

A close-up photograph of a hand holding a red eraser over a piece of paper. The paper has blue horizontal lines and some brown smudges or eraser marks. The eraser is red with a silver-colored metal band around its middle. The hand is holding the eraser from the top left, and the eraser is positioned over the paper. The background is slightly blurred.

The Problem of Perfectionism

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Learning Objectives

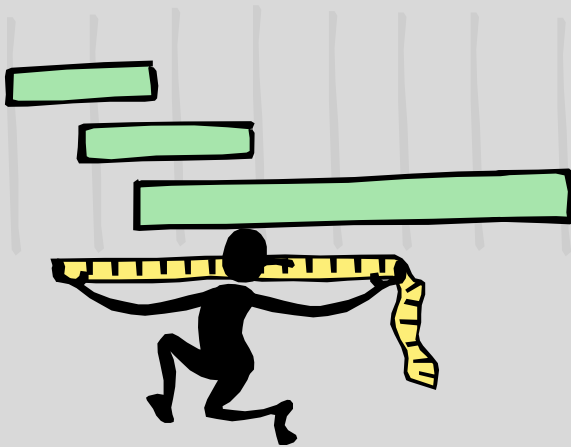
- Understand various definitions and models of perfectionism
- Understand the negative effects of perfectionism
- Understand the factors that can promote the development of perfectionism
- Understand key concepts in prevention and treatment of perfectionism

“The curious paradox
is that when I accept
myself as I am, then
I can change”

-Carl Rogers

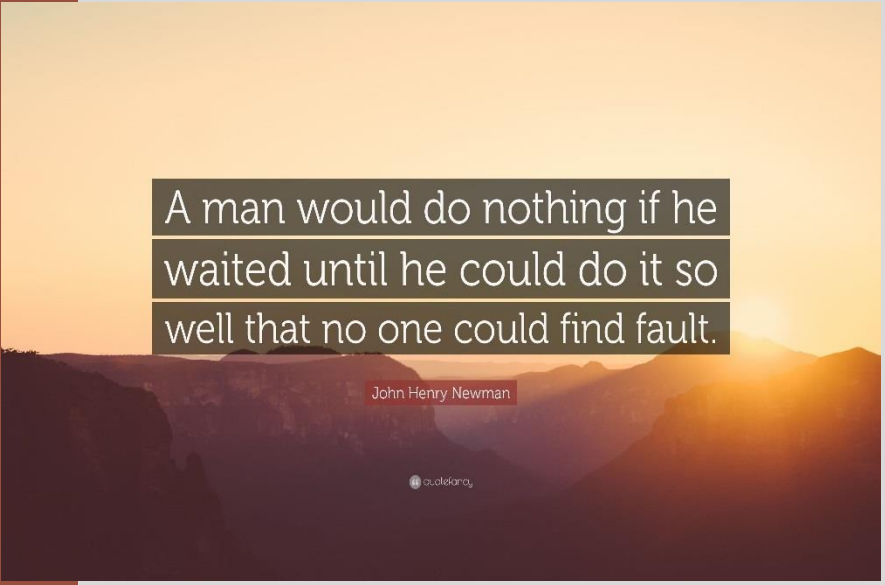
Perfectionists are, “people whose standards are high beyond reach or reason” and “who strain compulsively and unremittingly toward impossible goals and who measure their own worth entirely in terms of productivity and accomplishment.”

(David Burns, 1980)



Definitions & Models of Perfectionism

- No agreed upon definition, but agreed upon themes
- Debate about whether “adaptive perfectionism” exists



A man would do nothing if he waited until he could do it so well that no one could find fault.

John Henry Newman

 quotefancy

Hewitt, Flett & Colleagues

Multidimensional Model of Perfectionism

“Perfectionism is a neurotic or maladaptive personality style that involves three major components”

- Three trait perfectionism dimensions
- Interpersonal expression of perfectionism
- Cognitive processes associated with perfectionism

Three trait perfectionism dimensions	Interpersonal expression of perfectionism	Cognitive processes associated with perfectionism
1. Self-oriented Perfectionism: having high standards for yourself that are unrealistically high and impossible to maintain.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hide flaws from others • Forgiving of others flaws but not self 	<p>“People won’t love if I’m not perfect.”</p> <p>“If I make mistakes, I’m not good enough.”</p>
2. Other-Oriented Perfectionism: tendency to demand that others meet your unrealistically high standards.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Others aren’t good enough; judgmental • Can’t rely on others • Working in groups is difficult 	<p>“I might as well do it myself because no one else will do it correctly.”</p>
3. Socially Prescribed Perfectionism: exaggerated belief that others have expectations that are impossible to meet. In order to gain approval from others, these high standards must be met. High standards are believed to be imposed by others	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Behavior changes around individuals perceived as holding the standards 	<p>“I’ll really disappoint (my parents, my teachers) if I don’t do this perfectly.”</p> <p>“My parents expect me to be the best.”</p>

Frost's Model of Perfectionism

- Six domains
 - Excessive concern over mistakes
 - High personal standards
 - Doubt about actions
 - Need for organization
 - High parental expectations
 - Excessive parental criticism



