

Perfectionism in Perspective

Module 3

What keeps perfectionism going?

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Introduction

In Modules 1 and 2 we talked about how perfectionism can develop, and the consequences of pursuing perfectionism. Before starting to tackle your perfectionism it is important to understand how perfectionism is maintained and why it is so difficult to let go of high standards, even when pursuit of these standards has negative consequences. In this module, we will explore what keeps perfectionism going.

How Do Unrelenting High Standards Keep Perfectionism Going?

Not achieving the standard you set

Unrelenting high standards are so high that they cannot be achieved all the time. Instead of concluding that the expectation was unrealistic, perfectionists will draw the conclusion that they did not work hard enough or they have failed. Some perfectionists will just give up altogether and others will try even harder. For example, if you set the standard for yourself that you must achieve a High Distinction in every university assignment you submit, what do you think will happen when you don't achieve a Distinction? You might be thinking: "I should have tried harder" and feel disappointed or upset. Some people might work even harder next time and some might give up altogether.

Refer to the standards you identified in the previous module. What happens when you do not achieve the standards you have set for yourself?

Achieving the standard set but at a cost!

In some cases, the standard is achieved but only at great personal cost. For example, achieving the standard you set may require a large amount of time and effort to be spent on a task. The cost of this is that there is less time and energy available for other important activities (e.g., relaxation, socialising). You have already identified some of the costs of your perfectionism in Module 1.

There may also be a physical cost of the long-term pursuit of unrelenting high standards. Researchers have shown that high levels of a hormone (cortisol) are secreted into the bloodstream during times of high stress. Cortisol can have some positive effects in the short-term (e.g., a quick burst of energy, heightened memory, lower sensitivity to pain), but with perfectionism, high levels of stress (and cortisol) are maintained for long periods and the body is not able to recover properly. This can have several harmful consequences in the long-term (e.g., impaired mental performance, suppressed thyroid function, decreased bone density, higher blood pressure, lowered immunity, increased abdominal fat).



And you thought
there was stress
in your life !

Achieving the standard and then re-setting the standard

Unfortunately, even if a high standard is set and achieved, most perfectionists do not feel happy about this for very long. Some might see this as a “fluke” or decide that the standard set was not high enough, and set a higher standard the next time.

In his previous job Peter had applied for a promotion. When he got promoted to manager he was momentarily pleased but then he started thinking that this was because no-one else applied for the position. He started worrying about whether he was capable of doing the role. He arrived early at work so that he would have time to do extra preparation each day and he stayed late at the end of the day. He was starting to get exhausted and his wife was complaining that he was not spending enough time at home.

Refer to the standards you identified in the previous module. What happens when you do achieve a standard you have set for yourself?

Information Processing

The way we make sense of what goes on around us (how we process information) also plays a big part in maintaining perfectionism. There is so much happening in our environment at any one time – so much information – that to make sense of all of it is impossible. For this reason, our brains choose what we pay attention to and how we make sense of things. Often, it’s our beliefs that determine what we pay attention to and how we think about these things. We tend to **pay attention** to and **interpret** things according to what we expect. As a result, we tend to remember only things that happen in our lives that are consistent with what we believe to be true. This process of attending to and interpreting things in a manner that is consistent (rather than inconsistent) with our beliefs, is typical of all people.

Let’s look at this further using an example that is not related to perfectionism. For example, you may have the belief: “My neighbours are noisy.” This belief may be based on your experience of the first night they moved into the house next door and had a loud party that kept you awake till early morning. However, you might still hold your belief about your neighbours, which started from that first night, because:

- you only **pay attention** to your neighbours at times when they are noisy, not at times when they are quiet
- you **interpret** noise you hear as coming from those particular neighbours, often without checking if this is the case

Therefore, whenever the topic of your neighbours comes to mind, you only remember the occasions that they have been noisy. Your original belief: “My neighbours are noisy”, holds strong.

Let’s try another example, but this time related to perfectionism. Imagine you hold a strong belief or standard: “I must never make mistakes”. This is a conclusion that you developed following certain experiences you had when you were younger, but how does this affect your information processing now? Holding the belief: “I must never make mistakes” means that you will probably look out for any mistakes or signs of failure so you can correct these immediately. For example, you might repeatedly look through a

report for errors. You probably will not pay much attention to successes and it is unlikely that you will acknowledge the times when you had done an acceptable job – those times are never given a second thought because to you they are “no big deal”. Therefore, you only pay attention to negative incidents that confirm your belief: “I must never make mistakes”. You probably also have an extreme view of what success and failure is, with no middle ground. You might easily jump to the extreme conclusion that you have failed at something, when realistically you might not have done too badly at all (e.g., “I didn’t get an A on the assignment – this is terrible, and I should never make mistakes like this again”).

