Flourish Model: Self-Care and Self-Compassion 28

Perfectionism

Perfectionism is the belief that everything you do must be perfect or done perfectly.

This mentality can prevent you from trying new things and living your life to the fullest.

Perfectionism can also increase feelings of inadequacy and contribute to procrastination and stress.

There are two types of perfectionism: back-end perfectionism and front-end perfectionism.

Back-end perfectionism is getting things perfect once you've started. Front-end perfectionism is about getting things perfect before you start.



Back End Perfectionism

Back End Perfectionism

Back-end perfectionism (BEP) means having high and rigid standards for your task once you've started. When you are a back-end perfectionist, other tasks suffer pile up, and you may procrastinate and feel anxiety. You may also become overwhelmed and dysregulated when you start tasks because you have made them too hard to do.

Back end Perfectionism can also cause you trouble with time management, which may already be an issue for you.

Here are some examples of BEP:



• Feeling like all work-related emails must be answered in a lengthy and perfect way and writing them several times, even if it means staying up late or sacrificing time with loved ones.



• Spending hours obsessing over the layout and formatting of a presentation, even to the point where other tasks and areas of your life suffer.



• Refusing to delegate tasks to others, even when overwhelmed, because you fear the work won't be done to their standards.

Back-end and Front-end Perfectionism

Front-end Perfectionism

Front-end perfectionism is a mindset that manifests as rigid standards or preconditions that must be met in order to engage in a task or endeavor. These standards go above and beyond what you would need to get the task done.

- Feeling like you cannot start your homework unless you have 12 hours of sleep and all the laundry is done, so you put off the task indefinitely.

- Believing that you cannot do the laundry unless everyone is out of the house for the full day, so it never gets done.

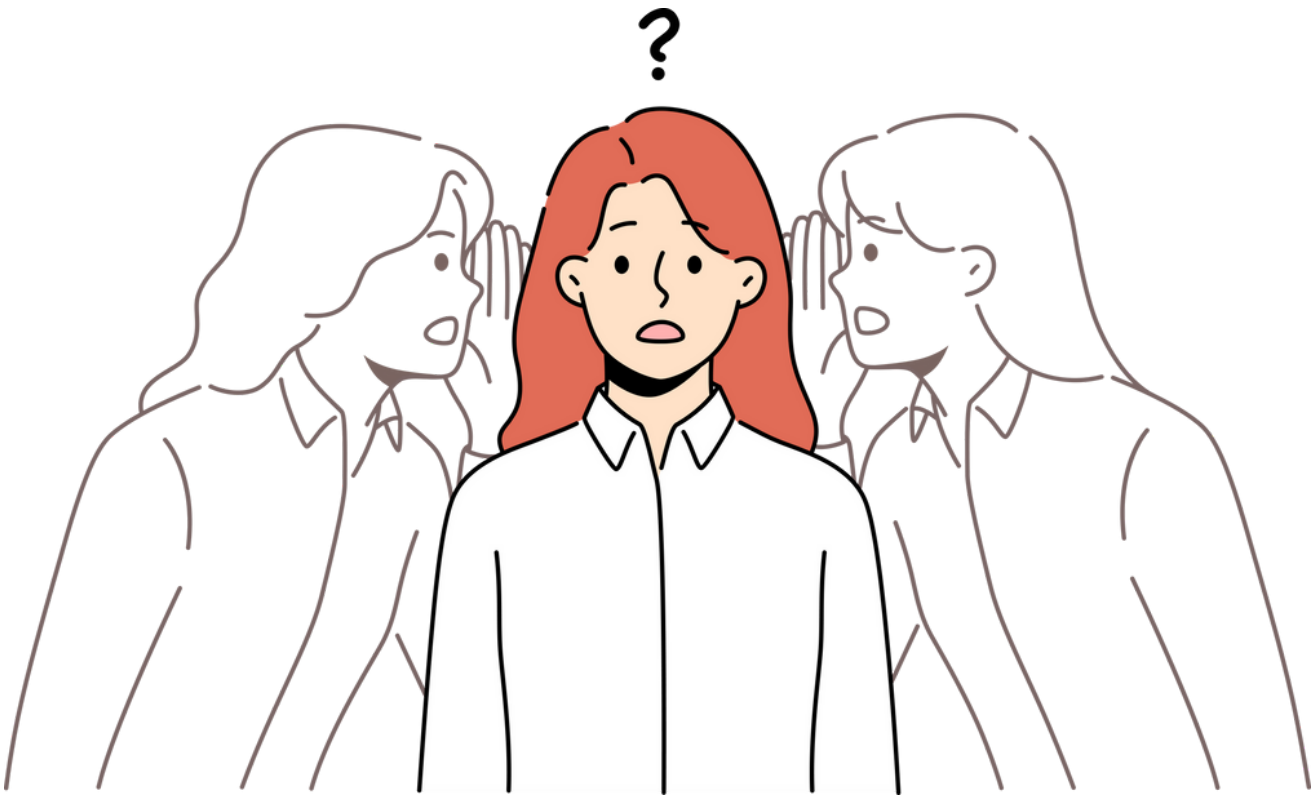
- Feeling like you cannot look for a job unless you feel motivated and you lose 20 pounds, so you haven't looked for a new one even though you are miserable.