Two-Component Model of Perfectionism

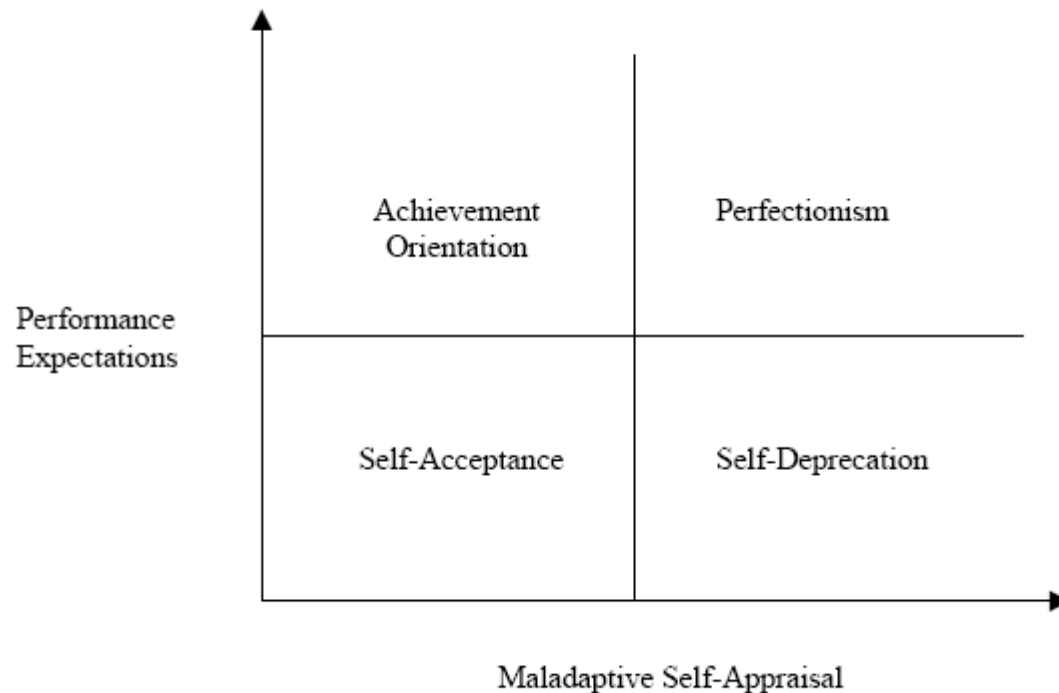


Figure 1. The two-component model of perfectionism.

Alden, Ryder, and Mellings (2002)

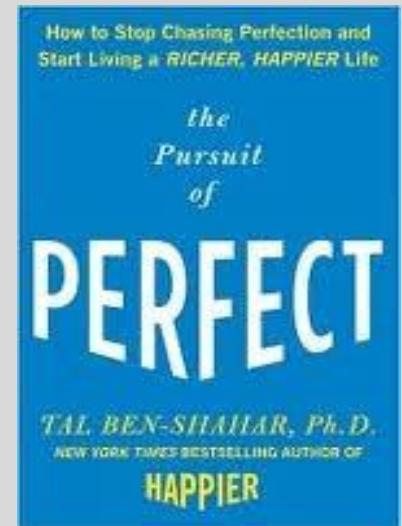
Differences Between Maladaptive and Adaptive Perfectionism

Maladaptive Perfectionism	Adaptive Perfectionism
Unable to experience pleasure from labors	Able to experience satisfaction or pleasure
Inflexibly high standards	Standards modified in accordance with the situation
Unrealistically or unreasonably high standards	Achievable standards
Overly generalized high standards	High standards are matched to the person's limitations and strengths
Fear of failure	Striving for success
Focus on avoiding error	Focus on doing things right
Tense/anxious attitude toward tasks	Relaxed but careful attitude
Large gap between performance and standards	Reasonable match between attainable performance and standards
Sense of self-worth dependent on performance	Sense of self independent of performance
Associated with procrastination	Timely completion of tasks
Motivation to avoid negative consequences	Motivation to achieve positive feedback/rewards
Goals attained for self-enhancement	Goals attained for enhancement of the society
Failure associated with harsh self criticism	Failure associated with disappointment and renewed efforts
Black and white thinking: perfection versus failure	Balanced thinking
Belief that one <i>should</i> excel	<i>Desire</i> to excel
"Compulsive" tendencies and doubting	Reasonable certainty about actions

Note. Table taken from Enns and Cox (2002, p. 51).

Tal Ben-Shahar's Definition

- No such thing as “adaptive” perfectionism
- Optimatism vs. Perfectionism
- The Oxford English Dictionary defines optimal as the “best, most favorable, especially under a particular set of circumstances.”



Regardless of Model or Definition Adopted There are Universal Themes

- Perfectionistic strivings + failure to meet those strivings (perfectionistic concerns)
- Excessively high standards (impossible standards)
- Excessive self-scrutiny
- Fleeting satisfaction with accomplishments
- Excessive concern with mistakes and failure
- Perceiving self-worth as synonymous with accomplishments

