

A Perfectionist's Guide to NOT Being ~~Perfect~~

by Bonnie Zucker, PsyD

**A Perfectionist's Guide
to NOT Being ~~Perfect~~**

For Isaac and Todd: your love is
the most perfect thing in life.

-BZ



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Book design by Rachel Ross
Printed by Sonic Media Solutions, Inc., Medford, NY

Magination Press®, Books for Kids From the American Psychological Association
maginationpress.org

Distributed by Lerner Publisher Services
lernerbooks.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Zucker, Bonnie, 1974- author.

Title: A perfectionist's guide to not being perfect / Bonnie Zucker, PsyD.

Description: Washington, DC: Magination Press, [2022] | Includes bibliographical references and index. | Audience: Ages 13-18 | Audience: Grades 10-12 | Summary: "Encourages teens to maintain their desire to achieve without striving to always be perfect and to appreciate and love who they are, not for what they accomplish"— Provided by publisher.

Identifiers: LCCN 2021043340 (print) | LCCN 2021043341 (ebook) | ISBN 9781433837036 (hardcover) | ISBN 9781433838415 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Perfectionism (Personality trait) | Body image in adolescence. | Cognitive therapy for teenagers. | BISAC: YOUNG ADULT NONFICTION / Social Topics / Emotions & Feelings | YOUNG ADULT NONFICTION / Social Topics / Self-Esteem & Self-Reliance

Classification: LCC BF698.35.P47 Z83 2022 (print) | LCC BF698.35.P47 (ebook) | DDC 155.2/32—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021043340>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021043341>

Manufactured in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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MAGINATION PRESS® • WASHINGTON, DC
AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