Front-end perfectionism is the most commonly endorsed kind of perfectionism among people with ADHD.

A New Definition

Defining Perfectionism in a new way.

Perfectionism is a critical inner voice that leads you to make choices about tasks based on fear of making a mistake



Where Does Perfectionism Come From?

Do these feel true for you?

There are several common pathways to perfectionism in ADHD women. Below are some you might recognize.

· **Executive Functioning Challenges:** You may develop a tendency to strive for perfection to compensate for executive functioning struggles so others don't notice.

· **Social Expectations:** You may feel societal pressure to conform to gender stereotypes, such as being highly organized, neat, and detail-oriented. Perfectionism is a way to help with this.

· **Trauma or Negative Life Experiences:** You may have experienced criticism, rejection, or failure. Perfectionism may be a way to avoid further criticism or rejection.

· **Co-occurring Conditions:** You may have co-occurring conditions, such as anxiety or depression, which can contribute to perfectionism as a way to manage these conditions.

· **Fear of Failure:** You may have a fear of failure and want to protect yourself from criticism that you received in the past from those around you.

· **Desire to Fit In and be Accepted:** You may feel that you have to work harder than others to meet expectations, and the desire to fit in and be accepted can drive you to strive for perfection.



Why Perfectionism Might Not Work Anymore

Below are some ways it sometimes begins to fail as a coping skill:

· **Procrastination:** Perfectionism can lead to procrastination if you feel you need the perfect conditions before starting a task, making it difficult to complete tasks in a timely manner.

Are any othese familiar for you?

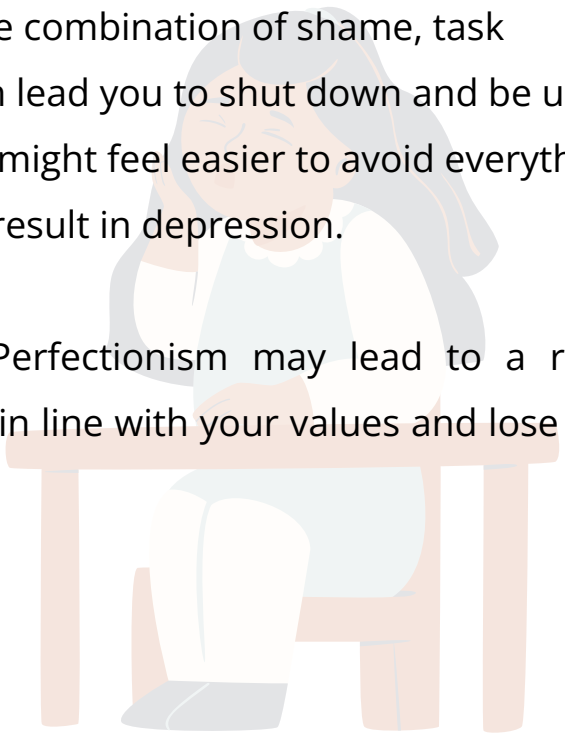
· **Shame:** If you are struggling to meet standards and fail, it may cause shame. This cycle of striving for perfection, failing to achieve it, and experiencing shame can be emotionally draining and damaging.