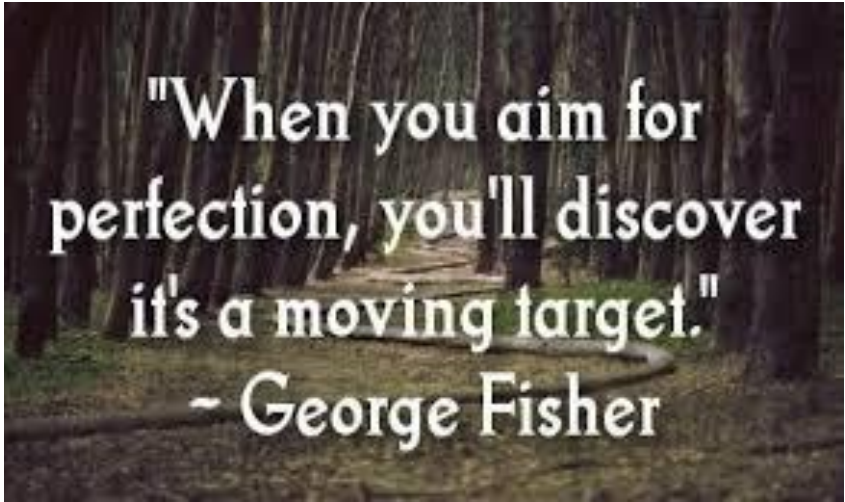
Listed below are a group of statements. Please rate your agreement with each of the statements using the following scale. If you strongly agree, circle 5. If you disagree, circle 1. If you feel somewhere in between, circle any one of the numbers between 1 and 5. If you feel neutral or undecided the middle point is 3.

1	2	3	4	5
Disagree		Neutral		Agree
Strongly				Strongly

- | | | | | | |
|--|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1.I think a lot about mistakes that I have made in front of other people..... | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 2.I always have to look as good as I can | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 3.I do not let other people know when I fail at something..... | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 4.It is important to act perfectly around other people | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 5.I always have to look perfect | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 6.I feel bad about myself when I make mistakes in front of other people | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 7.I have to look perfect around other people..... | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 8.I should always keep my problems secret | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 9.I want others to know about it when I do something well | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 10.I should fix my own problems rather than telling them to other people | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 11.Mistakes are worse when others see me make them..... | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 12.I never let others know how hard I work on things | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 13.If I seem perfect, other people will like me more | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 14.I do not want my friends to see even one of my bad points | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 15.I have to look like I always do things perfectly | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 16.It would be bad if I made a fool of myself in front of other people..... | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 17.I try hard to look perfect around other people..... | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 18.I like trying to look perfect to other people | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

Effects of Perfectionism

- Increased stress
 - Stress generation
 - Stress anticipation
 - Stress perpetuation
 - Stress enhancement
- Somatic complaints, increased illness, chronic disease
- Mental health deterioration
- Neglect of modifiable risk factors
- Suicide risk

A photograph of a narrow, winding path through a dense forest with tall, thin trees. The path is covered in fallen leaves and branches. Overlaid on the image is a quote in white text.

"When you aim for perfection, you'll discover it's a moving target."
- George Fisher