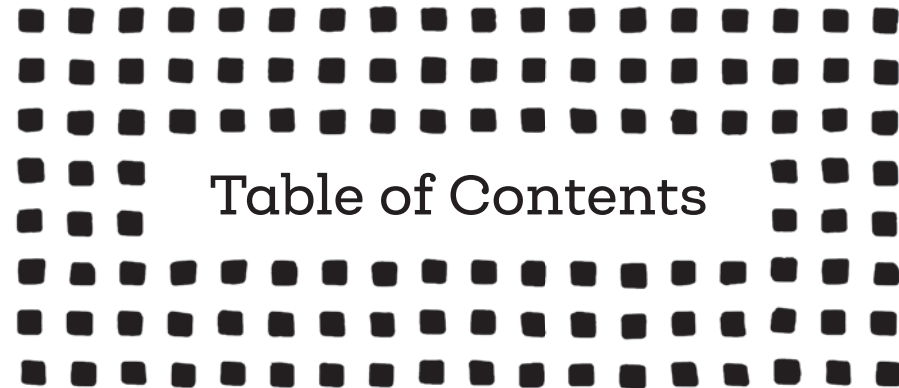
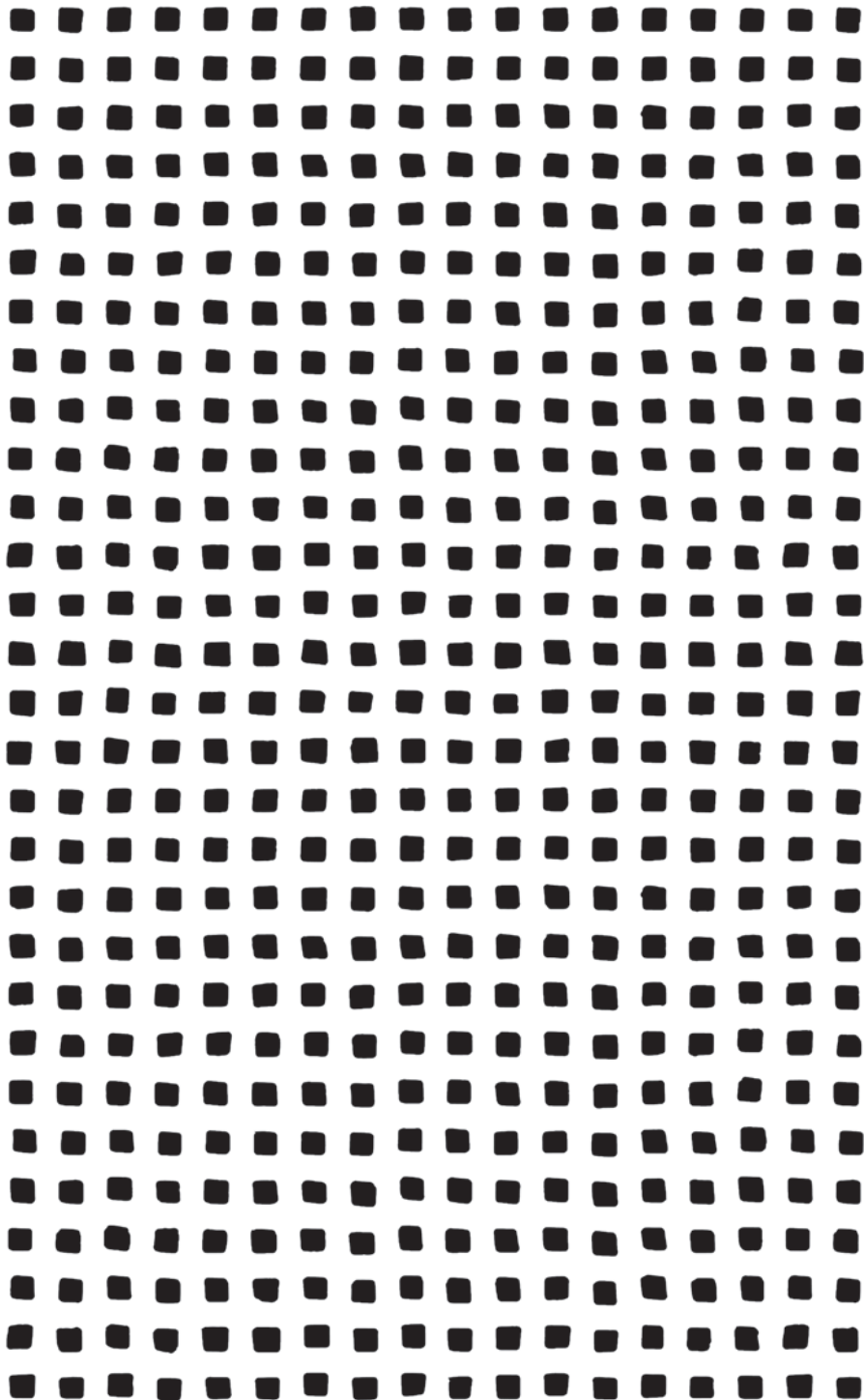
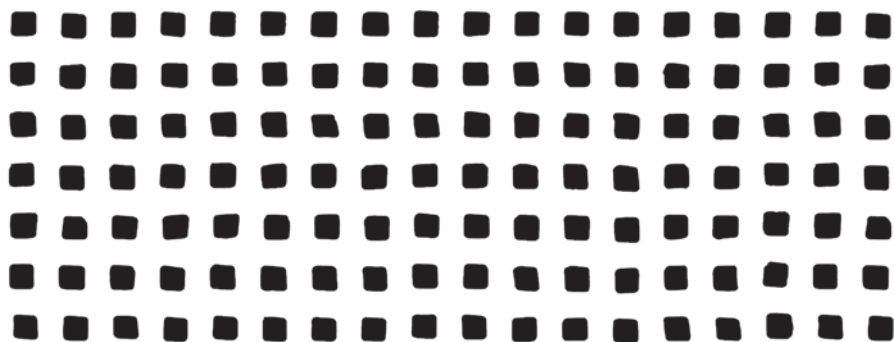