· **Decision-Making Paralysis:** The fear of making mistakes can cause decision-making paralysis, preventing you from making any decisions at all.

· **Emotional Dysregulation:** When tasks pile up because of perfectionism, overwhelm can happen and cause emotional dysregulation, burnout, and depression.

· **Shutting Down or Avoiding:** The combination of shame, task paralysis, and tasks piling up can lead you to shut down and be unable to do anything or avoid more. It might feel easier to avoid everything when you get into this place. This can result in depression.

· **Restricted Life Experience:** Perfectionism may lead to a restricted life experience; you may stop living in line with your values and lose track of your strengths.



Stereotype Threat and Perfectionism

Stereotype threat is the phenomenon where individuals from groups that are stigmatized or stereotyped feel pressure to perform to avoid confirming negative stereotypes about their group. This can cause anxiety, self-doubt, and reduced performance.

An example of stereotype threat in ADHD women with perfectionism is when women with ADHD are constantly reminded that they are disorganized, flighty, or have difficulty with attention. This can cause them to internalize these negative stereotypes and develop perfectionism as a way to counteract them. They may feel like they have to work twice as hard as their peers just to prove that they can be organized and attentive.





Perfectionism and Mental Health

Perfectionism is closely related to procrastination, anxiety, and depression, as it can exacerbate these issues and create a negative feedback loop.

· Procrastination: Perfectionists often have unrealistically high standards and fear of failure, which can lead to procrastination. This procrastination can cause increased stress, guilt, and frustration, contributing to anxiety and depression.

· Anxiety: Perfectionism can heighten anxiety. You might become overly concerned about meeting your own high expectations and avoiding mistakes. This constant worry about performance and the potential consequences of failing to meet their standards can lead to increased levels of anxiety and further procrastination.

· Depression: Perfectionism has been linked to higher levels of depressive symptoms. When perfectionists consistently fail to meet their own expectations, they may experience feelings of worthlessness.



Perfectionism was an old coping skill.

Some therapists call perfectionism a "cognitive distortion," but we won't. Perfectionism protected you. It’s one of the skills that your younger self used to help you.

In childhood, perfectionism often serves as a self-protection mechanism that helps ADHchildren feel in control of their world and gain approval, love, and acceptance from authority figures, peers, and adults.

Similarly, the development of a fear of making mistakes can be protective, as fears tend to develop to shield us from harm. In this sense, perfectionism can be viewed as an adaptive coping strategy that can help protect adhd girls from potential harm or rejection. However, perfectionism can overstay its welcome in later life and contribute to the development of secondary problems.

We can use our new skills to help bridge letting go of some of the perfectionist tendencies. However, as we discussed, you have to decide when and how to let go of perfectionistic tendencies. Do it only when it feels safe.



Self-Advocacy
Self-Compassion
Self-Care
Self-Accommodation
Self-Awareness of stress and emotions Self trust
Embodiment



Perfectionism is Unique in ADHD.

The website CCI Interventions has a self-help module on perfectionism with a fact sheet titled "What is Perfectionism." Here is a list of behaviors they list:

· Difficulty making timely decisions (e.g., choosing an outfit for work each day)

· Seeking constant reassurance (e.g., asking others to review your work)

· Over-organizing and excessive list-making (e.g., rewriting daily task lists)

· Quitting quickly (e.g., stopping a new activity after only a few attempts)

· Procrastination (e.g., delaying the start of a project due to fear of failure)

· Persisting in arguments past others' interest (e.g., excessively debating a point)

· Frequent checking behaviors (e.g., constantly examining appearance for flaws)

· Hoarding (e.g., keeping unnecessary documents for extended periods)

· Communicating slowly to ensure accuracy (e.g., speaking carefully to avoid mistakes)

· Avoiding potential failure situations (e.g., not applying for jobs due to fear of reWow!

Many of these behaviors listed are typical ADHD behaviors and may be done to either cope with having ADHD or to avoid negative consequences due to ADHD. This is why it's challenging to talk about and understand perfectionism in ADHD women. Perfectionism in ADHD is unique.