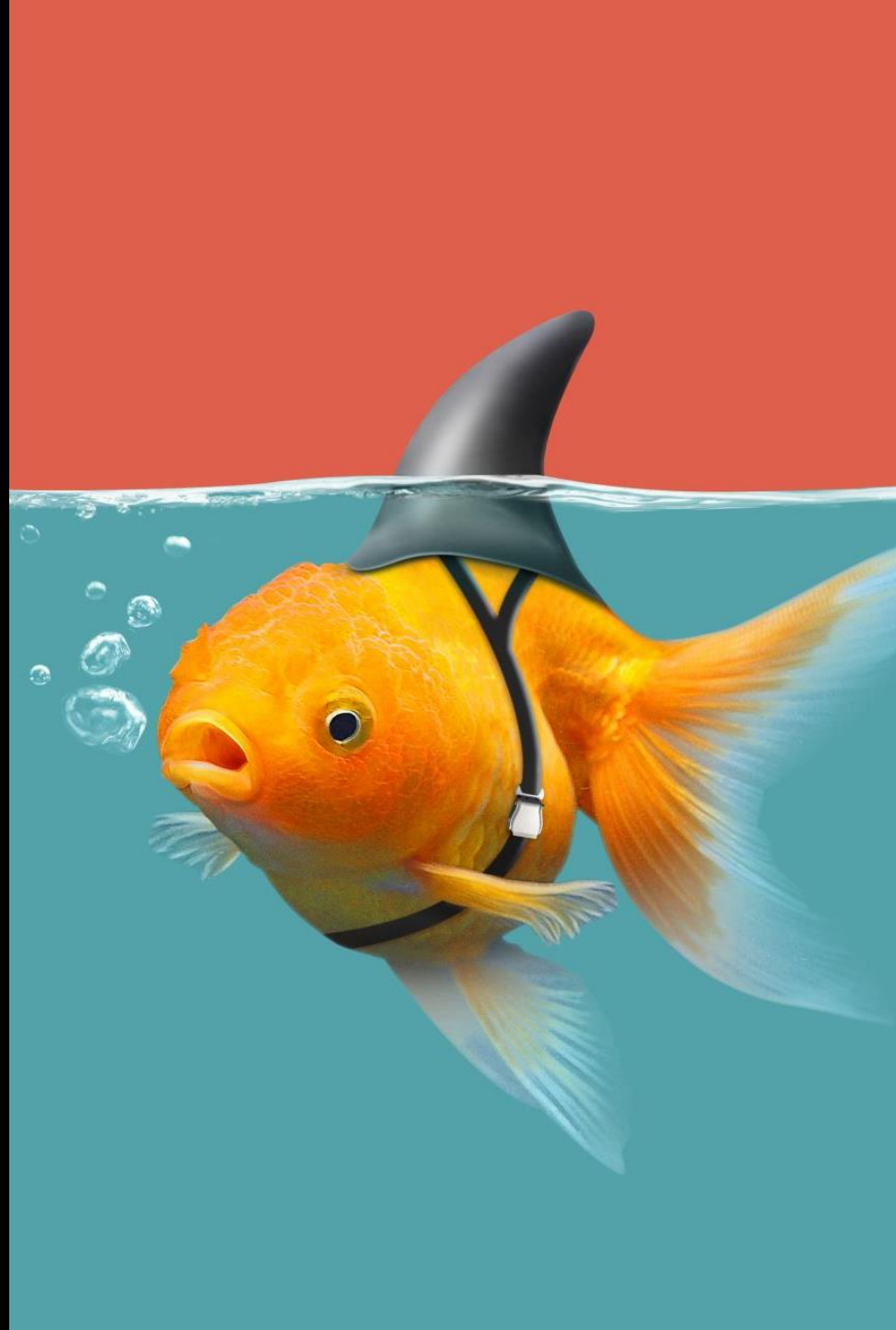


Development of Perfectionism

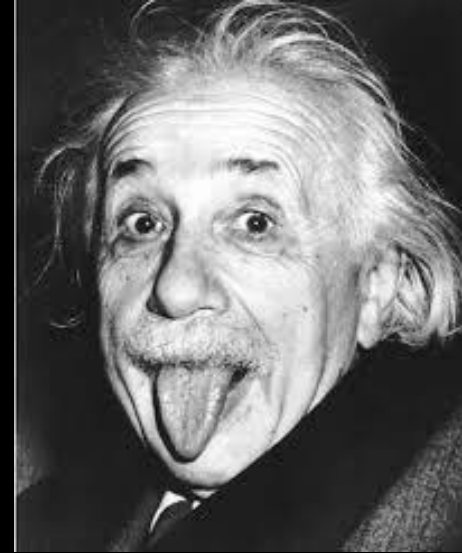
- Temperament and biological factors
- [Societal and cultural influences](#)
- [Social learning](#)

Prevention

- Model imperfect behaviors + effective coping
- Normalize mistakes
- Normalize uncertainty and ambiguity
- Discuss the benefits of making errors
- Encourage adaptability from an early age (e.g., sensory tolerance)
- Play games the wrong way
- Discuss and resist societal encouragement of perfectionism
- Big fish, small pond or small fish, big pond?
- Do things in new, imperfect ways
- Discuss the importance of failure
- Develop coping skills that are based on allowing adversity



Prevention



- Failure is critical to success
- Michael Jordan on “failure”
- Autobiographies of famous people
- Reframing failure with behavioral “experiments” (e.g., “draw a circle when...”)
- Discuss historical quotes
- Don’t reassure, model problem-solving (that doesn’t strive for perfection!)
- Limit praise for performance

Early Intervention

- Use prevention strategies +
- Self-help and online resources
- **Perhaps** CBT with a therapist trained as a generalist (first, do no harm)

MARTIN M. ANTONY, Ph.D.
RICHARD P. SWINSON, M.D.

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

Teach Your Children Well

When Perfect Isn't
Good Enough

— SECOND EDITION —

Strategies for Coping with Perfectionism

Why Values and Coping Skills
MATTER MORE
Than Grades, Trophies,
or "Fat Envelopes"

...with expert self-help advice for making independent, positive
and well-adjusted young people. Read this book—your kids will thank
you.

—David H. Rock, author of *Brain and a Workable Mind*

Madeline Levine, Ph.D.

Author of *The Price of Privilege*

Late Intervention

- CBT with a therapist who specializes in mental health issues related to perfectionism (e.g., anxiety)
 - Family history and functioning
 - Mood and substance use
 - Issues of non-disclosure and shame
 - Motivational interviewing
 - Risk of suicide
 - School collaboration