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Note to the Reader



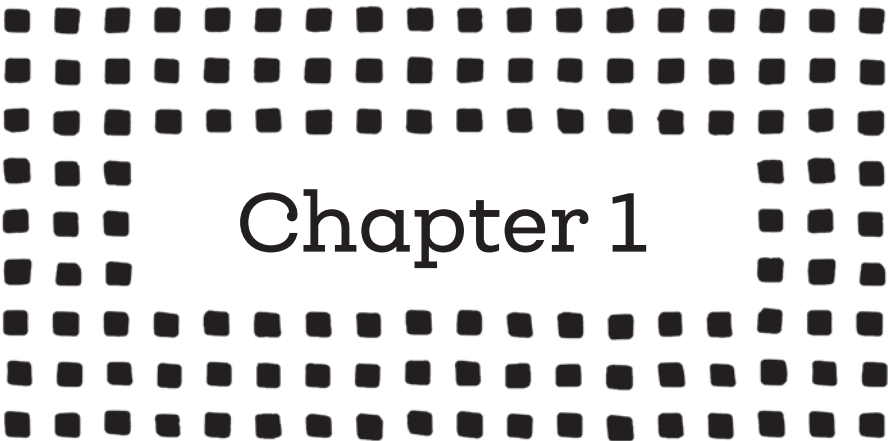
Welcome to *A Perfectionist's Guide to Not Being Perfect!* Whether this book was something you picked out, was given to you, or is something you're using as part of therapy, I hope you will find the ideas and suggestions useful and ultimately life-changing. My name is Dr. Bonnie Zucker, and I am a psychologist in private practice in Rockville, MD, just outside of Washington, D.C. I specialize in anxiety, obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), stress, and related issues, including perfectionism. I feel very grateful to love my work and be able to see so many young people succeed in therapy and overcome obstacles and challenges. I have

met many teens with perfectionism that has caused great interference in their lives, and have watched them become free from the hold it had over them. I have also watched their self-confidence flourish as a result.

With this book, I want you to be able to achieve that, too. First, we'll talk about what perfectionism is: how it affects your life, and why you would even want to change it. First, we'll talk about the ways perfectionism may be holding you back, and what the real ingredients for a successful life are. Then we'll get to the nitty-gritty: how to challenge your perfectionism. I'll share my best tools and strategies, and give you realistic advice for finding your own way through it. We'll talk about why breaking out of your comfort zone and learning to fail are important parts of life...and can even be blessings in disguise! And finally, we'll talk about how to manage stress and live a balanced, restorative, and relaxing life.

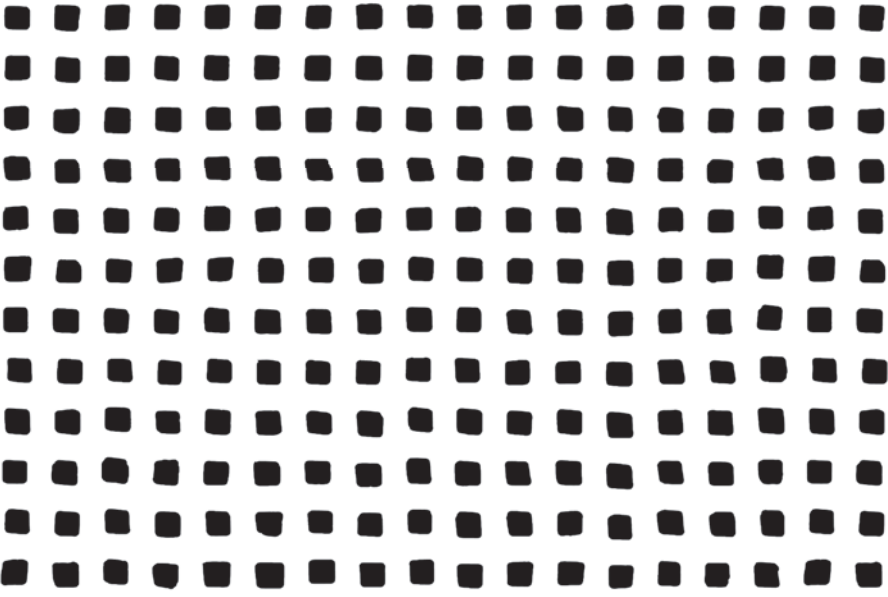
You too can overcome perfectionism. You too can become free to live life fully, confidently, and happily, while still being accomplished and successful. That is my wish for you. Now let's begin by understanding perfectionism.

Sincerely,
Bonnie Zucker, PsyD



Chapter 1

What Is Perfectionism & Why Change It?