UNIQUE

Front End Perfectionism or Accommodation?

When trying to understand if a behavior is perfectionistic, it's important to ask yourself: is this front-end perfectionism or is it self-accommodation?

Front-end perfectionism involves setting rigid, unrealistic standards that often lead to procrastination or task paralysis. For example, insisting that the entire house must be spotless before cooking. This standard is rarely met, leading to frustration, stress, and negative feelings about oneself.

Self-accommodation, on the other hand, is a more supportive approach. In this case, you might decide to clean only the kitchen before cooking because it helps you focus. This standard is achievable and helps you move forward with the task.

In short, self-accommodation helps you get tasks done effectively, while front-end perfectionism often leads to overwhelm and tasks piling up.



Back End Perfectionism or Conscientious?

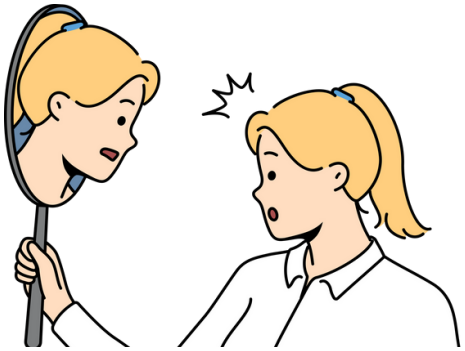
Similarly, back-end perfectionism involves striving for perfection after the task has begun. It's important to distinguish between being conscientious and being perfectionistic at this stage.

Conscientiousness is about being responsible and careful, traits that are valuable for success.

Back-end perfectionism, however, comes from an excessive fear of making mistakes or being judged. This can create unnecessary pressure and diminish personal satisfaction.

Ask yourself: Are you motivated by pride and the desire to do your best, or by fear of making mistakes? Understanding this can help you determine whether your actions are helping or hindering your growth and happiness.





Using Self Awareness Skills

To further explore whether perfectionism is driving your behaviors, practice using self-awareness techniques. Ask yourself:

- ✔ Is this causing me to be out of balance in other parts of my life?
- ✔ Am I feeling fear or pride as I work on this task?
- ✔ Where am I in my personal stress model?

When you notice fear, take a moment to reflect on how it feels in your body and ask:

- ✔ "Is this fear?"
- ✔ "What can I do to ease this fear?"
- ✔ "What do I need?"
- ✔ "What is truly best for me in this moment?"

By asking these questions, you can determine whether you need an accommodation and how to support yourself better. With practice, you'll build trust in your own judgment and distinguish between perfectionism and healthy striving.

Growth Mindset?

Worrying about making mistakes can limit our creativity and make us hesitant to take risks. This fear of failure can prevent us from living fulfilling lives. A growth mindset encourages people to view mistakes as opportunities to learn rather than as failures. Teaching a growth mindset can promote resilience and foster continuous learning.

However, it's important to recognize that the consequences of mistakes are not the same for everyone. Factors such as neurodivergence, racial or ethnic background, and socio-economic status can influence the severity of these consequences.

For neurodivergent individuals, especially ADHD women, perfectionism often develops as a protective response to the challenges they face. As children, they may have intuitively sensed that their mistakes could lead to harsher judgment, which makes perfectionism common in this group.

Exploring Your Beliefs About Mistakes

The risk of making mistakes may not be as severe as you anticipate. To challenge perfectionism, it's helpful to explore your own beliefs about mistakes:

What were you taught about mistakes growing up?_____

How did your family respond when you made mistakes?_____

What beliefs did you form about yourself based on those experiences?_____

By reflecting on these beliefs, you can begin to recognize where you can safely let go of perfectionism and embrace a more balanced perspective.

How Did Your Family Treat Mistakes?

The way your family responded to mistakes likely shaped how you view errors today

For example, Spanx founder Sarah Blakely attributes her persistence and success to her father's encouragement to embrace failure. He would ask her and her siblings about their failures each day, teaching them that making mistakes was an important part of learning and growing. This mindset helped her build resilience, even after facing setbacks like failing the LSAT before starting her billion-dollar company.