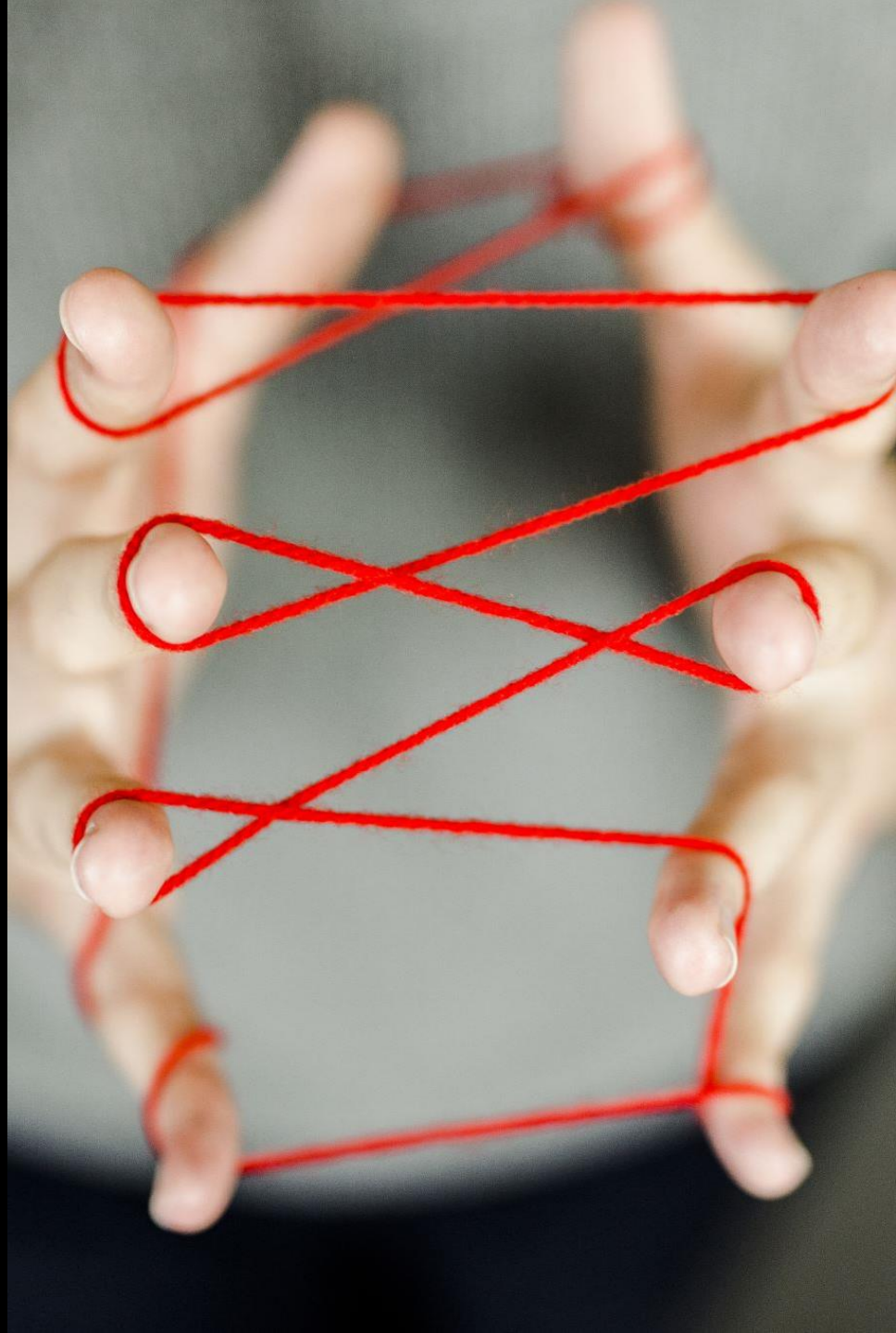
Brief Overview of an Expert Approach to Treatment

1. Setting the rationale and finding the hook
 - ❖ Three Messages
 - Message #1: On the surface, perfectionism makes sense.
 - Message #2: Therapy is not about changing you and your values.
 - Message #3: This treatment is about you living your life.
 - ❖ Finding the hook
 - Find out the child's interests and passions
 - What do they like to do?
 - What did they used to like to do before there was no time for anything?
 - What do they wish or dream to do if they had the time?



2. Digging a little deeper – How is perfectionism working for you?
 - ❖ Examining the pros and cons
 - ❖ Ask kids:
 - How is this strategy really working for you and how is it not?
 - How do you want your life to be?
 - How do you want your tomorrow to be?
 - If you were not working all the time, what would you want to do with your time?

3. Using CB Techniques to Change the Story
 - Technique #1:
The Failure/Success Continuum
 - Technique #2:
Writing a narrative of my life
 - Technique #3:
“Bossing Back Anxiety”
 - Technique #4:
Peeling the onion
 - Technique #5:
Behavioral Exercises/Exposure



Technique #1: The Failure/Success Continuum

- Goals of this exercise
 - Recognize how ludicrous definitions of success and failure are (or perfectionist and slacker or any other polar opposites).
 - After coming to this realization, rewrite the continuum to reflect a more balanced way of thinking.



Example: The Original Continuum

Failure

- Any mistake
- Any grade less than an A
- Missing a goal in soccer
- Eating any unhealthy food (pizza, cake, sweets, etc.)

Success

- No mistakes ever
- Straight A's
- Getting every goal in soccer
- Eating healthy foods all the time

Where are you on this continuum?



Failure

- Any mistake
- Any grade less than an A
- Missing a goal in soccer
- Eating any unhealthy food (pizza, cake, sweets, etc.)

Success

- No mistakes ever
- Straight A's
- Getting every goal in soccer
- Eating healthy foods all the time

Where are the
people you
most admire
on this
continuum?



Re-writing Definitions of Success and Failure

Failure

- Not trying/being lazy
- Not studying at all
- Not doing homework
- Missing out on fun things because of anxiety

Success

- Showing effort
- Completing all assigned work
- Balancing work with fun
- Doing what you love

Technique #2: Writing a narrative of my life



- For kids who are creative/love to write.
- Write a version of life story as a perfectionist.
- Write a version of life story with more relaxed standards.
- Opens up great discussion on pros and cons of living life as a perfectionist.

OCD	GAD
-Focus on bossing back.	-Bossing back and doing the opposite works here too.
-Focus on doing the opposite or breaking the rules.	-Focus on taking risks.
-Learning to tolerate anxiety by letting bad thoughts or feelings “be.”	-Learning to tolerate anxiety by doing things with lower standards.
-DON’T get into rational arguments/discussions with the OCD.	-Rational discussions more relevant (cognitive restructuring).