Refer to the standards you identified on Page 3. How do your standards influence what you pay attention to and how you interpret ambiguous information? Is your processing of information biased in any way?

Self-criticism and Unhelpful Thinking Styles

Perfectionists tend to be extremely self-critical, especially if they are unable to meet their high standards. They might say things to themselves such as: “I am such an idiot” or: “I should have tried harder”. This self-criticism keeps perfectionists feeling bad about themselves – they may feel guilty, stressed, worried, depressed, or angry. Negative emotions such as these are usually preceded by a number of unhelpful self-critical statements and thoughts. Often there is a pattern to these thoughts and we call these **unhelpful thinking styles**. We have noticed that people use unhelpful thinking styles as an automatic habit; it is something they do unconsciously. However, when a person consistently uses some of these styles of thinking, they can often cause themselves a great deal of emotional distress.



We are now going to describe a range of thinking styles that are common in people with perfectionism. Notice any thinking patterns and styles that you use often.

Black and white thinking

This thinking style involves seeing only one extreme or the other. You are right or wrong, good or bad, and so on. There are no in-betweens or shades of grey.

e.g., “If I make one mistake I am a complete failure”; “If I don’t scrub my kitchen with bleach after every meal then it’s not clean”

Mental filter

This thinking style involves a ‘filtering in’ and ‘filtering out’ process – a sort of ‘tunnel vision’, focusing on only one part and ignoring the rest. Usually this means only looking at the negative parts of a situation and forgetting the positive parts.

e.g., *noticing the one error on a report and ignoring the fact that the rest of the report is flawless*

‘Shoulding’ and ‘Musting’

Sometimes by saying: “I should...” or “I must...” you can put unreasonable demands or pressure on yourself and others. Although these statements can be helpful (e.g., “I must not drink and drive”), they can sometimes create unrealistic expectations (e.g., “I must never make mistakes”)

Catastrophising

Catastrophising occurs when we “blow things out of proportion” and we view a situation as awful, dreadful, horrible, even though the reality is that the problem itself is in fact quite small.
e.g., “It is terrible that I wasn’t able to clean my house today”

Labelling

We label ourselves and others when we make global statements based on behaviour in specific situations. We might use this label even though there are many more examples that aren’t consistent with this label.
e.g., “I am an idiot for not knowing the capital of Brazil”

Jumping to Conclusions

We jump to conclusions when we assume that we know what someone else is thinking (‘mind reading’) and when we make predictions about what is going to happen in the future (‘predictive thinking’).
e.g., “If I am not perfectly groomed then people will think I am a slob and they will reject me”

Magnification and Minimisation

In this thinking style, you magnify the positive attributes of other people and minimise your own positive attributes. It is as though you are explaining away your own positive characteristics or achievements as though they are not important.
e.g., “My boss only gave me a promotion because she was being nice and no-one else applied for the position”

Do you tend to be self-critical? What kinds of unhelpful thinking styles do you recognise as being part of your perfectionism?

We will be providing strategies to help you challenge your perfectionistic thinking in Module 6.

Perfectionism Behaviours

Perfectionists also engage in a range of unhelpful behaviours to make sure they continue to meet the high standards they set for themselves. You have probably been engaging in at least some of these behaviours for a long time. You may not even realise that you do these things to maintain your unrelenting high standards as they have become so much a part of your routine. In Module 1 we looked at perfectionism behaviours. Let’s take another look at the list below and check off any behaviours that you engage in:

- | | |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Procrastinating | <input type="checkbox"/> Giving up too soon |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Avoidance | <input type="checkbox"/> Not knowing when to stop |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Excessive checking | <input type="checkbox"/> Correcting |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Reassurance seeking | <input type="checkbox"/> Slowness |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Overcompensating | <input type="checkbox"/> Failure to delegate |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Repeating and correcting | <input type="checkbox"/> Hoarding |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Excessive organising and list making | <input type="checkbox"/> Attempts to change the behaviour of others |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Difficulty making decisions | |