How did your family talk about and handle mistakes? Were mistakes seen as learning opportunities or something to be avoided?_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____



Mindsets

Insufficiency Mindset

This mindset is tied to "front-end perfectionism," where a person feels that they cannot even start a task unless conditions are perfectly right. For example, if someone with ADHD thinks, "I can't focus unless the environment is perfect," they may delay or avoid tasks entirely because those ideal conditions are rarely met.

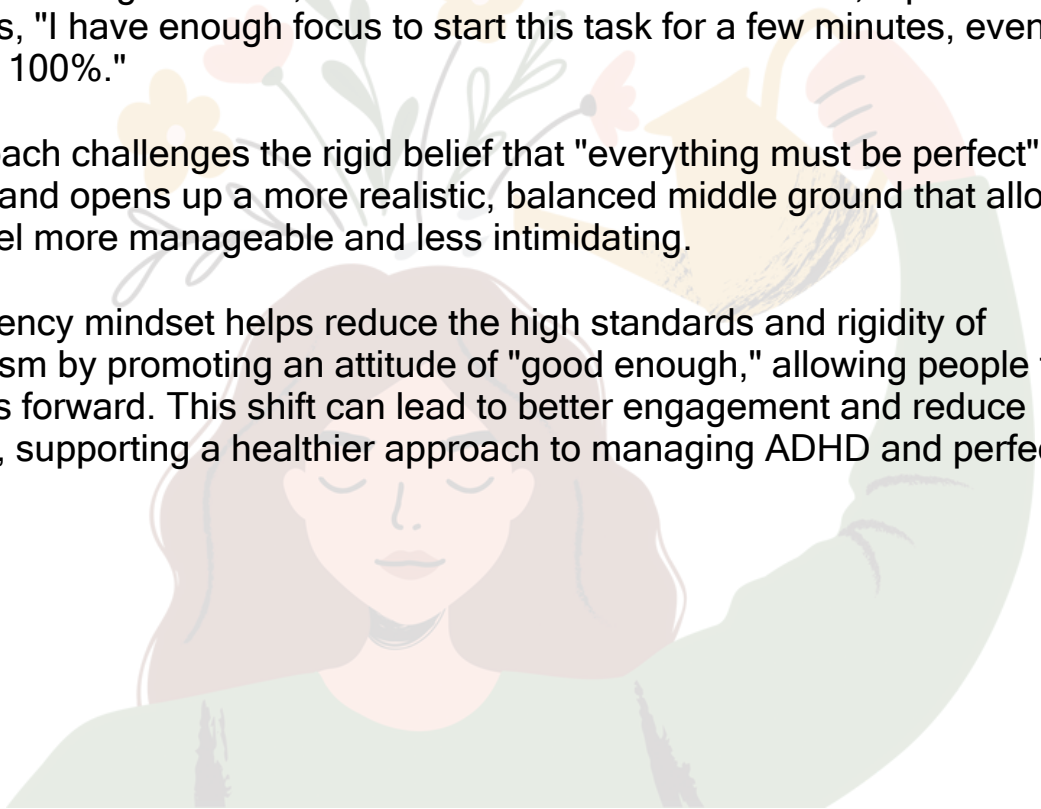
This mindset doesn't mean the person lacks capability. Instead, it's a mistrust in their ability to engage effectively under less-than-perfect conditions. They might think, "I know I can do this, but I don't trust I can do it right now," leading to avoidance and procrastination.

Sufficiency Mindset:

A sufficiency mindset reframes these conditions to focus on what is "good enough " or "sufficient" to get started, even if it's not ideal. For instance, a person might tell themselves, "I have enough focus to start this task for a few minutes, even if I'm not feeling 100%."

This approach challenges the rigid belief that "everything must be perfect" before beginning and opens up a more realistic, balanced middle ground that allows tasks to feel more manageable and less intimidating.

The sufficiency mindset helps reduce the high standards and rigidity of perfectionism by promoting an attitude of "good enough," allowing people to take small steps forward. This shift can lead to better engagement and reduce avoidance, supporting a healthier approach to managing ADHD and perfectionism .