Technique #3: “Bossing Back Anxiety”

Overall Strategy: OCD

Label it as OCD – know brain is stuck
and won't feel like good enough

Boss back – don't use logic; recognize
the problem is a stuck brain

Break rules OCD

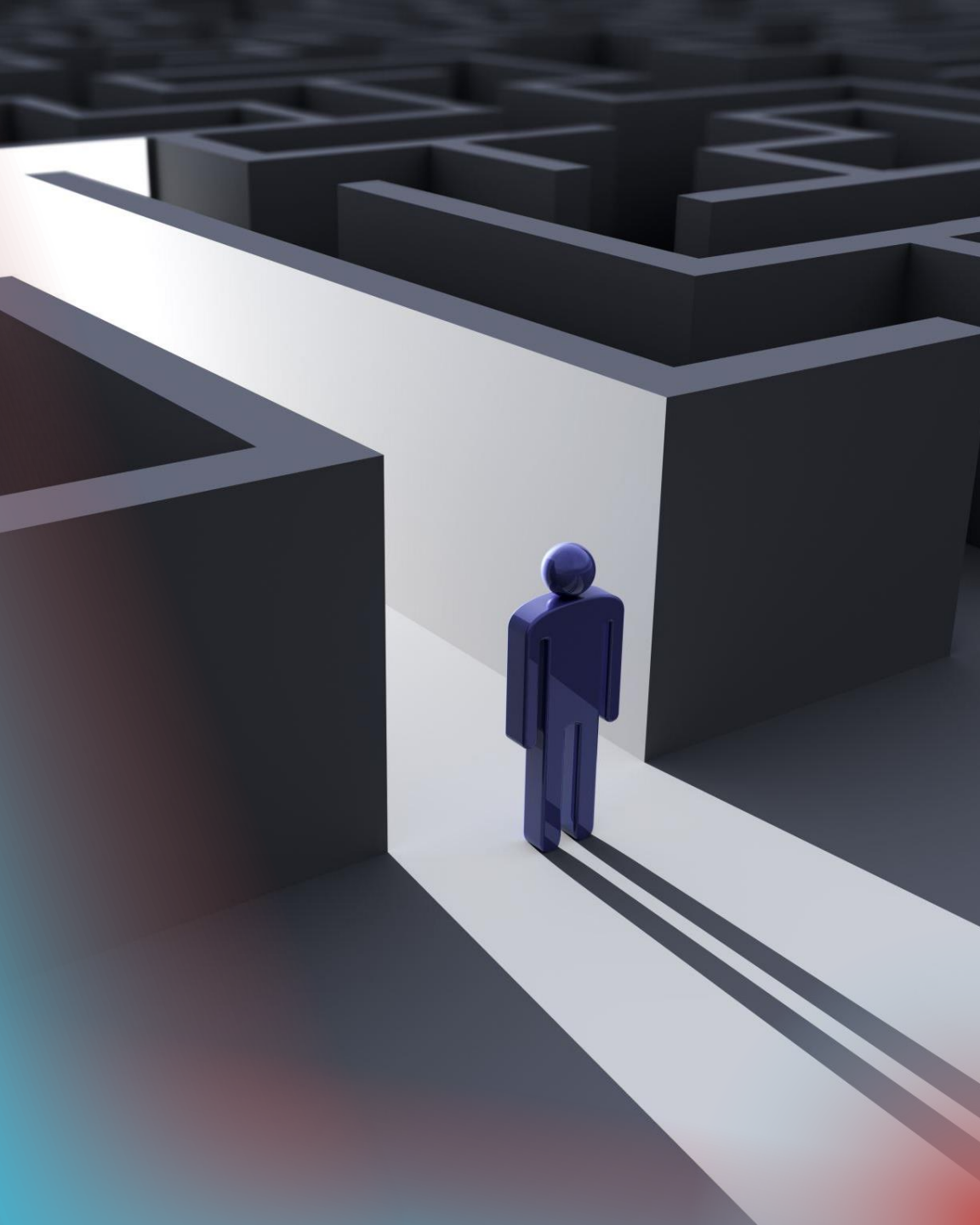
Learn dreaded outcome does not
come true and anxiety passes on own
– ride worry hill

Freedom is worth some discomfort

Pick up your brain and do what you want

Reward self for using strategies

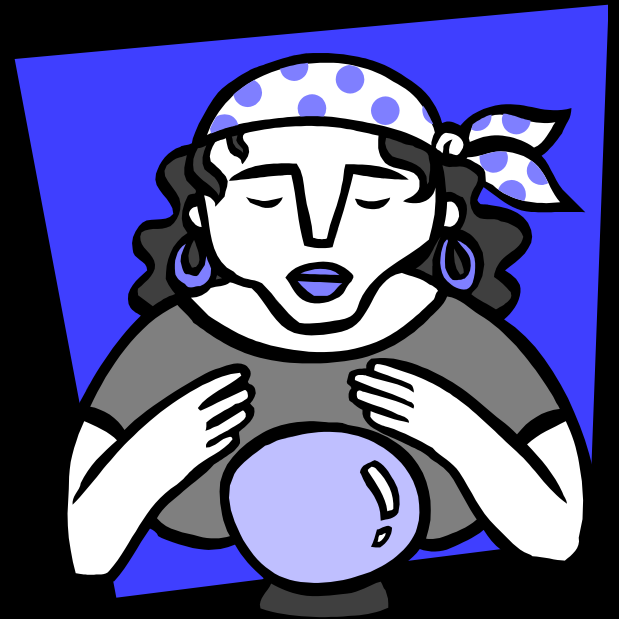




Overall Strategy: GAD

- Label it as anxiety
- Boss back
- Face fears step by step
- Learn anxiety can be managed
- Prediction is often wrong or not as bad
- Worry and anticipating is the torture part
- Doing it usually not so bad
- Reward for facing fears and using strategies

- Common thinking errors in perfectionism:
 - Negative glasses – only seeing one part of what happened – the negative part.
 - Fortune telling – thinking you know what is going to happen before an event occurs.
 - All or nothing thinking – believing you have to be perfect or you are a failure.
 - Snowballing – a single event grows into endless defeat.