“

The thing that is really hard, and really amazing, is giving up on being perfect and beginning the work of becoming yourself.

-Anna Quindlen, author

Understanding the difference between healthy striving and perfectionism is critical to laying down the shield and picking up your life.

-Brené Brown, The Gifts of Imperfection

”

It is after midnight, on a school night, and you have been seriously studying for your Spanish vocab quiz for four hours, going over your homework, reviewing your notes, and taking sample quizzes you found online. Everything you have been studying is easy—you learned it all before—but you want to be sure! It doesn't matter to you that this quiz will only count for 1% of your total grade this semester. Or that you have an A in the class (that's not even counting all the extra credit points you've accumulated). You probably wouldn't be *that* worried had you

not made a mistake in the piano recital during your audition. Now more than ever your grades need to be perfect. You really want 100% on this quiz so you can guarantee your A and maintain your perfect GPA on your transcript. You have to apply for college soon. And music school is so competitive!



Or: Tennis is your passion and you've been playing since you were five years old. You've been on a school team since middle school and now, in high school, you're playing in tournaments and regularly competing as part of a university program for teens. Over the past year, it's become harder and harder to just play and enjoy your sport; instead you are in your head constantly critiquing your every stroke and beating yourself up when you miss a point. *How could you miss that? You're supposed to be better than that. This is embarrassing.* With all of these critical thoughts flowing through your head, you're not performing up to your ability. After tournaments, you watch videos of yourself playing and struggle to find anything good to focus on; it's just all about how many points you missed and how you are getting worse, not better!

Or: It's 4:00 pm and you begin getting ready for a party that starts at 7:00. Your friends are coming over at 6:00 to get you, and you need at

least two hours to make yourself look right. There is no way you can leave the house unless you look perfect. Your outfit has to be ideal, your makeup needs to be perfect, your hair fully done. You start trying on clothes and it takes a full hour to figure out what to wear. Then another hour on makeup and hair. When your friends get there at 6:00, you are near tears because you hate how you look, and make them wait 30 minutes. One of them helps you change your outfit, even though she's annoyed because this happens all the time!



Perfectionism, or being a perfectionist, is something you may or may not identify with. Some people know they are perfectionists, and others don't really see themselves that way (in which case you might have been given this book by someone who thinks you should read it). We know that perfectionism exists on a spectrum, like other issues such as anxiety, ranging from mild to extreme. On the mild side, someone may spend more time than is needed checking over their work, be the very last one in the class to turn in their exam because they keep going over their answers, or keep their room spotlessly clean and organized. On the more extreme side, someone may not finish college because they couldn't complete the work on time, end friendships because others couldn't

meet their extreme standards, or struggle with more significant problems such as low self-esteem, anxiety, or depression. Regardless of where you land on the spectrum, this book will help you see yourself and your accomplishments in a better light, find a better balance, and discover what goes into being a happy *and* successful person.

What Is Perfectionism?

Being a perfectionist means refusing to accept anything less than perfect. People tend to see it as a personality trait (“I’m a perfectionist” or “they are a perfectionist”) that is characterized by creating and working toward excessively high, unrealistic standards that are often impossible to meet. However, lots of people think of perfectionism as a good thing, associated with high achievement, academic excellence, and intelligence. It’s easy to admire perfectionists! They often seem to have their act together, and many are even complimented for working so hard. But being seen this way can become their identity, meaning that perfectionists think their achievements define who they are and are a measure of what they are worth. And this only makes the perfectionism worse!

Perfectionism can have a compulsive quality to it. You’ve probably heard of OCD (obsessive-compulsive disorder), which can be driven by perfectionism, but is not the same thing. OCD can involve repetitive checking, the desire for certainty, or the need for things to be “just right,” which can seem similar to perfectionism. But with OCD, the thoughts and urges are experienced as intrusive and unwanted, and it’s more about relieving anxiety. With perfectionism, however, the thoughts do not feel intrusive, and the person is often okay with the perfectionistic behavior, as it often seems to make their lives more organized. People with OCD would like to stop the compulsive behaviors, but it is very hard for them to do so.