Using The Flourish Model
Self- Accommodation

For ADHD women, developing a sufficiency mindset—one that focuses on what is realistically “good enough” rather than perfect—can be transformative. Practicing self-accommodation, self-reflection, and self-awareness are three key tools that can make this mindset shift easier, reducing the need for perfectionism while enhancing well-being and productivity. Here’s how these approaches can support you:

Self-Accommodation: Making Tasks More Accessible

Self-accommodation involves adjusting your environment, routines, or expectations to make tasks feel more manageable. Instead of waiting for everything to be perfect or pushing yourself without support, self-accommodation allows you to set up realistic and supportive structures.

For example, breaking down a project into smaller steps, setting achievable time goals, or using reminders can make tasks feel more approachable without the added pressure of perfectionism.

This approach aligns with a sufficiency mindset by focusing on what’s “good enough” to get started, allowing you to move forward without feeling overwhelmed or inadequate.

Using The Flourish Model
Self- Awareness

Self-awareness is essential for recognizing whether a task feels comfortable and manageable—or if it may require extra support to be achievable. This awareness helps you identify when a task is simply too much or isn't well-suited to your ADHD brain.

By tuning in to your stress levels, self-awareness allows you to be honest about which tasks may need accommodations or support, and which might be unrealistic without added pressure. Rather than pushing through tasks that feel overwhelming or uncomfortable, self-awareness encourages you to honor your brain's needs, guiding you to make informed choices about when to seek help or adjust your approach.

Using The Flourish Model: Our Stress Model

One helpful tool to gauge your stress levels and recognize when perfectionism is taking over is the Stress Model. The Flourish Stress model breaks down stress into four stages: Rest, Challenge, Approaching Overwhelm, and Overwhelm. Understanding where you are in this model can help you decide whether you need to adjust your expectations or take a step back to support yourself.
Here is A Refresher of Our Stress Model

Rest

In this stage, you feel calm, balanced, and in control. Tasks feel manageable, and your actions are thoughtful without being overly cautious. This is where you want to be when approaching tasks, as you're more likely to be conscientious and productive without falling into perfectionism.

Challenge

Here, you experience some stress, but it's the healthy kind that pushes you to grow and stay motivated. You may feel slightly stretched, but it's manageable. It's important to keep an eye on this stage because this is where you can start tipping into perfectionism if the challenge becomes too much.

Approaching Overwhelm

At this stage, stress levels are increasing, and perfectionistic tendencies may start to take hold. You may begin setting unrealistic standards or feel anxious about making mistakes. This is a key point for intervention: recognizing that you're approaching overwhelm gives you the chance to step back, reassess, and make accommodations before perfectionism fully sets in.

Overwhelm

In the overwhelm stage, you're likely stuck in perfectionism, feeling frozen by decision-making or paralyzed by the fear of not getting things right. Tasks might be avoided entirely, or you may fixate on tiny details, unable to move forward. Recognizing that you've hit this stage is crucial—it signals that it's time for rest and recovery before moving forward again.

How to Use the Stress Model

When you feel perfectionism creeping in or your stress levels rising, take a moment to ask yourself:

Where am I in the stress model at rest, challenged, approaching overwhelm, or already overwhelmed?I?_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
What do I need in this moment to help myself(ie Do I need to take a break, adjust my expectations, or seek support?_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

Is fear of some kind driving my actions?_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

Can I self-accommodate in some way instead of "trying harder"?_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

By regularly checking in with yourself using the stress model, you can catch perfectionism before it takes over and ensure you're working in a balanced, self-supportive way.

More Questions that can Help You Shift Out of Both Back and Front End Perfectionism

What do I need to complete this task?

Clarifying what's required can help you feel more grounded and focused.

Am I feeling overwhelmed?

If so, could breaking the task into smaller steps make it more manageable?

What can I do to make getting started easier?

Simplifying the first step or lowering expectations can help overcome the initial barrier.

Do I need something to boost my energy?

Would music, a snack, or a quick break give me the push I need to get started?

Is my environment helping or hindering me?

Would adjusting my surroundings (e.g., decluttering or reducing distractions) make me more comfortable?