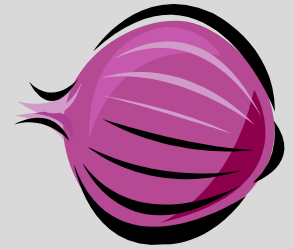
Example

- Thought: “I totally screwed up my soccer game. I let in three goals.”
- Thinking error: All or nothing, negative glasses.
- Evidence: “I did let in three goals, but I blocked seven.”
- Calm Thought: “Even the best goalies can’t block every shot.”



Technique #4:

Peeling the onion



- This refers to the process of getting to core beliefs.
 - Core beliefs are fixed statements or beliefs that we have about ourselves that form in early childhood.
- “I must be perfect” is a core belief. Sometimes embedded with that core belief are associated thoughts:
 - I must be perfect, or I will be unlovable.
 - I must be perfect, or I will be a failure.
- Core beliefs can be accessed by asking “So what?” or “If this was true, what would it mean about me?”

Situation: I got a B on my essay

So what? If this was true, what would it mean about you?

My teacher will think I am a slacker.

She'll grade me poorly next time, no matter how hard I try.

I'll do poorly in the class.

It will affect my GPA.

I won't get into college..

I won't be able to get a job.

I won't be able to earn a living or have a family.

I'll be a failure.





Core beliefs are addressed just like automatic thoughts.

*What are my thinking errors?
What's the evidence? Is there
another way to look at it? What's
my helpful or calm thought?*



Using the previous example, student might arrive at the helpful or calm thought, "It's just one grade."

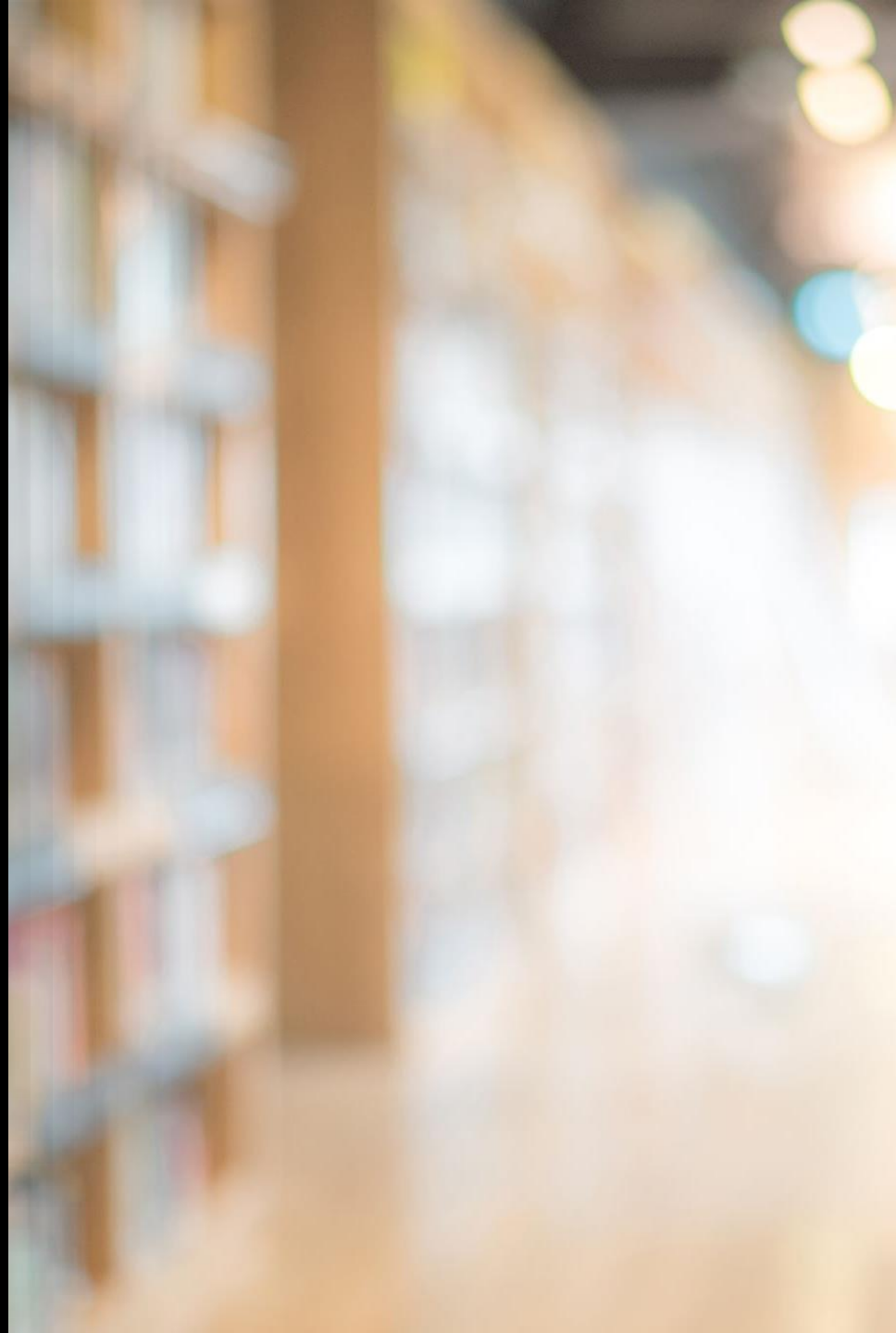


Therapy might involve addressing other issues – kid's fears can arise from what they observe in adults in their families.