Perfectionism is often about gaining the approval of others, or wanting to be accepted and admired by them, and avoiding judgment or blame. The focus then is on what others think, rather than what you think. It’s a lot about wanting to be *perceived* as perfect; but this is also unattainable. Regardless of how hard you try, you cannot control the perception of others.

It’s very important to realize that simply having high standards and striving to do your best isn’t perfectionism. In fact, positive striving, or striving for excellence, is a good thing. When you

require perfection, you feel that you must win, get the highest grade, and be the best at what you do. You are also profoundly upset and stressed by any performance or grade that's lower than your goal or what you had expected. Perfectionism is when the standards are set so high that they are out of reach, even with a great deal of effort. This sets you up for self-blame and self-criticism, which damages your self-esteem. Perfectionists have a hard time with "good enough," thinking of it as doing the bare minimum. But good enough often really is enough, and allowing yourself to sometimes do a good enough job lets you have more of a balanced life. The goal is to have positive striving for excellence without perfectionism and its negative consequences (such as feeling badly about yourself).

Can't Perfectionism Be a Good Thing?

There is really no such thing as "positive perfectionism," even though many perfectionists see it as a positive motivator. Perfectionism causes stress, anxiety, eating disorders, depression, and, often, exhaustion. It causes you to worry and ruminate. At the root of perfectionism is often a fear of failure, and the perfectionistic behaviors are

driven by this fear. When you are afraid of trying new things because you fear that you will not be good or the best at it, or when you are so sensitive to criticism that it ruins your week, makes you pull back from others, or prevents you from taking risks and putting yourself out there, perfectionism is limiting your creativity and true self-expression. When you are constantly concerned with how you are doing and comparing yourself to others, you are unable to relax, and perfectionism is hurting you. Perfectionism prevents you from feeling good about yourself and interferes with your sense of worth. It interferes with your ability to thrive, and it becomes your *disadvantage*, not your advantage. At the end of the day, perfectionism is an obstacle to a happy and rewarding life. To quote my well-respected colleague and dear friend Dr. Mary Alvord, "People think perfectionism is a good thing. High achievement is really good; doing your best is really good. Perfectionism implies that it has to be perfect, which very few things are. It sets us up for being disappointed."

Feeling unhappy or dissatisfied with the results of your sports team tryout, audition for the school play, grade on a test, not being invited to a party, or how someone reacted to your comment in class is a common experience whether you

have perfectionism or not. But perfectionists hold onto these moments, think about them as real failures, and go over them again and again in their heads. It can feel overwhelmingly stressful when you think these perceived failures cannot be undone, and that your future won't work out as you planned. This often comes from the faulty belief that perfectionistic behaviors will guarantee a good result—for example, believing that if you get all A's and excel in “your thing” (whether that's a sport, theater, or the yearbook), leads to getting into a top college, which leads to an amazing career, which leads to a happy and successful life. Perfectionism might make you believe this is the *only* path to success. So when you don't make the team, or you get a B on a test, suddenly it's like your whole life plan has been de-railed. In reality, there are *many* paths to a successful future.

Perfectionism tricks you into believing that if you just meet your very high goals and expectations, you will be satisfied and happy... but the opposite is actually true. Because these expectations can't ever be met, you end up putting forth too much effort, and then it feels even worse to not get the results you wanted. Even if the high

standards of perfectionism *were* attainable, the cost of reaching them is too high, as working so much, so hard, and for so long prevents you from experiencing other important parts of life.

Perfectionism also makes failure seem like a horrible thing. So much effort is put into avoiding any failure—but believe it or not, failure is important! Someone who has never experienced occasional failures and disappointments has never had the opportunity to develop resilience and the essential coping tools that are needed later in life (since in adulthood, things don't always work out the way we'd like them to!). Becoming a successful person often depends on being able to tolerate failure and disappointment.

Perfectionism can be about school, sports, or interests. It can also be about relationships, body image and appearance, and many other areas of life. When perfectionism takes an area of your life and makes being the best the focus, not only are you less able to be present in the moment, but it also takes time away from all the other parts of life. You can't “do it all”—no one can—and the goal instead needs to be about achieving a balance so you can live a full, rewarding, and meaningful life.