Would rewarding myself help?

Can I plan a small treat or break to motivate myself once I've completed part of the task ?

Do I need support from someone else?

Would having a body double or an accountability partner help me focus or stay on track?

Can I make the task more enjoyable or less boring?

Could adding something fun, like setting a timer or turning it into a challenge, help make the task more engaging?

Do I have all the materials and information I need?

Making sure I'm fully prepared before starting can ease stress and keep things on track

More Questions

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Do I fully understand what needs to be done?

If not, do I need to ask for help or clarification before proceeding?

Do I need to delegate or ask for help?

Is there a part of this task someone else could assist with or take over?

Is this something I actually want or need to do?

Am I taking this on because it's important to me, or because I feel external pressure?

Does this task align with my values or strengths?

Will completing this reflect what's truly important to me and play to my strengths?

Have I set realistic expectations for myself?

Am I aiming for progress rather than perfection, allowing myself to be human?

Am I giving myself enough time to finish?

Have I allowed enough time to complete this task without feeling rushed?

Have I set a reasonable deadline?

Is my timeline achievable given the size and scope of the task?

Am I emotionally ready to take on this task?

If not, what can I do to prepare myself mentally and emotionally before I begin?

Where am I in my hormonal cycle, and how might this affect me?

Could my energy or mood be impacting how I approach this task?

Using The Flourish Model: Self-Advocacy. Your Rights

Here are some rights you have as an ADHD woman to help you work on perfectionism:

☑ I have the right to make and learn from mistakes without fear of judgment or criticism.

☑ My worth as a person is not determined by my ability to be perfect or mistake-free.

☑ I have the right to take breaks and prioritize self-care, even if it means not completing a task to my usual standards.

☑ I have the right to ask for help when I need it without feeling ashamed or embarrassed.

☑ It is okay to start a task, feel overwhelmed, and take a break to regroup.

☑ I am capable of learning how to tell whether I am accommodating or practicing front-end perfectionism.

☑ I have the right to prioritize self-awareness, self-compassion, and self-care to manage my ADHD symptoms and work effectively.

☑ I have the right to set boundaries and say no to tasks or projects that are not within my capacity or aligned with my values.

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Embracing these rights can help reduce perfectionism, foster self-compassion, and support a balanced approach to managing ADHD.

Using The Flourish Model:Self-Care and Self-Compassion for Perfectionism

Setting personal boundaries is a crucial aspect of self-care, especially when it comes to addressing harmful behavior. **It involves drawing a clear line between what is acceptable and what is not and lovingly enforcing that boundary**. By respecting ourselves in this way, we can maintain safety, health, and smooth functioning in our lives. When we find ourselves stuck in a perfectionistic loop, it may be necessary to employ this strategy, **being firm with our self-critical voice in a loving, non-shaming way, like a parent setting limits for a child.**

Just as we wouldn't yell at a loved one for making mistakes, **we shouldn't treat ourselves that way either. Imagine your friend is a perfectionist who is striving for excellence in everything she does.** One day, she makes a mistake or fails to meet her own high standards and begins to berate herself, calling herself a failure and beating herself up emotionally. As her friend, you would never talk to her this way. You would respond in a firm but loving manner, telling her that it breaks your heart to see her talking to herself this way and reminding her that you love her no matter what.