Technique #5: Behavioral Exercises/Exposure

- Active experiments – child takes the lead role
- Observational experiments
 - Direct observation
 - Surveys
 - Gathering information from other sources

(from *Oxford
Guide to Behavioural
Experiments in Cognitive
Therapy*)



Behavioral Exercises

- If possible, begin with non-school related material (lower risk).
- Start slow.
- Child must be on board – give two equally acceptable choices and let child choose.
- Talk about how “your project is different” – messages being given at school/in media don’t apply to you!



Examples of Active Experiments: Non-School Related

- Wear clothes that don't match.
- Wear clothes that are wrinkly or have a small stain.
- Eat breakfast without measuring out cereal.
- Leave items out of place in room.
- Do daily routine in the wrong order.



Examples of Active Experiments: School Related (Older Kids)

- MUST work with school – reach out to school counselor
- Bring homework to session for exposures.
- Set time limit for homework.
- Set time limit for studying.
- Leave item on homework undone.
- Purposefully make a mistake on homework.
- Purposefully hand in “messy” homework.
- Take a night off (leisure time exposures are very important!).
- Take a test with no studying at all.



00PS!

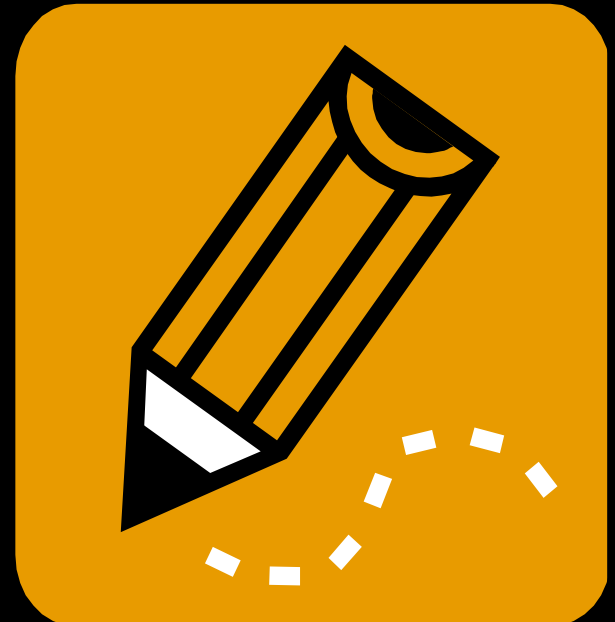


Examples of Active Experiments with Little Kids: “Not Perfect Challenges”

- Draw a face with one eye or part missing.
- Write with the wrong hand.
- Make up own language for spelling.
- Deliberately answer parent or sibling question wrong.
- Make family game to say the “wrongest” answer.
- Talk at dinner about how you handle failures

In Vivo Practice in Session

- Sessions spent doing homework
- Writing without erasers or with pen
- Time limits for deciding on topic for kids who can't get started
- Finish assignment with mistakes or incomplete – give to parent to hold until going out the door
- Giving “tests” of how much they understand for kids who re-read or overstudy
- Take SAT in session
- Procrastination in writing – conduct FA – practice quick decision making in a fluency type style





Help Parents Process Expectation vs. Actual Outcome

- Big picture
- What is actual outcome of exposure
- What is actual consequence of mistake
- Values - picture what kind of life they want for themselves, family and child

1. Give yourself permission to be human. When we accept emotions — such as fear, sadness, or anxiety — as natural, we are more likely to overcome them. Rejecting our emotions, positive or negative, leads to frustration and unhappiness.
2. Happiness lies at the intersection between pleasure and meaning. Whether at work or at home, the goal is to engage in activities that are both personally significant and enjoyable. When this is not feasible, make sure you have happiness boosters, moments throughout the week that provide you with both pleasure and meaning.
3. Keep in mind that happiness is mostly dependent on our state of mind, not on our status or the state of our bank account. Barring extreme circumstances, our level of well being is determined by what we choose to focus on (the full or the empty part of the glass) and by our interpretation of external events. For example, do we view failure as catastrophic, or do we see it as a learning opportunity?
4. Simplify! We are, generally, too busy, trying to squeeze in more and more activities into less and less time. Quantity influences quality, and we compromise on our happiness by trying to do too much.
5. Remember the mind-body connection. What we do — or don't do — with our bodies influences our mind. Regular exercise, adequate sleep, and healthy eating habits lead to both physical and mental health.
6. Express gratitude, whenever possible. We too often take our lives for granted. Learn to appreciate and savor the wonderful things in life, from people to food, from nature to a smile.

- Tal Ben-Shahar