If you are a perfectionist, it is likely that you checked several of these behaviours. Perfectionism behaviours keep perfectionistic thinking going because, if you keep behaving this way, you never have the opportunity to test out whether your perfectionistic thinking is true. This is like a vicious cycle in which perfectionistic thoughts and behaviours keep each other going. Many of these behaviours are **time-consuming** (e.g., excessive checking, overcompensating, repeating and correcting, slowness, failure to delegate, difficulty making decision) and are **done at the expense of other important activities** (e.g., taking work home rather than spending time relaxing or with family). They may **delay or interfere with attempts to meet the standard set** (e.g., procrastinating and avoidance, giving up too soon) and this can be interpreted as a failure. Some of these behaviours also **interfere with having good relationships with other people** (e.g., attempts to change the behaviour of others, reassurance seeking). We will be helping you reduce your perfectionism behaviours in Module 5.

Reward and Reinforcement

Finally, high standards and the pursuit of achievement are often highly valued by society and actively reinforced by others. Students who do well at school or university are rewarded for their achievements by teachers and parents (e.g., by getting good marks, recognition, praise, and awards). Physical attractiveness, good health, and cleanliness are also rewarded by society (e.g., dressing nicely and staying clean is associated with increased attractiveness). Or the pursuit of high standards may result in a promotion at work and therefore better income. This reinforcement by others (external reinforcement) may contribute to the belief that you need to continue to be perfectionistic in order to achieve and be accepted by others.



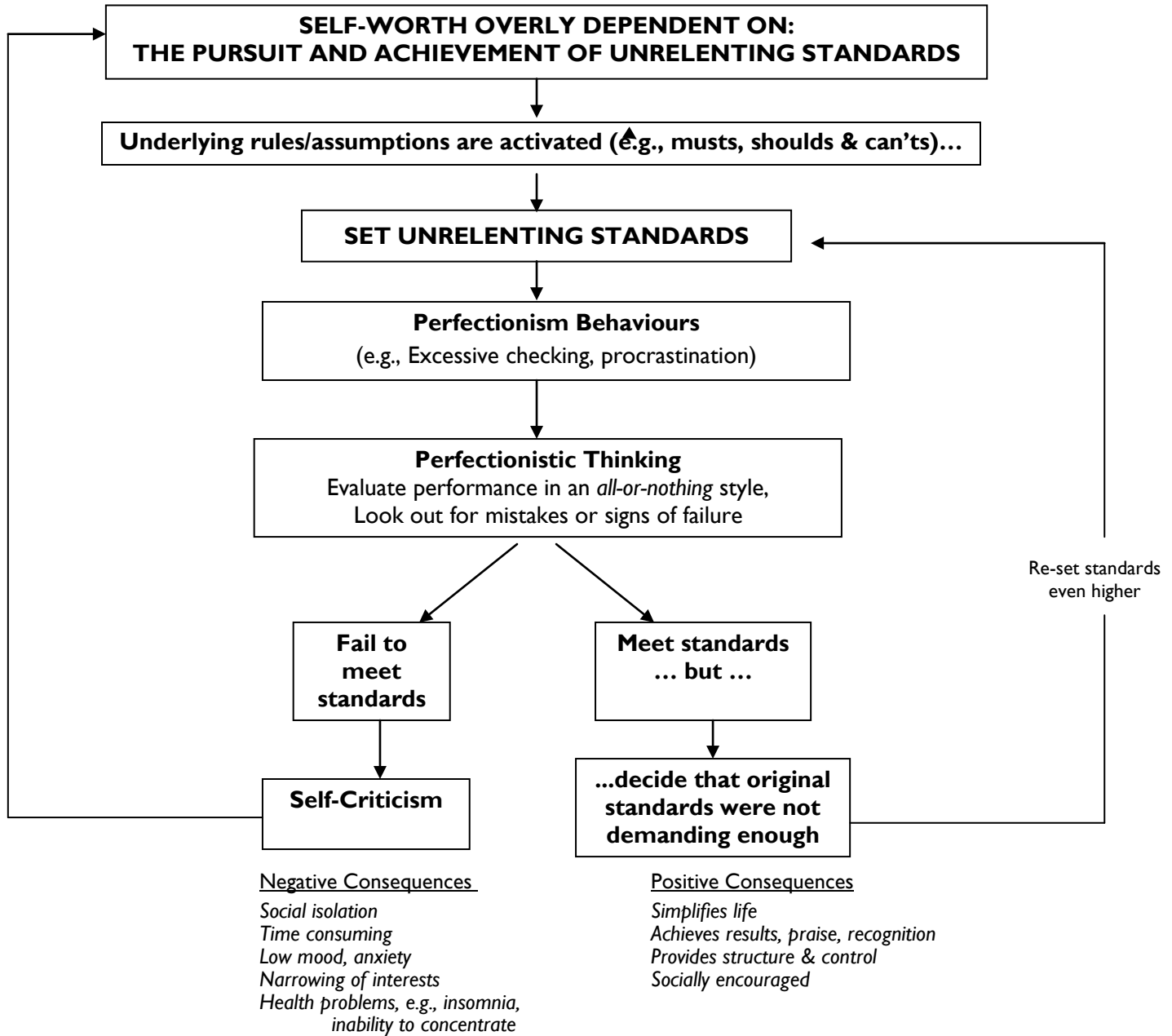
Conversely, not achieving or pursuing high standards may have negative consequences. A child who is constantly criticised for not doing things 'perfectly' may develop a belief that it is vital to do things correctly. In adulthood, poor performance in a job interview may result in not being selected for that job. These sorts of experiences reinforce the belief that it is important to do things to a very high standard.