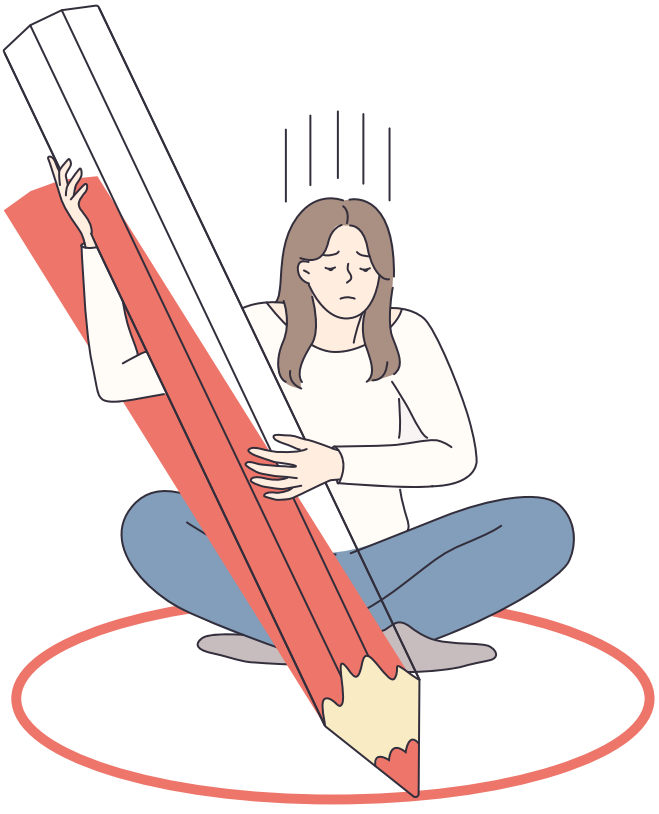


Using The Flourish Model: Self-Care and Self-Compassion

Similarly, when we set personal boundaries with ourselves, it's important to remember that we are not perfect and mistakes will happen. We need to be firm with ourselves but also kind and compassionate, just as we would be with a friend who is struggling with perfectionism. We create a supportive inner environment that promotes growth, resilience, and self-acceptance by treating ourselves with understanding and empathy.

Psychological "Injuries" "In the psychological realm, injuries come in the form of emotional harm; feeling lethargic, anxious, or depressed are some of the signals that we need some time to recover.

Unlike physical injuries, these signals are more subtle and easier to discount. And it is not uncommon for a person to continue working just as hard, if not harder, while the mind and the heart are pleading for a break.



Group Exercise =Self Compassion for Perfectionism

Find a comfortable position and close your eyes or focus softly on a spot. Take a few slow, deep breaths, and notice each one with openness and curiosity. You are about to do an exercise in imagination.

Some people imagine with vivid, colorful pictures, like watching a TV screen. Others imagine with vague , fuzzy, unclear pictures, while some don't use pictures at all, relying more on words and ideas. However you imagine is just fine.

Now, imagine yourself stepping into a time machine. Once inside, you travel back to visit yourself as a young girl, meeting her at a moment in her life when she made a mistake.

Step out of the time machine and gently approach this young girl. Take a good look at her and notice what she might be experiencing:

- ☑ Is she crying?
- ☑ Is she angry, frightened, guilty, or ashamed?

Consider what this young girl truly needs:

- ☑ Love
- ☑ Kindness
- ☑ Understanding
- ☑ Forgiveness
- ☑ Nurturing
- ☑ Acceptance

In a calm and gentle voice, tell her that you understand what she's been through and how much she is hurting.

Remind her that the world can often feel unkind to people with neurodivergence, especially women. Let her know that she doesn't need to mask or strive for perfection to live a joyful life. Assure her that hiding her true self isn't necessary to fit in with others who may think differently. Tell this young girl that she doesn't need anyone else to validate her experience—because YOU know.



Now, **tell the young girl within you that she survived the experience**, and **that now it is just a painful memory**. **Gently ask her if there's anything she needs or wants from you—and whatever she asks for**, **give it to her**.

☑ If she asks you to take her somewhere special, go ahead and do it.

☑ Offer her an ice cream cone, a hug, words of kindness, or a thoughtful gift.

This is an exercise in imagination, so you can give her anything she wants.

If this young girl doesn't know what she wants or doesn't fully trust you yet, let her know that's okay. Assure her:

☑ "I am here for support and will always be there to help however I can."

☑ "I am here, I care, and I will help you recover from this pain so you can lead a full, rich, and valued life."

Continue to radiate caring and kindness toward this young girl through any words, gestures, or deeds you can imagine.

Remember:
This exercise is for your benefit, and if at any time you feel uncomfortable or scared in your body, you can stop.

If you have trauma in your past and any triggering or scary memories arise, please pause the exercise and take care of yourself. Take a few slow, deep breaths and notice each with openness and curiosity. When you're ready, you can open your eyes and return to the present moment.

(Adapted from The Reality Slap)