It is not always others who reward or punish your efforts. Sometimes these responses are internally driven (internal reinforcement). For example, you may be very self-critical when you make a mistake or you may feel relief when you achieve a high standard.

We are now going to see how all of these concepts work together to create a vicious cycle that keeps perfectionism going. We will illustrate this with a model that maps out the vicious cycle, and then use an example to show how it operates.

Model of Perfectionism: How Perfectionism Is Maintained

Model of Perfectionism: The Pursuit of Unrelenting Standards

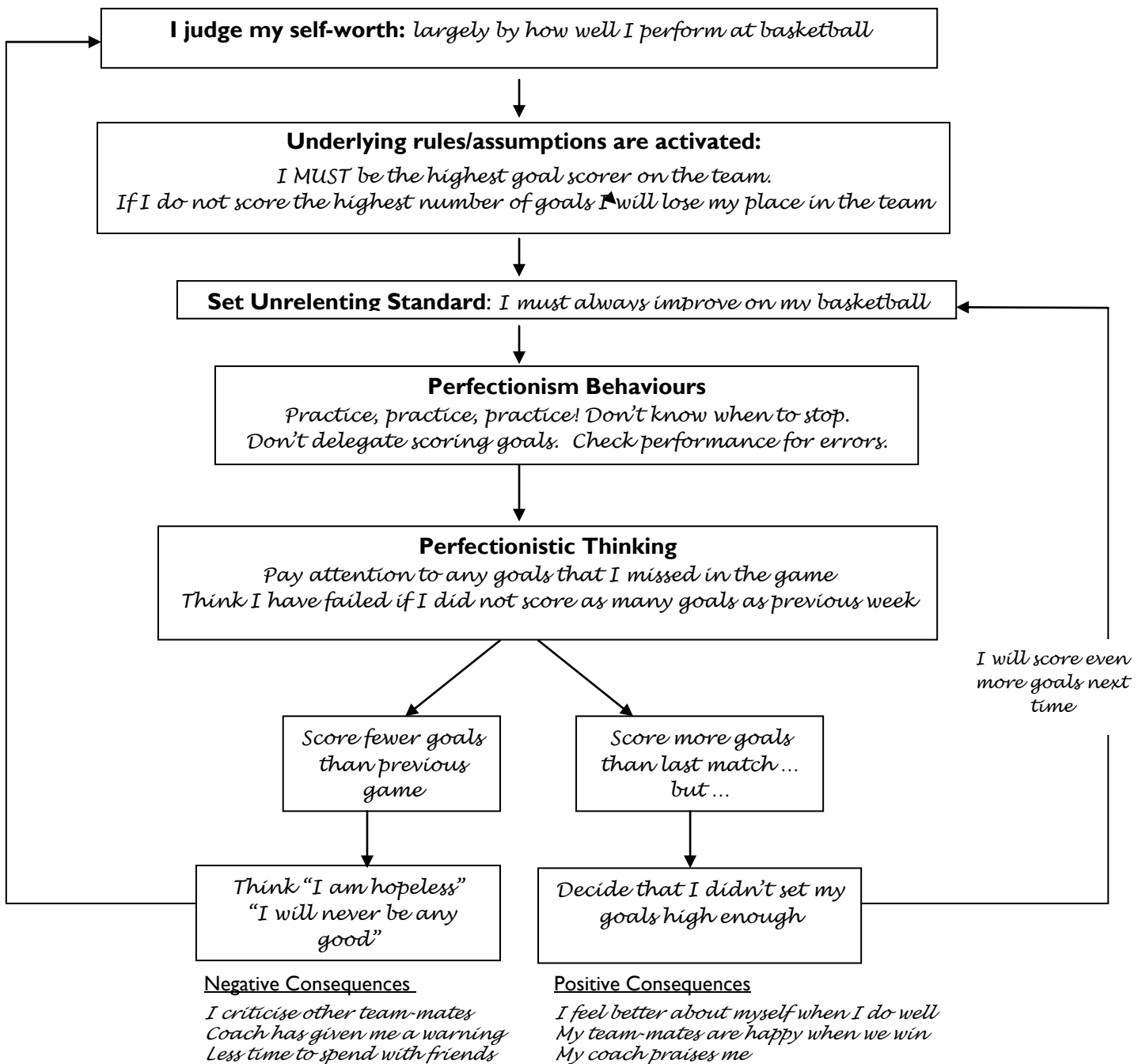


The model illustrates the factors that keep perfectionism going. It shows that perfectionism might begin with placing a great deal of importance on the pursuit and achievement of unrelenting standards to the extent that these efforts become the basis for which we place worth and value on ourselves. Our rules and assumptions get activated and we set unrelenting high standards for ourselves. To make sure we meet these standards, we engage in perfectionism behaviours and unhelpful thinking. This is harmful in many ways. First, perfectionists tend to evaluate their experiences in a biased way by only paying attention to mistakes or signs of failure. Second, because the standards set are unreasonable, the perfectionist may procrastinate or give up altogether. In this case, the person has not met the standard set and is likely to become self-critical, which just reinforces their earlier belief that they need to achieve in order to be a valuable person. Third, if the perfectionist does achieve the standard set they may experience some short-

term relief but, in the long-term, may conclude that the standard set was not high enough and re-set the standard for next time. In any case, the pursuit of unrelenting high standards is associated with considerable cost (e.g., social isolation, low mood). When we value ourselves largely on the basis of our achievements or our attempts to achieve high standards, then it is likely that perfectionism will become problematic.

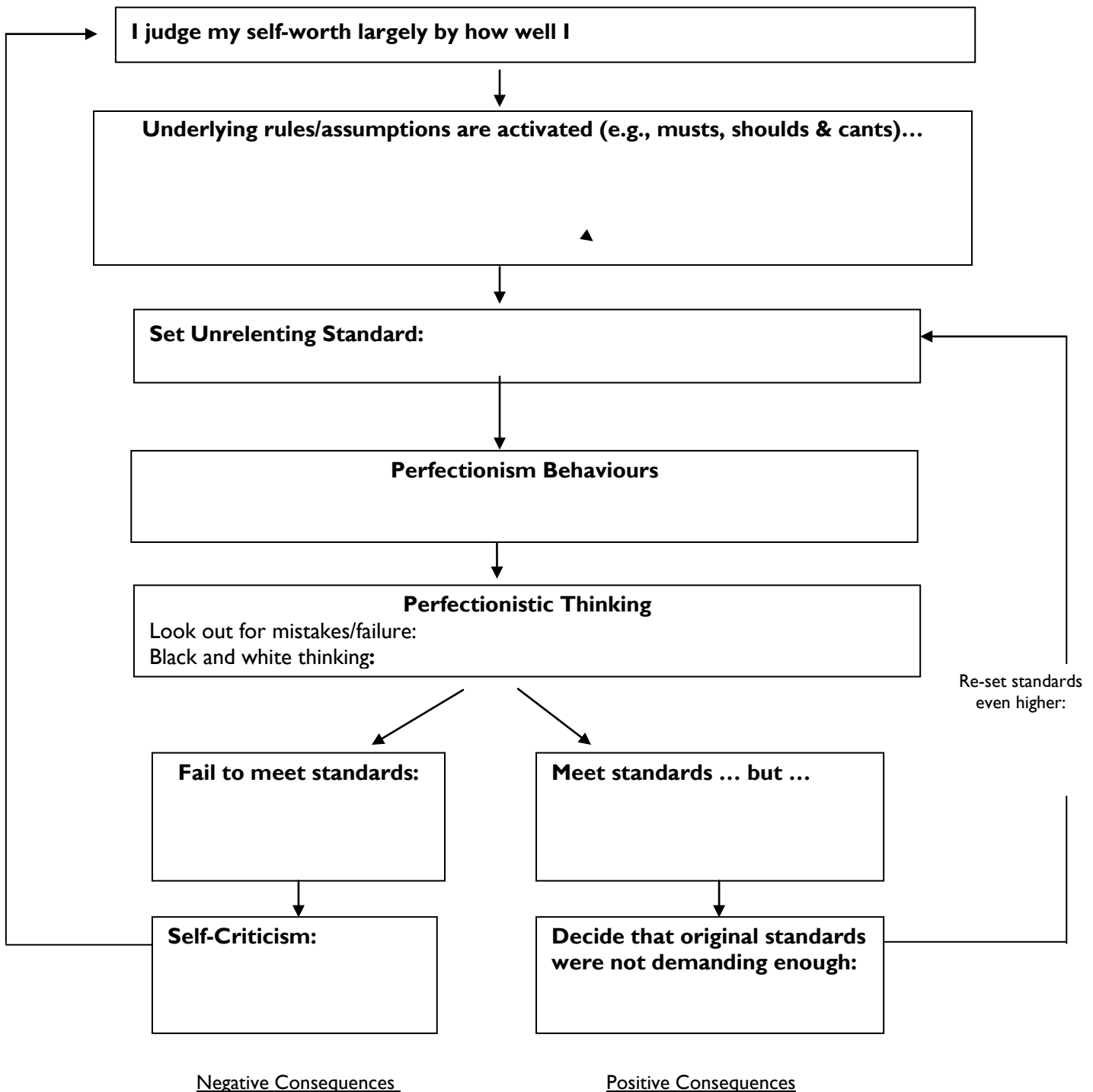
Now we will have another look at this perfectionism model using the example of Polly:

Model of Perfectionism: How Polly's Perfectionism is Maintained



Now it is your turn...Let's see how your perfectionism is maintained. Referring to the model on Page 7, complete the worksheet overleaf.

Model of Perfectionism: How My Perfectionism Is Maintained



Now that you've been introduced to the model of perfectionism and seen how being setting unrelenting standards keeps the perfectionism going, in a vicious cycle, we will look at the impact of perfectionism on your life. Join us in the next module to decide whether you want to loosen up your unrelenting standards.

Module Summary

- Unrelenting high standards keep perfectionism going because they are not achievable all of the time or only achievable at great personal cost.
- Other things that keep perfectionism going include:
 - the way we make sense of the things that happen around us (our attention and interpretation)
 - self-criticism and unhelpful thinking styles
 - perfectionism behaviours
 - reward and reinforcement (from self and others)
- We can put all of these things together into a model of the vicious cycle that keeps perfectionism going.

What I Have Learned in this Module

Think about what you have learned in this module and any useful bits of information, tips or strategies that you want to remember. Write them down below so you can refer to them later.

Think about how you might use the information you have just learned. Write down some ways in which you could make use of this information.

Coming Up...



In Module 4 (Changing Perfectionism) you will have an opportunity to look at how perfectionism impacts your life and the pros and cons of changing versus staying the same

About this Module

CONTRIBUTORS

Dr. Anthea Fursland (Ph.D.¹)
Principal Clinical Psychologist
Centre for Clinical Interventions

Dr. Anna Steele (Ph.D.¹)
Clinical Psychologist
Centre for Clinical Interventions

Dr. Bronwyn Raykos (MPsych², Ph.D.¹)
Clinical Psychologist
Centre for Clinical Interventions

Dr. Louella Lim (D.Psych.³)
Clinical Psychologist
Centre for Clinical Interventions

¹ Doctor of Philosophy (Clinical Psychology)

² Master of Psychology (Clinical Psychology)

³ Doctor of Psychology (Clinical)

BACKGROUND

The concepts and strategies in this module have been developed from evidence-based psychological treatment, primarily Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT). CBT for perfectionism is based on the approach that perfectionism is the result of problematic cognitions (thoughts) and behaviours.

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